

**A Depraved Blessing**  
By D.C. Clemens

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## Prologue

It would be prudent to refer to this galaxy as Nimbus, for that is what it is known as by its assortment of inhabitants. While Earth's human denizens share in its crowded history, their presence is not yet necessary and their account is forthcoming. The species that will occupy our consideration can be described as humanoid in their leathery physique and their level of technology has yet to make exploring their own system an economically viable option. Also, as most primeval species believe, they think themselves alone, having no tangible evidence to state otherwise.

Their world, Evon, accommodates two moons in its elliptical orbit. The largest and uglier of the pair is the brown-shaded Tess, while the other is a buttery little sphere named Newt. The tectonic forces proceeding in Evon are sluggish compared to Earth's, consequently presenting only a few mountain ranges across the face of their world. The equator appears the most earthlike with its green pastures and strips of woodlands, but is otherwise drier and more windswept the nearer one travels to the northern and southern poles. Much of the planet's surface is covered in arid landmasses, with the remaining third filled by relatively shallow seas.

Some among Evon are believed to have been blessed by their deities. These few are able to wield the elements and their states of matter, but whether this sacred gift can aid their species in their time of uncertainty is yet to be determined.

## Chapter One

### Impact

My father was taken from the realm of the living quite early in my life. So young was I, in fact, that I had more memories of being in mourning than of his actual presence. One of the sharpest of these remembrances transpired soon after the memorial service. The presiding cleric strode over to me, and while I remembered his traditional blue robes more than his face, I do recall the words he imparted to me. As he leaned down to meet my glassy, yellow eyes with his own, he began to preach that no matter how difficult the looming years might seem to me, to know that today was actually the first day of healing. I remember thinking at the time how it felt much more like the first day of the end of the world...

*“Good morning citizens of Dirth! The time?”*

*“Way too early for us!”*

*“Well, can you at least give us the weather?”*

*“It’s the start of the hot season, meaning we won’t see last week’s temps anymore! You can bet your life savings on that! Expect today and the next few days to dip no lower than 95 degrees, and the midday temps to easily reach a blistering 135 in most areas.”*

*“We have the cure for those balmy temperatures! The cooling songs of Sir Sa-”*

I snappily hit the snooze with the ball of my palm, allowing me to hear the more pleasing voice of my wife across the hall waking our son to the newly roused light, which pitilessly made its way to my listless eyes. I could not help but become mesmerized by Lizeth’s songlike tenor within my sluggish state. Her whisper beyond was soft and soothing, echoing a melody into my ears which could never be imitated by any other. She could make a blind man fall for her with that voice alone, even if she were spewing the vilest of curses at him.

Much to my reluctance, we performed our morning ceremony. We would go to the same place, at the same time, and do the same things. Nothing was changed in that respect for the last several years. It was all so monotonous sometimes. What I wouldn’t give now for it to have remained that way. I was sitting at the breakfast counter eating slices of grilled fruits and toast with my wife close by me, although, she was more concerned with arranging the pantry than with any thought directed at me. Meanwhile, as I was meditating on my upcoming schedule of the day, my son walked in. Once our eyes met, his innocent face lighted up like a firework. He

always carried his biggest of his smiles in the morning, as the nine year old obstinately seemed to enjoy the prospects a fresh day brought, unlike his father. He settled himself on the stool to my right.

“Dad, can we go to the shockball game tomorrow?” he asked in a rapid sort of manner, as if hoping I would not notice his newfound venture at maturity.

“Dayce, what do you mean by ‘Dad?’” I asked in return, acting more serious than I actually was. “What happened with calling me ‘Daddy?’”

“Seaver says only babies say ‘Daddy,’” he stated as his excuse, slyly grabbing his share of toast from the plate before me. “And I’m not a baby.”

“Well, I guess that means you’re all grown up then. Good, I can kick you out of house soon. Wait, that also means you can buy your own ticket for the game tomorrow. I’ll see you there.” I stood from my stool and half turned my back to pretend I was leaving him.

“No, Dad, I don’t have a job yet.”

“Now that’s too bad, because only ‘daddies’ buy tickets for their sons.” Then, after contorting my face to imply I was thinking through an unsolvable problem, I sat back down and placed my full attention upon him. “Okay, how ‘bout this. When it’s just you, me, and Mommy, you call me ‘Daddy’ and in public you can call me ‘Dad?’”

The signature grin stamped on his bright face approved of my idea. After gobbling up the last piece of toast from his hands, he replied, “Okay, Daddy.”

“All right,” said Lizeth, looking at Dayce and placing my packed lunch near me. “Now that I know you still need school, it’s time for you to go. Hop in the car my little prince.”

Our son complied, snatching his backpack atop the dining room table behind us before heading out the front door, though not without leaving me his farewell firecracker.

“I’ll see you after work,” she told me, barely looking in my direction as she reached for her purse on the table. “I should be home early today.”

She pecked my cheek with the brink of her lips, but as she attempted to walk away, I held on to her blue blouse.

“Hey, sorry again about yesterday,” I said, giving her an overzealous apologetic look that I knew could melt her heart at any time, which is why I used it sparingly.

“Forgiven and mostly forgotten,” she responded, her serene expression letting me know I was indeed forgiven.

“You know, we never officially made up,” I pointed out teasingly. “Think Dayce will be back in the next five minutes?”

“Going for a personal best?” she asked, matching my humor. “I might be able to work something out later if you come home for lunch.”

After a longer and more dotting kiss, she parted.

I reached my office about half an hour’s drive later. It was located in the fourth floor of the university’s science department, a building infamous for having an antique elevator that would take two miracles to work, never doing my morning any good. I had always felt suffocated inside my compressed and dismal office, not even the sham of a window on the back wall could save that reality. There was a day shortly after I had moved in when I attempted to enliven the space by adding a few pictures of the most beautiful streams and wildlife ever seen on this world, but they only served to cause the place to become even more sorrowful than before. I knew they did not belong trapped alongside me. The semester mornings were pretty much clockwork for me. I had an early lecture, progressing more leisurely than I was used to, and any time I had alone was filled with the grading of biology assignments, which was generally quite relaxing for me, not taking into account the times I met an unforgivable error from a student’s paper.

My second class began not long before the sun was grazing the highest point in the sky. This particular session was always filled with the greatest agitation out of all my classes. Many were just beginning to feel the effects of low blood sugar and were impatiently watching the clock tick by until the designated time to eat arrived. For my part, I was starting to sense I cared more about my words than anyone else in the room, which was, sadly, never unordinary, but when I was about to show a video about the cardiovascular system on the projection screen, I began to hear the voices swelling in the room. They were not by any means loud exchanges. In truth, their conversations ascended so gradually that I couldn’t even distinguish exactly when they were created. I also would not say they were disruptive, for they were only whispers, and yet, even whispers could reveal more distress than in the loudest of screams.

“May I ask what all this commotion is about?” I inquired, not without a little aggravation in my tone.

As I turned to address the crowd, I realized that this was the first time I had truly examined the state of the room. Much of their attention was fixed toward a student in the center

of the dimly lit auditorium, with some acquiring seats near him for a better view. They were leering on his laptop resting before him, the light of it reflecting off their fretful faces. In spite of me, everyone was so enthralled by their recent interest that their subtle murmurs continued on. As I remained reticent for a moment, though it could have been longer, their conversations ceased. They must have finally sensed my stillness, for all their eyes soon fell on me and the room was filled with a silence only ominous news could bear.

A bolder student, who was involved in the center circle, said, "Um, Professor Rosyth, something happened in Dorvale. There was a big disaster. A huge explosion of some kind. A lot of people could be dead."

It took a moment to fully grasp his explanation. Dorvale was one of the largest cities in the potent Valland Nation. On a globe, Valland was situated almost directly opposite from Dirth. Before I could ponder a guess as to what had happened on my own accord, I was already staring at the early reports on my computer. I did not even recall taking down the cardiovascular video I never had the chance to explain. The news bulletin was also mirrored on the projection screen to the left of me. I looked back and forth between them, as if I could not believe what either screen showed and hoped that one of them would change to a less harsh truth.

Every headline I came across stated: "*Breaking News*" in bold red font. The words afterward did not bring much promise either, generally stating: "*Rescue operations underway as massive detonation plunges Dorvale into chaos and takes out power to much of Valland. Dorvale and much of the surrounding regions are obscured with heavy dust and smoke. This does not appear to be a nuclear strike as no nation has declared responsibility or detected a missile launch, however, the Valland military is on high alert.*" I kept seeing the same words over and over again on other articles, like a never ending sequence of bad news déjà vu.

There was an off chance someone may have spoken to me before my ears ultimately picked up a female voice asking, "Professor Rosyth, what do you think it is? Could it have been an asteroid?" but given that I was so enthralled by the information portrayed to me, I did not hear them. I didn't even recognize whose far-off sounding voiced had reached me; my eyes never reached hers.

"It's looking that way," I answered her. My words were mindless, there was no sense of self-control. "The Valland have no active volcanos or calderas, which are the only other natural sources that could possibly affect such a large area."

“How many live in Dorvale?” another student asked, originating from the far left side of the room.

“Isn’t it about six million?” added someone new near the top right.

“Shit, millions wiped out!” were the last words I heard to snap me out of my trance.

I raised my head and looked at the class, feeling like I was no longer a professor to them. Most of the students were still speaking over each other, louder than they had ever been. “We don’t know if it was a direct hit or not,” I said in my soundest voice, hoping to obtain everyone’s attention, which succeeded. “Let us all thank our ancestors it didn’t hit a few hours earlier or later. Dorvale is nearly at the same latitude we are and only a minor time difference might have saved us. We should pray to the Spirits for those who are affected.” I was not really the religious type, but it felt appropriate to say, given the circumstances. “Listen, I’m not saying to go crazy or anything, but I know a sizeable asteroid strike can end up affecting the weather for the next few years, and Valland trade will definitely be impaired, so the price of food and numerous items will certainly be on the rise shortly. I advise all of you to stock up on nonperishable food items as soon as you can. You are all dismissed for the day.”

As soon I gave my consent to leave, they were gone. They could not have departed any faster if the room was on fire. I did not feel the same eagerness they felt, so I stayed behind. I don’t think I wanted to feel the collective foreboding that was to be expected after a tragedy of this magnitude. Furthermore, I liked the idea of being alone for a while, understanding it would be difficult to achieve afterwards when I and the rest of the world would be obsessed for new information for the foreseeable future. All the while, I stared blankly at my computer screen, eventually staring at a sleeping monitor. If there were any new reports being made, I didn’t want to know about them.

In the midst of my solitude, I received a message in my cellphone. I knew who it was from and what it said before I read it. My assumption proved correct. It was my wife asking if I was okay. It was just like her to think that way. A disaster occurred halfway around the world and she was concerned about me, as if I had perhaps gone there without telling her. At that instant I recognized where I needed to be. I immediately felt guilty for taking time for myself, knowing how worried she was about me, no matter how senseless. After replying back that I was heading home, I left as fast as I could, though not before forwarding a message to my students and leaving a note on the auditorium door that classes were canceled for the day.



I reached home in due course, remembering little of the actual drive there. All I discerned was that when I had arrived and opened the front door, my wife fell into my arms. She was trembling and must have been for some time, but as I wrapped my arms around her, I could feel her nerves unwinding throughout her body. It was easy to forget how emotional she could be. I always did take pride in knowing that I was one of the few who had an incredible easing influence on her. Her parents could never hide their amazement when I would put their daughter in her most tranquil state of mind without much effort.

We made ourselves lunch, though we had no real intention to eat it, while we watched coverage of the catastrophe. No new reports were being made. It was the same phrases I had read before, except there were faces behind the words. We did come to see the first disclosed images together, or more like the lack thereof. Everything was concealed under the night. All anyone could detect were the packed clouds of dust and smoke churning in an atmosphere only illuminated by Newt. We couldn't even identify the signature skyscrapers that stood so tall in the proud city of Dorvale. Seeing nothing was almost worse than seeing what was really happening, as it made my imagination run wild. We placed the freshly made sandwiches on the little glass table before the television, with their expected fate to become stale. Most of the babble in the room came from the various gathered authorities and guests on the screen. I had sat down on our big red couch whereas Lizeth remained standing, but she lingered within arm's length of me. She could never be still, no matter how calm she became, so I did not expect it during this particular interval.

"Oh, Roym," were the first strained words Lizeth said to break our long silence. I almost didn't hear her low voice above the broadcaster. "Dayce will have a lot of questions."

Comforted that the muteness was finally ended between us, I was assertive enough to say, "Don't fret, Liz. I'll take care of it."

"Please, try not to scare him. You tend to be too blunt with him. Do you remember telling him the sun will eventually explode? He cried in his room the whole day." She sat down on the arm of the couch next to me, indicating her allaying mind.

"This is a natural disaster," I said to her, a little annoyed that she thought I couldn't be tactful with our son. "Maybe if it was a terrorist attack or outright war I'd understand your worry, but you can't sugarcoat a dust storm or volcano. Besides, Dayce is older now, he must have only been six when I told him about a star's lifecycle. He shouldn't cry now."

“He doesn’t have to cry to be scared,” she responded, carrying the same stressed tone she started with.

She became silent, but again rose from her place. I followed, positioning myself behind her. I then wrapped my arms around her waist and pressed my chest to her back.

“Many will be afraid, there’s no helping that,” I said as calmly as I could express it.

“It’s just so randomly horrible though, isn’t it?” she asked, pulling away from me. I nodded back to her. She took a quick glance at the television and said, in a voice suppressed with lively antipathy, “I can’t stand some people at the firm. You know, I overheard Alun today, do you remember him? That fat fuck from my boss’s party last year? I heard him complaining about how this would affect his quarterly numbers, and I know he wasn’t the only one thinking it. Working with people like him makes me hate my job sometimes.”

“Don’t I keep telling you? Join me at UKI and you can teach some business classes. You’ll be much happier there.”

She stared at me with her most serious look and said, “But the pay is so shitty.”

I cracked a smile. She followed my lead. We then burst into a fit of contagious laughter.

Lizeth managed to remain home and didn’t return back to work as she would normally have done. In the interim, my hunger returned to me and I realized just how starved I really was. I ate the sandwich that I made earlier, with no heed to how long ago I made it, and immediately lamented leaving my hearty soup in my office. After shoving the miserable sandwich down my throat, I went to go take a quick shower, which took longer than I anticipated when Lizeth joined me. I suppose being reminded how fragile our existence was could make some feel the need to emphatically embrace life’s most precious moments. We remained in this blissful physical and mental state until the moment I had to go pick up Dayce from school. It was time for us to return back to reality.

## Chapter Two Revelations

When I observed Dayce approaching the car, he lacked his laugh and smile. I missed them already, fearing how little I would see those spectacles of joy in the coming future. He entered the backseat without saying a word. I had already come to the conclusion that I would let him confront the news first, so I merely continued to gauge his disposition. He remained in a contemplative state for several minutes into the drive, a sight that was so foreign for me to witness. The muteness seemed to grow between us with every sporadic glance I made to him in the rearview mirror, which happened as much as I was safely able.

Finally, after I thought he might be waiting to speak with his mother instead of me, he asked, “Are we going to get hit, too?”

I couldn’t help but grin a little, mainly because I was relieved to hear his voice, but also due to the manner in which he stated the question. It made me realize how simple the conversation could be. “No, Dayce,” I said with a lighter heart, making sure we locked eyes in the mirror. “Impacts like this are rare. It could be hundreds, maybe thousands of years before this happens again.”

“No one knows when it could happen, then?”

“Sometimes we can see it coming, but we have to learn not to live in fear of what *could* happen. I definitely wouldn’t be driving right now if that were the case. It wouldn’t be a healthy way to live.”

“So, you’re not afraid, Daddy?” he asked, his mood relaxing.

“Your mother wouldn’t marry a coward, would she? Her men have to be brave for her, Dayce, and then she won’t be afraid. Do you understand?”

“I understand.” He settled with a smile into the plush seats of the car. “I won’t make Mommy worry.”

This was the last conversation we had that day about the calamity. He was a resilient boy, and seemed, from my perspective, to be taking the tragedy rather well; better than I or his mother could have hoped. Taking what I said to heart, Dayce appeared to make his sole purpose to keep his mother distracted. Lizeth enjoyed the unusual amount of attention her son gave her. She listened with great diligence at everything he said, even wearing a wonderstruck expression that I

found endearing. She made it seem as though he was disclosing a revolutionary new discovery to her, despite him just talking about his schoolwork or his favorite athletes. Dayce must have learned well from his father, seeing as Lizeth didn't seem at all anxious after we had arrived. It was a good arrangement for them both. However, it was soon wearing on him. By the end of the day, his feet were dragging and he appeared to be in a constant struggle to keep his eyes open. He went to bed earlier than customary, though not without me hoping for him to have pleasant dreams that night.

None of us were aware of what was happening on the other side of Evon. We had severed any connection with the outside world after Dayce came home, so for some time we could pretend everything was the same as before. But once Dayce was asleep long enough for us to know he would not wake up any time soon, we knew we could not avoid it any longer. There was a subconscious uneasiness growing within me all throughout the day, and my qualms were actualized the moment I revived the television in my bedroom.

The dawn light was just beginning to shine on the blurry city horizon of Dorvale. It was recently confirmed that there was no direct strike on the city. The reputed asteroid impacted the nearby Gears Mountain Range roughly six miles away from the heart of Dorvale, though no one would have guessed it by the hectic scene. Helicopters soaring in the sky revealed the first murky images of the ruined cityscape, as the thick mists of dust and yellowish fumes were beginning to disperse in the strong winds. Most of the weaker buildings had collapsed in the shockwave, malformed into nothing more than piles of unrecognizable fragments. The ones that did manage to remain standing were almost a sadder sight to behold. The former embodiments of sanctuary were dusky and bleak, nothing but thin streaks of flashlights gleamed through their ruptured windows. There was a sense of stirring on the streets, where people were beginning to emerge out of the rubble that were once their grandest constructions. Hundreds of thousands were expected dead, which was the worse vision of all, even if it wasn't shown in the images.

There was a spark of hope in all the despair and anguish. Countries from all parts of the world were responding to the disaster and sending in their support. Even acknowledged enemies of Valland were promising their assistance and expressing their condolences. Emergency services were already well underway, exposing themselves in every corner of the city in what was conceivably the biggest relief effort in all of history. It was inspiring to witness. It made

Lizeth shed tears and nearly made me do the same. Well, maybe one eye may have accidentally leaked out a miniscule droplet of moisture.

We recognized we had to stop watching with the night creeping ever deeper. Whereas sleep was the furthest thing from our minds, Dayce was not, and we each foresaw we couldn't face the day in general after a sleepless night, even if that appeared unavoidable. As we mutually came to this decision, the manner of the newscaster's voice, who had accompanied us for most of the broadcast, abruptly changed from somber to ambiguity.

*"I'm sorry to interrupt you,"* he said to the crisis expert he was interviewing, *"but I just received word that the first visual of the impact site on the Gears Mountain Range itself is about to be revealed to us. The clearing of the dust has finally allowed our helicopter to fly through."*

The scene then shown was difficult to make out at first. There was nothing but haze and distortion from the dust as it continued to fill the entire screen. It was like that for such a long stretch of time that I almost assumed the monitor had went to static. Even so, with neither my wife nor I taking more than two breaths between us, we could begin to see the vague outline of the mountain range.

*"This is a live shot,"* said the news anchor, his voice lingering in the background. A tremble of anticipation quivered his vocal folds, which I'm sure was felt by all watching. *"I'm being told they will shortly exit the dust cloud and, if I'm correctly hearing this, we will then be able to see a live shot of... Is that right? Of the asteroid itself? Let's give them a moment."*

In the course of that short period, my mind was completely controlled by the screen in front of me. In essence, anyone watching became a puppet to the impending future. I was able to see the uneven terrain ascending and the soil becoming more ridged as the video climbed the mountain peaks. Sharply, before it could reach the sky, the image stirred and focused on one particularly battered mountain. As the picture adjusted, my eyes roamed closer to the bottom of the jagged landscape and I was able to see something that was completely different from anything I had ever seen before. First off, at the base of this mountain, there was an immense crater reaching the neighboring mountains nearby, although that was not what caused me to suddenly struggle for breath. Within the crater laid the apparent asteroid, but it wasn't what I expected to see in my naïve mind of mine. This object appeared intensely dark and oblong shaped. The video was not yet completely distinct, with billows of dust still haunting the screen,

so I kept blinking my eyes thinking the image would transform into something more ordinary, but at every release, all remained the same.

The object was far larger than I had first supposed, and that was granting some of it was buried deep within the mountain's foundation, with the exhibited portion being a third as long as the mountain was high, making it at least a mile in length. Questions were beginning to run through my mind like grains of sand in a sandstorm. How could that much of the asteroid survive such an energetic impact? And why, then, wasn't the impact even greater? An object that massive should have released enough energy to level a continent, not just a nearby city. Before I could begin to say these questions out loud, I noticed that the asteroid I had been studying all this time was molded in an unnervingly consistent, rectangular shape.

I heard a voice say, "That's a strange looking rock."

It sounded so much like an echo that I originally thought I was hearing it from my own head, but a quick recalculation told me it had arisen from Lizeth. I had forgotten all about her in my trepidation. I wanted to look at her, but a magnetic glue forced my eyes to glare at the screen in front of me, hoping the image was all in my feral imagination. I *needed* it to be my imagination.

"Roym?" Lizeth uttered, with some concern in her voice.

Still I did not turn to her. I felt her eyes piercing me like a cold dagger, and while I could feel the grim puncture on my face, I continued to look onward. The rest of my body was absent, and everything around me was void and vacant.

"What's wrong?" she asked me, with more nervousness than before, for she must have felt my anxiety by that point.

The sound of her acutely troubled voice must have revived me at last, because it was then that I finally turned to her. Her cocked head, pursed lips, and watery eyes revealed her distress, and it escalated when she saw my own face. I knew she was scared, I don't think she had ever seen me like this before. I stared back at her, but nothing came out of my gaping mouth. I knew any word from me would have comforted her, but I could not form one. Nonetheless, I soon didn't have to, since the broadcaster spoke for me, which I was grateful for, knowing I would have remained senselessly silent all night.

*“That appears to be the... the object that generated the blast,”* said the unconfident newscaster, saying every word with great carefulness. *“Perhaps we can try to get the astronomer, Dr. Lynn, back on? She might be able shed some light on the image we are seeing.”*

It was official. It wasn't my imagination. The anchor struggled with every syllable he pronounced because he and I were thinking the same damn thing. He knew, just as I did, that the asteroid we were witnessing was actually not an asteroid at all. It was alien.

## Chapter Three Reaction

Today rotated to tomorrow. The world's fascination and focus was now directed to the object in the crater. The struggle in Dorvale became a distant concern in everyone's minds. All spellbound eyes were watching the flood of new pictures and video coming in as the dust continued to vacate the region by order of the strengthening daylight and winds. Helicopters were swarming the mountain that was now integrated into my memory to every last perceptible pebble. Its visitor, which seemed to have turned darker each time I looked at it, never left the screen, allowing for more extensive analysis. The base of the structure was about a quarter wider than its ceiling and was raised from the crater's floor at a slight angle, but the deceptively small ascent was enough to create a space of about six hundred feet between the body and the ground at its presumed stern. Its walls inclined upward from the base and formed a flattened plateau on top to make the roof. The mysterious vessel reached about one-fifth up the mountain, giving me a good idea of the structure's true stature. Most mountains in the Gears Range were known to touch the clouds, and this one in particular reigned over them all, indicating that the object's height would dwarf all but the tallest buildings in the world.

Despite fragments of the mountain masking a good portion of the foreign craft, unveiling themselves were a few shallow cracks flowing across the otherwise sleek, uniform surface. How it was left with only those few scars, or how it could have survived a collision that intense at all, no one could fathom. Most agreed that the energy expended from the impact—which experts had equated to several times the detonation of several nuclear weapons of the largest yield—should have vaporized any known material, or at least have destroyed it to the extent that there would be little to salvage. Even with the scarring, the interior remained a secret to everyone. There were no windows of any kind or cavities to speak of to disclose any hint of the inside. Another detail I could not disregard was the lack of a visible engine. There was nothing giving the impression of a propulsion mechanism, or any trace of how it could have drifted through space, if that's allegedly what it was designed to do. The engine, or engines, I hypothesized, could have been concealed where it was buried, hidden inside of it, or may have not needed one at all.

None of these speculative observations helped to release my thoughts from the unrelenting questions: Why did it crash? Where was it going? Was anyone alive inside? What



would they do if they were? I naturally became frustrated by it. I was beginning to think that none of it was fair. Today was supposed to be the world's first day for healing.

Another inquest breached my mind, however, this one came via Lizeth, who asked, "What's going to happen?"

I subconsciously thanked her for taking me out of my stupor. "I'm sure everyone is thinking the same thing," I mechanically replied to her, for I was still only half myself. I felt her devoted hand over my arm and she gently squeezed it, but even so, I could hardly feel her slim fingers on my skin. My entire body felt numb. I felt a need for her to crush my arm somehow, so then maybe I could feel something.

This was not something that was supposed to happen to me. As a biologist I thought I was prepared for an occurrence like this. Out of the billions of planets in our galaxy alone and the innumerable galaxies beyond that, it had always made sense for me to envision that some type of life existed outside our solar neighborhood. There would therefore be some type of life that would, in due course, become articulate and practical enough to develop technology that might be more advanced than our own. But seeing the spacecraft from another existence resting within the crater somewhere on my world made my blood run cold until it felt as though my entire body was experiencing brain freeze. The last time I must have felt this unsure of myself was when I exited the womb. Everything was reintroduced to me; reset. All facts were now buried in a previous age.

This was not me. It never was. I remembered the time when, just weeks before receiving my driver's license, my mother and I were involved in a vicious car accident. The clouds had uncharacteristically lost control of the rain that evening, making my mother lose hers. The car flipped over anywhere between one to a hundred times; feeling more like the latter. It sent each of us to the hospital and she had to remain there for over a month. Three weeks after her release, I received my driver's license with avid expectations. It was as though the accident had never happened. My youthful spirit had wholly possessed me, freeing the terrible event from my mind. I had seized the freedom given to me instead of fearing what it could bring.

Currently, it was the complete opposite. The feeling of dismay conquered all of me, and each of the possibilities and opportunities I thought my scientific mind would grasp were entirely deficient. I could now sympathize with an animal that had watched a fellow creature get shot down by a peculiar hunter with an otherworldly weapon. In any case, notwithstanding my

building anxiety and tension, I knew I must do my utmost to not express it. Not in front of Lizeth or Dayce. I forced myself to keep sane for them. Their safety was all that mattered to me now. For the first time in my life, I understood that my higher thinking must be set aside and allow pure instinct to lead me through.

Somewhat less than an hour after the world first set eyes on the craft that violently skidded from the sky, the military imposed a two mile quarantine zone and no-fly sector around the mountain it now called home. Once the military attained control, so ended the flow of new images. All the same, I didn't feel there was a need for anymore, for there was no escaping those already circulating throughout the globe in every possible media form. Every television channel, active website, all radio stations, and messages on my phone from friends and colleagues gave testimonies of its overriding presence. Sleep escaped us. The hours went on and we continued to watch unceasingly, even if we both knew nothing new was going to be waiting for us. No professional could enlighten us and no specialist alive or dead could clarify what we were all seeing and experiencing.

What sign it symbolized or what omen was approaching depended on who was speaking. Some saw it as a religious test or even as a gift from any number of higher forces, divine or otherwise. Others foretold that the end of the world was imminent, but the general consensus did not differ from my own; watch and wait. Despite the fact a shadow was now cast above all nations, panic did not become the mutual sentiment. The occasional law did have to be reinforced across the lands, but the small upheavals were mere opportunists taking advantage of the frightened.

Dawn divulged itself in the form of small streams of light peeking through the window drapes. I thought of how much had changed since our last morning, as well as how much I had already altered. As I relived yesterday's journey, I suddenly recalled the advice I gave to my students and how little I listened to my own recommendation. I convinced Lizeth that buying supplies sooner rather than later would be the best course of action to take in this unanticipated situation. I was envisioning the grocery stores with never ending lines that curved around the block, only to find nothing on the shelves inside after hours of waiting. Even if Lizeth had not agreed with me, there was not much she could have said to hinder our separation, since I was hastily getting dressed during my proposal and was out the door before she could give her full consent. I really just needed to do something, anything to get my blood flowing again.

I thought I might be early, but the nearest marketplace was already filled to capacity, leaving me surprised how the little cubed building did not burst by the overflow. It was not a simple local grocery store anymore; it acted more like an emergency relief center. I saw a woman start to cry when she discovered that there were no pastries left. Another man was shouting at a young clerk for the low stock of canned goods. Her composure held up well until her supervisor arrived and liberated her. Besides a few more incidents, much was quiet in the expedition. I did not contrast from most. I grabbed anything that looked useful and even some things that did not, learning to snatch up what I could before an extra blink made it vanish. Hums of whispers reverberated in the condensed air. Never before had I beheld this large a group swollen with such a soundless sense of apprehension. I doubted the atmosphere would have been any different if I was to be transported to the eve of a great battle.

Regardless of the upturned world, the sun and moons appeared and disappeared daily, blissfully having no notion of the events below them. In spite of the observable evidence that time was indeed passing, our sphere seemed to come to a standstill. Needless to say, Dayce and I could not go to the shockball game. Schools had empty chairs in each classroom, including my own, which I canceled for the rest of the week. Jobs did not appear as important as they once were. Offices and desks not considered crucial to the sustainment of a nation lied uninhabited. Lizeth even managed to convince her boss, the merciless, for a few days leave, and aside from a handful of choice words coming from his side, he did relent in the end. To be fair, he exercised his artful language on everyone and on any occasion. I had good reason to believe he garnered great pride in coming up with curses no one had ever thought of saying before.

The bonus time at home meant more time with Dayce and the unremitting questions that came out of him. Every few hours he would meet me and ask the same questions in an ever unchanging cycle, wondering if anything new had occurred since the few hours before.

“Are they going to eat us, Daddy? Are they tall or tiny? Do you think we’ll be able to fly in the spaceship someday?”

Regardless of remaining unenlightened to most of his inquiries, he never did appear ill at ease. I knew it was his appreciation for blockbuster movies that was the source of his composure. Like many young boys, he learned far too much of his history, fictional or otherwise, through movies, including all of his knowledge regarding alien lifeforms. I was only thankful that most of them had us as the victors. If Dayce could truly comprehend the precipice our race was facing,

I was positive he would dwell in a state of complete terror, undoubtedly burying himself under his bed lest our potential masters should appear before him. I grew to envy his ignorance. It was challenging for me to enjoy the idea of their impending effect on the world. No matter who ended up in control of the vast technological forces that manufactured the alien craft, everything was about to undergo a revolution, for better or worse.

## Chapter Four

### Healing

New days kept ending and I was still as uninformed as I was when the crater was first formed. The few reports that managed to surface only explained that the slow pace came from the military's caution of any potential contamination and their even greater vigilance at accidental provocation, in case anything was indeed responsive inside. The best technology we had available was commissioned in trying to reveal what was underneath the stubborn casing. Drones, satellites, and any other sensory equipment governments could muster had their opportunity to perform their designed tasks, and each also took their moment to absolutely fail.

In addition to technology, nations began sending some of their best and brightest for an impromptu congregation near the crash site. Some liked to describe themselves as experts when interviewed, but I didn't understand how someone could be an "expert" without ever having the experience of studying an alien object. As long as the structure refused to cooperate, it seemed unlikely that any major decisions could be made in the immediate future. The imminent right then rested on the unceasing rescuing persisting around the wrecked city, for though the world was no longer paying as close attention, some things should never come to an end.

The monumental week came and went in a way that made it seem as though the impact happened the day before and also to have happened decades ago. The intermission permitted our lives to return to relative normalcy. School doors were beginning to open, offices were fuller, sports resumed to be a topic of conversation, and the ever present theme of the weather was discussed. Yet, no matter the subject matter or the location one was in, there was always a way to connect it to the unsettled billow of shadows looming behind every one of us.

Before a second week came to an end, I was gratified to learn that one of the specialists invited to join the research committee in Valland was actually a good friend of mine, a bioengineer named Lormek. He was an old professor of mine whom I had never lost contact with and was the crowning reason I had ventured into my chosen profession. When Lizeth, who was as starved for information as anyone else, discovered my close connection to the situation, she entreated me to immediately attempt to communicate with him. While I was as famished as she was, I decided it would be beneficial to wait a day or two, knowing it would be appropriate to

give my old professor time to get comfortable with his new employment and learn as much as he could.

I did not have to wait many rings to hear his gruffly familiar voice again. He was the type who loved to hear himself talk, which I knew was the main reason he seldom responded to text messages or email.

“How ya doing, Roym?!” he answered with his usual gusto, no doubt through a smoke filled mouth. “I had a feeling or two you’d call me, seems like everyone else has. People I haven’t talked to in years or outright hate my guts are giving my ass a good licking these last couple days! I feel like some hot bitch in a bar. Regrettably, I had to blow most of them off. Ha! Get it? Blow?!” He took a moment here to recover himself from his uncontrollable laughter, which I did not attempt to dissuade. “Since I like you,” he resumed with a lingering chuckle, “and are basically a colleague of mine, I’ll make the time for a short chat.”

“Thanks, Lormek,” I said as my first words to enter the conversation, “I hope I didn’t disturb you too much. I know it must be madness over there.”

“Of course it is,” he returned with a more serious tone, though I still would not quite call it that, “but it’s a fun, historic kind of madness. The times I forget about the large amount of people who died here recently, I become as happy as I’ve felt in a long while. I know you’d love it here, Roym. It’s full of our kind of people. Why not come over? This is an official invitation.”

“I’m flattered,” I replied half-truthfully. “Ten years ago I would have accepted without a second’s hesitation, but I can’t now for the little details of Liz and Dayce.” I knew I was using family as an excuse, but I was hoping he wouldn’t realize that.

“You don’t have family they can stay with? How about your mother? I’m really serious here, Roym. I can easily call you my ‘invaluable assistant’ and they can send you over on their coin. You’ll be in the ground zero of history by tomorrow night.”

Since I was beginning to feel uncomfortable with his insistent request, and not wanting his considerable influence to get the better of me, I attempted to change the subject and asked the only topic that I knew would attract his attention. “Your actual assistant didn’t go with you?”

“Carloma is here, but she’s without her head most of the time,” he answered with a loosening attitude.

“That can happen when you hire someone based purely on how expansive they make a particular organ feel,” I told him, willingly taking my part in the banter.

He gave an ardent laugh and said, "Life is far too short to look at the unattractive all day. But you don't have to worry about me! I'm smart enough not to fall into the old marriage cliché and get hitched to my assistant like you did with your pretty little one. I'm enjoying life as a perverted old man and I plan on staying that way."

"I was only engaged to her," I corrected. Recognizing I had not yet formally refused his offer, and not wanting him to take the subject change as an affirmative on my part, I continued with, "Thanks for the offer, Lormek, but I have to decline it."

"That's certainly too bad," he said regretfully, but still with his lively spirits intact. "There hasn't been a dull moment around here. And Spirits, what a sight she is! Pictures or video don't do that work of art justice. Even from several miles away she rules the landscape, and despite her black exterior, she gives off this eerie glow that allows her to stick out at night."

"I heard no one has been able to examine what's beneath the shell."

"We've been observing her nonstop with everything we have and we're having trouble detecting how thick her skin is, much less determine what's underneath it. It will also take time to figure out what in Evon it's made of, but the material has proven to be damn interesting of late."

"Care to explain?" I asked, my full attention on him at this point.

"Well," he said with some difficulty, "she's healing herself."

"She's healing herself?" I reiterated more to myself than addressing him. "You mean the cracks?"

"Precisely." I could hear him taking a long puff from his cigar. "Yesterday someone observed some of the cracks becoming smaller and less shallow, especially on her roof, but there has also shown to be a minor increase in temperature where the healing is taking place. A week ago our pics showed the largest crack ran fourteen hundred feet across and averaged thirty feet deep. It was twelve hundred feet across and about a dozen feet deep as of three hours ago."

"Shit, Lormek!" I said, surprised by how animated I became, especially knowing Dayce could walk into my office at any moment. "Why haven't we heard about this yet?"

"Don't worry, ol' boy, I expect it to be in the news soon. Like I said, we just collected this information yesterday and the guys here want a while longer to try and gather more data. It would also be nice to find out how this reconstruction is happening."

"I know your theory. Are others agreeing with you?"

“Yes, a good number actually. And don’t be so astonished, it makes the most sense, doesn’t it? Imagine it, countless of unseen, microscopic workers working around the clock. The shell must be at least partly composed of microbots, making the cracks on the exterior resemble wounds on skin.” Lormek said all this with a dignified air, pleased of the analysis he had made.

“Then it’s mimicking a biological system,” I reflected aloud to myself. Then, conjecturing to Lormek directly, I said, “Of course, this is probably an automatic response to the damage it obtained. It doesn’t confirm anything’s actually alive in there.” I felt comforted in the theory I attained.

“Alive? As far as I’m concerned, she *is* alive.”

“How do you mean?” I asked, putting a restraint on my comfort.

“There’s something in the air here, Roym, something... physical,” he said in a wistful tone, one I had never heard him use. “I’ve felt it since the first day I arrived here. I thought it was just nerves at first, but when I first went into the edge of the quarantine zone, I knew for a fact it wasn’t. It’s emanating from *her*. I haven’t been able to actually measure anything on my instruments, but I know I’m right. I know it, particularly on the rare event when everything is still and quiet. I can sense a low buzz in the air all around me.”

“Do others feel it as well?” I asked, wholly intrigued by his description. Plenty of things he said in the past had always intrigued me, but never on this scale of importance.

“Most I’ve spoken with think it’s just stress or all in my head,” he said, sounding a bit frustrated by the circumstance. I knew nothing annoyed a scientist more than skeptics to their ideas. It was expected in our highly critical profession, of course, but it was still annoying. “However, a couple of them did agree with me, and I’ll take what I can get. Both of them were spirit warriors, no less, which I don’t think is a coincidence. The first one is an older guy, like me, with the resemblance being freakishly uncanny, if I might add. It made me wonder just how promiscuous my father was. Anyhow, he described the atmosphere like a relentless drizzle that keeps him chilled to the bone. The other is this young babe who patrols the quarantine zone perimeter. She said she felt like someone was always watching over her. She also swears she can sometimes hear the ship ‘breathing’ if she gets close enough. These are spirit warriors, Roym. I’m confident they aren’t just freaked out. Of course, this is all anecdotal, therefore, no one will take me seriously. But if you want my professional opinion, she is alive. At least, somehow she is, and when she’s done healing herself, something is going to happen. Take my word for it.”



“If that’s the case, we should know more about its intentions soon.” I bemoaned calling him, since I thought the troubled feeling taking me over was not worth the knowledge. I didn’t care that knowing about Lormek’s enlightenment was better in the long run. Directing the attention to Liz instead of myself, I continued by saying, “I doubt this will make Liz feel any better.”

“Speaking of the ladies, I think that young soldier girl took a liking to me.” Lormek’s statement was so casually stated, it was almost as if he had completely forgotten the conversation we were previously having. “She showed me how she was able to warp water right out of the air and solidify it into ice. Now, you know I’m no expert on spirit warriors, but that has to be master level stuff. If Evon starts cracking, I’m finding her.”

“How is the military presence?”

“As you might expect. The quarantine zone is thick with soldiers, but there aren’t too many tanks or heavy weapons around, since they don’t want to look dangerous in front of our guests, but it looks like I have to get going.” His voice accelerated near the end of his answer to signify that he was ready to speak to somebody new. “It’s been a good talk, Roym. You know I can talk to you all day, but it seems like Carloma’s lost her head again and I just received some new thermal readings. If I find anything good I’ll be sure to call you when I can. Tell that woman of yours not to worry, Lormek is on the case!”

After expressing my gratitude for his generosity and exchanging our farewells, we disconnected and returned to where we belonged; him on one side of the world and I on the other. The pleasant exchange did not ease my outlook. All that was affirmed in the chat was that my wish for the ship to do nothing had wholly vanished. Its recovery was now a double-edged sword. The great machine was doubtlessly mending its more vital interior no less as profusely as it was healing its exterior. On one hand, the ship could repair itself enough to be able to depart from this world and leave us to return to our formerly dull lives. It would never come back and I would not care where it went. Someday I would wake up and the experience would all seem like a vivid hallucination, simply becoming a chapter in our history classes at some point. Why would it not leave if given the chance? It obviously did not land on its own accord. Would it not leave this primitive, parched planet at its first opportunity? The other edge of the sword cut much deeper. What if it heals itself enough to do everything but takeoff? My brittle body involuntarily shivered when I ventured to think about everything they could possibly do, and especially from

the things I could not conceive.

## Chapter Five Preparation

“What if they don’t leave, Roym?” Lizeth asked, unknowingly repeating my unspoken reservation as soon as I disclosed all that I had learned to her. “What if they turn out to be hostile? Shouldn’t we have a plan?”

“A plan would be nice if we knew what was going to happen,” I said, using impudence to conceal the intense vacillation I had. “But this situation is much more unpredictable than guessing what the lotto numbers are going to be.”

“I know, I know,” she replied, almost in defeat. “Your mother isn’t that far from us,” she said after a short delay, though more soft-spoken. “I won’t mind if she comes and stays here for a while.”

I felt a little touched that my mother was on her mind, since she was the last thing I expected to be in there. “You say that now, but two hours in and you’re going to be arguing with her and begging me to take her back.”

“But we won’t have to worry about getting her if something does happen, so we could then just go straight to my parents.”

I almost hated how reasonable she could be when we were disputing something. For all her emotional outbreaks, unadulterated anger was not in her repertoire. I always looked to be an irrational beast raging on a delicate flower in even our most heated arguments. Disingenuously, I said, “If that’s the case, then it might be easier to first pick up your parents and then we can go to my mother’s afterward.”

“You can’t be serious,” she said, not picking up on my insincerity. “If panic does ensue, the traffic will be unbearable. We can’t make a trip twice as long just for her.”

“I’ll talk to her,” I said in my inescapable consent. “It’s not a bad idea to have her with us if Evon does start cracking. Besides, I’m sure she’ll leave her comfort zone for Dayce, if nothing else.”

I allowed two days to pass, so as to wait for the oncoming weekend, before I attempted to confront my mother about our plan. It only required an hour and a half of debate, a few stern pronounces of her first name, Bethma, to express my seriousness, and promising multiple times that her demands would be met to ultimately convince her. She surrendered, but not without

sounding disgruntled. I drove the two hundred mile stretch early the following morning for the beginning of what I knew was going to be a vexing journey. She still lived in my childhood home, a small apartment building not far from the city's center. It always gave her satisfaction to know she lived in one of the bigger accommodations, but that didn't say much in that building.

I must have had a prophetic vision to bring the van, for I saw piles of luggage stockpiled in the living room when I stepped in, and I knew how many more there would be strewn about the apartment. It was easier to identify the objects she was not going to bring based on the plethora of bare shelves I saw. I was about to say this sentiment out loud before my mother gave me a disapproving look telling me it was best that I did not say a word about it. I complied, knowing how much she cherished every one of the items since my father's death. It was as though each piece represented a different part of him and they all needed to stay together for the complete portrayal, so she did not like to separate from them for long.

We only managed brief sentences between us during the early part of the drive, unless I included her judgmental grimacing every time I made a turn or accelerated too quickly as conversation. It wasn't until she placed a cigarette in her hand about halfway home did I become uneasy and alert at her next words, given that the action was her usual signal for the coming of loose lips.

"Anything new about the alien?" she asked. She lighted her cigarette and proceeded to inhale her first puff. Exhaling her first cloud of smoke, she said, "I haven't watched the news all day since I was forced to pack and getting myself ready to leave."

"It's still fixing itself," I replied to her, avoiding her not so subtle remark. "Just wait another few days and the outside should be completely healed. Not until then should we expect any news to happen."

"And what does that terrible Lormek say now?"

"I haven't talked to him since that first time. I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to talk to him at all. And, as I recall, 'terrible' wasn't the word you used to describe him the first time you saw him."

"Looks don't change how crude that man is." Then, quickly trying to change the subject, she said, "I need to take a nap when we arrive. Will my room be ready?" Her tone indicated my answer be in the affirmative or experience her coarser side.

“Yes, Mom, we prepared the room just how you like it. The windows are covered with heavy drapes so the light won’t shine through,” another exhale of smoke reached my face, as she did not bother aiming her mouth to the open window, “and the bed is away from the air vent. Any other preferences you’d like? How ‘bout getting Dayce to read you some bedtime stories and getting him to tuck you in?” I made my attitude as playful as possible, trying to lighten the mood, more specifically, mine.

“Do you know how Siena is doing in all this?” she asked, rather unexpectedly.

“Why in the name of the Spirits would I know?” I stated irritably. I hated how carefree she mentioned her, as if she expected I had secretly been talking to her behind Liz’s back. “We have completely different lives now, different people to worry about,” I continued, not even attempting to subdue my aggravation.

“She was wondering how you were doing,” she said just as nonchalantly as before, taking no heed of my crystal clear annoyance.

The indifferent response was unforeseen and briefly made me forget I was driving, making me nearly swerve into incoming traffic. “How do you know that? Did you call her?!”

“No!” she responded with some emotion for the first time, and I’m sure it wasn’t because of my driving. She speedily recovered herself. “She’s the one that called me the other day. She asked how we were holding up. She’s a very considerate girl, isn’t she? Of course, she asked me not to tell you she called.”

More smoke. I remained silent and opened more of my window.

“Aren’t you going to ask me how she’s doing?” she wondered, after it was clear I was not going to continue the discussion voluntarily.

Concluding the obvious, I said, “If she called, then she’s fine too.” I noticed she was finally about to finish her cigarette.

Unhesitatingly, she said, “She’s with her parents in Hornstone-”

“Mom,” I began to explain through clenched teeth, trying to keep my tone as placid as possible, “I didn’t ask you, and if you don’t want to spend your upcoming nights in a hotel, then I suggest you don’t mention a word of this to Liz. She doesn’t need to hear how her ex-friend is doing, especially from you.”

“Pardon me, but I thought anyone would want to know how someone they care about was doing,” she said, failing to sound apologetic.

I pointed the van at a forthcoming gas station, despite the fact the fuel tank was less than half empty. I could not get there fast enough, not trusting myself to stay another moment in such a confined space with my mother's unrelenting visit to the past. My stop did not go without merit. She never spoke of Siena during the rest of the trip. No matter how much irritation I felt toward my mother for bringing up what I could only label as ancient times, a small hint of relief crept into my heart knowing Siena was indeed safe, even if I recognized how she logically had to be. Her occupation, marine biology, would be among the last jobs that would be involved with Dorvale or anything associated with it, assuming we did not discover the spacecraft to contain an underwater environment.

We arrived without any more incidents after what felt like a weeklong conference. My mother always gave the impression of time waddling along at a slower pace. We were in time for lunch, but in spite of my hunger, I could not eat with my usual zest. I was vigilant of the constrained battle going on before me, whose combatants were my mother and Liz. They were tangibly together, feigning smiles and pretending not to watch each other's every move, but they could not have been further apart emotionally. No prolonged eye contact was made and it retreated quickly when there accidentally was. Their sentences were patchy, and the brief conversations they did have were anything but elegant. Liz continued to bite her tongue through the night while my unassuming mother enjoyed seeing her do it.

In the middle of it, I was a spectator for it all and continued to count down the minutes, sometimes seconds, of the intermission until the next day. I was weary when I left to bed, mostly due to watching the inaudible havoc of the day, and also with my recent comprehension that similar days lay ahead. My fatigue began to subside when my head met my old pillow. My latent mind continually settled on Siena. I would revive the memories of our shared past every time her aspect appeared before my shut eyes. I then gradually traveled to the future that was never written, continuing to follow this unknown dimension into my dreams.

The headaches I expected to endure over the next few days were not as painful as I had anticipated. Of course, that's not to say the passive aggressive undertone wasn't alive and well between the two central women of my life, and that insolent comments were not being hissed under their breath, but that was the best case scenario I imagined coming from their undeclared contention. On the second day of operation "Mother-in-Law," Liz decided to leave to her office, which really meant she needed to escape from my mother, as it was still the weekend. It spoke

tellingly for her emotional state to know she would rather be yelled at by her boss than to be mentally belittled by my mother. I concluded Bethma had won the first round.

Meanwhile, Dayce and I were on a mission to enliven his grandmother's spirits before Liz returned, each of us carrying different motivations. I wanted to make Liz feel less harassed when she came home to a subdued Bethma, while Dayce merely found delight in it. With all the failings she was as a mother-in-law, she nearly made up for it by being a wonderful grandparent. Dayce greatly enjoyed the way she was so eager to take part in anything he wanted and answer any questions he had involving any topic he could think of. Bethma also never failed to have a childishly witty answer or comment for him. As Dayce became older, I noticed that he increasingly began to look with wonder and perplexity at his grandmother when he observed the relationship between her and his mother. While they were careful not to argue in front of him, their dislike for each other became hard to hide, even from a child.

Notwithstanding my trivial trials at home, the genuine menace still lay beyond. Every minute that passed, the colossal structure came closer to completely restoring itself. There was no sign of it relenting. The world witnessed the cracks upon it fade almost hourly. As each day ended, more boxes were being packed, slowly adorning our house floors, while our drawers and shelves were progressively being stripped of their contents. Hornstone was our emergency refuge and we did not want to waste any time getting there by preparing our provisions at the last second. Lizbeth's parents would be waiting for us there in her childhood home. It was a mid-sized town three hundred miles south, and even my mother agreed it was the best option for us, given we were too close to a major city to remain if a calamity broke out. In truth, our jobs were our only ties left to hinder our leaving. We would have already loosened them entirely if we were sure Liz's unsympathetic boss would not fire her.

The anticipation was rising as the final crack persisted at the center of its roof. It was previously so deep and broad when I compared it with the earlier photos, and now it looked like nothing but a trifling notch upon its potent frame. All were waiting for the moment to arrive when it would finally complete its task, with much of the world, like Lormek, treating the healing as a makeshift countdown. When the dim light of early dawn made its appearance above our horizon on the first weekday, the wait was declared over. Pictures of every angle and footage of the sharpest kind showed that not one scratch was left on its lustrous surface. From what we could see in the dwindling Valland evening, it was flawlessly smooth, as though it had never

savagely impacted the ground, and it made it seem like there was a new, otherworldly gleam to it after its rehabilitation. It was not until then did I truly begin to appreciate how remarkable a structure it was. It was challenging for me not to become awed by its beauty and magnitude. Each breath on Evon was held and filled with expectancy, however, the minutes transmuted to hours and the edifice kept its reserve. A sense of relief started increasing in the collective air after the day was out, and the feeling was contagious. I went to bed feeling a little reassured and sleep came easy. The tranquility did not last.

I slumbered with Lizeth, my mother, and Dayce dwelling in my dreaming mind. All of us were in a small apartment, the one Liz and I lived in before we bought our house, contemplating our idyllic future before us. Without warning, the lights in our room went dark and I heard someone brutally knocking on the wooden door. We all ran and gathered in the farthest corner of the room, not wanting to open the assaulted door, though I couldn't say why, except that we had a dreadful feeling something horrendous was on the other side. The pounding on the door grew louder and louder, but still I did not move. Dayce and Liz were crying and my mother was begging for me to stay with them and not open the door. But the choice was not ours to make. One of the knocks became a ferocious bang, causing the door to crack and let in a blinding stream of light. I closed my eyes with my family in my arms. I heard the door shatter, but when I opened my eyes to see what was going to be our end, I was staring at the ceiling.

I let out a long exhale and turned to Liz, who was sleeping peacefully alongside me. As I was leaning to kiss her forehead, there was a loud knock on the door.



## Chapter Six Emergence

There was a brief inclination to run to the nearest corner of the room, but before I could wholly dismiss the notion, I heard a familiar voice through the locked entrance.

“Roym! Something is happening to the ship! Get up and come quick!”

The ordinary voice of my mother subsided my rattled nerves to some extent, despite her troubled tone. My torpid gaze met the clock on the nightstand, informing me it was still two hours before dawn’s advent. Pure darkness lounged behind the window curtains, not even the cold gleam of the moons and far-flung stars were hanging in their customary slots. My mother persisted to knock on the door, but did not add more than what was already expressed. She did finally stop when she heard me say, “We’ll be right out!”

Liz stirred next to me and mumbled a few words that I didn’t catch. Once my mind made sure I was in the dimension of the material, I began moving more deliberately. We would have left quicker, but we were by no means ready to show ourselves, since we were completely undressed—a consequence of Liz liking to spite my mother by making love to me almost every night she was in our home. My wife did not waste any time trying to find out what the commotion was all about. The familiar words “*Breaking News*” emerged before us on the lower end of the screen when she roused our little bedroom television from its respite. Both of us stood almost motionless, rapt by the display. It was a live look at the spacecraft, and its appearance was discernably altered from the last time we beheld it. Bright, sharp blue lines had manifested on its exterior, crisscrossing themselves along all three visible walls and traveling in all directions with no true pattern or design. The only goal they all followed was to gather around the border of the ceiling, where the unnerving light shined at its brightest. The intense light did not seem to lose any dimness to the air, as if some type of invisible force field prohibited any light particle from dispersing freely. The twilight sky was retreating, but even the sun at its most dazzling would have stood no chance to defeat the glow of the alien rays.

According to the telecaster, the blue marks first made their arrival only ten minutes before, with no new activity transpiring since. Liz and I soon joined my mother in the living room to resume our anticipation of the future together. Complete sentences were scarcely spoken between us. There was a peculiar, pervading feeling surrounding us that I sensed was not just

confined to our room, but was permeating into the entire waking world. It would also not require a big leap to say that it was interweaving into the domain of our ancestors, who were watching in another not so distant realm. For that tick of the clock, the past, present, and our unforeseen future were all fused to mean one and the same.

Time's blade sliced off half an hour. I do not believe I moved during the interim. I would have been surprised to learn I had blinked. At any rate, one minute after the elapse of that half hour, change revived itself. The assembled brilliant blue streaks became brighter, which I didn't think possible an instant before, and they began to move toward the center of the roof lengthwise, dividing it into two equal halves. They next started splitting in opposite directions, unraveling the roof with it. A vague, bluish light, or a color strongly resembling the color blue, gradually came breaching out from the inside, uniting itself with the dimming sky. The roof was completely unsealed in a matter of seconds, a result our finest scientists and engineers would not have accomplished if they were given another century.

When I thought my bewilderment had reached its pinnacle, I was swiftly amended to believe otherwise. I saw, with beads of sweat leaking out my forehead, an object emerge from the depths of the eerie blue light. It was humbled against its keeper, but I knew it could challenge the tallest skyscraper our civilization could offer. The camera faltered as it was struggling to zoom up to the object. As it did, I could see that it was roughly shaped like a screw, though its head was a long crossbar. Other details were difficult to clarify in the fuzzy picture. A teal light was delicately gushing beneath the ends of the farthest points that made its roof, which appeared to be the source of its propulsion, for it was rising gradually under its own influence into the black sky. It was not alone for long. Others identical to the first soon followed behind it.

They all hovered higher and higher in graceful harmony. When their leader reached about a mile above the main vessel, its pace rapidly accelerated. Before I could adjust my eyes to it, it was swallowed by the heavens. Its comrades mimicked their trailblazing leader's actions when they reached their unseen mark. Before a flash of light expired, they were all gone, leaving behind their progenitor. By my count, twenty-two of the objects appeared and went, which was later confirmed by those counting on television. When her children disappeared from our sights, the mother bade her farewell to us. She closed her roof and her glaring blue lines seemingly vanished into the air itself. She was soundless once again, exactly as she had been when I first laid eyes on her, and yet, now entirely transformed.

We were sitting hushed and inflexible on our red couch, waiting for some signal to stir us again. Liz was to my left and my mother to my right. I had no idea what was dwelling in their minds, but if it was anything resembling mine, I pitied them. I thought we were going to remain in this inert state the rest of the morning, but Liz was strong enough to rebel against the considerable influence.

“Roym, what just happened?”

I was questioning the same matter to myself, without much result, but, for her sake, I could not remain wordless. “Those were clearly other ships,” I began saying, attempting to sound as poised as possible, but I quickly faltered. “I don’t... maybe... maybe they were some type of lifeboats.”

“Do you think they could’ve left?” she asked, showing more optimism than she had ever displayed since the crater was first formed.

“They could have,” I replied, though not sharing in her optimism.

I didn’t wish to spoil her hopeful spirits by dismissing the notion, but through my estimation, that answer seemed too easy. No matter how much I wanted it to be true and how many times I tried to validate the theory, I was always struck with issues that all but destroyed my sanguinities. The shape of the ships were strange and did not give the impression that they were lifeboats. Besides, even if they were some kind of emergency ship, I could not comprehend how they, no matter who they were, would abandon their mothership to simply reside on a planet with a species that could take advantage of the wealth of advanced technology.

About twenty minutes later, our inertia was gone, or as much as it could be, and my mother decided to cook us breakfast. She performed this ritual any time she felt stressed, as she rarely enjoyed fixing meals. My lost appetite returned as soon as the smell and sound of searing bi-bi meat poured into the room. I next saw it in front of me, fresh out of the frying pan. I eagerly gobbled down a bite, tasting its perfect balance of crispness and intertwined moistness. Just as I swallowed its splendor, practically on cue, the stomach churning words “*Breaking News*” flashed like fire on the screen in front of me. The broadcaster I had come to know so well the last few weeks came into view. His visible weariness did not transpire to his steady voice.

“*We are receiving new reports from our various affiliates,*” he hurriedly began to say, wanting to skip the formalities and begin the real story, “*that the latest ships we just witnessed are appearing in cities all across the world.*” While he addressed his audience, the screen

directed us to one of the ships we beheld not too far in the past, still floating high in its vertical position. The video appeared to come from a low flying helicopter. *“These are live images from Qerth, a city approximately four hundred miles south of Dorvale,”* he continued, not even attempting to conceal his restlessness from us anymore.

Next, in one rapid and fluid motion, the enormous craft spun toward the ground. It landed on what appeared to be a park near the downtown area, partially burrowing itself into the soil with most of the structure still protruding well above ground level. I was finally able to more plainly see the structure that was currently haunting everyone’s thoughts when the camera advanced closer to the recently birthed ship. The freshly embedded stake was essentially in the shape of a huge drill bit. Seconds after it had landed, four supporting legs jutted out from the interior of the drill and managed to settle themselves on the topsoil. The alien Tower was coated in a deep shade of black, closely resembling its keeper. Comparing it to the green and orange flora below only made it appear more terrible. Contrasting the desolate blackness, the curves at the edges of the screw were outlined in a shade of silver, which reflected the surrounding urbanized lights. Its leg supports were a more conventional metallic design and color, making them look as though they belonged in a steel mill instead of extending out from an alien craft. The nearby trees and buildings stood no chance to match the height of their uninvited guest, looking as though they were recoiling at their new neighbor’s greatness. Only the more distant skyscrapers appeared to make any attempt to defend their territory.

Though I was seeing it all happen in front of me, I still could not fully comprehend exactly what was happening. It was as if I was watching a part of someone else’s immoral thoughts I had no business looking into. Before I could begin analyzing those thoughts, I felt an almost indiscernible tremor travel under the house. Despite the quake being no more than a minor tremble, the state I was in made the perception so vivid that an explosion may as well have erupted outside the front door.

“Did you feel that?” my mother asked, more baffled than startled. “What was that?”

Liz and I faced each another. Her eyes were as large as they could be, an appearance I’m sure my own expression closely mirrored, for I saw that our minds shared a common thought.

“I’ll be right back,” I said, leaping off the couch, directed to one purpose.

“Now? Where are you going?” asked my mother in my flight, her bewilderment focused on me.

“The roof.”

“The roof? What for?”

“To check,” I responded right before shutting the door connecting to the garage.

I opened the garage gate, introducing the aroma of the fresh outdoor air I had not enjoyed the company of for some time, and retrieved a ladder stationed against the wall. I could already see our star’s presence fast approaching. Thin streaks of light rose above the horizon and gingerly illuminated the bottom third of the sky. I leaned the ladder alongside the exterior wall and briskly climbed the stairs, skipping a step in each hike. When I reached the end of my ascent, I saw, about three miles to the north, what I anticipated to see. The shudder going over my fleshly frame almost made me regret completing the journey, knowing the stiff morning wind had no part in inducing the convulsion. Flanking the downtown skyscrapers to the west, still chiefly illuminated by lights not yet ready to take leave of their profession, I saw the outline of an alien Tower intruding on the serene assembly.

## Chapter Seven Escape

It was no longer an image confined to a detached display and separated by thousands of miles. The vast expanse instantly disintegrated into nothing. I was now beholding something truly alien, a megalith no one on this world had any chance of understanding. Curiously, fear did not conquer my consciousness. A peculiar kind of hope seized a part of my sensibility as I imagined all the opportunities that could arise if our interplanetary visitors were, in actuality, benevolent. Time was imperceptible for some number of moments, but I could not bypass it for long when I recognized I had to return to what was familiar, or attempt to save what remained of it. Turning my body to go, the corner of my eye picked up something originating from within the ship. Hissing out from the openings the leg supports created when they withdrew from the drill, something resembling a grayish steam was mixing with the lower atmosphere. The gusting wind led this unidentified mist across the city.

“What did you see?” my mother asked me when I had walked in, obviously enlightened about the cause of my sudden departure.

“One of those Towers landed outside the city,” I told her bluntly, understanding that the days of living in subtlety were over.

Liz rushed into my arms and avidly embraced me. Then, entreatingly looking into my eyes, she said in her most pressing voice, “Roym, we have to leave!”

I knew other minds would conclude that very same conviction. “The roads will be impassable in an hour,” I said. “Wake Dayce up while I get the van ready. Mom, hurry and get your things.” Liz followed my instruction straightaway and hurried in the direction of Dayce. My mother, on the other hand, didn’t appear to have heard a word I said and stood with her feet nailed to the ground. Her eyes stared expressionless at the wall. “Bethma!” I shouted at her. Of all the times I wanted her to be still and silent she inopportunistically elected this moment to be so. She turned her eyes to meet mine. “There’s no time. Go!”

“What do I do?” she asked meekly.

“Get your things!”

“All right,” she said blankly, finally unclasping herself from the floor.

To the general inhabitants of the house, I yelled, “Five! We leave in five!”

Before this point, I did not think my mother thoroughly understood the gravity of the situation we were in, and she was now having trouble translating coherent thoughts into fluent actions. My internal clock was running at full speed and I couldn't let time slip away fruitlessly, even to help my insensible mother escape the partial trance that overtook her.

I packed the van almost to capacity, having to occasionally remind myself to make room for three other occupants. Much of our provisions, like gas cans, water, and food, had been previously packed and were expectedly waiting to be transferred into the van, making it easy to load everything quickly. I also siphoned extra gas from the other car, endeavoring not to leave one necessity behind. In that moment I believed I would have dug a mile into the ground if I knew there was fuel underneath and I was promised enough time to excavate it. The only belongings missing were my mother's. I was anticipating needing to go through an argument with her to get her to leave half the things she brought, but when she appeared, she only carried a couple of half-filled boxes with her. Now I definitely knew she wasn't herself. She looked as if she recovered some of her self-possession, but still did not say a word. If I ever considered time a luxury, it was here, and I willingly snatched the two boxes without tempting to stir her. Liz momentarily arrived to the scene with Dayce. He was still more than half asleep, merely following where Liz's hand took him, which I was grateful for since I did not have the ability to calmly explain to him the situation.

I opened the garage gate again to commence the impending journey, letting in the crisp morning light that indicated the sun's impatience to emerge from its characteristic rest, though the richness of the foliage I smelled before did not come with it. I couldn't help but notice the activity of some of my neighbors. They were either imitating our current selves by preparing to leave or were watching in wonder, as I had done, at the city's center. When everyone was in the van, I made sure nothing was neglected before I reversed the car. My memory surveyed itself, but I couldn't find anything that wasn't already done, so I drove into the street. Anything I left behind would have to remain, for it would be too late to turn back.

Everyone held their breaths during the early stages of the drive, worried we might not escape whatever fate the alien Tower had in store for us. Luckily, we appeared to have been ahead of the masses, as the roads were by no means as congested as I guessed they'd be. Most looked to be endeavoring to return home after, no doubt, seeing the recently arrived ship in their initial drive for work. It was also probable that many were not yet aware of what had occurred in

the early morning, giving my family a fortuitous head start. Liz was in the passenger seat looking out the window, so I could hardly see her face. Her thoughts must have been wandering fiercely in her mind, but exactly what they were, I could not predict. I glimpsed at the rearview mirror to see Dayce still drowsy in the arms of his grandmother. He looked so tranquil; I wished then he could remain that way until all of this was over. My mother, remarkably, looked almost as serene as the child she was holding. She was tilting her head against Dayce's and her eyes were closed, but I knew she wasn't sleeping. How could anyone who knew what laid in the skyline? I needed to know precisely how much she had recovered herself, so I was forced to upset the silence we were all enduring.

"Thanks for waking us up, Mom. I'm glad you were awake."

After a short pause, she said, "I had a dream about you father. I couldn't sleep after that. It was only five minutes later that the ship began to behave strangely. I don't quite remember the dream, but... I'm sure... but I'm sure he was trying to warn us."

I didn't know if that was the end of her story, but that's where she stopped. Her voice completely failed her and she began to sob. She revived Dayce from his weariness, who was stunned to see her capable of producing tears. Liz must have felt the same way, as this was also her first time witnessing the event. Even I had scarcely seen her cry in front of me, not since the first few months after Dad's passing.

"Don't cry, Grandma," said Dayce, giving her a hug. "Daddy and I are being brave for you and Mommy, so you don't have to be scared."

One of my packets of pride burst. I always knew he was strong, but this was the first time I saw him as an imminent leader. For Liz, hearing our fearless, if mildly oblivious, son's statement, served to start her own waterworks.

"You're being very brave my little prince," she said, adamant to speak despite her whimpering voice. "You're doing a great job."

I hoped shedding tears wasn't too contagious for the sake of my concentration.

Our steady drive came to an end when we reached a highway resembling what I had expected the other roads to be; compressed to capacity. It was advancing, albeit, at a crawling infant's pace. All the same, I imagined I was moving at light speed compared to how it would be a short time later. The Tower was directly behind us, and every turn of the tires brought less of its power to bear on our dispositions. Just as it disappeared from our sights, no sooner did our



spirits reappear after a collective exhale of heavy air propagated through the van. The absent edifice almost made it seem like an ordinary day. We were simply caught in traffic, wishing to reach Liz's parents in time for lunch. Dayce, now released by the arms of his grandmother and seated behind his own mother, sensed our freshly relaxed states and thought it suitable to return to his normal, curious self.

"Are we leaving home forever?" my son asked.

"We don't know, sweetheart," Liz answered, a small amount of sorrow escaping her. "We might have to spend a lot of time with your grandparents and uncle Orins."

I could not tell if Dayce either did not notice her heartache or perhaps he did and tried to cheer her up, for his own tone changed into a more cheery manner.

"I like Orins, he's a sports guy," he said. Knowing it was his job to keep our minds occupied, he turned to my mother and asked, "Do you like him, Grandma?"

"I've only met him once," she coolly answered him, "though, from what I could tell, he's a very nice young man."

An unchallenging hour went by while the road ahead of us gradually became more spacious, letting us to progress at a pace I was more comfortable matching. No major city stood between us and Hornstone, and despite my mind not completely at rest with relentless questions entering unwanted, I was still soothed knowing that much. We could not resist learning what was happening outside our escape vehicle, but as neither Liz nor I wanted to turn on the radio, for Dayce's sake, we obtained our updates through Liz's phone. We found that one of the Towers had arrived in our capital, the second largest port city in the world, Iva, which was about 250 miles east from Hornstone. Additionally, the rest of the spawn ships had all resurfaced and were accounted for. Their reappearance wasn't the only thing they all shared. Each of them had harmoniously decided to land outside a major metropolitan area, taking no heed whether they were in the wettest of climates or the hottest of deserts. I also learned I was not alone in my observation. Others had likewise perceived the grayish mist discharging from the Towers, but they were otherwise devoid of any other activity.

Despite most cities not yet prompting mandatory evacuations, many people within sight of the ships decided to leave. The decision formed traffic jams miles long in most of the twenty-two areas affected. Poorer cities with underdeveloped roads had it the worst, but even updated roadways were barely moving above idling speed. One article declared that it was impossible to

securely fit a vertical piece of paper between the tightly crammed vehicles. Although all the ships now seized new territory, there was not much discussion to retaliate by military force, since they did not show any outright aggression. After all, there were only a few unfortunate souls that were killed by the ships landing and no one wanted to provoke a more aggressive reaction from them. More sensible ideas were not making themselves known, so caution seemed to be the best option to take. There was uproar by some. Bloggers, television pundits, radio hosts, and anyone else who had an outlet were arguing for a preemptive strike of some kind. Of course, most originated from people outside the affected cities. Nonetheless, as long as practical societies continued to manage the military, their war mongering dreams would have to be realized another day.

## Chapter Eight Refuge

It was noon when we finally arrived in Hornstone and the two-story house of my in-laws. The quaint wooden home rested on a world untouched by the dramatic events taking place not too far off, rather than the two acres stated on the lease. Even the glistening canal water fed by the Iva River close by implied a peaceful realm reigned here. Naturally, Neves Ave was the first to greet us. Dayce ran into his grandfather's arms, which were waiting outstretched to receive him. Dayce always loved spending time with his grandparents, especially his only grandfather. Dayce laughed as Neves picked him up with his strong arms.

"Damn! What have you been feeding this kid?" my father-in-law asked, a playful grimace on his smirking face. "He's grown twice as big since I last saw him!"

"And I haven't even eaten a real meal today," Dayce proudly pointed out. "Is uncle Orins making lunch?"

"Absolutely! A nice big fish fresh from the river!" He then glanced at Liz, who was walking up to him for an embrace. "And how is my little girl?"

"Much better now, Daddy," she animatedly replied, though not completely partaking in his enthusiasm.

"Ah, Mrs. Rosyth, welcome to my humble abode," Neves said to my mother, in the most respectful tone he could muster. "I hope you'll be comfortable here."

"Yes, it's a very nice home," she replied. "Thank you, Mr. Ave."

I could tell she was still trying to comprehend the idea of living, in her view, in the middle of nowhere, though I don't think Neves noticed it.

"Roym, welcome back," he cordially addressed me as we shook hands, which I was always a little embarrassed to do. His hands were so much stronger than mine, something that came from his never ceasing athletic endeavors. "Thank you for bringing my little girl back home safe."

"And thank you for not living in a big city," I rejoined with a smile.

"Ha! Isn't that the truth!" he stated as he walked back toward his home, still holding Dayce in his arms. "Now everyone inside! Delphnia and Orins should almost be ready with the feast!"

I did not think it was possible for me to forget the reality of having just escaped an inscrutable alien vessel, but being with Neves made me come close to it, to my own surprise. His charisma thoroughly subdued anyone he ever spoke with without any form of struggle from the listener, and I doubt he was even trying to win over friends, it simply happened. He found moderate success playing professional shockball in his youth, which allowed him to retire earlier than most. I didn't only have Neves to acknowledge for my being charmed, but Liz's mother as well. Delphnia, despite being almost a pair of decades younger than her husband and the embodiment of a trophy wife, was a magnetic hostess. She had a knack for sensing what people needed, whether that be an ear to listen or a mouth to fill up a silent void. Outside of her hosting duties, she helped manage a prosperous restaurant in town procured by some of Neves' earnings. It was there where her son discovered his passion for preparing food. Liz's brother could have played any professional sport he wanted for as long as his body held up, but not long after college, he pursued his true desire of becoming a professional chef—to the chagrin of his father and making his mother more than pleased. He gave all his time and energy into cooking and it was exhibited in every meal he created, that day included. It made me feel as though I had been stranded on a deserted island for years and had forgotten what the real taste of food was like.

That night, the three testosterone guided beings relaxed at Neves' pool house, as we were apt to do anytime I came to visit, there being no reason why it would have been any different that evening. It was located near the canal, which I was regularly reminded of while in the sitting room, as it had a perfect view of it. The stars, Tess, and Newt, without any hindrance from the clouds or city lights, revealed themselves plainly through the backdrop of the sky. Their waxing light gravitated toward the river where they were then reflected back into interlacing beams dancing above the slow flowing water. Neves and Orins were talking amongst themselves for some time, not quite sure if they perceived my far mind, but I was soon required to join them when Orins presented a sarcastic question to me.

“So, Roym, you have the biggest brain of all of us, should we surrender now and become their slaves, or should we start sacrificing virgins to them?”

“Don't talk like that,” said Neves before I had a chance to answer. “A lot of our friends are stuck in Iva right now and they're scared shitless. Fuck, I'm scared shitless and we're not even that close to one of those things.”

“Didn’t you say you had a friend near the big one?” Orins asked, spinning on his revolving chair to face me. “What does he say?”

“He’s with some of the smartest people in the world right now and the best they can do is not much more than we’re able to do. Wait and see.”

“But you must have some guesses,” said Neves.

“I’m like everyone else, I only have a lot of questions. What’s been bothering me the most is wondering why it even crashed in the first place. An advanced, self-healing ship doesn’t simply crash without a reason, and I can only think of one.”

“And what’s that?” asked Orins.

“That something as advanced as itself damaged it in an attack. If that’s the case, then it raises even more unanswerable questions. Why was it attacked? And by whom? Those answers will go a long way in determining what we should do.”

“I hoped they wouldn’t care about us,” began Orins, “but that wish is out the door with the other ships visiting all our cities. A friend of mine thought they wouldn’t bother us since he figured they would view us in the same way we would see bugs.”

“Maybe it’s a science ship and they’re studying us?” speculated Neves. “Maybe the crash was to study our reactions and now they’re upping the ante by releasing those other ships. This is what animals in a lab must feel like when they’re being studied.” He pondered over his concluding words, delighted with the concept he had formulated.

“That’s actually not a terrible guess,” I said sincerely. “But the critical question still remains. How far are they willing to go?”

A drowsy tranquility was streaming into my newly acclimated home, but the feeling was not shared throughout most slices of the world. Large populations were growing more and more chaotic at every passing minute. Traveling beyond a city limit was becoming a mythical endeavor for millions. Highways were being challenged to their limit and there were suddenly too few airplanes and not enough airports that existed. It did not matter if the actual manifestations of the otherworldly entities were felt or not in a particular region, countless people began leaving their metropolis for less populous areas. A majority of business transactions stopped all at once, crashing entire financial markets. International trade was disrupted to a degree never before seen as thousands of ship captains and pilots were diverted to ports and airstrips that were free of our visitors. To top it all off, the only jobs being attended to

involved government workforces trying to find some kind of order. A world war would have been the only event that could generate the panic now felt mutually across the planet, and all this transpired without a single round being fired.

## Chapter Nine Infection

It was on the second evening after our arrival when I was disturbed by the ringing of my phone. Seeing it was from Lormek changed my demeanor into expectation for a fresh report, as I had not experienced more than a few texts from him since our last conversation. I moved into the study and closed the door, not wanting to be bothered. Disappointment and a foreboding replaced my willingness for an update when I found that it was a woman's voice on the other end.

"Is this Mr. Rosyth?" she asked me in an almost inaudible, strained voice. It sounded as though she had been crying a great deal and was still struggling to make sure more tears didn't escape her.

"Yes. Is this Carloma?" I asked, knowing full well it was, for Lormek would not have allowed anyone but his assistant to use his phone.

"Yes, the professor wanted me to call you," she said, somewhat composing herself.

"Is he all right? What happened?"

"H-he's sick, I think. He was in a lot of pain when I left him. He couldn't really talk. He wanted me to tell you to get as far away from the cities as possible. There's something that's making people really sick."

"People are getting sick?"

"In the last couple hours we've seen more and more people experiencing a great deal of pain of some sort, but before we could study more, the professor got sick himself and then asked me to leave." Her voice was overflowing with remorse, the emotion choking her throat for a second, but fought to swiftly regain her self-control. "We saw them," she continued. "We obtained an air sample shortly after the ship opened and in it we saw thousands of microscopic bug-like things. The professor said they looked artificial. 'Microbots' is what he called them. He thinks that the other ships are going to spread these microbots to the other cities and make more people fall ill."

So Lormek's assumption was correct. The ship did contain microbots, but I never considered them carrying the capability to detach from the ship and possessing the ability to cause an illness. I then remembered the gray mist I witnessed dissolving into the air. "Do others

know about this?" I asked Carloma, who did not seem to mind the short pause I undertook. I was sure she needed it, too.

"Yes, I sent the results to others."

"Thank you, Carloma. Please, get somewhere safe."

"Mr. Rosyth," she began to say, but a silence arose, in which I could only hear her irregular gasps for a long moment. "Mr. Rosyth, I-I think he's dying."

The grief-filled words were not unexpected, given her state, but an aching throbbing coursed my body until I was left dazed. I did not want to openly express my wounded emotions and was resolute to remain as self-possessed as possible. I replied, "His message won't be in vain, and trust me when I say that old bastard has lived more than both of us combined. Goodbye, Carloma, and stay safe."

Not a thing was stirring in the study room. Even the trees I had seen swaying in the wind outside the window were currently motionless with me. "*He's dying.*" Carloma's words kept resonating in an incessant cycle. I had a sudden wish that I had accepted his offer to join him, in what turned out to be our last conversation. It would not matter if he couldn't speak and it wouldn't matter if I couldn't come up with something to say. I knew it would be enough for us to give each other that wholehearted look close friends could give to one another to let them know everything they needed to know. I was left praying to my ancestors that he knew, nonetheless.

After a few deep inhales, accompanied with maybe one more, I became committed enough to reveal all that Lormek gave his remaining strength to bestow to me, including his own approaching passing. Dayce was the only one spared from this recent intelligence. I would tell him in my own way when we were alone. They all knew something was amiss as soon as they saw me, since I could not completely hide how drained and weary I was. Only Liz could grasp what the conceivable loss of my friend truly meant to me. Even my mother had little idea that Lormek had essentially become the premier father figure in my life. I was not able to fathom why I chose to emulate a brutish, blunt, and crass womanizer, but it happened. Everyone else assumed most of my visible stress came from the information I imparted about the artificial infection.

It must have been less than half an hour afterwards when the world at large began to share in our distressing enlightenment. Everything Lormek warned me about was manifesting itself before our eyes. Story after story emerged on television about this newly detected disease



sending an increasing amount of the inflicted into hospitals. It first started near the initial strike in Dorvale, but it was quickly spreading to cities all across the globe, each one sharing the alien Tower in their backdrop. It did not take a great deal of time or intellect for the public and governments to comprehend what the cause of this readily dispersed infection was. Their instantaneous solution to this impossibly unforeseen occurrence was to quarantine all twenty-three cities as quickly as possible, despite the fact that millions wanted nothing more than to leave. In Iva, people exploited the old tunnel systems and underground bombing shelters to try and escape from the synthetic contagion, but most cities had no such shelters, and people were becoming frantic. While the day fell in Hornstone, so did their anger grow. Riots in all the affected cities were swelling, being fueled by the infection's increasingly horrific effects.

## Chapter Ten Update

“I’m Tradie Ata reporting live from the Iva Central Hospital and I’m here talking with Dr. Watlack. Thank you for joining us, Dr. Watlack. What can you tell us about the infection so far?”

“I’m afraid we know very little as of now. Our main mission is simply trying to control the situation. We don’t know if it’s contagious, but we are proceeding like it is.”

“Can you describe the symptoms the patients are experiencing?”

“Increasingly intense pain all over the body, which no painkiller or anesthetic we have is able to ease by any noticeable degree. In fact, the pain in some patients has intensified so greatly that some have started to become... difficult. We’ve had to restrain several to minimize injury to themselves and others. Many patients also experience swelling of their blood vessels, which seems to be the most immediate side effect to present itself. I advise anyone experiencing this symptom to contact emergency services and isolate yourself until emergency personnel arrive.”

“Thank you again for your time, Dr. Watlack”

Fifty-five minutes later: “We are joined once more by Tradie Ata who now has now a new update for us. Tradie?”

“That’s right. I have just spoken with the Iva Central Hospital’s mortician and he said there have been several recent deaths from those infected, all due to the same cause. Excessive internal bleeding has essentially drowned people in their own blood. He described the bodies as being extremely bloated with more blood than the average body is capable of producing.”

“So the infection is producing more blood?”

“That at least seems to be a syndrome for many of the inflicted. I have actually seen plenty of infected patients with highly pronounced veins all over their bodies, but only a minority have died up to now. Unfortunately, updates will be coming in slower. I have been forced out of the hospital due to overcrowding.”

“You’re doing a wonderful job, Tradie. Please stay safe.”

“Thank you. I’ll try.”

Ten minutes later: “This is a recent video from a Dorvale Hospital. Please be advised, the images we are about to present are disturbing.”

The screen cut to a tall reporter looking straight at the camera. He stood next to the hospital's entrance, speaking a tongue not many outside Valland were fluent with. He was not alone. He was surrounded by fellow reporters, law enforcement, and ordinary citizens, undoubtedly with loved ones inside. Next, the noise of a window shattering broke the close night air. It was instantly followed by faint shouts coming from inside the building. Closely succeeding the interruption was a loud thud striking the concrete ground, causing some people who had seen what happened to scream. The camera unsteadily panned to the right of the reporter, who, by this time, had turned to the direction no eye was turned away from. Shards of glass were seen shimmering upon the ground, followed momentarily by a prone body completely surrounded and covered by the clear material, signifying its dreadful deed.

A hysterical shriek ascended from the presumed corpse, muting those around him. He then started to move. He clumsily rose to his feet, never using his hands to aid him. He presently stood fully erect, with his body in ongoing convulsions. The skin was an unnatural shade of merging dark blue and red contusions, colors no living being should bear. His wailing persisted, louder than before, with many around him joining his chorus with their own cries as they backed away or fled entirely. He took a few lumbering steps toward the camera, nearly falling several times. His spasms grew greater, but he fought to remain on his feet. Blood trickled down his face from the corners of his eyes and mouth. His nose was unceasingly gushing out more of the gelatinous fluid, and the hospital gown he was wearing was caked with the vital liquid, making it difficult to believe it was white at one point. The camera operator couldn't endure the provoking being for long. He relented and moved back a number of steps, but as he did so, the infected man fell on his knees and his torso was abruptly sheathed in flames. The flashing inferno only allowed an ethereal view of his burning silhouette. Gurgling squeals continued from within the blaze as his face met the ground. His unnatural cries slowly died away with him as the fire began reducing his corpse to ash.

The anchor's accustomed face reappeared on the screen. "What we have just witnessed seems to confirm various reports of a few infected individuals showing warping capabilities, in spite of never exhibiting the aptitude of a spirit warrior before they were infected. Those able to warp fire have easily caused the most damage. Reports have also come in about the infected becoming increasingly more hostile and impulsively attacking anyone near them. With hospitals already inundated with patients, there have been accounts of these infected roaming the streets.

Officials are now advising everyone in the infected cities to stay indoors. If someone you know is infected, try and isolate them until EMS personnel can reach them.”

One and a half hours later: “Moments ago we just received confirmation that due to the undeniably artificial means that the infection is spreading by, some military forces have agreed to a simultaneous strike against what they now have labeled as ‘hostile invaders.’ Our country is indeed one of those who have agreed to cooperate and assist in the strike, which I’m told should start anytime now.”

They switched to a live feed showing the Iva spawn Tower no more than a mile away, illuminated by city lights and the partial light of both moons. Less than a minute later, explosions started to cover the Tower on all sides, coating the higher sections with black smoke and pulsating bursts of firestorms. At the end of that instant, all our lights went out.

## Chapter Eleven

### Unlit

Instinctively grabbing my right arm, Liz launched a short, high-pitched scream right next to my ear, complemented instantaneously by her mother. I searched for Dayce, but quickly recalled that he was sleeping on the second floor. I was glad he slept as heavily as he did and hoped the trend would go unbroken.

After a brief interlude where only sharp breathing resonated in the living room, Liz's father wondered aloud, "What the fuck just happened?" Without wasting any time waiting for a response, he rose from his seat and looked out the window of the other room behind us. From there, his stifled voice announced, "It looks like our neighbor's lights are out too."

"Can't imagine it's a coincidence the power went out as soon as we started attacking," said Orins. He too departed from the room, though in a separate direction from his father.

"Baby, my phone's out. Can I borrow yours?" Delphnia asked her husband when he returned. "I want to check to see if our friends are okay."

"Sure," said Neves, pulling out his phone from his pocket. But as he checked its status, he clearly did not like what he saw. Abrasively fiddling with the communication device, he said, "Shit, my phone isn't working either. Now how does a blackout make a cellphone stop working?"

I procured my own phone and saw that it also would not awaken with my command.

"EMP?" I whispered to myself.

Liz, who had never released my arm from her grasp, unquietly asked me, "What did you say?"

Everyone in the room stared at me, so I was left with no other option than to speak my mind. I was sure my awkwardness did not fail to emerge alongside the self-doubting manner I could not help but convey. "I'm no expert, but this could very well be the effects of EMP. An electromagnetic pulse would fry any unprotected electronic device in its range. Orins is probably right, our attack must have activated the defense mechanism in that Tower."

"So our phones are fucked?" inquired Neves, indicating he wished for a more layman's version.

"Pretty much."

“Even the landline?”

“Most likely.”

A moving ray of light emerged from the kitchen. Orins reappeared with a flashlight in his hand.

“I can only get one of them to work,” he said.

“How long does this EMP last?” my mother asked, turning to face me from her small lounge chair.

“It’s not a question of length,” I said. Feeling more questions coming, I decided to educate her and everyone else a little more. “The EMP itself doesn’t have to last longer than a second. It’s just a matter of replacing every system that’s been affected, and most of those would be near major cities, but with the infection... It could be a long time before even a few regions can be restored.” I began not quite believing my own use of the phrase “a long time.” The more I thought about it, the more I thought how lucky I would be to see an electric streetlight light up ever again.

With my outlook rapidly falling, and my faith beginning to do the same, I heard Neves say, “Oh! I have a generator in my toolshed. Orins, Roym, come help me with it.” He promptly left with Orins strolling behind him.

My contemplations made me delay at my father-in-law’s request, but I felt Liz nudge my arm and I was out the door before I knew it. We busily prepped the generator for its duty, which I hoped it still knew how to accomplish, given it was shielded in an aluminum shed.

I must have been more preoccupied with my dismal thoughts than I supposed, since Neves asked me, “You have a very serious look on your face, Roym. Well, more so than usual.”

“Of course he’s serious,” interjected Orin. “The world did just go back in time a hundred years!”

“Actually, it’s not just that,” I started to say, for there was no sense in keeping my thoughts to myself any longer. “It’s not even really about the infection. We’re cut off now, Neves, and when supplies become lower... Let’s just say our neighbors aren’t going to be so neighborly.”

Neves flashed me a suspicious glance before he asked, “What are you saying, Roym?”

“I’m praying to our ancestors and the Spirits that the military will eventually restore order, but, if they don’t, it means outside help will be practically nonexistent. Food, medicine,

and clean water will ultimately run low, and it won't be just the aliens we'll have to worry about."

"Except you forget how the Iva River provides all the water, rich farmland, and fish we could ever want," stated Neves encouragingly and resolutely. "No fighting necessary or inevitable."

"I hope you're right," I said delicately. It was a mistake on my part to advise Neves to be skeptical of others or to warn him of the dangers of a desperate mind. This was a man who immediately befriended anyone he met and only saw the best in others.

"You know, people are probably meeting at City Hall right now," Orins announced. "We should go and see if they come up with a plan."

"That's a good idea, son. Just maybe we can avoid total anarchy with this meeting," Neves said sardonically. He casted a not so subtle glare at me, but he lost it when he asked, "Wait, do cars work after this EMP?"

"Depends," I answered. "A new luxury car like Delphnia's probably won't work, but your old diesel truck should be fine. I'll go check my van in a minute."

"Let me go with you," Liz entreated me a few minutes later, her pleading eyes gazing up at me when I told her of our recently decided task of visiting City Hall.

I tried my best not to look into her persuasive eyes, lest they should sway me. It was never easy for me to refuse her wishes, even if I only did have her best interests at heart. "You should stay here in case Dayce wakes up. Don't worry, we won't be long and I doubt anything more can happen in the next few hours."

We left in Neves' truck after successfully setting up the generator to the old, unused fridge in the garage. Before undertaking the road that led into the main part of town, Neves decided to pay a visit to a good friend of his, a nearby neighbor I only knew by the name of Bervin. He promptly joined us when he heard the purpose of our trip. Bervin was a little older and thinner than Neves, but looked just as spry. He lived alone, his wife having passed a few years back, and was childless, as far as I knew.

The sight was bizarrely peaceful as we drove on the desolate countryside road. The leaves on the trees and each blade of grass were standing perfectly still in the ominously absent breeze, only being disturbed by our headlights when they gazed over them. At best, only some dim candle lights flickered from inside a few homes to show there were still any signs of life

around us. Tess' meager moonlight was barely visible behind a batch of clouds, and Newt seemingly sensed what was happening below and wasn't brave enough to appear from behind its bigger sibling. It was not until we reached the main road did the effects of the vast outage become more clearly visible. Some cars were left petrified in the middle of the lanes, but there were more working vehicles traveling with us than I would have first guessed. There were numerous accidents in the more congested streets caused by the power failure of traffic lights and which blocked us from entering some avenues. I shuddered to think what the conditions were like for the invaded cities.

Fortunately, my imagination did not have enough time to wander wildly, for I then perceived City Hall in the distance, looking indiscreet in its haughty design of elevated steps and gaudy, silvery pillars. Orins' expectation became fact when I saw people assembled around the building. The four of us exited the truck half a block away and merged with the crowd. It didn't take long after we arrived to hear of the disconcerting news that all power was lost in the two Hornstone hospitals, with even the backups failing them. The main mission at this point was to find any spare generators anyone could part with before more lives were lost by this unanticipated tragedy. It did not take Neves any time to respond to the need.

"Orins, go back home and give them ours," he decisively ordered. The instruction was so staunch that I briefly saw him in a military uniform. "Then go to the restaurant and see how much supplies you can get from there, especially ice, so we can put some food in a cooler. Here are the keys. Roym, Bervin, and I will stay here and see what we can do."

"All right, I'll wait for you guys back here when I'm done," said Orins, his departure resembling the soldier who had just received commands from his superior. I do not believe I ever saw him in a more purposeful demeanor.

There were a few police officers supervising the crowd and guarding the front entrance. Recognizing one of them, Neves began maneuvering through the gathering, with I'm sure his ears still open to any more pleas for assistance. I was simply glad no one was asking for any limbs or organs, knowing he could convince me to give up my lungs to an avid cigar smoker. Neves moved to greet the known officer, who looked more youthful than most of his fellow cohorts.

"Hey, Mr. Ave, is your family doing all right?" the police officer asked when he noticed Neves approaching.



Greeting the officer with a hasty handshake, Neves replied, "Thank the Sprints they are. How are yours holding up?"

"My parents are fine, and so is Suva, but my sister and nephew were in Iva. They tried leaving, but I don't know if they made it out." The young officer tried to keep his voice hopeful, but his twitching eyes were betraying him.

"You can be sure we'll be praying for them, Drian," Neves said sympathetically. He next turned to myself and Bervin and said, "Oh, by the way, this is my son-in-law, Roym Rosyth and my neighbor Bervin Tevens," pointing to each of us respectably before placing his hand on the officer's shoulder. "Roym, Bervin, this here is Drian Ano, the finest officer in the force. Drian, I know it's early, but do you have any new info for us?"

"Sorry, sir, not much. We're still trying to get the mayor and most of the city council together. We have to send people to pick them up personally with no phones or radios working. Organizing will take a while, I guess."

"Shouldn't there be more cops here?" asked Bervin.

"The captain wanted most of us near the stores and supermarkets," answered Drian. "She didn't want riots and looting to start there. Hopefully, we can get the lights back on soon."

"Actually," began Neves, "according to my son-in-law, I'm afraid that might not happen anytime soon."

Before I could completely build my conviction to respond with more detail, I heard a familiar voice behind me ask, "Why not?"

I twisted around to see the familiar voice matched a familiar face, though the years had definitely worn it down a bit since I saw him last, which was no less than ten years ago.

Drian was the first to speak, saying respectfully, "Hello, Captain Tillar."

"You have a new captain now, Mr. Ano," he responded, attempting to sound serious, but it didn't come across as so. I could tell he still enjoyed the title. "You know she'll be offended if she hears you call me that." Then, gluing his steady eyes to me, he asked, "Anyway, what's this about the lights not coming back on, Mr. Rosyth?"

"Well, sir, I don't believe this is a normal blackout," I said, clearing my throat once or twice, trusting I at least did not look as jittery as I felt. "I believe attacking the ship caused them to use EMP, or something similar, thus frying anything within hundreds of miles, possibly more."

If the burst reached the hydroelectric dam that powers this town, then even under normal circumstances it would take weeks to get the power back on.”

“EMP, huh?” he said, musing over the acronym. “That’s a term I think I’ve heard once or twice while I was in the Army. An officer I knew was a tech nut who’d always lock his electronics in metal boxes or cabinets. I once asked him why he did this and his answer was EMP protection. Actually, I believe his exact words were ‘If our enemy has any fucking sense, they’d set off a nuke high in the sky to create a big ass electromagnetic pulse to knock out our equipment for thousands of miles.’ I guess that means this enemy has some sense.”

Caring more about people than science talk, Neves asked Mr. Tillar, “Is Kaya at the hospital?”

“She had the night shift,” he responded, “so she’s been there for some time already. In fact, I just dropped off both girls there not too long ago.” He glimpsed at me with his firm expression when he mentioned the girls. “They wanted to help as best they could.”

“And Helmtor?”

“Last I heard, he was stationed on the *Rica* heading toward the waters off Iva, but that was yesterday. I have no idea where he is or what he’s doing now.”

As he finished speaking, a vintage red convertible made its way ostentatiously to the scene. An officer was driving the not so understated vehicle and parked it by the curb near the steps of the entrance. In the passenger seat adjoining the steps sat a man looking slightly younger than I and wearing a clean, pressed tan suit.

“Good, now we can all stop worrying,” Mr. Tillar said under his breath, not failing to display his sarcasm. “The mayor is here to save the day. Come with me, Roym. I’m probably going to need you to stop me from punching that kid’s face in.”

I usurped a glimpse at Neves, whose only response was an uncertain shrug. I knew the real reason I was granted the liberty of accompanying him was to bestow my knowledge to the mayor. I followed Mr. Tillar down the steps to reach our target, who still stood by the car looking a little overwhelmed by the crowd. The officer who had masqueraded as the driver moments before kept the mayor between himself and the car in an attempt to hold the throng of inquiring people at bay. This was no inconvenience for the retired police captain. Mr. Tillar was simply able to give a nod to the officer, who had likely once served under him, and approached the mayor as if he had already made a reservation.

Without any fanfare, Mr. Tillar introduced me and I was immediately expected to speak, leaving me with no other option but to blatantly express my theory, since I knew I would unlikely have another chance to provide my input. I went on to explain as simply and deliberately as I could what EMP did and how it meant there was little chance for the power to revive if we remained unaided by the outside world. I went on further to say that his top priority should be to efficiently manage resources, as that would logically help keep order. He seemed to agree with all I said, going by the little nods he made, but his wise eyes, agape mouth, and squirming fingers made me believe he would have followed the counsel of a drunken child.

I for one had never felt more important as when I was disclosing information that seemingly no one else in the proximity knew or thought to consider. The listeners who were overhearing truly cared what I had to say, something I was not accustomed to experiencing in my classes. However, my importance diminished just as quickly as I had acquired it. I reverted to my usual obscure stature when the captain of the police presented herself to our gathering. Even Mr. Tillar was less distinguished standing next to her, which was not an easy accomplishment. She carried a pair of walkie-talkies that somehow managed to escape the fate of most of the others of their kind. I saw a few more were being distributed among other officials. With my prominence being sapped to near none existence and Mr. Tillar's bearing becoming reassured with a competent leader in the captain at the helm, I thought this no better occasion than to take my leave from him. He must have shared the same notion, for he offered his hand to me for an official parting.

As we shook hands an uncontrollable urge made me ask, "How's Siena?"

Mr. Tillar kept the same piercing aspect, but he could still not help stare at me attentively for a moment. In due course, he answered, "Like everyone else, she's worried for the people she knows, and unlike many others, she's worried for the people she doesn't know." He said this with a sense of pride that I knew all too well only came when he discussed his two daughters. "She tries to keep busy at the hospital since she's returned. How about your family? Are they doing okay?"

"My mother is with us and I don't have any siblings, so I can't complain too much."

"Listen, Roym, considering the circumstances, I wouldn't mind if you wanted to see Siena. In truth, I think it would make her happy, but it's up to you. I'll tell her I saw you, but that's it."

When Mr. Tillar completed his assertion, I felt as if I was handed the key to a gate that I spent years trying to conceal behind an overgrowth of vines. The last thing I needed, now of all times, was to open the doorway and remind myself what was on the other side. With this torrent of feelings owning me, the only reply I could come forth with was a meager, "I'll think about it."

In return, Mr. Tillar gave me a half-hearted nod and did the honors of departing first, expeditiously becoming engulfed in the mass of bodies.

The once short walk back to the truck became longer than I last experienced it, or perhaps I could have unwittingly walked around in circles, for I decided to use the key. The lightless town I was walking through, the horrifying infection happening only a few hundred miles away, the invaders who had caused the chaos, they did not prevail in my reality in that moment. The imageries of our young love, along with the future life we were envisioning, all flashed before me like photographs in a slideshow. I couldn't help but smile a little when I realized that no matter what decision I had made, no matter what track I would have chosen, each road would have led me to this town. There was also the possibility a boy would have been born, a boy that would have been given the name of his late grandfather. When I concentrated on the blurry figures in front of me, I saw that they morphed into Bervin and Neves talking to one another as they waited for Orins to bring the truck. Seeing them forced me to stop the slideshow and replace it with the ones that represented the here and now. I had already made my choice nine years earlier, or, in a way, it was Dayce who had made the choice for me.

The following days bypassed us without too much adversity. We returned back to town a few times to gather what news we could, even if it was just the local news. Several radios were found that were fortunate enough not to be impaired, but the only thing they could bequeath to us outside the town was the vindictive sound of static. The necessities of food and water were naturally foremost in most minds, though fuel developed into the most precious inedible resource. Leaving was a renowned concept for many, but as the fuel pumps could not implement their designated task, only a handful left town. These were mostly loners who did not have to worry about the needs of companions. A few desperate individuals couldn't restrain themselves from attempting to obtain gas by pilfering it from other vehicles, but most were met by some form of justice. It was difficult to take something considered more valuable than any jewel and was constantly watched over.

Meanwhile, we were able to revive our van with just a few replacement parts, and by “we” I really meant Neves and Liz. I would not call myself the most useful when it came to automobile expertise, which Liz never failed to tease me about anytime the chance presented itself. She always did love the art of repairing something with her own hands, especially something that involved getting dirty over, taking great satisfaction in it, as did I when I called her “My Greasy Girl.” We did not have the incentive to leave like others did, but that’s not to say we were not prepared in case the occasion arose. Considering our supply of gasoline outweighed our supply of diesel, it was decided that, in an unforeseen event, we would take the van. In any case, if we had time to jump start the truck, we would also take Neves’ vehicle for as long as it could run.

Providentially, clean water and food was not a major concern. In fact, I don’t think I had ever eaten as much as I did in those two days. We had to sacrifice ourselves by eating our share of the food items that could not be preserved for long without refrigeration. Dayce did not shy away from devouring all the desserts he could consume, though he was committed to not show any discomfort. Even with our full appetites, there was still plenty of more enduring food in Delphnia’s pantry, which we were going to be much more prudent about in the future. We couldn’t exactly say the same about our reserve of freshwater, but if the worst did happen, all we needed to do was boil water from the canal. Seeing as we were likely living like the kings of old compared to a great many people, I made sure not to show any bit of angst. Complaining was not something I felt I had the right to do. Not yet, anyway.

## Chapter Twelve Recollections

It only required two days after the power deserted us for Neves to find another way to help others. He became involved with a city council project to donate the more quickly perishing food to homeless and aid centers across town so they would not go needlessly wasted. Liz, Orins, Bervin, and I joined in the effort, though, in all honesty, my initial motive for doing so was to have something to keep my mind employed. Orins and Liz united with Neves on his trip in the truck to keep the family reunion together, while Bervin and I ended up undertaking our own path in the van. Dayce wanted to join us, but Liz felt uneasy about him entering the debilitated town. He stayed home with his grandmothers once I reminded him of his job to keep his mother's heart as untroubled as possible.

In the process of taking the produce to the first couple of shelters, I found my disposition was eased by the sight of regular folks cooperating and comforting each other instead of delving into the anarchy I feared would take over. I always believed, or wanted to believe, people were inherently good-natured, but it was still reassuring to see it firsthand during a disaster. Still, just underneath the skin, there was an unmistakable tension in the muscles of many, ready to spring loose with the slightest provocation. Each shelter was filled to the brink, and there was a sort of foreboding in almost every eye within. It was impossible from stopping myself from wondering if I too would soon become acquainted with their notion of intolerable hunger as a daily occurrence.

A little passed noon, on the outing before our last, I entered a shelter that was not much different from the others. I was carrying a stack of boxes containing sweet fruits into the shelter like I had done in my previous visits, however, I had to walk using my peripheral vision to guide me on this run, given that the only view I had in front of me was the side of a cardboard box.

"Excuse me, where do I put these?" I asked the back of a shelter volunteer, who I partially saw in front of me. I tried not to sound as though I was in too much discomfort, but it was obvious I had somewhat encumbered myself.

"Oh, goodness. You've surely proven yourself to be quite a strong fellow holding on to so many boxes," she responded mockingly. "If you can, please place them on the counter."

My heart pumped faster with each new word she uttered. The woman's voice gave me an incredibly strong sense of nostalgia, which taxed me much more than the burden I carried. "Siena?" I queried cautiously, afraid of being embarrassed if my presumption was wrong. Before she could respond, I saw the answer with my own eyes after I laid the delivery where she directed me. Undeniably, it was her standing in front of me, and for the first time in a long time, it was not just in my head. Her golden eyes met my own and her expression became just as astonished, if not more so.

"Roym?" she asked, echoing the essence of my question with a composed suppression of her bafflement.

We must have been static in word and deed for only a second, but her intense eyes kept me from caring exactly how much time had elapsed. It would not have surprised me if Bervin came up to me to tell me night had already fallen. After nine years apart, my memory of her rich, glossy eyes was as vivid as ever, but it gave no challenge to the actual articles.

She awkwardly extended one of her hands toward me and then quickly adjusted by rising both arms, all while in the process of leaning in, before she ultimately gave up on the task all together and put them both down. She flashed me an uncomfortable smile. Showing I did not mind, I embraced her first, which I don't believe she was expecting. I had forgotten she was shorter than Liz, as my chin was able to rest on the top of her head. I mostly did it to ease her nerves, but letting go was not so simple.

"Roym, what are you doing here?" she asked me, withdrawing from my arms. "I mean, I knew you were in town, and it looks like you're volunteering, obviously. So I guess it isn't so weird that you're here."

"I see you're still answering your own questions," I said, an uncomplicated smile attached with the message.

"Only when I'm nervous, which is all the time now. So, how are Liz and Dayce?"

"Liz is volunteering as well, but she's with her father and brother in another shelter. Dayce is at home with her mom and mine. Bethma is actually teaching him how to fish as we speak. How 'bout your sister? Is she here too?"

"She's back with Mom at the hospital," she answered, her visible anxiousness all but vaporized. "I was there too, but I needed a breather. I can't help feeling bad for leaving, but I don't have Valssi's constitution."

“You’re too hard on yourself,” I said, having a flashback of saying that to her before. “If volunteering at a shelter is your idea of a breather, then you have nothing to feel bad about. I bet more people are edging closer to mob rule than helping anyone else.”

“People are scared, and frightened animals rarely act rationally. Who knows, maybe a few thousand more years of evolution and we’ll become completely logical-minded beings.”

Her comment had me wondering whether we would get the opportunity to find out if the world would be able to see the next year, much less a few thousand.

Siena must have either realized the same concept I did or read the somber look in my face I was unable to conceal, since her uncomfortable smile returned. She rolled her eyes and said, “There I go again, making things awkward. We should probably get back to work. Anyway, it was nice to see-”

She was gradually interrupted by the escalating hum of engines coming from outside. When I turned to the direction of the rumbling sound, I saw a convoy of military vehicles—comprising of jeeps, tarped-roofed trucks, and other heavily armored conveyances I was not qualified to identify—passing the building. Their presence enticed many to stand by the windows, some practically ramming their faces against the glass, while others went into the streets for a better view. I suppose Siena and I were among those magnetized, for we were already standing among those in the quivering sidewalk before I became aware of where I was.

Almost every soldier I could see riding in the transports had a guise on their face I had never thought I would be so close to witness on a soldier; a look of not only misfortune, but of outright misery. I felt as if I was gawking into a television screen, as we all seemed invisible to them. None of them offered one regard to us no matter how many spectators stared or waved. The majority of the vehicles kept on the same road in their chronic convoy until three trucks near the end of the line opposed the succession and turned their way to the hospital, which was only a couple of blocks down the left side of the road. This was the same hospital where Siena’s mother and sister were working.

“Let’s go see if we can find anything out,” I told Siena at the same time I was walking up to Bervin, who had stopped unloading food by the van to watch the spectacle taking place. “I’ll be right back,” I informed him. “I’m going to see what I can find out.” I didn’t bother to wait and see if he assented or not before I rejoined my former fiancé.



Siena and I approached the hospital at a brisk pace, where we saw a number of soldiers unloading their injured and carrying them inside without so much as a word to one another. Siena and I kept our respected distances from the scene. It wasn't until all the wounded soldiers were marshaled inside did we choose to move in closer. Two of the three military vehicles left as soon as we arrived, with four soldiers staying behind. Two of them stood by the entrance with a few police officers close by, though they were not conversing much, which was no fault of the officers, since the soldiers did not seem to be the most approachable of pairs. The other two were sitting at the edge of their truck bed. We headed for those on the military vehicle. One of them was a young man no older than his early twenties and the other was a woman who was probably in her early thirties. They were both younger than I, and yet, I knew that they were far older than me in many respects.

"Let me start the talking," Siena advised me in a whisper when we were in front of the troops. She was a better conversationalist than I, but I also knew to defer to her when it came to dealing with soldiers, given her family experience. She turned to them and said, "Sergeant, I'm sorry to see so many of your comrades injured."

"Not as sorry as you'll be in a few days," cantankerously answered the male soldier, who kept his eyes on the smoke climbing out of his cigarette.

"Not here, private!" ordered the sergeant. He only flashed an indifferent glance at her. "Sorry about him," she replied to Siena, completely subduing the displeasure she had displayed. "We've been through some shit."

"I don't want to even imagine it," returned Siena, "but I've lived with imagining the worst all my life. My father was in the Army and my brother is now in the Navy. He's out there somewhere and I can't even find out where he is. Is it possible you can tell me what happened after the lights went out?"

After a short sigh, the sergeant said, "Nothing good. The line I was in was the backup to the quarantine line, so we were about a mile out from downtown Iva. I saw the city go dark and all but our most basic equipment stopped working. Even those cinderblock-sized radios that should survive anything were useless. Despite all that, some of the attack kept going, but there was no visible progress. I watched tank fire, missiles, RPG's, everything we still had hit that thing and it didn't even budge. After a while, I began noticing the rate of attack was weakening."

“I know why,” interjected the private, still not looking at anything in particular. “I was on West 49, right on the quarantine line with that fucker half a mile away. Right after the lights went out I could see a bunch of objects start falling from the top of the Tower. I saw them with my binoculars while using the light from the explosions. There must’ve been hundreds of them, and I know they were the ones that started breaking our lines and making everyone...”

The last words lingered on the private’s tongue, unable to escape. He drew a long drag from his cigarette, reflecting on an untold horror, before he jumped from the truck while exhaling the smoke from his nostrils, leaving it behind him. With the three of us watching him, he walked deeper into the parking lot without saying anything more.

After shaking her head and with her eyes still pasted to her subordinate, the sergeant said, “The quarantine line saw the worst of it. Most didn’t make it.” Her voice was as somber as she could conjure it to be. She then scrutinized us with an expression of pity. If she pitied him or us, I could not say. “From what I gathered from the survivors, they were at some point being fired on with an assault of hypodermic-like needles. Those things must have been filled with a fast acting form of the infection, because within minutes they turned into mindless killers.” She was looking at us, but I sensed she was really looking off at a far-off place I desired never to see. “Much of the quarantine line experienced this hyper-infection. As a result, those who were not infected began pulling back. Our standby line became the main one and we were forced to kill the oncoming infected. Fucked up, isn’t? Allies becoming enemies in a matter of minutes...” She shifted her body so that she was now sloping on the side of the truck. Undoubtedly, her mind was also shifting inside.

“Did you see what fired those needles?” I asked her, hoping and succeeding to bring her back to the present. I spoke in a low tone, though that did not hinder her hearing me, as the three of us seemed to be temporarily detached from the outside world during her despondent account.

“Injectors,” she answered. “That’s our fancy name for them. Our line was regularly being assaulted by the infected. They started to pour out of the city by the hundreds as our front line barriers failed. We were stretched too thin, so we began retreating to find a more defensible position. That’s when I first saw them. Well, I guess I technically didn’t *see* them. It was just a vague outline. I heard some soldiers that were running behind me start to scream. When I looked back, I saw six or seven men squirming ten feet in the air, being held up by something I couldn’t see. Still, two or three of them were able to fire at this invisible something. As their bullets

landed, I saw their impacts caused some kind of ripple effect, which sort of allowed me to see the outline of the alien machine... If it was a machine.

“It must have been at least fifteen feet tall. I know it was slender, like a skeleton, but I can’t give you a definite shape beyond that. The soldiers were dropped by the Injector after a few seconds. My legs wouldn’t move, and I was sure I was next on its list, when I suddenly heard the music of a .50 Cal start firing at the invisible fucker. The Injector turned its attention to its attacker, but it didn’t seem to be fazed at all by the bullets. It then fired those needle-like things at the gun operator. That’s the last thing I saw before I finally got my ass moving. I don’t know how long I ran, but I eventually reached the area where most of the others were falling back to. I don’t know if it was the sun rising or the line of double-barreled tanks nearby, but we didn’t get any more trouble from the Injectors that day. Anyway, more and more infected kept pouring out, and they’re a bitch to take down. Shooting them just a few times doesn’t work. Some even still move after being practically decapitated. You think you got them after blowing away half their brains, but nope, they just pop back up and keep coming as fast as ever.”

“Where are you heading now?” asked a dry-mouthed Siena.

“Most were ordered to regroup south of the river,” the sergeant answered without any delay between her words. “My group was to go as far west as we could and instruct every town along the way to make sure to do the same.”

“Evacuate?” Siena said with surprise, corresponding to what I was thinking and feeling.

“Yes, but it isn’t mandatory. We don’t have the manpower to make everyone leave, but thousands if not millions of the infected are spilling out from the city, and really, the river will be better at holding them back than we are.

“How long do you think we have?” I asked.

She shook her head. “There’s no way of knowing. Maybe the infected don’t come this way or our lines actually hold, but I do know those Injectors will go anywhere there are people. The only reason you might still have some time is because hundreds of thousands are still between you and them.”

The sergeant was now struggling to keep her drained eyes open and her weary mouth was moving in slow motion. Siena concluded it would be selfish for us to remain any longer.

“Thank you, sergeant, for the valuable information you gave us. May the Spirits guide you.”

“I hope your brother is okay, but you should concentrate on yourselves,” said the sergeant, her eyes closed at this point. “Also, for whatever its worth, may our ancestors guide us.”

I hoped her sleep would at least give her some level of respite.

With every kind of thought brimming our minds and our hearts disheartened, the walk back to the shelter was a mute one. It was tough for me to put all I learned into perspective. What was worse was concluding that I could never grasp it until the savagery entered my reality. It wasn't until both of us actually saw the shelter in front of us did our words leave their purgatory.

“Will you go?” Siena first asked me, her eyes meeting mine for the first time since the start of our walk back.

“I don't know.” My eyes stayed with the ground. I wished I had an answer that was more decisive, but I did not have one, so all was left for me to do was tell the truth. “Based on what the soldier said it sounds too risky to stay, but... Where else would we go? How far can we go?”

“Dad has been talking about leaving,” she said in a low voice, a voice I felt I would always hear from her from then on. “But Mom's been hesitant. She doesn't want to leave the hospital.” I stopped in mid-stride. She walked a few extra steps before noticing I had stopped. “What is it?”

“I don't know if we're going to decide to leave or stay, but I think if both our families decide to do the same thing, then it makes sense to help each other out. It'll be psychotic to keep all of us divided when it's clear that we need as many trusted people as possible.”

“You're right. My mother and sister do still hate your guts, but they'll have to agree.” I almost thought a smile was about to cross her face, but it never appeared.

Ignoring the obvious fact about her mother and sister, I informed her, “Whatever we decide, I'll try to let you know somehow. If we both happen to agree, then we'll go from there.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

With graceless nod from each of us, we went our separate ways.

## Chapter Thirteen

### Kites

Within the next hour, everyone in Neves' house, including Bervin, had heard the sergeant's narrative as I had heard it. Dayce, of course, was the only one exempt from hearing the harrowing tale. As he was told to continue his fishing practice from where we could see him through the high windows of the living room, I did not have to worry about him sneaking in to catch a word. I decided to leave out Siena's participation for the time being, seeing no reason it mattered when nothing was decided. Their faces gave me a good idea of how mine must have looked when I received the account, but I knew they trusted every word. The doubts came once we began planning what to do next.

"How is Caddoa safer than here?" asked Orins. "Last I heard, there's a Tower in Trilon and they're south of the river."

"Yes, but Trilon is eight hundred miles away," responded Neves, "and it doesn't sound like the military can adequately protect us north of the Iva River. Like Roym says, they hope to use Iva as a barrier, which makes perfect sense to me."

Bervin lighted a cigarette and said, "Sense? Did it make sense for us to attack an alien ship a billion years more advanced than us?"

It was then my turn to intercede, though it had nothing to do with the decision in question. "Can you please put that out?" I asked Bervin as modestly as I was able. "I'm sorry, but Liz can't stand smoke." I wasn't so fond of it myself. Bervin didn't attempt to fight my request and obliged, not to say he didn't seem a little bothered, though he appeared more ashamed than irritated. He did take a glance at my mother, whom I was sure he must have seen smoke once or twice, but he did not say anything more. Now that I had opened my mouth, I thought it best to add to the discussion. "Even if we didn't attack them, we would still have the same problem concerning the infection."

"But we might still have our lights on, which means more gas to get somewhere," countered Bervin.

I gave him a small shrug, letting him know he had a point.

"How far can we go?" Liz asked to no one in particular.

Her father answered, "That depends how packed the streets are. We can end up wasting a lot of fuel idling to nowhere. Best case scenario, we can probably go five hundred miles or so, but even that's dubious."

Informing us of the next problem to ascend, Delphnia asked, "What happens if we get stuck in the road in the middle of nowhere? Can we risk that?"

"It's better than the alternative," I answered, suddenly coming to a clear resolution.

"Roym?" Liz asked fretfully.

"I've never seen people look so out of it before," I told Liz, forgetting there were other people in the room. "I don't know how to exactly explain it, but they saw things I don't want you or Dayce to ever see, and if that means leaving, then so be it."

"So you want to leave, then?" Neves asked me, in a grave voice I had not heard very often from him.

"I think it might be our best option," I said, dictating to everyone in the room. "Staying will ultimately mean we'll be stuck here if things get worse. We can't go east, west, or north, but from what I remember, there aren't any Towers directly south of us for at least two thousand miles." I focused my eyes at Neves and asked, "What do you think?"

He looked straight back at me, but I couldn't read him when his mouth was sealed. He then stared at his wife and trailed to Liz a moment later, his aura remaining unchanged. "You'll go with him?" he asked his daughter.

I don't know why, but I became nervous for her answer, as if she would reply with something different from what I expected her to say.

"I want to take Dayce as far away as possible from those Towers," answered Liz, momentarily relieving the stress I had.

His eyes next rotated to his son, equally as steadfast and warm as they were on Liz. "Orins?"

"I'll go where you go, old man," the son responded.

Neves next placed his unwavering eyes at me and said, "All right. When do you want to go?"

"I'm thinking we gather as much as we can, get some sleep, and leave as early as we can tomorrow morning. It's best we go with as much daylight as possible."

“Babe, start putting the food in the boxes,” Neves said to his other half, officially kicking off the start our flight. He spun to face his friend and asked, “Bervin, are you coming with us?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” he replied, seemingly pleased to be considered as part of our family. “Bless my wife she’s not here to see this! May her spirit guide us!”

The rest of the day was dedicated to procuring as many provisions we were capable of bringing without suffocating the van in the process. We furthermore spent another part of our time examining routes that, with any luck, would not lead us into gridlock. Knowing a life or death destiny was carved into the map, I had many of the roads memorized in the short time I examined it. We were soon as ready as it was possible for us to feel once we packed what we could and chose what initial route to take. However, not everything was completed.

After waking from a restful nap, thanks in no small part to having Dayce between Liz and me, my eyes uncovered themselves to the dipping sun to see Lizeth was still fast asleep and Dayce was gone. I could have slept longer, but I had unfinished business with Siena. Seeing Liz sound asleep, I thought it no better time to find out Siena’s verdict. It felt wrong not telling Liz about my excursion, but I thought my best option was to inform her only if Siena’s family did decide join us, seeing no point to pile on old memories needlessly. I informed Neves of my design, and while he did not seem overly pleased to hear of my project, mostly because I was keeping it from his daughter, he did not dispute it either. I told him I would just check what their decision was and I would tell Liz everything afterwards, to which he begrudgingly agreed.

Taking Neves’ truck, I journeyed down a road I never thought I would tour again. The drive was definitely more hectic than it was earlier in the day. By this time, everyone had heard the military’s recommendation to evacuate and many did not waste time in heeding it, despite night looming just over the horizon. Each home I passed was either frenetic or it was quiet and deserted looking; there was no in between. I also saw police and soldiers who stayed behind to keep order and to help those who could not help themselves. I couldn’t say I envied them, but I could say that they were better people than I.

Regardless of the tumultuous streets and nine years removal, the boulevards leading to Siena’s first home came back to my memory as easily as if I visited it yesterday. When I finally arrived at the driveway of the old-fashioned two-story house, I almost believed I was going to see Siena run out from the screen doors, jump into my car, and we would drive off to a weekend stay at the beach. But I was not in my old convertible, and any weekend plans were indefinitely

postponed. I knocked on the screen door, the metal resonance sounding uncannily familiar, and after a short eternity passed, Valssi opened the inner door. I could not help being taken aback by the alteration in her appearance. She looked tired, far too tired to even give me the harsh look I anticipated she wanted to give me.

If anything, she sounded grateful when she opened the screen door and stepped back to let me in, saying, "Siena said to expect you. She should be right down."

"Have you decided what to do?" I asked her, knowing blowing by meager salutations would be appreciated by the both of us.

Valssi nodded, looking as if it required a considerable effort on her part, and answered, "We're leaving. Siena and I have been getting ready, but-" She was cut short by the sudden presence of her younger sibling coming down the stairs. "Did you get to Mom's stuff or do you want me to start on it?"

"I haven't yet, but you need to get some sleep for Spirit's sake," Siena answered with clear frustration. Obviously, this was not the first time she had told her that.

All Valssi could reply in return was, "I can sleep when we're on the road." She then clambered up the stairs like a mountain climber near the summit.

"Hi, Roym," hailed Siena. "As I'm sure you've heard, we've decided to leave. What did your family choose to do?"

"Same thing. Where are your parents?"

"At the hospital. Dad's trying to convince her to leave. At first I thought she was worried about leaving her patients, but now I think she's also trying to occupy herself as much as possible." Her voice dropped and became gloomy. "I'm worried about her. She was running on fumes the last time I saw her and she didn't want to leave. Dad told us to get everything ready and then went back for her."

Trying to sound sympathetic and pressing at the same time, I asked, "Do you know when you're supposed to leave?"

"Early in the morning, so we can try to go with as much daylight as possible."

"We were thinking the same thing."

"Did Lizeth say anything about your plan to travel together? Wait, let me guess, you haven't told her you're seeing me, have you?"



“I told Neves, but I didn’t see a point complicating matters if it wasn’t going to be necessary,” I replied, not being able to think of a better way to phrase it.

“Oh? So I’m a complication?” she asked, forming a sly smile as she feigned her resentment.

“Since the day you were born.” I clenched my fists to remind myself to keep serious. “Anyway, Liz should be okay with you coming along. If anything, I would think it would be you who would have the problem with her.”

“I was once mad at her,” she responded, losing the smile, “or more precisely, I was mad at everybody, but I’ve long since realized...”

“Yes?”

“Only that I’d be a real bitch if I held a grudge for this long.” Her slender lips reformed into a smile, but one without its usual luster.

I knew that was not what she was going to say and would have tried jabbing her a bit longer if our attentions weren’t embezzled by a strange and distant uproar coming from beyond the walls.

“What’s that?” Siena alertly asked, tip-toeing to look over my shoulder toward the entry behind me.

Something inside me did not want to know what the cause of the haunting melody was, but my instinct differed. I stepped up to the screen door in an attempt to catch sight of the source, my body not having the will to actually open it. Siena followed close behind me. The noises became louder and clearer, soon becoming apparent that they were made up of a multitude of animalistic shrieks. They were emerging from the right side of the house to the east, meaning there was still a trace of the setting sun’s gleams still lingering on the skyline. I beheld a dark cloud inhabiting the eastern sky, not dissimilar from what I was familiar in seeing during the intermittent thunderstorm. Yet none of its acquaintances in the sky matched it, and there was something about it that went against the laws of nature. It was drifting and plummeting faster than any cloud was capable of doing.

Next, pieces of it started separating from the rest of its great body, diving at the ground like a shower of harpoons. All at once, it struck me. I knew what they were. It was a flock, or more like a swarm, of carrion birds. They were known as kites, so named for their diamond-shaped, leathery wing, which could expand to over eight feet wide in mature adults, allowing

them to glide hundreds of miles with a few flaps. Never before had I seen them congregate in such massive numbers. The shadow they emitted below was blacker than the evening sky. More and more of them charged the ground, heading to where we were standing at exceedingly faster speeds. Their clamor was hideous, but it did not defy the more upsetting screams that often followed their dives.

“Are those what I think they are?” I overheard Siena ask in a quivering voice. “What are they doing? Are they attacking!?”

“Fuck, they must be infected!”

I wasn't expecting to exclaim it as loudly as I did or even to say it at all, since the last thing I wanted to do was heighten Siena's distress. I had not thoroughly come to terms with people mutating into senseless killers, now I had to come face to face with beasts doing the same. Nature was being turned against us.

“Roym, they're coming this way! Close the door!”

She was right in her message; they were no farther than half a minute in reaching us. Siena began running up the stairs, undoubtedly with her sister in mind. I followed her into the master bedroom where I saw Valssi gazing out the window, though it looked out west, so she could not have known of the impending horde approaching us.

“Was that screaming? What's going on?” asked Valssi when Siena touched her shoulder to make her aware of our presence. Her eyes were cloudy, though I knew it now had nothing to do with exhaustion. Even if she could not see it, she knew something frightful was about to arrive.

“Infected kites,” I answered. “Hundreds, maybe thousands, of them.”

“Kites,” Valssi repeated in a monotone. “Oh, Spirits... What do we do?”

“The closet!” said the other sister. “We'll hide there until they pass!”

Some nearby gunfire erupted, followed quickly by pained yells. All three of us mutually flinched. No doubt they had reached the neighborhood. Without a gander or word, the three of us migrated into the walk-in closet. When I shut the door, Siena turned on the little flashlight she had stashed in her back pocket. The dreadful outcries muffled into a dim reverberation once the door closed, somehow making them sound more unpleasant.

“I hope Mom and Dad will be okay,” Siena stated after a short time of only hearing the repulsive resonances surrounding us.

“Either they’re in the hospital or in Dad’s truck, there’s no way they were caught outside,” Valssi reassured her relation.

The cries of the kites grew to a fevered pitch as the minutes went on. Sometimes they bashed themselves against the roof, causing us to recoil.

“Why are they making that noise?” Valssi wondered.

“I think they’re in pain,” I answered. “From what I heard, it’s one of the side effects of the infection.”

“Why?” Valssi asked, near hysteria and at the verge of shedding tears. I had not noticed until then how every tormented sound was degrading her mental condition. “Why doesn’t the infection just kill? What’s the point of making everything go fucking insane? Do those fucking cock suckers think this is funny?!” Siena embraced her sister to comfort and quiet her, or I believe she would have kept her rant going.

Her agitated words had merit. The sophisticated intelligence our unknown assailers displayed through their mastery of space travel suggested it should have been a child’s pastime to synthesize a virus capable of killing every living thing in our world. Yet, that clearly was not their goal. So what was it?

Valssi calmed herself down in the subsequent minutes, but the shrieking of the kites continued unabated. If I closed my eyes, I almost supposed I was child again, with a horror film playing in the other room and I was simply hiding until it was over. In time, the clatter did start to dissipate, disclosing the end of their coming. Siena gave a small sigh of relief in behalf of all of us, but she was too premature. A window shattered downstairs. It was immediately followed by the wretched screech of a kite.

“Shit! It’s in the house!” Valssi said at the same time she cried out in panic.

“It sounds like it’s coming from downstairs,” said Siena, with more poise than what I would have expected. “What do we do now? Do we try to kill it?”

“No!” Valssi replied. “What if the infection is contagious and bites us or something?”

“And just wait for it to pounce on Mom and Dad?”

“I don’t think they’ll come in with that racket going on,” I responded. “I’m sure they’d know it’s in here.”

“And then what?” asked Siena. “Someone has to get rid of it.”

“Dad will see it and then call soldiers here,” Valssi rejoined.

“Don’t you hear what’s going on out there? They’re already busy, and for who knows how long.”

“Fine,” snapped Valssi. “I’ll just put on my suit of armor, go down there, and use my brand-new assault rifle, how’s that?”

“I was just throwing it out there,” said Siena, with a submissive tone. “Actually, I think Dad left his hunting rifle in his study downstairs. Maybe we can use that.”

“We don’t need to get his gun,” I coolly interposed.

“And why’s that?”

“Because I have mine.” I pulled out my revolver, which had been tucked away between the waistband of my pants and lower back, concealed behind my shirt. There was a look of disbelief on Siena’s partially lighted face. “What are you looking at me like that for? You know I learned to shoot after you and your brother kept making fun of me.”

“Of course I remember, but I also remember Liz absolutely hates guns and would make you get rid of it if she knew. Or has that changed?”

“No, she still hates them,” I quietly answered, as though confessing a sin. But I hastily reminded myself of the situation we were in and said, “So I kept it hidden. It never made sense for me to get rid of it.”

“So are you going to try and kill it?” asked Valssi, an outpouring of trepidation escaping her.

“Let’s wait a little longer,” I said. “There’s still some out there, and I don’t know if a gunshot will attract more, but I’m definitely not taking the chance now.”

This wait was more nerve-wracking than the former. The unrelenting thrashing and the more horrible shrieking made by the fiend that now dwelled in our midst constantly reminded me of how many of our own brethren shared in the same crazed state. Between the furors of their kite stuck inside, the three of us struggled to listen to the cries of its external kindred. They seemed fainter than they were previously each time I perceived them. I heard almost nothing of them about ten minutes later.

“I’m going to go out and check,” I told the girls as I rose to my feet, making sure no hint of cowardice came through.

Feeling her grab a hold of fabric from my lower leg, Siena asked, “Are you sure? We could just wait it out.”

“You were ready to kill it five minutes ago.”

“That was the adrenaline talking. I’m slightly less senseless now.”

“Well, my adrenaline is still going and I don’t like the idea of my family worrying any longer. I’ve been away too long and they might start fearing the worst.”

“Shouldn’t you wear something more protective?” I heard Valssi ask.

“Nothing here seems particularly protective looking,” I said, quietly reclosing the door. It did not appear like Mr. Tillar kept any of his old captain’s memorabilia in this closet, and unless he had riot gear armor, I doubted it would have mattered.

“Wait, hold on,” requested Siena, seeing her seizing random clothing from the racks.

I had no idea what she was trying to accomplish by simply attaining outfits until she took one of her father’s shirts and wrapped it around my arm. I was ready to dismiss it, but I recognized that some sort of protection was, in the end, better than none.

“Oh, good idea,” said Valssi, joining her relative on her scheme.

I was soon made into a child’s vision of a punching bag. I had shirts, scarfs, and I didn’t want to know what else, enveloped around my arms, neck, and legs.

“There, that should be sturdy enough,” said Siena, carefully arranging the loose ends. I thought I saw a smile appear on her face, but I suppose it was only my imagination. “Just please make it quick, okay?” she said, her eyes fermenting a sense of seriousness I had not seen her give me in a long time.

I nodded back my understanding, or gave my best impression of one, as my neck could not really move at my command. I exited the closet as feather-like as possible and gingerly closed the door behind me. The clacking sound of the door shutting gave me the impression I had left some nameless part of myself behind. The repulsive music the kite was conducting was even more disconcerting outside the small sanctuary, but it did at least serve as an auditory road to keep a general track of its whereabouts. Making sure not to attract any unwelcomed attention, I moved as slowly and deliberately as it was feasible for me to do, but still making sure I finished the deed within that day.

More adrenaline began coursing into my muscles, my body knowing I needed every ounce of help for the dire situation I was in. I could begin hearing something as faint as my footsteps and smell a weak but distinctly foul odor, something that could have only come from the swarm. Despite the heavy tension, when I saw my reflection in a full-length mirror, I almost

could not help chuckling out loud, though I did manage a small grin. There was something comical about seeing myself puffed up to nearly twice my normal size; moreover, appreciating I was gift-wrapped with women's clothing to keep it all together. I felt I was either a bad burglar or an even worse superhero.

My miniature mirth did not last long. I was cruelly reminded of the reason I had exposed myself when, below my feet, I heard the jagged sound of breaking plates. Walking through the room and into the hallway with the revolver in my hand made me feel more valiant than I had ever felt before, not so much as I considered myself a savior of damsels, but more as if this was all too extraordinary for it to be real. The stairs were not as cooperative as I hoped they would be, as a few of the wooden steps groaned and creaked under the fresh encumbrance, making me wince every time it happened. When I was about three-fourths of the way down, a disobeying stair made such a loud gripe that it was able to reach the poor hearing of the kite. The ensuing silence that befell was even more horrid than any noise previous. Directly afterward, the kite generated the loudest shriek yet, almost high-pitched enough to go unheard by my ears.

I was able to catch the sound of its wing banging against the walls and floor, as it zealously tried to find the origin of the sound. Knowing staying near the base of the steps would be imprudent on my part, especially when I understood I was dealing with a clumsy creature when on land, I turned around and climbed back up. When I reached the pinnacle of the stairs and looked behind me, the first image I beheld was the fevered adult kite mercilessly looking up at me with its iridescent eyes of a brilliant white, bobbing on a small head that was attached to a long neck. The paltry light coming in at this point made anything but its dark silhouette and shining eyes unperceivable, which I think was for the best. I doubted I could have stayed sensible gazing at its true face. The stairwell was too narrow for it to spread its wing, forcing it to resort to crawling using its flapping arms. Luckily, it had marginal success in its endeavor, as each time it gained a step, it descended two. I knew this was my chance. I raised my gun to the struggling, ravenous creature and, without a second thought, I pulled the trigger. I couldn't tell where the bullet landed, and even if it did find its mark, the flailing beast took no notice.

The lingering pulse of the gunshot faded away, leaving bare the persisting shrieks of my impending attacker, mocking my failure. Perhaps influenced to some degree by my target's madness, I began pulling the trigger relentlessly, with no real consideration to my accuracy. I don't know how many bullets I relinquished, but I do know I had the power to cease fire when I

observed the kite's motionless form. The sergeant's words repeated in my head: "*Shooting them just a few times doesn't work.*" I knew my mission wasn't over and I needed to make sure that it was. I loaded several more bullets into their chambers. I descended each step more cautiously than the last, with my gun continued to be pointed at the fallen scrounger, prepared to restart my barrage if it made any small movement or gave any kind of sound. I only stepped close enough to distinguish its figure to ensure a precise aim, but certainly not a step closer. I saw the wound that became its downfall struck just behind its wide open eye, making me shiver, for it still faintly reflected the scant light it received. I made the visual organ my target, not only because I knew most of its brain was hidden beneath it, but to rid of the scornful eye forever. I pulled the trigger. The brains of the lifeless kite decorated half the stairs, even so, I half expected it to move. I heard a noise that made me start, but it was not the dead kite; it was the soft words of a concerned woman.

"Are you all right?" asked Siena, in a voice stifled by the make-shift panic room.

"I'm fine," I hesitatingly replied, for I wasn't completely sure if I was. "It's dead, but don't come out yet. Let me get it out of the way first."

My thoughts were moving industriously, shifting through all the options of how to accomplish what I stated. I found myself reentering the master bedroom where I acquired two bed sheets, not caring about some luggage falling to the floor as a result. I rested one of the bed sheets on the dead creature and laid the other on the floor at the end of the stairs. Then I rolled the corpse to the fellow bed sheet, subsequently wrapping them together as best I could. I next dragged the carcass to the backyard. Back inside, I told the recently liberated inmates it was now safe to emerge from their asylum, advising them not to go in the backyard, if possible.

I met them running down the stairs, where they did not seem to take any notice of the residue left by the departed animal I had not entirely cleaned up. I could tell their hearts were completely lightened when they saw my face, especially seeing as I still had on much of my colorful armor.

"I suppose you'll be going, then?" asked Siena, aiding me in discarding my getup.

"Yeah, I have to go check on Liz and everyone else."

"Of course. It sounds like everything has calmed down."

"And we'll keep this rifle handy this time," stated Valssi, coming out of her father's study, tightly holding said weapon.

I was walking to the door with my hand reaching for the doorknob until I remembered the reason why I was there to begin with. I don't know if they had forgotten also, but I was bound to remind them. "When your father gets here, tell him to meet us at Neves' before dawn. We want to leave no later than early sunrise." I left them without waiting for them to say another word, not that they would have responded if I had. They appeared more concerned about comprehending what it was they had just experienced.

If I could, I would have switched off the headlights on my drive back so that I did not have to look upon the sight of the kites littering the streets and yards. Most of these creatures were dead, but some only needed the sound of the passing engine or the light to shine on their alleged corpses for them to resume their struggle, in spite of their battered forms. Not many other people were on the streets. Most I did glimpse were either soldiers or police officers making sure the kites on the ground were truly deceased. Encouragingly, I did not see any of my kind among the perished, suggesting the majority were able to safely wait out the horde inside their homes or vehicles. I was sure that gave no indication to their bruised mental states. We all knew it now. The infected were getting closer.

A strange glumness came over me when I looked at Neves' house, knowing I would have to leave it soon, perhaps forever. I wondered why I did not feel this melancholy when leaving my own home. I at last opened the door without any idea of what to expect from the other side. I imagined everything from relief to resentment, thinking any reaction they chose was justifiable. They were all congregated in the living room, presumably waiting for me after Neves told them of my undertaking. I didn't really see anyone else's initial expression but Dayce's, my eyes receiving his straightaway. The smile he radiated made all my previous struggles of the evening melt away as he came running into my arms.

"Did you see them, Daddy?" he asked, bestowing me his biggest hug. "Grandpa said they were kites, but kites don't sound like that, right?"

"They were kites, Dayce, but they were sick," I tenderly answered, giving his head a mild rubbing with my palm. "That's why they sounded like that."

I glanced up to see Liz approaching me. Her cheeks exposed the evidence of the tears she shed not too long ago.

"Are you okay? Are you hurt?" she asked while looking deep into my eyes, trying to read them.



“I’m fine,” I answered, embracing her, though I knew no matter what I said she would have suspicions to my words. “I was indoors when they came and was able to hide in a closet for most of it.”

Liz pulled away from me and not with a little passion said, “Don’t you ever leave like that again, and certainly not alone.” I thought she was going to break into tears again, but she had enough self-will not to. “We can’t afford to be separated, not ever.”

“I know, I know. It was stupid of me in hindsight.”

“Hindsight? It was stupid in hindsight, foresight, backsight, or any other sight you choose,” she said, more irritated than before.

“All right, Liz,” my mother calmly intervened as she touched her arm. “Roym is fine, thank the Spirits, and he said he won’t do it again. There’s no need to start a fight in front of Dayce.”

“We’re not fighting, Bethma,” returned Liz, with a tone not quite supporting her statement.

“What did you find out from the Tillars?” asked my mother, giving no more heed to Liz.

“They’re coming with us,” I told her and everyone else. “They’ll meet us before dawn.”

I didn’t end it there. I told them everything that had happened while at the Tillar’s, including the killing of the kite, the possession of my gun, and how the Tillar girls were holding up. As expected, the mention of the gun left Liz ill at ease, going purely by the face she conveyed, since a word she did not speak. The truth I spewed, but a lie I could not bring myself to suppress. I said I had bought it for our own safety soon after the crashing of the ship, though Liz seemed more troubled by me having to actually kill a kite and did not seem too concerned with that fact, or in reality, that fiction.

“I wonder how many people died?” asked Orins.

“I didn’t see anyone dead,” I responded. “It was dark, but I’m sure there weren’t many people on the streets when the swarm came.”

“I believe most of the flock didn’t actually come down since I saw a shit load of them continue westward,” added Neves.

“So the poor animals are infected too?” Delphnia said unhappily to herself, more concerned than I had ever heard her. “Oh, the poor things.”

It was not long before I found myself back into bed again, not taking a great deal of convincing for me to do so. I needed a few hours of sleep before our enterprise, not knowing when I would get another opportunity to do so on a bed. I had not realized how consumed I was from the eventful evening until my head touched the pillow, making me feel as though I was composed of fluff. Yet actual sleep did not come so readily. My body was drained, but my mind was still wide awake. It was not ready to put either the night in the past nor face the approaching future. Liz, likewise, soon joined me. She rarely spoke at all since my full disclosure, which I never enjoyed, but knew it should have been anticipated. It was here she asked her own questions.

“Why didn’t you tell me of your plan?” she gently asked, her hand caressing my shirtless chest. “I wouldn’t have been angry.”

“I know,” “I replied, staring up at the ceiling, almost matching the tenderness in her tone. “It wasn’t your anger I was afraid of. I just didn’t want to add complications if they turned out to be unnecessary.”

“Complications?” She sat up to look at me better, her tone now containing more inquisitiveness than anything else. “Like what?”

“I’m not sure. To tell you the truth, I didn’t really think it through. It was so spontaneous. I just felt like bringing up old emotions was wrong.”

“I’ve been feeling old emotions since we arrived here, Roym.” I turned my head to look up at her with my own curiosity, finally dawning on me that she must have equally been dealing with the past that belonged to the both of us. “Every time we visit my parents I can’t help thinking about the friend I once had and the events that broke us apart.”

I nearly laughed at what she said, understanding I was selfish for going through this alone. “If it makes you feel better,” I said, “I don’t think she’s angry with you anymore. That’s what I got from her, anyway.”

“It doesn’t matter what we feel anymore. It makes sense for us to work together.” She gave me a slim smile while she stroked my cheek with her hand before she let her head fall into her pillow. While closing my eyes to say goodnight to this stage of my life, I heard her whisper next to me, “May the Spirits guide us.”

## Chapter Fourteen Crossing

The night still overpowered the sky when my repose was broken by Neves' muffled voice telling us that our expected guests had arrived. Liz did not seem enthusiastic by their announced arrival, though it likely had nothing to do with our newest companions and everything to do about soon having to leave her childhood home. The greeting was, at best, lukewarm, but supportive overall. Much bigger issues than the ones that had separated our families overruled any real unpleasantness that would have normally accompanied the assembly. However, that concept completely went over the head of my mother. She was so welcoming and cordial to Siena, it actually caused everyone else to feel a tad more awkward than they would have otherwise. The two former best friends reacted well, warmly hugging each other to essentially say that a new period of their lives had begun in that moment. Dayce was the only one who did not try to conceal his interest at the emergence of the new faces. Liz told him they were old family friends of ours and they were there to help us, which freed him from any confusion, if only outwardly.

They came in Mr. Tillar's bulky pickup truck, which I saw was well-stocked with essentials of all kinds and types when I checked underneath the bed's black tarp. Before we left, we discussed and agreed on Neves' plan to journey westward and head for an old bridge twenty-five miles from town. He knew many were no longer well acquainted with it, given that it was replaced by an updated bridge eight miles away, making it prudent for us to attempt to cross it if we wanted to try and avoid as much traffic as possible. Our plan was to then proceed to a small city called Talib, which lied two hundred miles southeast near the end of the Dows, a narrow river fed by the Iva. The population of the pursued city was somewhere less than two hundred thousand, a number we liked the sound of. It seemed low enough not to draw the unwanted attention by the Towers or Injectors, as they appeared to be allured by the sight of a larger population. Yet, if we were attacked, the number sounded large enough to feel as if we had a fighter's chance at escaping in the fray. We understood we couldn't isolate ourselves and still expect to receive news and support.

The climbing sun was hiding behind thickening gray clouds, keeping the sky darker than was normal this time of year. Ultimately, the somber clouds released a light drizzle, expressing

their own sorrow for our departure. The drive to the unknown was a steady one. I would have preferred to have trekked at a faster rate, and there were times where I wanted nothing more than to press hard on the accelerator, but I knew conserving fuel was more important than rushing to a place where we would be forced to idle anyway. Following my van was Neves, Delphnia, and Orins in Neves' truck. We knew the diesel fuel would not last longer than a hundred miles, but we also recognized that the extra supplies it carried would be useful in keeping our loads as light as possible for as long as it would last. The newcomers were leading our rolling fleet in Mr. Tillar's heavy-duty pickup. His experience in the military and keeper of the peace made him the obvious choice to be our unofficial leader. Bervin completed our convoy with his small two-door car bringing up the rear. In the van, my mother employed the passenger seat, indignant by the fact she was not permitted to calm her nerves by smoking, while Liz was with Dayce in the backseat, each helping to relax the other.

We finally caught sight of the bridge twenty-six miles later. It would have been foolish to expect there to be no traffic or, if there was, that it would be advancing at a decent pace, so I was not disillusioned to see there was indeed a line waiting for us, but I was not indifferent to it either. It was moving no faster than a continent, but moving nonetheless. There were four lanes on the bridge, but only three were available to the public. The fourth was being used by military vehicles to travel unabated. My convoy joined the lane next to the military procession.

A half hour passed before Mr. Tillar's front tires were able to touch the bridge, which felt so much like a breakthrough that we might as well have touched the surface of another planet. I often looked at the rearview mirror, sometimes to look at Liz and Dayce, sometimes to view Neves driving behind me, and, more times than not, it was to look at the lengthening line. In one of these glances, I saw some small fowl flying out from the lofty trees behind us. It began with a couple, then a few more, and then a great flock. The frantic flapping of their wings was nearly as dominant as the croaking calls they used as a warning signal. My leg muscles became tight, my brain was telling them to run. Verifying my fears, I heard the blast of an explosion that made me jump in my seat. It had felt and sounded so close that I thought we were surely inside of it, but it came from the forest behind me. Distant gunfire succeeded the explosion. All I wanted to do was escape before it worsened, for unquestionably it would get worse, but I was imprisoned. I heard some commotion to my left. I discovered the clamor to be the soldiers shouting orders and

getting into their vehicles, hypnotically heading to the acknowledged danger. In a minute, their lane became accessible and I, along with everyone else in our line, decided to fill it.

I knew the bridge spanned about a mile in length, but steering with the constant sound of gunfire in the background made it extend tenfold. Midway through the passage, two fast moving objects appeared in the sky in front of us. It was apparent a few seconds later that they were two jets flying no higher than three hundred feet. The sound I then heard after they passed over us was one I had only been familiar with through television. I could practically see the sonic boom they released, the ripple of air shaking the van. Endeavoring to follow their path in the rearview mirror, I saw a pillar of flame rise above the woods behind us. If it was a missile or a bomb initiated by the jets or by something else entirely, I didn't see, and I did not have time to provide a guess as another like it instantly erupted, cropping up uncomfortably close to the backed up line. I was so overwhelmed by the view behind me, and so immersed by my own thoughts, I had almost forgotten I was still driving. I didn't even realize I was about to strike Mr. Tillar's braking vehicle, and I would have if I didn't hear the blaring horn his truck produced. Apparently, more vehicles than could fit were trying to merge on the new lane and the lane we had left. Some were not as patient as others, something I could not hold against them.

Notwithstanding the narrow escapes, the extra lane did allow us to keep moving at a reasonable pace, and we were finally able to touch ground on the other side. Almost immediately afterward, we were impeded by a bottleneck on the main road where automobiles were raucously deciding their future of which road to take next. It was impossible for anyone to consider going off road since a dense timberland of towering trees surrounded us. Never before had I wanted to grab a hatchet and start ripping down our precious forests so badly. I could no longer hear the gunfire, but it was only because the sound of the boisterous horns from the automobiles surpassed everything else, proclaiming everyone's innermost fears.

I could sense the apprehension rising as the traffic progressed at a painstaking pace. Ten seizure inducing minutes later, we were finally at the crossroads. I stalked Mr. Tillar onto the chosen path, progressively hearing my van's engine hum longer and longer the faster the line moved. I had not dared glanced at the spectacle behind us after the jets flew overhead, lest I should forget about my responsibility of driving, but I could not resist the urge any longer when I heard a noise I never liked to hear, but had heard too much of late. Faint screaming was ballooning from the backdrop, and glimpsing into the rearview mirror, I saw people on the

bridge running to our location. I couldn't see what they were fleeing from, but perhaps it was better I did not know. I was losing sight of them as we moved quicker, but before they were able to vanish completely from my view, I watched some of them drop headlong to the ground, not dissimilar to what I might have seen if they were shot in the back or suddenly being dragged by their legs. That was the last I saw before the vista of the bridge was lost from my sight forever.

"Can you still see everyone?" Liz asked me, never turning to look what was happening behind us.

"Yes," I answered, noticing my hands were trembling. "Mr. Tillar's truck is a couple cars ahead and everyone else is farther back, but I can still see them."

Another peek at the rearview and I could not elude observing the heavy smoke continuing to rise in the distance. It made me feel a new form of emotion; relief with an element of sadness, sadness with an element of confusion, confusion with an element of dread, and everything in between.

The company joining our less popular southeastern route was a small number compared to the many more traveling directly south. The drive itself was mostly smooth and, for my part, mostly quiet. Liz was busy recounting various kinds of family stories to Dayce to take his mind off from what we were going through, but I didn't pretend it was only for Dayce's sake. My mother chimed in every once in a while, but was mainly reserved. I kept watching the mirrors to make certain that the rest of our coalition were still in my sights, knowing staying together was our top priority.

Mr. Tillar guided the way until he parked at a rest stop about seventy miles from the bridge. It was already occupied by several others, but there were less than I projected there to be. As soon as we dismounted our vehicles, we were bombarded by questions from those who were famished for news. Neves' disposition made him best suited to tell our audience what had happened at the bridge, but not even he could have prevented them from feeling troubled.

"How much longer do you think you can go?" I asked Neves as we ate from our supplies near the van. I was having a simple heated soup straight from the can. Given the choice, I probably would not have been eating, but I knew Liz would have been worried if I didn't, seeing as I only had some water since we set forth.

"Twenty, maybe twenty-five miles at the most," Neves answered with his mouth full of sandwich. He was always an untidy eater.

“Did you see how close that was?” entered Bervin, practically yelling across the rest stop as he was returning from the washroom. “If we had arrived five minutes later, that would’ve been our asses.”

“I wonder if that’s happening in all the bridge crossings?” said Orins. “I hope Talib is far enough south for us.”

“What do you think, Rendry?” Neves asked Mr. Tillar, who was near his truck, but it was close enough for him to hear the conversation taking place.

“We keep going as planned,” he impassively responded. “If we want to change course, we’ll have to do it once we reach Talib.”

## Chapter Fifteen Casting

The time had finally come when Neves' truck expended its final drop of life. Instead of abandoning it for naught, we fastened it to Mr. Tillar's truck for the rest of the journey. If in the off chance the Spirits had not completely forsaken us, we hoped to find more diesel to keep it running. We touched the outskirts of Talib an hour before noon. We could not allow ourselves to waste any more fuel maneuvering our way into the town itself, so we parked at the edge of a park near the river where other refugees were making camp. They were filled with families and supplies of different sizes and characters, but all with the same goal. There were some organizers from the town directing people, but with the lights out here as well, there was little they could do other than keep order.

The rest of the day and night was better than I thought it was going to be, but still not what I would call restful. The following evening, after employing most of the morning and afternoon getting acclimated to our new setting, Dayce and I decided to use the remaining sunlight to go fishing by the river. It was good for the both of us. Dayce wanted to test the new skills he learned, excited to show his mother he could take care of us on his own, and I wanted to spend time with him, understanding I had not really talked to him since we left either home. We were not the first to get the idea. The town organizers had to keep watch over the herds of people, making sure no one seized more fish than was necessary and used practices that would not decimate the population. Dayce and I found a relatively secluded spot down a gently sloping hill.

Not long after we started attempting to catch dinner, a young man with the same intention joined us when he sat down a few yards away. He evidently considered his skin a blank canvas, as it was coated with tattoos.

Dayce noticed him and garnered a couple of inquisitive peeps before he could not help asking, "Do you have a bad memory?"

I was a bit embarrassed when he asked, but not at all surprised. The stranger looked at Dayce and me curiously, and returned his question with one of his own.

"What makes you say that, kid?"



“My dad says people who get tattoos must need a lot of reminding, so they get tattoos to help them.”

“That so?” he replied, eyeing me for a second, though it was anything but callous. I simply expressed an amused shrug. He stared at Dayce again with a more pleasant countenance than before and continued. “Your old man is right, in a way, but it’s not about losing my memory. It’s more like not losing my favorite things. You must have a favorite sports team, picture, or story, right?” Dayce nodded. “Well, you can lose a book, a photo, or I suppose even a memory or two, but you can’t lose it if it’s on you. You see?”

“I think so,” Dayce replied.

“Your old man doesn’t say people with tattoos are bad, does he?”

“No, he just says I can’t have tattoos until I’m old enough to buy a house or if we win the lottery.”

“That’s a good kid. So where you headed?” he asked me, but keeping his grin for Dayce.

“We don’t know yet,” I answered.

“I’m headed to the coast myself. I figure I might be able to catch a boat, go to some far away island and fish there for the rest of my life. Who knows, maybe I’ll be the one to restart the species.” I don’t know if it was because he found it funny or because he was thinking it could become a serious mission, but his grin widened.

“Are you here with others?”

He turned to gaze at the languid river. I don’t know if I might have asked him the wrong question, but he answered nonetheless.

“A friend of mine is with me. There were others, but we were separated before we crossed the river.”

“I’m sorry,” I said as kindheartedly as I could.

“No sweat, old-timer,” he said, as if it was foolish of me for trying to sound considerate.

I would have liked to ask more questions, such as at what bridge and how it happened, but it did not take much assessment to know it was not my place to ask. The next few moments were spent in silence, but it was far from a grave one. There was a soft zephyr whispering through our ears and which rippled the pale blue water. All the while, the warm colors in the sky faded as the sun made its final bow in the horizon. Even the refugees around us were dim and far

away. Dayce and I weren't actually talking much, but I still felt as though we had a meaningful exchange.

The tranquility was interrupted when the line of our acquaintance began to call the attention of its owner.

He rose and said, "This one's a fighter!"

The struggle persisted for several concentrated minutes. A stalemate seemed imminent, but just as the sun was leaving the brightest of its light behind, the fisherman finally trounced his catch. Rising above the water, I saw it easily reached a foot in length and, even with its recent defeat, it continued to thrash vehemently in the air, still not willing to accept its demise.

The victor, after trying to steady the line, released his grasp from the fishing pole and shouted, "Dammit!"

"What is it?" I asked him.

"The fish, it's bleeding all over," he responded coolly, inspecting the fish with bodily contempt.

I warily began walking toward what he had caught, not remembering commanding my legs to do such a thing. The catch writhed every which way, with more than a trifling effort to return to its rightful domain. I made sure before completely leaving Dayce's side to take a stern glare at him as a sign not follow in my steps, enforcing it by keeping my arm between me and him. He obeyed, but his eyes stayed watching in the background. I tip-toed closer to the bloated looking animal, becoming nauseated when I caught a whiff of its putrid stench. It seemed to be gaining power as it beat itself more aggressively against the ground, generating a revolting squashing noise with every flop. Despite the offending smell and sound my nose and ears picked up, they were secondary compared to what my eyes could not fail to identify. Glistening crimson blood leaked uncontrollably from its oval shaped eyes at the top of its head and the gills on its stomach. When it would lay immobile for a moment, I noted that its inflamed eyes burned a flash of rainbow-filled color as they reflected the rays of the wilting sunset, making it appear more alive than it ever was. Only one thought came into my mind with this sight.

"Infected," I said to myself, and I suppose to the fisherman next to me.

"Beautiful," said the catcher of the sordid creature, with an exhale to reveal he was nothing but derisive.

After beginning to wonder what we should do next to the miserable animal, I unexpectedly saw a foot long hole appear beneath the creature, dropping it below the surface. I thought my eyes had deceived me, but after blinking a few times, I saw it had indeed plunged into the ground. When I came to terms that my eyes were undertaking no elaborate scheme on me, I saw the dirt around the hole enclose itself over the fish, completely burying it. I was astonished by what I saw, knowing what the action represented.

I looked at the person who had undoubtedly created it and asked him, “You’re a spirit warrior?” I hoped my amazement didn’t entirely shine through, since I was sure he received enough of that.

He returned the look I gave him, and replied with a little humility, “I’m technically no warrior, but I do know a thing or two.”

“That’s so cool!” I heard Dayce say behind me, taking some rushed steps up to us. He had enough excitement for the both of us. “He can control Evon!”

“Not only that, I can make a bit of fire too,” said the elemental conjurer, “but that zaps my energy more than anything, so I use it sparingly.”

“We better tell the organizers what we found or people might start eating the infected fish,” I suggested, my inner child in awe at meeting a spirit warrior.

His expression told me he thought it too much trouble for him to come along, but finding he could not think of an excuse to refute my words, he said, “Lead the way, old-timer.”

“It’s Roym by the way,” I informed him, hoping that would end my impromptu label.

“And I’m Dayce,” eagerly inputted my son, adding a look of admiration.

“Yitro.”

I didn’t blame the organizer we found for having misgivings to our words, or my words, as I did all of the talking. I knew it was not going to be easy to swallow such news. He wanted to see it with his own eyes, saying we might have mistaken it for something else. I could not fathom what we could have misidentified it for, but I didn’t think he knew either. We led him to the creature’s burial site. When we were near, Yitro did the honors of warping the soil to uncover the grave. As soon as the fish was exposed, it began flopping wildly in its tomb. Its eyes were brighter and bloodier than before.

“Spirits, the little bastard’s still alive!” said an amazed Yitro.

“Shit,” stated the organizer, sounding more annoyed than shocked by what he saw. “Looks like the infection can get to marine life too. This isn’t going to go over well. Well, thanks for letting us know.” He turned to Yitro and fretfully requested, “Do you mind burying it again, and maybe a bit deeper?”

“Sure. I’ll even make sure to kill it,” Yitro said with a half smirk.

A wave of his hand reburied the corrupted being and, after making his hand into a fist, I heard a muffled squish where the shallow grave was located. With the last of the daylight gone, we started our return to our respective camps.

Parting, I said, “Take care, Yitro.”

“Yeah, you too,” he replied. He next looked down at Dayce by my side and told him, “Take care of your old man, will ya?”

“Yes, sir.”

My son was still captivated and it only strengthened when he looked at him. Whatever Yitro would have said, he would have had the same answer.

I felt it was far too often I was a bearer of bad news. As expected, the update dejected my group. Liz might have been further troubled by the fact Dayce witnessed it, but she was eased when our son would only talk about the spirit warrior we met.

“I thought fishing in the river would be safe, at least for a little while longer,” said Orins. “I can’t believe the infection is already this far downstream. I mean, aren’t we a thousand miles from the Tower upstream?”

“The infection seems to make everything hyper and stronger,” answered Siena. “The constant pain it causes is what likely coerces everything to be in constant motion. So, theoretically, a fast moving fish going downstream nonstop can make a several hundred mile trip pretty quickly.”

“But isn’t that why we’re here, to have fresh food and water?” Valssi interposed, not attempting to hide her frustration.

“Can’t we just boil the water and cook the fish?” wondered Neves. “Wouldn’t that kill the infection?”

“There’s no way of knowing that,” I said. “We still don’t know exactly what this infection is. I doubt it works like a regular biological contagion due to its artificial nature.”

Siena next added, in a low voice that implied she did not want to listen to her own words, “I hate to be even more of a downer, but with this apparently being spread by using nanotechnology, it’s likely we can’t cure it using conventional means. We can’t take the chance to eat or drink anything if it has a chance of being contaminated.”

“Should we move away from the river?” Delphnia asked, with my mother nodding her approval.

With his strong baritone voice, Mr. Tillar responded, “We have food and our own water to last for a little while longer, and everything is pretty organized here. I say we wait a couple more days before deciding what to do, or at least until we hear news of a better option.”

Even if we wanted to, there was no quarreling with his words. We all at once assented to his sound judgment.

That night, the maligned fish returned in my dreams. I saw it through my locked eyes in its bloated form while it thrashed on the soggy soil near the river. It secreted water and blood every time it senselessly struck the ground, creating the stomach-turning squishing sound that made me want to both find water to help revive it and also stab it. But I could not do either; its revoltingly remarkable eyes would not allow me. In contrast to the rest of its sickly body, they appeared to be more blooming than it could ever have been before its inflicted malady. It was almost as if the infection had given it a stronger soul, but the body could not handle it. Suddenly, those captivating eyes grew larger, which in turn glorified their attraction, but then beauty overextended, and the eyes bulged out of their sockets and burst.

That was the last sound and image I saw before I awoke. My body was so drenched in sweat that it seeped through my clothes and into my sleeping bag. There were many flickering stars accompanying the half-moons shining on either side of me, and without really understanding why, I remembered an old passage I once read while in college and had not thought of since. It was scrawled into an ancient stone pillar by an unknown author, from a lost civilization, and in a bygone era. It stated: *“Though someone be simply sitting beneath the stars, lady misfortune can descend on him from the heavens above...”*

## Chapter Sixteen

### Faith

By morning, the news had spread throughout all the camp of our vile visitor in the river, imparting a disquieting ambiance across the entire haven. Liz, my mother, Delphnia, Bervin, and Dayce used the early light to seek some sort of comfort in the makeshift Spirit Temple made for the refuge. Siena and Valssi stayed by their mother's side, as she was not yet recovered from the excruciating hours she underwent before the journey. The rest of us were left with the singular purpose of devising a new route to embark on should we need to leave the town.

Due to our fuel situation, pushing farther south did not seem particularly welcoming. Going too far southward would lead us to the boundless Tridad desert, and with the hot season only starting, the outcome did not look promising. Nonetheless, if I was traveling alone, it would have been my choice. Heading east or west meant crossing densely populated towns and cities, likely meaning the chances were higher that travelers would bump into the invaders. But with family to take care of, we were forced to take resources into account, something a desert did not have much of. In the end, east won. The direction would take us to the coast, where we hoped to catch a ship that would take us to a safer region. We decided to head for a town called Ryse, residing about 350 miles southeast from our current position. Despite the highly populated area it was surrounded by, it was fairly isolated, anticipating that meant less competition for aid.

Throughout the next couple of days, the whirling turbines of helicopters and planes were almost continuously heard over our refuge. They kept coming in groups and they were moving north, but what lay there, I couldn't know. Four days and three nights had come and gone and I dare say there almost became a sense of normalcy. Obviously, not the normal I used to know, but of a new kind; a kind I could get used to if I was assured safety and supplies. More northern refugees joined us in the afternoon. With them came updates. According to their accounts, the military was left with no other option but to destroy many of the bridges over the river to keep the infected at bay. To me, the most surprising news was hearing that the Tower in Iva City had gone. Apparently, three days had passed since it was last seen soaring into the sky with an unknown trajectory. Whether it was mere coincidence or something more, Injector assaults also largely ceased to the north. Some took this as a promising sign. I wanted to as well, but I

couldn't and didn't. To me, this only signaled that their first phase was over, leaving me to wonder how many others there would be. However, I kept these thoughts confined within me.

Later in the night, after wavering a few too many times, I finally entered the Spirit Temple tent. It had been years since my feet had last treaded a holy floor, improvised or not. I regretted it had to take a world changing event to get me to cross the threshold. When I proclaimed my faith and distress by entering, I saw the plain white tent did not do it justice. Liz told me how beautifully it was decorated—with short candles hanging throughout, low wooden pews, an indigo carpet elaborately embellished with flowing floral patterns, and how I should enter for that alone—but I thought it was said from the mind of a hopeful soul and anything resembling the credence of the Spirits would have made her say that. There were around ten people inside, less than I thought, more than I wanted, and some seemed to have looked to have been there for several days and nights consecutively. I sat in the corner of the room nearest the draped entrance, expecting not to be noticed. I didn't know why, but I had never felt comfortable in a temple. My mother always said that I inherited the notion from my father, but I never knew what she meant by that. I was not sure what exactly drew me in that night. Was it answers? Respite?

Minutes ticked by and I was getting nowhere spiritually, emotionally, or mentally. As I was ready to leave in defeat, I saw a form pass to my right, making the candles dangling low from the ceiling flick their flames. I felt the new presence taking a seat by my side.

My wish to remain alone went unrequited when a soft spoken, but clearly masculine, voice asked me, "Having trouble sleeping?"

With a little glance to the fringe of my vision, I saw the old-fashioned blue robes of a cleric adorned on a man about my age, but I somehow felt like a child sitting next to him.

Perhaps that was the reason I didn't relish entering temples?

"I could ask you the same thing," I replied to the questioner, still staring at the candles hanging in front of me. I noticed one of them in the center had a dimmer flame than the rest. It struggled to dance with the others.

"I'll admit, my sleep has been sporadic as of late, but I'm sure even the most devout of us can say the same thing."

"And how's your devotion holding up?"

He sighed. "It's a trying time, but then I remember our world has faced difficult and seemingly insurmountable challenges before. Just in the last few generations we've seen severe droughts, plagues, great world wars, and yet, by the grace of our ancestors, we've pulled through every time, becoming stronger for it."

"You believe our ancestors can guide us out of this one?"

"What do you believe?"

"I was never one for worship or prayer, though I have always believed in the Spirits. I want to now, more than ever, but I have recently come to an unsettling thought. What if the Spirits do exist, but they're not strong enough to guide us through this?"

"Then we must remember the Spirits guide our souls and no enemy can take that away."

After a brief silence in contemplation, I asked, half in jest, "Do you know if someone can trade their soul for the safety of others?"

Almost sternly, he said, "We must never become desperate enough to wish for such a thing, no matter how well-intentioned it might be."

"Thanks for the talk, but I better get back." I stood up to leave. He raised himself up as well. It was here I perceived the center flame had gone out. "Spirits guide you."

"And you as well."

At first, I left the temple not feeling especially enlightened, neither better nor worse, but I didn't give the Spirits and their mediators enough credit, for that same night, I slept a deeper sleep than I had in days. Not even dreams dared disturb me.



## Chapter Seventeen

### Exiled

On the ensuing afternoon, Liz and I were enjoying a quiet moment watching Dayce play with some new playmates in the jungle gym. He was an outgoing boy and if we moved thirty different times he would gain thirty different best friends. The sound of children laughing was deposed by the echoes of remote gunfire. It could not have been too far away, originating beyond a thick passage of trees in the direction of the river about 150 yards away. Before I understood how exactly it came to be, I already had Dayce in my arms and hastily placed him in the van. Delphnia and my mother were already there preparing our lunches. Next to the van I saw Valsi standing on the lowered tailgate of her father's truck. She was holding his hunting rifle, ready to meet any adversary. Bervin was conjointly holding a handgun of his own while standing alongside the truck. His confidence seemed unwavering; hopefully, he was as he looked.

Siena ran toward her sibling, anxiously telling her when she reached us, "Dad went to the river with Neves a few minutes ago. There was some type of commotion and they went to check it out."

More shots rang out. I joined Valsi on the tailgate.

"See anything?" I asked her as I scanned for the answer, cursing myself for not remembering to bring binoculars.

"No, there are too many trees in the way," she answered.

I unconsciously headed for the roof of the truck for a better vantage point, though it didn't make much of a difference. No one around us was panicking. Like us, they were mutely ogling at the tree line and hearing the intermittent barrage of shots. Sometimes I thought I could perceive the faint screams of the agonized in a way that reminded me of the cries emitted from the kites. Finally, a panicked crowd started to emerge from the woods. With them appeared a running Neves and Mr. Tillar.

"Dad, what's happening!?" Valsi yelled out to her father when she thought him close enough to hear her voice.

"We have to go now!" Mr. Tillar barked back. He was out of breath, but that did not impede his running or his voice.

"Infected are coming! Dozens of them!" added Neves with a strained voice.

My heart accelerated its beats, my lungs needed air, and my skin began to feel damp. As soon as Neves and others like him spoke the words, supplies were getting cleared and vehicles were being filled. Packing was easy, as we were always careful not to leave many provisions out of our vehicles. Leaving turned out to be a bit more challenging to achieve at first. Word speedily spread about the incoming peril and not one second was being spared by the hundreds of refugees. Thanks to the numerous avenues the town had prepared for a possible evacuation, the early trial of maneuvering our way through the park and streets did not last long. With Talib several miles behind us, we were soon at a judicious pace. Our escape route traveled southeast.

Disrupting our sighs of relief was Dayce excitedly exclaiming, “Daddy! Look! There’s Yitro!”

I saw he was peering out the left window. Glancing at my left side mirror proved my child correct. Yitro was sitting in the passenger seat of a red jeep, which I could only tell was red by the exposed streaks of dry mud. Going by his hand dangling out the open window, I thought him pretty carefree. I began to wonder if he had no other temperament. I had not talked to him since the evening I met him, in fact, I had not seen him since then. In the driver seat was a girl I assumed was the friend he mentioned he had escaped with. She was just as young as he was and, while pretty, was the opposite I imagined Yitro’s girlfriend would dress like, since she couldn’t have been more modest in appearance.

“Get his attention, Daddy!” Dayce begged me.

“Who’s Yitro?” asked my mother from the backseat, who appeared surprised by Dayce’s reaction.

“He’s the spirit warrior I told you about,” I made her recall.

“Him? I imagined someone more civilized looking. I’m glad you didn’t turn out that way.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I think Roym can pull off the bad boy look,” said Liz lightheartedly, glad to have something normal to talk about.

My mother was about to respond, but Dayce, apparently not hearing any of the conversation, said, “Dad, he’s right next to us. Honk the horn!”

I nonverbally thanked Dayce for interrupting my mother’s response by complying with his request. It only necessitated a single honk to detain Yitro’s attention. He returned Dayce’s ecstatic wave with a more tranquil one. We continued to stay in each other’s sights during much

of the drive. The road was disciplined, persisting in the same direction with few turns or bends, which helped in keeping us together. We saw sixty more miles of the open road before it started becoming much less uncluttered. The ends of car lines jamming the highway forced us back into a crawl. Why we were ensnared stayed a mystery until we scuttled five miles more. A military blockade was redirecting traffic to a more northern course. Seeing as we were barely moving, I saw Siena and Valssi exit from their truck up ahead and walk toward a group of soldiers blockading a motorway, with certainly the purpose of searching for answers to fill in the blanks.

“So, what is it?” I asked Siena when she visited my window after she spoke with the soldiers for a minute.

“They said there has been a lot of Injector activity to the south in the last couple days. It doesn’t look like we can go southeast for a while.”

“Great,” I said with an irritated exhale. Siena was about to turn around when I called her back. “Oh, by the way, do you mind going up to that red jeep and telling them what you heard?”

“Sure,” she replied, taking a look their way. “Who are they?” She looked as if she was worried she should somehow already know them.

“He’s the spirit warrior Dayce and I met.”

“Oh, okay. Dad says to keep following him for now, not that there’s much choice with all this traffic.”

I was starting to think I was a fixture in a scenic painting after some thirty miles staring at the same ginger fields of grain every which way. At some point, we found ourselves on top of a hundred foot high hill. It didn’t seem all that tall when I saw it from a distance, but the more we advanced, the higher up we went. I soon realized we were overlooking a city that was larger than most, smaller than some, several miles away to our right. Despite the streets being inundated with vehicles, I still sensed its desolation. The overcast sky did not help its disposition. The gray clouds were not afraid to take the throne from the sun and only seemed to become darker and all the more dismal with each scan I pilfered, waiting to conquer our ground with the downpour it was stubbornly holding on to.

Looking back to check if I could still see everyone, I felt Liz pull on my arm and, at the same time, whispering, “Roym...”

Her head was turned to the scenery on our right. Following her cue, I leered with her. Descending from the silver blanket of the sky, heading for the perimeter of the city, was a

Tower. It landed gracefully and with a resounding thud that I was able to feel a few seconds after its entrenching. It all suddenly made perfect sense. The Tower, the assembly of people that were now bound together, the Injector attacks that blocked access to the south and the similar attack we had fled from in the west, we were all part of a sick design weaved for our ruin. We were being treated like livestock. They were using their attacks to force us to converge into a corner; all the easier to defile us with their venomous infection.

Almost as quickly as the legs of the Tower met with the ground, and after ostensibly pausing to make sure all eyes were on its imposing frame, the toxic mist was seen merging with the city air. The sound of squawking horns started to ascend from the vehicles around us, as though the haste of our pace depended on the decibel level. I did not follow in their pursuit, as enduring on this road was the last thing I wished to do. It would only take us two miles closer to the city before we had the opportunity to turn east again, meaning we would surely be exposed to the infection at some point. We were trapped.

With as much composure as possible, I said, “Mom, make sure all the backpacks are filled with as much food and water as possible, along with anything else you might feel is important.”

Liz stared at me uneasily, knowing how the wheels were turning in my mind. The first thing I wanted to do was to reach the nethermost of the hill. The minutes continued to lag and the clouds continued to become darker, but we managed only a few turn of the wheels before the line seemed to outright stall. The billows of clouds were intensifying their growling, but the tenacious rain was still not willing to heed to their appeal. The wind was howling, but, thankfully, if I was allowed to be thankful for anything, it was gusting to the north. With any luck, it would not change its mind for some time and help to keep the infection from reaching us. Some in the traffic jam had become so desperate to move that they tried to force the line forward by pushing the vehicle in front of them, but the only task they accomplished was to aggravate the people around them, raising the tension ever higher.

After thirty minutes of vainly waiting for some sort of real progress and watching the darkness creep nearer, I saw people begin to start a new journey on foot. Every time I saw another person, another couple, or another family pass us, each carrying only the little of the person they used to be, I turned to see Liz’s eyes filling up with more tears. I held her hand as she struggled not to cry, or, more accurately, trying not to sob too loudly. Dayce was still

foremost in her mind, not wanting to worry him with her lamentations. I gently pressed her hand in mine, hoping it would make her struggle easier to bear, to know she was not fighting her battle alone. I was beginning to feel her strength revive when I saw Neves and Orins exit their inoperative truck, still attached to Mr. Tillar's vehicle three cars ahead of mine, and went to pay a visit to their guide. It wasn't too long after that when Bervin walked by us to join them. He collected a quick glimpse at me as he went, confirming I was not the only one whose mental wheels had been turning.

"I have to go for a minute," I said, turning to Liz. "Will you be okay?"

Her eyes were glistening from her tears, but she shut them with my closing words, wanting to prevent an outflow. She answered me by squeezing my hand tightly and then letting go. She might have also nodded, or she might have simply been lowering her head.

"Stay inside, Dayce." I ordered, watching him through the rearview mirror. "Don't even open the window." I looked at my mother for confirmation, which she gave. "I'll be right back."

The deliberation wasn't long, since there was only one clear choice to make. We had to evade our sightless pursuers on foot. We had to risk the wind altering its course and pray it would be sympathetic to our plight. Near the end of our conference, Yitro and his partner came to accompany us.

"Hey, old-timer. Nice day, isn't it?" Yitro greeted dryly.

"You must be the spirit warrior Roym mentioned," Mr. Tillar surmised. "You're Yitro, correct?"

"That's right, sir," he replied. I supposed he did deserve that title, but why was I stuck with mine? "This here is Eloram," Yitro went on, patting the girl on the shoulder. She simply gave a shy wave for her salutation. The complete opposite of Yitro, I thought. "So, are you guys gonna leave?"

A piercing clap of thunder quivered the black sky, making all of us shudder with it. After that short pause, we confirmed our unavoidable exodus.

"That's what we're going to do," said Yitro. "I'm assuming we're heading east?"

"Yes," Mr. Tillar answered, which was his way of showing his approval for Yitro's self-invite. "The first step is going down this hill and find shelter if it rains. Once we get to clearer streets, maybe we can find an abandoned car or someone willing to give us a ride."

It only took a few minutes to gather all we could for our outing, carrying most things in backpacks. Each step I strode farther from the Tower eased the pain of my distress, however, Kaya hindered our speed significantly. Her overexertion at the hospital still appeared to linger and her shock of the invasion must have had a greater effect than I had formerly thought. She rarely involved herself in conversations. When she did talk, it was sometimes in incoherent sentences. On the other end of the spectrum was Dayce, who was not as troubled as I felt he would normally be. His eyes were often on Yitro and his companion, regularly trying to follow his steps and emulate his movements. His excitement was noticeable, although, when Yitro would look directly at him, Dayce attempted to contain it, but he would restore his profound interest when Yitro turned away. Tiredness or fear did not exist in him for much of the night, and I felt I would be eternally indebted to our newest cohort for this.

While the thunder continued to roll, the rain itself accumulated to little more than a sprinkling, allowing us to walk without stopping. Strange to say, but it was here when the realization that nothing was ever going to be the same hit me the hardest. It was not my first sight of the crashed ship, the Towers landing by the cities, the lights going out, or even the killing of the infected kite. No, it was seeing my family reverted to a nomadic tribe as they walked through the slowly forming mud, carrying what was left of their life on their backs, heading, quite literally, into the unknown.

There were places we passed throughout the night that could have been used as shelter, but we never stopped, if anything, we walked a little quicker to not tempt our desires. Not many others opposed our sentiments, not seeing anyone stop for shelter. The threat was still too strong and no roving soul was ignorant of it. We trudged across derelict neighborhoods where families would never again make their memories, parks that would remain childless, abandoned vehicles that might never roll again, and fellow nomads. Sometimes, when the clouds paused from their thunderous tumult, I could hear the drone of helicopters and jets fly over us. When I looked up, I spotted the small dots of blinking lights to give evidence that they were there. They did not appear to have any intention of attacking the Tower. It almost felt as if the night itself was an extension of the Tower's looming shadow insulting our desperate journey, and with every new shadow the night created, we marched a little faster to avoid it.

## Chapter Eighteen

### Parting

More and more people kept emerging from the deep dusk. Their worn out faces carried no expression on their stiffened features, their heads slumped low to avoid the many reminders of the mad world we now lived in. The footprints I saw pressed neatly into the soggy ground were almost as vacant as the people who left them. At multiple points we were able to catch hints of the countless vehicles hopelessly tangled on the roads for miles beyond our sights.

When I detected the horizon was gaining a lighter complexion from the nearing dawn, I started to scout for a place to rest our tiring legs. Dayce rested on my back, shifting my backpack to my front side, and he seemed to gain an extra pound every few steps. Before I could get too serious in my scouting project, some of the refugees ahead of me started to walk with haste, eventually turning a corner to what appeared to be a gated community. We followed them. Huddled by the entrance of the walled neighborhood were dozens of civilians surrounding the tan uniformed soldiers of the Caddoa Army, who were acting as guardsmen in front of the gates.

An amplified voice filled the air. It came from a soldier holding a megaphone declaring, "...children. I repeat. We will begin evacuating as soon as our birds arrive. Women and children are top priority. Once they are cleared we will then start with the men. Women and children can start entering through the gates..."

I didn't look to anyone for confirmation to do what I knew was necessary. I bent down to allow a half sleeping Dayce to slide off my back, letting my pack slip off as well.

"Dayce, did you hear that? You and Mommy get to go on a helicopter ride," I told him. I tried to sound energetic, but it came off as a poor imitation of it when a trace of sadness invaded my tone. Luckily, Dayce was too tired to realize it.

"Not you?" he asked drowsily, rubbing his eyes to awaken them.

"No, I'll have to go later." I wrapped my arms around him, not only because I badly wanted to, but because I needed to make sure he did not catch a glimpse of the heartache on my face. "You and your mom are much more important, so you get to go first."

In a frightened and timid voice, Liz began to say, "But, Roym, I don't-"

Before she could finish, I rose and squeezed her in my arms, saying as steadfastly as I could, "There's no way you or Dayce are staying. Don't worry, I'll be right behind you. We'll be fine."

I held on to her for as long as I was able, relishing every moment of it. I beheld her eyes with great severity to make sure they were carved into my memory, in case I would ever need them. They sparkled with a beauty I had never seen before. I almost wished I had not drunk them in. I didn't want to let her go, but at the same time, I never wanted to let her go more. I next faced my mother, who appeared so solemn standing there looking back at me. I only remember her staring at me like that once before. Using some firm coaxing, I walked them over to the gates to make certain they were able to leave the abominable place in the first run. Before I completely entrusted them to someone else, I asked the nearest soldier of their destination.

He replied, with only half of his attention on me and the other to the crowd, "Arora. It's in the desert, but the lights still work. Please, sir, I'm going to have to ask you to step back."

I followed his request, receding a few steps to give my farewell, though I tried not to think of it that way. I shared a quick kiss with Liz and afterward told Dayce, "Take care of the girls until I get back."

He nodded and said, "I will, Dad."

His awakening mind was just now starting to grasp what was happening. I regretted obliging Liz to handle his full understanding on her own. Everyone was saying their goodbyes and they started to cross the gates.

Siena was the last to leave. Before she crossed to the other side, she came and told me, "I will never leave Liz or Dayce's side. I swear nothing will happen to them as long as I'm with them."

I nodded my appreciation, but I doubt she saw it, for, in a flash, she was lost in the sea of women and children. Their fates were now out of my influence, but there was some consolation knowing they would soon be far from a Tower. Neves had already found Arora on the map when I went to meet what was left of our group. The small town was located about six hundred miles south of where we stood and forty miles from the coast. The nearest major population area was five hundred miles away and an air force base adjoined it. If the lights there did actually still work, then I trusted they would be comfortable there.



After a wait of less than ten minutes, with the daylight rising little by little and the shadowy clouds dissipating to unveil more of the morning, the whirring of an advancing helicopter became audible. It momentarily became visible and it landed inside the gated community. It was a large two-rotor helicopter, with what looked to be extra fuel pods strapped to its lower frame, and it was one of a group, the rest of which continued flying overhead. The helicopter soon departed southward, holding the most precious cargo it had ever carried. The rest of the morning held this pattern. A transport helicopter landed and carried away six to seven dozen women and children every hour or so, but there was no stopping the influx of more families inundating the evacuation site. The men continued to wait; some nervously, some irritably, but always relieved that their families were heading to safer pastures. Sleep did not cross any of our minds, even if every single person there was exhausted. Still, I felt more contented than I had in weeks.

The state of the men looked a little dire by mid-afternoon. I almost concluded that our collective fates would be to wait on that spot until an agent of eternity swallowed us. Finally, our ears picked up the grumble of engines coming down the road. There was a couple of army Humvees leading a convoy of buses and a couple of semi-trucks. As it stopped near us, a soldier on the stand of the .50 Cal stood up and, while reading a clipboard he had in the left hand and with his mouth to a megaphone, he addressed the male crowd.

“A route has been cleared for your transfer to the airport where we have several birds waiting. Men who have families headed to Arora must board either the semi-trucks or the school buses directly behind them. Those heading to Rett must board...”

That was all I needed to hear. We trudged toward the designated vehicles, ending up taking the second semi-trailer after the first filled to capacity. It was awkward standing tightly among the other men in the cramped space, only enhancing my earlier vision of being treated as livestock. One door remained open to help ease our claustrophobia and to make sure that acquiring air wasn't going to be a struggle during the trip. Through the open door and between the heads and bodies of the people in front of me, I saw the streets had swelled with more groups of exiles, some of which were chasing after us, begging to be taken in. I caught a glimpse of a woman holding up a small child before they were lost among the wailing mass of the destitute. An empathetic guilt stopped me from attempting to see what we passed outside, but nothing could stop me from hearing their frantic pleas. The convoy halted about twenty minutes into the

excursion. The warmth of the bright sunlight felt welcoming on my clammy skin once I stepped out the semi. I observed I was standing in the middle of a small airport reserved for equally petite aircraft. There were a handful of small planes lined on the tarmac, but the soldier told everyone to board any of the three robust transport helicopters located on the grass nearby.

I found myself forcibly ushered into the closest one by the crowd of eager legs. The sunlight faded as the ramp closed, leaving the small circular windows as the only source of infiltration by the natural light. In a moment, gravity no longer held sway over the helicopter and we were in total union with the air. Looking out the window to my right, I saw the other aircraft began matching our movements. My companions were all scattered among the crowd, but I could still see each of them clearly, with Mr. Tillar standing the least distant. Each of their faces were loosened from the bolts of stress, gratified to have escaped the horridness on the ground below. If anyone had a fear of heights before, they did not anymore. The other groups of men were in an excited clamor as well.

I closed my eyes to better sense the rising of the helicopter's elevation, and to see if I could sleep standing up, when I overheard something that made my bones spasm; the sound of glass shattering. The only thought I had, before feeling the pain from bumping violently against the wall and other bodies, was thinking that the sound must have originated from within the cockpit. Just as everything started spiraling out of control, it came to a complete and abrupt stop. We had hit the ground, that much was clear, yet I still felt as though I was spinning. All I could definitely perceive was a perpetual throbbing in my head. I did not even comprehend for the next few seconds that I was being crushed by innumerable bodies. I was aware enough to know I was alive, but unaware enough to know to what extent. I wanted to escape from the crushing pile, but I unable to do so in my first efforts. It was only after a few moments of concentrating all my energy and sensing the decreasing weight of the pile that was I able to drag myself out.

My jostled brain could not focus on one thing for long. Combined with the various incomprehensible bustling noises the bellowing of dozens of men generated, my rattled head prevented any clear pathways for my overloaded nerves to competently command my body. However, everything was reset when I saw the lifeless body of Rendry Tillar lying beside me, his leaden eyes looking up at the ceiling, or what used to be the right wall of the helicopter. Still on my stomach, I crawled to his side. I despairingly tried shaking his body and screaming his name, but no response came. The blood pooling under his head told me no response was ever going to

come. I didn't have a chance to start mourning for him, as I then heard a sharp and vaguely familiar cry of pain amid the other exclamations and expletives. My engrossment was instinctively shifted to search for the source of the wail, which I found was Orins. He was kneeling and grasping his left shoulder, grimacing in discomfort. When he ventured to look about himself, I was the first image he shifted his eyes to, as if he sensed I was watching him. He next recognized whom I was next to.

As he gazed dejectedly at the body, he began to form a word on his lips, but it was unable to be articulated. He was interrupted by a metallic thud of what must have been another helicopter crashing. Examining more of the space, I saw Bervin prone over a window. A sick feeling constricted my stomach. I moved a little closer to see that he was still breathing and actually groggily awake, relieving some of the stomach ache. I compelled myself to start helping him up, pushing through squirming bodies, and although he was clearly shaken up, he did not look injured enough to preclude him from walking under his own strength. I soon found Neves and Yitro among the amending crowd in essentially the same manner. A sharp beam of light was spilling in, coming through the open ramp the crash had produced. It was open no more than two feet wide. At the time, I did not appreciate how fortunate we were to have that happened. The piece of sun coming from the crevice beckoned us away from captivity, which many yielded to.

"What made us crash?" wondered Neves, still trying to get himself back together.

"Where's Rendry?" Bervin asked nearly at the same time.

An awful anguish went through my body when he asked it, but I forced myself to turn to the body and answer, "He didn't make it."

"Spirits," said Neves' lips, though I could not tell if I had actually heard it or not. "May they guide him to a better place," he continued more loudly, speaking for all of us.

Fate did not allow Mr. Tillar to receive the reverence he deserved. A sudden salvo of gunfire erupted from outside, involuntarily making most of us in the chopper crouch to the ground.

In a hushed tone, Orins shouted, "Fuck! It has to be those Injector things!"

A muffled shout came from beyond the outer opening of the ramp, which said, "Let's go! You're not safe here! Let's go!"

Whether we wanted to move or not, the crowd of people pushed us toward the exit. To keep from tripping or falling, I had to balance myself on a corpse. The image of Mr. Tillar's inert

body being treated in the same manner flashed in my eyes and it made me nauseous. I reviled myself for doing the same, unintentional or not. The man I respected for much of my adult life, deserved to be respected just as much, if not more so, in death. The conviction, however, was invariably replaced by self-preservation when I met the full brunt of the sun's rays. With my ears hearing so many noises and my eyes once again trying to adjust to the light, I could not make out anything right away. Nebulously, in the middle of all the turmoil, I did hear, "Buses! Everyone to the buses!" It was exclaimed by the soldier beside the ramp. He was declaring it so sluggishly that, in my estimation, everything around me seemed to be happening at half its normal speed.

I ran with such ferocity on my way to the vehicles, I imagined my legs would reach a bus before the rest of my body. The transports were some twenty yards distant, but they seemed to be an extra zero or two farther away. Halfway to my aspiration, I was swathed with a penetrating heat on my right side. My curiosity conquered me and I turned my head to spot two helicopters lying contorted on the ground. The nearest one was immersed in flames, unwaveringly consuming all the steel it possessed. I could detect stifling screams coming from underneath the blare of the firestorm. With the ramp still jammed in its locked position, I actually caught myself hoping they would die of suffocation before the inferno could touch them. About eighty yards farther out, there was the incarnation of a firefight. Humvees, army jeeps, and even a tank contributed, but who they were challenging was concealed either by distance or mechanism.

Anyone who might have been in or near the airport at the time were linking with our fleeing group. Some vehicles must have left right after dropping off their passengers, for there were only two buses left to choose from, which did not look like enough. The five of us were able to finally reach a school bus. It was crowded, but we fit in, even if there were no seats left. Not that I complained. I wasn't calm enough to sit down. A few moments and much anxiety later, the soldier directing the wheel closed the door when he saw not even an insect more could enter without bursting the seams apart. He stepped on the gas pedal as hard as he could, forcing me to fall back a little. There were people hysterically banging on the exterior side of bus. I tried not to listen to their despairing entreaties and I knew better than to look out the windows. The driver did not pay any attention to them either, simply making the bus move faster.

Almost as soon as the bus, which was the lead one, finished its U-turn, I heard the windows to our left side shatter in a procession. It forced me and everyone else to duck. The bus swerved and the driver shouted a curse, but he kept the bus under his control and surged it to its

utmost gear. Except for the shattered windows, the vehicle did not appear to have suffered any worse damage. My immediate reaction was to ensure I had escaped unscathed. I combed for any trace of blood and waited for any pain that might arise in reference to any wound, but in not finding anything amiss, I investigated if anyone else had undergone any type of grievance. Orins was to my left and I asked him if he was hurt. All the color had left his face and moved into his eyes, for they were boiling in orange flame.

“Orins, what is it?” I asked, practically shouting it in my alarm.

He feverishly began pulling out something from his left shoulder, followed by another and then by several more. I perceived others around me were doing the same.

Neves, who was standing behind me, gripped his son’s arm. Virtually shouting in his own right, though he was trembling too much to make it one, he asked, “Orins, what’s happening? Are you okay?”

Orins’ head slowly revolved to meet his father’s. I don’t think he wanted to look at him, but how could he deny him the right? Orins’ eyes had already lost much of the fire they possessed and were now sunken and sullen. Neves and I next became aware of what he was holding. Between his fingers was an inch-long, clear needle, its tip stained in blood. I gulped down a lump of gathered saliva when I noticed several more needles were still impaled on his upper arm and neck, with some others resting on the floor. Orins’ face was one of pure agony when I beheld it next.

“Oh, fuck,” said Yitro, who was behind Orins. “In just a few minutes-”

Someone at the back of the bus, easily discernible above the mumblings, yelled, “Stop the bus! They’re infected! Get them off!”

The bus complied with this panicked outburst by braking into a bumpy stop.

The soldier next opened the door, stood from his seat, and said, “All right, whoever was struck by even one needle, get off now! If you don’t, you will be endangering the non-infected in a few minutes! I also need someone who can drive a bus to meet me up here!”

Half the people started shouting and the other half remained silent. I partook with the silent. The second bus passed us, but I could not tell what its condition was.

“I-I have to go, Dad,” said Orins. “I-I feel it’s s-starting to hurt.”

Neves was at a loss. Before he could muster a reply, though I doubt he would have said anything for a long while, the people around us were becoming more hostile in their attempt to

force anyone with the unfortunate mark off the bus. How quickly a person could be treated as a horrible monster; how quickly we could become those monsters.

Orins, now with tears streaming down his face, turned to me and said, “Roym, tell Liz she’s been the best sister a brother could ask for. Tell her I’m sorry I didn’t get to let her plan my grand wedding.” He then clasped his father’s shoulders and started to say “Dad-”

Bodies were being pressed into us, which made us push the people in front of us. The chaos in the bus ascended. The pushing escalated into shoving, then intensified into ramming, but it all came to a stop with a gunshot. The soldier had fired a bullet out the fragmented window. In the quiet, we could hear was the remote battle persisting in the background.

“Enough!” the warrior bellowed. “Everyone out! Those who aren’t infected can go back in!” Everyone stayed staring at him. “Move! Or I fucking swear to the Spirits I’ll start shooting everyone who doesn’t!”

No one gambled to test his assertion. Most who were standing were forced to exit. The indistinct echoes of battle fumed in the air as we stood outside the bus door. Only the ones who were fortune enough to have escaped our enemy’s vengeful strike were allowed to return back inside, to tempt destiny once again. Neves and I stayed with Orins for as long as we could push it. His veins were already becoming more pronounced, swelling darkly all across his skin. I could basically see his blood being pumped through his frame, and I sometimes thought I could hear and see his heart beating within his chest. It was impossible for him to hide the pain he felt. In the tears he released, coming from a combination of both his physical and emotional ache, I saw a small trace of blood come out with them. Others who shared in the repulsive corruption were also going through the same signs, making it easier to separate them from those uninfected. Time was remorseless to our farewell.

“Dad,” Orins was barely able to say. He grappled with the impurity that sought to overtake him so that he may last a few moments more, knowing it would prevail in the end. “Dad, please tell Mom I died a hero or something. Just don’t tell her... I... I died like this.”

His father embraced his weakening son, who fell readily in his arms. Neves had tears carving a river into his cheeks when he whispered something in his son’s ear. I could not hear what it was, and I didn’t try to listen.

“Who can drive the bus?” I heard the soldier ask.

He had gone outside, but he was inquiring inside the vehicle in question. I noticed for the first time that his face and hands were displaying the symptoms of the curse.

“I can,” I heard a man inside the bus reply, seeing him stand up through the window. He did not look especially confident.

“Then get on the driver’s seat and leave now!” the soldier demanded with an increasingly unsteady voice. “Go back where we came from. They still might be able to get you out of here.” The soldier hastily turned his face from the bus and even from those who shared in his woe.

I beheld Neves still despairingly holding on to his trembling offspring. I didn’t want to do it, but I could see the new driver take his allotted seat, so I clenched Neves’ arm and urged him somberly, “We have to go.”

Neves looked miserably into my brother-in-law’s blood filled eyes, which only made his own fill with heavier grief.

“Go!” Orins cried, roughly removing his father’s grasp from his arms. “Mom can’t lose you too!”

I led the distraught father back to the bus to begin the new leg of our failing journey to escape, hating having to be the one to part the son and father in their last words together. It was impossible not to imagine myself and Dayce in their position. The door closed seconds after we stepped into the vehicle and we began moving in that instant. Not once did Neves look back, he would not have been able to continue if he had. The bus looked so empty and desolate compared to how it was before. Only half the people remained, giving Neves and me enough room to sit in the back. Bervin came and squatted next to his friend’s seat and tried his best to comfort him, no matter how much in vain that seemed.

Excluding the few whispers of prayer and support, everyone kept to themselves. I couldn’t help stealing a look behind me. I scrutinized the forsaken, knowing any one of them could have very well been me. Why wasn’t it me instead of Orins? Why wasn’t it another world instead of ours? The group behind us became smaller and hazier. When they were hardly visible in the line separating sky from ground, I saw a man, who appeared to be our former driver, lift his gun to his head and, after a short salute, his body collapsed to the ground. The vague pop of the gunshot wasn’t too clear from where we were, but I could feel everyone simultaneously shiver when the soldier’s body fell. I looked away after that.

The only noise I heard for the next few minutes was the rushing of the wind thrusting through the broken windows. It was here I recalled that we had not taken Orins' pack. This recollection made me habitually look at mine. Sticking to the strap of my upper left shoulder was the delicate glimmer of a needle half-filled with a dark purplish color. I fervently plucked it and tossed it out the window.



## Chapter Nineteen Stationary

My view was of the brown seat in front of me, but that's not where my contemplations lied. I was absent within the past I hardly remembered, the present I did not fathom, and the future I could not foresee. My mentor, my once potential father-in-law, my brother-in-law, and tens of millions around the world were lost, and I had yet to see our enemy. Even with our world collapsing before our eyes, they preserved their enigmatic status. The sky would have been a more realistic adversary to wage war against. The only entities we were permitted to see were their malevolent ships looming arrogantly by our cities. Never before had I imagined something could be so dominant and be so invisible at the same time. It was as if their shadows alone held mass.

My overwhelmed mind did not realize the bus was coming to a stop until it had become completely stationary. I observed that a few soldiers on the road had caused our halt with a makeshift checkpoint.

"Keep it still," I heard a soldier say to the driver as she eyeballed the damage to our transport. Given the reduced state of the windows, I had no trouble hearing her. "Where's the private? What happened?" She looked young, but did not sound as though she was.

"We were attacked," our driver answered. "A lot of us had to stay behind, including the private." The soldier bit her lower lip when he gave his explanation, but that was the only emotion she expressed, the rest of her face remaining stoic. "He told us to go back to the gated community."

"You can't go back. Most of our evac sites are being attacked, including the site up the road."

"Then where do we go?"

After taking a short pause, she advised, "Get on the side of the street and stay with us for now. Maybe we can still get a bird for you."

The driver did as requested. It was eerily calm considering the forays stirring on either side of us. I felt as if we were wedged between two noxious realms, each guarded by a sentry of Mistress Death. No one could relax, but no one tried to exit the bus or move about, as we desired to be ready to leave should another crisis occur. It was here I wondered what had happened to the

second bus. I never did find out. Every few minutes the silence would be splintered by distant gunfire, a far off explosion, or the buzzing of a passing helicopter. The wait was worse for Neves, as I was certain he was perpetually reliving what had transpired. He was quiet, like everyone else, his eyes incessantly boring into the floor, but I also sensed an inner intensity roasting within him. I was sure the first time his daughter and wife set their eyes to him, they would not recognize him as the same person.

A substantial hour had slipped away before we heard the soldier again. She informed us that a chopper was going to arrive to take us away from this timeless agony.

“Where would it drop us off?” our driver asked the female warrior. “Arora?”

“No,” she replied. “This one is going to Meltmore. Sorry, but only a few of our birds can make it straight to Arora. Just be glad we could get anything for you, a lot of Evac Zones were attacked and many airships either didn’t make it or won’t be able to return.”

I examined the map from the pack I was able to save. Meltmore lied at the edge of the desert three hundred miles away, making it just halfway to the city we wished to encounter. Still, I did not allow myself to become too discouraged. The region appeared sparsely populated and I was almost certain the personnel there would try to reunite us with our families after we arrived, or so I and the other men would demand. It was ten minutes later when the small cargo helicopter arrived. The sound of the twin propellers served to remind me that our enemy could also be listening to the hovering bastion and callously wait for us to board again before forcing us down, if they did indeed take pleasure in ripping away sanguinity beneath our feet. There were women and children aboard when we entered, but there was still ample room for the new arrivals. The occasional turbulence, adult chatter, and the spontaneous high-pitched squealing of some of the children were not enough to foil my overpowering fatigue. I was asleep as soon as I sat down on one of the corner chairs fixed against the wall.

I do not know how long I was restrained to the unconscious notions of my own mind, but when I came to, not much had changed, except the sunlight was vastly dimmer. It must have been no more than half an hour after my revival when I saw the outskirts of Meltmore, its suntanned buildings becoming larger with our descent. As soon as we disembarked, we were shepherded into an old bus, which was apparently used as a prisoner transport at one time, and which hauled us to a refugee camp. The electrical grid did not work here, but the camp appeared to be well organized and some synthetic lights indicated they had some generators active. The

only corporal drawback came in the form of the hot, dusty plain the town was settled on. I doubted my sinuses would enjoy the region much. I heard one of the men in our group ask a soldier, who was standing outside an insurance building they were using as a command center, when we would be transferred to Arora, but he had heard nothing of the kind and told him to check later. We were left with no choice but to wait tolerantly in the solitude of Meltmore.

It didn't take long to get acclimated with our new venue. We were assigned two small tents, with Bervin sharing with Neves, while I shared with Yitro. We ate at a designated food tent where I was never so happy to see a bowl of soup. I don't even remember if it was served hot or cold, or if it tasted good or not. Afterwards, I set off for my cot with the hope of acquiring a restful slumber.

Maybe it was longer than anything I had experienced lately, but it was definitely not soothing. The uneasy sleep had my eyes constantly reopening to see the tent's white ceiling. I kept seeing the same soldier saluting over and over again. Each time I saw him, he was closer and more corrupted until I could see the blood running down his eyes like a crimson waterfall. His veins were so dark and swollen that they looked ready to burst. I would be roused awake by the gunshot reverberating in my ears.

The following day passed without a single word of when we would be given transportation to Arora. There was, however, new updates making their way throughout the camp. The infection continued its annexation, becoming more widespread across the city we left, which forced the military to withdraw from much of their evacuation zones. Injectors were only bolstering their hostility toward military targets, though I came to hypothesize that their attacks were more of an aspiration to discontinue evacuations rather than seeing them as a legitimate threat.

"Do you think we should nuke them?" Yitro asked me later that evening. We were finishing up some of our canned rations as we sat on our squat bar stools outside our tent. The sun was setting in front of us and the sky to our backs was adorned with haughty stars taunting our ill luck.

"We might have no other option if this keeps up," I replied. "Though I doubt it'll work."

"You think they're invincible?"

"Invincible is a strong word. I'm sure if we get a strong enough bomb inside one of those Towers it could disable it, but it's made of pretty strong material from everything I've heard and

seen. Not to mention the shielding it must have and the other defenses we don't even know about."

"You sound as if we've already lost the war."

I was about to say that anyone who considered this a war was fooling themselves. That this was something more akin to a fight between a flightless insect and a fighter jet, and our only hope was if the insect miraculously managed to short circuit the jet. Instead, I looked straight ahead at the setting sun and said, "I just want to get back to my family." At least the sun knew it was going to come back tomorrow.

The sun did reappear the next morning, but that was not what woke me and my companion from our sleep. There was a furor coming from outside.

The first thing I heard distinctly was the sound of a woman's voice screaming, "He's not infected!"

I next heard a man yelling out sharply, "We can't take that chance!"

As I emerged from my shelter, with Yitro following close behind, I saw a dozen or so people alongside a tent a few yards down on my side of the row. Once I pushed through as much of the crowd as possible, I saw a boy no older than sixteen convulsing on the ground. Standing over him were two stout men. The less stout of the two was brandishing a pistol.

A woman, with the same voice as the one who had awakened me, was on her knees behind the two burly men, struggling to force her way between them to get to the boy, but with little success. "Please!" she entreated hysterically, which was difficult to hear clearly amid her sobbing and screams. "He has epilepsy! He can't control it! Please!"

The men were not listening to her heart wrenching pleas. The larger man reached down and grabbed the quaking boy by the arm. The gun totting man merely looked on with consent as he kept the woman back, her screams rising in pitch. No one moved. Whether it was the immediate threat of the gun or the fear of the virulent infection foremost in everyone's minds, no one showed any sign to attempt to stop the ruthless tormentors.

I muscled my way through the rest of the crowd using the little muscle I had, overtaken by a part of my soul I did not know I possessed, though always hoped I did.

The irrational being was beginning to drag the youth off to who knows where, when I exclaimed, "Let him go! For Spirit's sake, he's obviously not infected!"

The man released the boy and I saw the other point his firearm at me, each of their eyes flaring with paranoid indignation.

“This is for our own safety! Just stand back!” growled the unreasonable, shaking the gun he held, making me feel not untroubled.

He was clearly beyond my reason or his own. I felt drawing out my own weapon would only escalate the situation, so I did the only other action I thought could work. I yelled out, “Yitro!”

It was more instinctive than anything, since I could not be sure if Yitro would involve himself, or if he did, what he would do exactly. The uncertainties I held were vanquished when I saw the gun toting man soar upwards through the air in the blink of an eye. I had time to recall as he fell backwards that a fist-sized piece of the ground had ardently shot upwards and impacted directly under his chin. He landed on the ground already out cold. I glanced behind me to see Yitro casually standing amid the crowd. No one seemed to have noticed that he was the cause of this and they might have assumed I was the spirit warrior. Everyone, including the second brute, remained motionless and silent, either watching me or the fallen man before them. The lone sound came from the woman’s sobs as she scrambled to the boy, who had subsided his convulses, but was unconscious. I also went toward the youth. After giving the woman a look of sympathy, I was allowed to pick up the boy and carried him to the cot in his tent. I next asked an older gentleman standing near the entrance to find a doctor. He left straightaway, looking a little ashamed as he did so. As I went back to rejoin those outside, I saw the conscious man in the process of lifting his insensible compatriot off the ground.

Before he could complete the task, I asked him, “Do you think he’ll be saner when he wakes up?”

He stared at me for a moment, but it wasn’t one of contempt, but of remorse. “I’ll keep an eye on him,” he weakly replied. “Maybe the hit will do him some good.”

“Keep the gun away from him until you’re sure,” I said in my most commanding tone.

He timidly nodded, possibly expecting the ground to get its vengeance on him next if he did not comply. He proceeded to lift his friend and carry him toward their tent a dozen yards away.

“That was pretty ballsy, old-timer,” said Yitro, now standing next to me as the rest of the crowd dispersed.

“It’s a sad day when somebody standing up for a kid with epilepsy is considered ballsy,” I replied.

“Well, actually, I mean you could’ve just stood back the whole time,” he said, giving me a coy smile. “I would’ve knocked him out anyway.”

“I guess I didn’t really think it through. I’ll keep that in mind next time.”

Later in the day, after the boy had awoken and had been seen and treated by a doctor, I again checked to see whether our proposal was any closer to being fulfilled. The answer was in the negative. I was told the military was already stretched too thin, and as we were already in a refugee camp, we were no longer deemed a priority. I was also informed that the Injectors were actively targeting aircraft of all types, quickly reducing their already low availability. I could tell most of soldiers were beginning to get annoyed with our pestering. With the hope of rejoining my family becoming lower and lower, I needed to think of some way to reach them, so I asked a soldier if he could at least let my family know we were safe. The soldier responded by saying he would talk to his superior. It was the following day when the military jotted down the names of the men to update the Arora camp of our arrival. It wasn’t until we were telling them our names was I aware that this would be the way Liz and everyone would discover a brother, a son, an uncle, a father, and a husband were no longer in the dominion of the living. It felt wrong notifying them in this impersonal way, to let them speculate on how it all transpired. In the end, it was necessary and unavoidable.

Neves remained a shell of a man on each day and night I visited him during those early days in Meltmore. He was close to making me believe his spirit had already left his body. He drank little, ate less, and spoke not at all, nor did I attempt to converse with him at length. Only time held any promise to mend his mind. Nevertheless, an opportunity came forth to me one morning to lift his inflicted outlook. In the glare of coming daylight, I saw some kids playing shockball. I always correlated Neves and his happiest mood when playing or watching the sport that had given him his previously blessed life, so I asked Bervin to persuade him to accompany him on a walk, hoping that seeing the jubilant children playing his life sport would salvage some heartening memories and help bring him back from total misery. As Neves didn’t have the inclination to struggle, he readily yielded to the proposal of his friend. I was sitting outside my tent in the meantime, trying to watch his every move for any sign of revitalized life.

When they first passed by the lively bustle of the laughing children, I was already beginning to think my scheme would be in vain. Neves did not seem to pay any attention to them, almost as if they were ghosts only I could see. A few moments afterwards, however, I was shown that not all hope was lost. Neves took a short glance back at them. As Neves walked back to his tent, after some minutes strolling the area, he could not resist going up to the amateur players and begin giving them pointers. The children seemed to eagerly listen to their elder's instruction when it became apparent the stranger knew what he was talking about. He looked like his old self again, the one I remembered watching when he was first teaching me the finer points of the game over a decade ago. He had zero difficulty adapting to the youngster's innocent competition and I had just about forgotten the depression he had held moments before. Even I was uplifted when Bervin integrated himself with the group and proceeded to clumsily stumble about and generally act as the comic relief, to the youngsters' delight.

An hour had gone by when Neves returned to his tent, with, I'd say, a lightened heart. As soon as he walked through, I heard the weeping of a wounded man dripping out the heavy, swelled heart that had been caged the instant he walked away from his son. Venting sadness in a tent was not something new in this place, but it was something new in his.

That coming evening, for the first time since our arrival, all four of us ate and talked together in Neves' tent.

"They still won't move us, eh?" Bervin asked once he had finished his meal.

"No," I answered, halfway through my own stringy soup. "I checked again today. From the sound of it, we're going to be here a while."

"What if we just say Yitro was ordered to go to Arora?" he suggested. I could tell this wasn't the first time the idea had crossed his mind. "They won't know he's unregistered."

I glanced at Yitro, but he was still looking down at his food and did not appear to notice that his name was mentioned.

I answered, "I doubt they'll believe that. And even if they did, they might just 'change' his orders and send him somewhere else."

"That's something I've been curious about," Neves asked, which did catch Yitro's attention. "Why aren't you registered with the military? I always thought it was mandatory for anyone blessed with your gift?"

“It wasn’t up to me,” the recipient of the question replied, in a quiet voice that sounded a bit stiff. “I discovered my ability early on and my father didn’t want me to become part of the so-called ‘complex.’ But he had no problem making me become a part of his.”

“So who taught you?” asked Bervin.

“An associate of my father’s.” Yitro looked back down at his food. “He had a lot of connections. None of that helped him in the end, though.”

“He didn’t make it?” I asked.

“No,” he said wearily. “A silver lining for me in all this.”

“Eloram seems like another silver lining,” I said, feeling he wanted the subject changed. “What’s her story?”

He somewhat perked up, saying, “Sweet girl, isn’t she? If it wasn’t for her... Well, let’s just say I owe her. I’m at least glad she’s with good company. I know she’ll start seeing Dayce like a little brother in no time.”

“And Liz did always want a daughter,” I said, the remnants of a smile still on my face.

With the shadows becoming darker and the moons and stars brightening later that night, we received an update informing us that many of the Towers had departed from their cities. The next few days were met with much speculation and consternation on wondering what the next intentions of the Towers would be. It seemed everyone in the refuge was anticipating their strike at any given moment.

Not long after this news, reports of the most intriguing kind sprung from the working radios in the camp. Valland had taken the action many thought long overdue. The nation decided to take their fate into their own hands by exercising their nuclear option on the infamous mother ship. Each new story that followed became conflicted with the one before it and the one after it. They created more questions than answers at first, but, little by little, the story started to come together. It had been seven hours since a squadron of bombers had left for their imperative assignment, but none had accomplished their mission. In fact, none were able to even reach their target. It was said they crashed, but exactly at what point or by what method was unconfirmed. A second attempt was tried shortly afterwards with a wave of ballistic missiles from ships at sea or by the subs under it. Some of the missiles had unmistakably detonated, but well before hitting the target of their desire. There was a word of a third attempt, but that was all we had, a word, for most of the other statements stated there were only two up to that point. It was plain from all the



accounts that the vessel from the void was being protected by an unseen force that prevented our most powerful weapons from giving their shot at a counterpunch. It was now official; nothing conventional would work against them. This insight brought about a deep sense of vulnerability over all our souls, as if we had been caught naked in front of an assembly of gawkers.

The succeeding days passed uneventfully. Of course, that was suggesting being in a refugee camp was uneventful to begin with. Like most modernized citizens, I never imagined I would be in such a position. This was a place I thought only existed half a world away, across seas, canyons, and assemblies of sandy deserts, off in barbaric, war-torn lands. A TV commercial would come on every now and again to remind you to send some extra change to these dissolute places. They often showed the lamentable grime covered faces of children, who, under the best circumstances, lived in feeble homes you could not be sure would survive a minor accumulation of dead leaves. It was Liz who would often urge me to donate, and as soon as the rush of good feeling washed over me, I would forget their troubles when my own snags arose. Now I was one of those faces in those commercials, walking aimlessly in an ailing land. I was now dependent on uncontrollable events and counted on the goodwill of beings that seemed to have none. Yet I knew I was among the lucky ones. I had cooked food, clean water, and a place to sleep. We had to forget the luxuries of the past to remember the fortunes of the present.

Most tried making the best of our situation, not only because it was sensible, but because it was necessary for our spirits to endure, given as it was one of the few possessions we still had left. The days sluggishly elapsed under the heat of the sun, which radiated with more intensity with each new sunrise. Many switched their sleep cycles to avoid the star's burning firelight as much as possible, becoming more active in the evenings and early mornings. Someone somewhere usually had music playing in some form when the temperatures dropped, and people would gather and share food and stories with their new neighbors. Bervin and Neves often seamlessly merged themselves with these get-togethers once Neves rediscovered the need for social interaction, attempting to mend the collateral damage left when Orins was ripped away. It did not take Neves long to find support in others who suffered as he did. Yitro liked to go off on his own and would never really say what he was up to, but I never cared to ask. I was never in the mind to find comfort in the company of others, least of all strangers, so I rarely participated in the gatherings. When I did attend, I seldom stayed long. I understood why others did it, why they needed it, but I could not find solace in it.

It had been a fortnight since our arrival to the camp when we received distressing information. Arora had been attacked. Details were slow to reach us. All the men whose wellbeing was bound with the events in Arora were diligently and impatiently waiting by the military tents to await the coming of new information. The anticipation of the news and the conjecture as to why the attack occurred was agonizing, to say the least. My heart pounded so robustly that I had to sway back and forth on my feet to make sure no one saw me shaking in my suspense. I could not understand why they were attacked. Arora was supposed to be the safer dwelling in its more isolated location. I was supposed to be the one constantly afraid for my life, the one that couldn't sleep because even the whistling of the wind was enough to make me think the infected or their creators were finally coming to stake their claim. I needed to be the one who would have to fight to escape death, not them. Could they not even let me have that much?

## Chapter Twenty Reunion

A few hours passed with my pores oozing a heated odor. The best the soldiers could do was inform us that only about half the refugees were accounted for. Some were able to escape with the help of helicopters, but the majority were on vehicles heading for various camps or towns, meaning it would be some time before they could relate who had escaped and where they were relocated to. During the next few days, as communications were reestablished in their respective sites, some names would be announced to reveal the scattered survivors who were privileged enough to have lived another day. On the first light of the fourth day, I heard four names I did not expect to hear: Neves', Yitro's, Bervin's, and my own. We walked up to the soldier who called us with a blend of confusion and nervousness.

"You the guys?" the soldier asked as he looked up from his clipboard with a scrutinizing eye when we met him under a command tent.

"Yes," I answered. "What's going on?"

"I've been ordered to take you to our base in Glenfar," he replied, sounding and looking indifferent to our presence. "Your families are there." He looked back down at his clipboard. "Delphnia, Siena, Lizeth, Dayce, and Eloram, right?"

"Yes!" Bervin said spontaneously. "That's them! Thank the Spirits they're alive!" He took an eager glance at each of us, then, noticing what the rest of us had already realized, he turned back to the soldier and said, "Hold on! Valssi and Kaya, where are they? What happened to them?"

He examined his notes once more, but his expression didn't change when he said, "Sorry, I don't have their names here."

There was sadness for the two names that were abandoned from the soldier's auspicious list, just as two names were discarded in ours, however, there was more relief on hearing the names of Liz and Dayce. Nothing else mattered, but even so, I could not prevent a gloom from veiling my cheerier sentiments. I couldn't answer the question as to why we had the honor of a precious reunion while everyone else could only beg for such an opportunity. A peek at Yitro told me he was thinking something similar. We did not ask the question aloud however, as if

acknowledging it would suddenly remove the unforeseen privilege. Neves still was not in the best of spirits, but the mention of his family's names brought a spark of life in his eyes.

We followed the same soldier to a truck after hastily gathering the few belongings from the tents I was glad to leave behind. After a short drive in a truck, I saw a mid-sized, single rotor helicopter waiting for us on the helipad on top of a small hospital. We used the fire escape to climb the three stories to the roof. The chopper had just enough room for all of us.

"How long will it take us to get there?" I asked the pilot.

"Three hours," he answered, looking a bit perturbed I was asking during the takeoff sequence.

That was the end of my questioning and I stopped anyone else from asking theirs, since I was sure the soldiers were only following orders and were incapable of answering our inquiries any better than we could. Looking down at the refuge's layout made me comprehend just how sprawling it really was. My inspection of my former refuge did not last long. I began envisioning everyone staring up to watch the helicopter propelling to a place better than theirs. I kept my vision from drifting to the ground for much of the trip. We were not disturbed by any invaders or their contraptions during our voyage in the air. Nature tossed a minor sandstorm in our way, but any desert pilot worth their weight learned to maneuver through a sandstorm even before the unsoiled air. The voyage felt neither long nor short, for my mind was too engrossed with questions to bother keeping time.

While I was still trying to force my head not to question the few favorable things still present in my life, I saw the beginning constructions of a military base below. It was near the edge of a small sea port, allowing us to see the iridescent sapphire ocean reflecting back the harsh rays of the sun and altering them to a softer shade. The base seemed to be exclusively used by the military, with no hint of a civilian camp nearby, bringing the question as to why my family was there back to the forefront of my conscious. We landed in front of a robust, two-story building, which we were led into by a soldier who had been waiting to meet us as soon as the door slid open. I was the first to enter.

Before any image of the space could reach my eyes, I heard a ringing voice delightfully exclaim, "Daddy!"

Naturally, I went on my knees when I saw Dayce dashing toward me with his arms wide open and donning the kind of smile I had not seen him display in this era. We must have been

only a second into our embrace when I felt my mother join us. I next anticipated feeling, hearing, or seeing Liz at some point, but nothing of the sort entered my reality. I lifted my head to search for her. I saw Delphnia crying in Neves' arms, with his tears falling not too far behind. I observed Eloram quietly hugging Yitro, with an emotional but still reserved air. Standing a few feet in front of me was Siena. The expression she wore was one I had never before seen from her. Sadness was there, but that's not what she predominantly conveyed. It was more of a repentance that cut deep into my heart. She knew I was searching in vain and right then I knew my feeling of total relief was premature.

As steadily as she could, Siena said, "She's here, Roym, but--"

Dayce interrupted her. "Mommy's sick. They don't want us to touch her."

In another day I would have probably been surprised by Dayce's abruptness, but I only heard the most important word. I knew "sick" had to mean something far more than what it used to represent.

"Sick? Where is she?" I asked Siena, still holding on to Dayce as I rose.

"In quarantine," I heard an unfamiliar, dry sounding voice answer. To my right stood a high-ranking officer, who had been overlooking our reunion, though I could not recall if he had been there the entire time or not. "So, you're the husband, Mr. Rosyth? I'm Colonel Tanner," he said, only bothering to approach a step closer.

Honestly, he could have been one of the Spirits in its corporeal form and I could not have cared less. I just wanted to know about one thing. "Can I see her?" I asked him, not shy in approaching him. I would have felt uncomfortable around him at any other time, but I was too busy to feel anything else but restlessness for my wife

"Yes, but only you and her father," he informed me, taking a short squint at Neves, making sure he was paying attention to him, which he was. "You can follow me when you're ready."

"We're ready now." To my son, I said, "I have to see Mommy, all right, Dayce?"

He nodded reassuringly. I left him on the ground with my mother after a squeeze. I did not notice it before, but he appeared much older.

In endeavoring to examine the building more astutely as we walked, I discovered that we were in a research laboratory. I would occasionally see a few diligent people in lab coats and other personnel going into various labs sprinkled throughout the building, which were sometimes

guarded by a soldier or two. As I wondered how I was supposed to feel about walking down a building full of some of the keenest minds in the world, with my wife being somewhere through these doors, the striding Colonel began to divulge some information.

“As your son stated, Mr. Rosyth, your wife has been infected, however, unlike a great majority of the populace, her reaction has been rather unique.”

“How so?”

“For one, she doesn’t look as sickly as many of the infected do, but more importantly, she’s still rational. Granted, she’s been a bit uncooperative, not dangerously so, but she won’t let us do any more comprehensive tests until we retrieved you and Mr. Ave.”

I could sense the annoyance he felt in those last words. With the conclusion of his explanation, we stopped by a sturdy double door safeguarded by a couple of dedicated guards, who gave their salute, and ensued to enter a code on a numbered panel to let us pass. We entered into a modestly sized decontamination room, which held a few hanging hazmat suits on either side of us.

“Put these on gentlemen,” ordered the colonel while he was unhooking one of the protective suits off the wall.

Once we had accomplished his requirement, we were directed through the solid steel door in front of us, which opened with the swipe of the colonel’s pass card. The door skated open to reveal a large and brightly lit lab. My eyes directly targeted the far end of the systematically expansive room. There were three hospital-like accommodations encased in a thick concrete wall in the lower half and a dense wall of glass in the upper half, so that no secrets could be kept within. Inside the farthest room to my left stood the figure that relit a fervor in my heart and allowed my soul to feel symphonic. Liz had one of her hands resting on the glass wall and she gazed with an eager somberness at me. I ran to her. With each stride I discerned that her features were not what I last saw them to be. The infection was attesting its influence by the veins swelling out from the skin, but not to the extent I had seen or heard from in previous subjects. Her once pure, coppery skin was now darker in tone and gave me the fleeting impression she had lost virtue itself, but it was quickly forgotten. It was her now blood red eyes that captured all my attention. The sensitive and thin blood vessels in our eyes could not handle the bulging blood flow and commonly ruptured from the effects. There was an arresting passion buried within

them, one I found impossible not to find peculiarly captivating. There was an intercom by the locked door that I used to speak with her.

“Liz! Thank the Spirits you’re alive!” There were a few blood stained tears running down her cheeks gleaming from the obese florescent lights above us. “How do you feel?”

“I feel... I’m fine. I’m not in pain,” she hesitantly said, though I do not know if it was because she was overcome with so many different emotions or because she was lying. “Orins,” she continued meekly. “What... what happened? Where is he?”

I only shook my head.

As fresh tears sprouted, she called out, “Daddy! Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, sweetheart,” he said as he set himself next to me. His voice was as close to the old Neves as he could possibly make it. “Don’t worry about me or any of us.”

The colonel then spoke up. “Everyone, this is Dr. Sonatis Gaffor. She’s in charge of the research division here.”

I was finally able to break the spell from Liz’s eyes to turn around and perceive the woman the colonel was introducing. A hasty observation showed me she was around the same age as my mother, but more fit looking and her better posture made her appear a head taller.

“Welcome to my lab,” she graciously said, ambling gracefully toward where we were grouped. “I’m sorry it’s not under better circumstances.”

I shook the hand she held out for me. She was about to hold it out for Neves, but seeing as he had his full attention on his little girl, she did not attempt it. He wasn’t in the most hospitable spirit, which I thought reasonable, as it must have been difficult for him to see his only daughter being treated like a lab animal. It wasn’t easy for me either, but I knew I was left with no other choice. I had to be compliant, if not for me, but for Liz.

“How does it look for her?” I asked the expert.

“Her physiology has certainly changed, but she is more or less stable at this point,” she answered, her severe eyes sweeping Liz’s figure.

“I’m assuming you took blood samples?”

“A few, but we haven’t had time to form any solid conclusions from them. Though, from what we’ve seen, we can theorize she isn’t contagious. We injected some of her blood into some of our rodent specimens and no perceptible effects formed. Once the machines enter the first subject, they seem to discard much of the infection they carry, leaving little or nothing to spread

to other hosts, and the nano-machines themselves remained inert in their new hosts. Of course, we'll have to keep her isolated until we can be sure. With you and her father here, she will hopefully allow us to continue with more all-inclusive tests."

"I know it's early," said Neves, "but do you have any clue why she's been able to, um, hold back the infection?"

"There's really no way to know at this time," the head scientist replied. "I initially believed she didn't have enough of the infection in her system, but if that was indeed the case, I would imagine many others would be in this sort of half-state she's in. Instead, with the exception of a few more like her, anyone else exposed to any measure of the nano-machines has become wholly infected."

"There are others like her?" asked Neves, beating me to the question.

"Reports have come in about a handful of others who have been able to resist the infection to some degree. From what I've gathered, Mrs. Rosyth here might be one of the best examples." Liz hadn't moved or emitted a sound since the doctor was made known, but with these last words I thought I saw her bow her head and relinquish a sigh. "She's suffering very few side effects compared to the others we know about, who do still experience intense pain, bouts of convulsions, and many more graphic symptoms. In fact, taking into account how grievous most symptoms are, I'm surprised by how relatively few people or animals die from the contamination itself. It makes me think a large percentage of the population might already hold some level of resistance that prevents their bodies from completely failing, and Mrs. Rosyth is taking that a step further. What we need to do is discover what exactly makes Mrs. Rosyth so resistant and, with any luck, replicate that propensity in others. Even if we can't entirely remove the contamination, we can at least adapt to it."

"Thank you for your time, doctor," I said. "We don't want to keep you any longer from your work." What I said was true, but it was also true that I did not want to hear anymore. It was beginning to be too much to absorb. I looked at Liz, whose eyes were cast to the ground.

"I know it must not be easy to see her like this," said the doctor, changing her methodical voice into one that was kinder and gentler, "but she's our best hope in finding a way to counter the infection right now." The doctor nodded her goodbye and walked away, just as elegantly as she came.



“Roym, Dad, you can go rest and eat now,” said Liz. She tried to sound strong, but she was not fooling anyone. I stared at her face and she at mine. Despite everything she had been through and everything that was happening to her, I could still see her soul scorching underneath, making me feel as though this was the clearest I had ever seen her. “Go back to Dayce. He missed you so much.” The ardent tone in her appeal had me wondering how long it had been since she had seen her child.

“I can stay longer,” I said, with my best attempt at convincing her it was all I wanted.

A little smile came across her face, a smile she still wore beautifully. “Don’t be stubborn. Even under that suit I can tell you look terrible. Don’t worry about me. I’m content knowing you’re safe. Besides, there’s work to do.”

I did not want to leave her, but I knew she wanted me to take care of myself and Dayce, and there was no refusing that petition. We exited with the colonel and we soaked in one last look of each other before the door sealed itself.

While we were shedding the hazmat suits, which I did not comprehend just how constricting they were until I was free from their grasp, I asked the colonel a question I had been too afraid to ask, and the only reason I must have asked it was because my mind needed to cleanse itself from the image of Liz being restrained in the glass container. “How’s the rest of the world doing?”

“It’s not pretty,” the colonel answered frankly. “As of right now, sixty-seven major populations have been targeted by those drill-ships, including the original site. Our estimates put the infected or dead at a quarter to half a billion.”

“We heard Valland tried nuking the mother ship,” said Neves. “Do you think we’ll try nuking the smaller Towers next?”

The question took me by surprise, as the Neves I once knew would never think about putting thousands of uninfected people at risk by knowingly exposing them to either the blast or radiation from the military’s drastic measure. It was logically the next stage in the match with our enemies, but it was not a train of thought the old Neves would have made.

“If the Valland attempts showed any kind of promise we might have already went ahead with phase two,” the colonel answered, “but the failed attempts have made us believe that air delivery is an unviable option.”

“You want to send in ground forces to deliver a nuke?” I asked. “Do you think that would work?”

“If we can get close enough quickly enough,” he replied. “However, the Valland attempts have shown that they can detect the nukes coming from a significant range. So even if we could find a way to get through their defenses, all the Towers would have to do is take off, which, in spite of their size, they can accomplish incredibly expeditiously.” We walked out the double doors and I heard them shut softly behind me. He resumed his steady gait. “Truthfully, if ground forces don’t work, then the only other offensive option left would likely cause a nuclear winter.” He curtly stopped. “Now, if there are not more depressing questions, I have to get back to work. My men back in the lobby will accommodate you.”

We followed Liz’s request to eat and find what respite we could, but despite our new comfortable and agreeable quarters—not taking a whole lot of luxury for me to say at this point—and having the company of my son and mother by my side again, it still wasn’t enough to bring my full appetite back. Since finding out Liz had a resistance to the infection, and I could not be gratified enough on that verity, as I knew that was the only reason I was able to come back to her, my thoughts kept drifting back to Orins. An alarming possibility plagued my mind. What if he also had a higher form of resistance? After all, when we abandoned him, he had not been completely overtaken by the infection yet. It was still conceivable we gave up too soon. I thanked the Spirits for Liz’s fortune. She could have been left behind like her brother and I don’t think I could have blamed anyone for it. Maybe there were more out there who never did get the chance. The boy in the Meltmore camp may have not have never gotten the chance and he wasn’t even infected. Of course, Orins was displaying clear symptoms. I had to keep telling myself there was no use thinking about it, that I didn’t have a choice. The others in the bus would have never allowed him to return with us. Still, I could have stayed with him, just maybe... No, there was no other choice. Yet the disturbing doubt would not escape my conscious. What if we had left him too soon?

I was staring intently into Dayce’s face as he was eating some cereal in front of me, albeit slowly. Yet it was not really my son I was watching. I was imagining myself as Neves staring into his own son’s terrified face in the final seconds he saw him. Thankfully, I did not believe Dayce noticed where my contemplation was. I only saw the illusion for a moment, being replaced by my own weary child. It was apparent he had not been sleeping well. Once we

finished our meal, or as much as were willing to fit in our stomachs, I followed my mother to our latest lodgings. They were located on the second floor, accompanying the cafeteria, positioned at the eastern end of the hallway. The living quarters consisted of large rooms with each one employing eight bunk beds and supplemented with a spacious gym-like bathroom of their own.

I started with something I was positive I would never experience again; a shower. The cool water tickling the surface of my skin, hearing the resounding drips when the water droplets hit the cool tiled floor, and the very smell of my cleansing gave me a feeling of bliss. It was odd to me how something so simple could uplift me so much. I dressed into some new airy clothes my mother had picked out for me, the first time she had done so since I moved out of her home, and I rested on the first bed I saw, the sheets wrapping me with their companionship. As I closed my eyes, trying to picture myself in a time when it was no feat to feel the softness of a bed, I felt Dayce lie down by my side, enfolding his small arms around me, making the trip back in time much easier.

He did not say anything. I had no doubt he was happy to see me, for he held on to me so tightly, and that he was glad to see his grandfather and his new favorite hero, but he was unusually quiet since I had arrived. I surmised it was due to him detecting that our group had come back smaller, combined with the shrinking of his previous group and the state of his mother, along with so many other things. I felt as if I could sense all the questions bundled in his body, wanting to come out, but he never did ask them. Maybe he thought they were too inappropriate, or that I would not want to answer them, or that I simply did not know the answers. He would not have been wrong. At any rate, he did not have the time to build the courage to ask. I began to hear his soft, rhythmic breathing within the minute of his joining me. Hearing his metrical breaths soon soothed me enough to allow my own body to partake in a much needed reprieve.

It couldn't last. The nightmares lurking in my subconscious emerged from their slumber when I started mine. Barely an hour had gone by, and I felt neither well-rested nor tired enough to try again. The room was darker, as someone had turned off all the lights and the sunlight was close to leaving us. It would have been completely dark if the door wasn't halfway open to allow a stream of light to come from the hallway. Dayce was still sleeping, seemingly not bearing my burden, at least, not in his slumbering. I don't think he had even moved since I last saw him, and was, encouragingly, drooling on my shirt, a signal he would not wake for a few more hours.

On a bunk bed neighboring mine, I saw my mother was also sleeping. Yitro was on the top bunk in the middle of the room. He was awake and listening to music, going by the earphones he wore. His face glowed off the light from a music player he had somehow acquired. There were also a few strangers in the room getting their rest from their scientific burdens. At the far end of the room, I perceived the silhouettes of Siena and Eloram. They were whispering to each other, so I could not hear what they were saying. Sleep had escaped me and I knew I would not be able to chase after it, so I delicately slid myself off the bed and covered Dayce more completely with the blanket. When I arose, I heard the whispering cease. In the corner of my eye, I saw Siena rise. She passed through the shaft of light formed by the open door and, in that moment, I saw the fresh gleam of what was the residue of recent tears.

## Chapter Twenty-One Enlightenments

“He looks better,” Siena said tenderly, looking down at Dayce. “He’s been very brave. You should be proud.”

“I am,” I told her, matching her undertone, though it didn’t sound as supple. “But he shouldn’t overdo it. I can never leave him again.” There was an awkward pause between us, as we knew the issues we had to touch on next. I recognized it was my duty to go first. “Listen, Siena, I’m sorry about your father. I-”

She moved closer to me and benignly said, “I know. Mr. Ave told me everything. There...” Her eyes darted to the floor for a second, trying to find strength, before reuniting our fields of vision. A newfound sheen was blurring her eyes. “There was nothing anyone could do.”

I wrapped her in my arms when the fresh stream of hushed tears came out. I felt them sinking into my shirt and dampen my chest, mixing with the deposit left by Dayce. Neither of us moved or made a sound for the next several moments.

When I sensed she had stopped crying, I remembered we were on a military base. I pulled away and asked her, “Have they tried contacting your brother?”

“He’s alive on the *Rica*,” she answered. “It was in Arora when I was able to first find out. I actually checked again yesterday and they told me he’s likely going to be offshore for a while. He should be safe.” Her eyes once again welled up, but I think she had emptied all her reserves. “But his fiancée, I have no idea how she’s doing. She was living on a base up north, but they’ve been cut off for some time. I can’t imagine how he must be feeling right now.”

Her words loitered and she was forced to stop herself so she wouldn’t cry out loud. She went to sit on a bed, struggling to release tears that simply were no longer there.

I followed her footsteps and sat down next to her, draping my arm around her shoulders. Her head remained lowered, but I sensed her avid emotions subside to some extent when she felt me by her side. The act took me back to a memory we shared. She learned her grandfather had passed away and she sat down and cried, though her tears ran more freely then. But she was not weeping for herself or for her lost grandfather, in fact, he was cold and distant in all the years she knew him. The drops of sorrow falling that day were for her heartbroken grandmother. Siena couldn’t help being forlorn seeing her grandmother’s loss affect her so much. This was the same

kind of sadness. She mourned not just because she lost her father, and quite possibly her mother and sister, but because her brother lost his future wife and Neves lost his son.

A few silent moments went by before Siena confirmed my belief that her vast empathy expanded beyond her own losses.

“I’m sorry about Liz. I tried-”

This time, I was the one who would not let her finish. “Unless it was you who brought the aliens here, you have nothing to be sorry for. All of us have tried our best, with less than stellar results.”

“Do you want to know what happened?” she asked me, with her sturdiest voice yet.

“You don’t have to.”

“You deserve to know. And it would also make me feel better, I think.”

“All right, but not here,” looking at Dayce as I said this.

He still hadn’t moved and, if I focused, I could hear his cadenced breathing still going on. Not much was going to halt his torpor, but I couldn’t take the risk that he might awaken and hear a tragedy he had already lived through.

Siena and I stepped inaudibly into the hallway. I left the door open in case Dayce’s dreams were to wake him earlier than predicted, allowing him to see that I had not left him. The corridor was mute in its hollowness. Most of the personnel were either working or in the privacy of their own rooms, so I didn’t expect to be interrupted by anyone.

“I guess I’ll get right to it,” Siena began, with reinforced composure. “We were staying in Arora’s old shockball stadium, the little domed one they used to use back when they had a team. It wasn’t bad. A little crowded, but it was comfortable with the electricity and facilities working well enough. There were a lot of good people...” She paused, likely recalling many of those individuals. “They attacked in the night. I first heard the screaming coming from outside, followed closely by the weapons fire. The panic flooded the stadium in a wave. We knew waiting inside would make us easy targets. We were lucky. Our cots were already near one of the exits. We ran for the doors, but Mom... she wouldn’t move. Valssi went back for her and told all of us to run for it.”

She weakly sighed and forced herself to hastily move on before I could say anything.

“With the crowd quickly on top of us, there wasn’t any other choice but to push forward. There were military trucks and jeeps parked nearby and that’s where most of us ran to. *They*

must have been waiting for us. As soon as a large group of us were outside, I started seeing some people being lifted by an invisible force not far from where we were. We didn't face one directly, but this must have been the time when Liz was hit by some of those needles, though I never saw her react to them in any way. We then boarded a waiting truck, taking off as soon as it was full. Dayce was the one who first noticed Liz was unconscious a couple minutes later. I was deathly worried for her, but some time passed and nothing alarming happened. It was too dark to really tell if she was showing any symptoms. She never had muscle spasms or moaned in pain and she was breathing normally.

“It was Eloram who found them. There were some needles stuck around her ankles and lower leg. The other women on the truck found out and started banging on the wall to get the driver to stop, which he did. After some time arguing by the others to leave her behind, the soldier quieted everyone, taking great interest in Liz's condition. He knew anyone who was hit by the needles would have shown symptoms within a minute and would've been completely infected shortly afterward. Knowing Liz was showing a unique case, he ordered his subordinate to keep us company and, if she showed any signs of aggression, he was to take care of it. We drove for an hour more before Liz woke up. She awoke normally and asked what had happened. All of us were in shock at how unaffected she was. She just said she felt a slight headache and some soreness. It wasn't until dawn did we finally see some of her veins become plump, but only a little. We eventually stopped at a refugee camp, but only the other women were allowed to leave or, I should say, Liz wasn't allowed to leave and we stayed with her. We stayed in this limbo for half a day until they finally told us they were transferring us here.” She refocused her eyes on me, as if just noticing I was there. “You can pretty much guess the rest.”

After some meditation, I uttered, “I see.” At that moment, her story seemed more like a fable than a report. The story itself did not shock me, not in the caustic new world we were living in. I did believe it happened, but weirdly enough, hearing it from someone else, even by someone I knew so well, had me feeling more like a detective who would need to interview others involved to make sure everything added up. “I thought Arora would be safe.” I next told her. “Why was it attacked? Why would they go so far south and ignore our own camp and probably many others? I wonder if the fact the camp was mostly made up of women and children had anything to do with it?”

“I don’t know,” she said, now wholly awakened from her narrative mode. “Some pointed out there was an air base nearby, but I’m not sure if they shared in the attack.”

“Do you think that Liz... Do you think she’s in a lot of pain?”

“Personally, I don’t think she is or ever was. She told me that the worst she felt was back at the refugee camp when it felt like her body was really sore.” Reacting to the doubtful expression I sported, she said, “I don’t think she’s trying to act tough. She’s never been good at that.” A faint smile by her removed my doubt. I had already forgotten how well she knew her.

In order for communication to persist between Liz and the group, especially Dayce, who was not able to see her in the hazmat required lab, we were given a mechanical portal later in the day; a two-way radio. Even as it gave me her entrancing voice, and without it I would have been unreservedly desolate, I still preferred to see her personally when I could. Dr. Gaffor did allow for a maximum of three people to visit her every evening for an hour, which was equal to half a jiffy for me.

There was little physical change in her as the days passed. If anything, I thought I saw her rejuvenating back to who she was, even before the day our lives changed forever. Tests indicated otherwise. Beneath her invigorated complexion, her physiology was in overdrive. Many types of her cells regenerated at a fraction of the usual rate, her muscle mass had amplified in density and, while not as extreme as the other infected, her blood volume rose. Notwithstanding all of these unbelievable new realities, the most noteworthy were the microbots residing in her blood; the designers of these new realities. A blood sample of hers was exposed to several normally incurable pathogens, but the microbots had eliminated them all before they could cause any significant harm to the cells, even going out of their way to help repair the damaged ones. Dr. Gaffor also found evidence of not just one type, but various types of microbots haunting their host. The largest found were about cell-sized and appeared to be the original carriers of the infection, but the contagion itself remained a mystery. Not a single bacterium or portion of a virus could be uncovered. So how were they tainting our bodies?

Assisting the foremost bots were lesser microbots, which appeared to be the chief defenders when foreign contaminants threatened their new household. It was also possible, very much probable, that there were even smaller micro-technologies among them that could not be spotted by our primitive instruments. All of this data strongly implied that the microtech was actually heavily invested in the well-being of their host, striving to do everything in their power



to help their bearer survive. This explained why the infected were difficult to bring down even after suffering a wound that would have been fatal in their previous life. I suppose, in a way, Liz had become the most enhanced being this world had ever known.

“It’s just mocking us, really,” the head scientist started to say in one of my visits. “We have the cure to virtually any disease, the technology to repair the damage to all cells and organs, and a whole multitude of endless possibilities staring right at us. Yet it’s all just beyond our reach.”

I was alone outside speaking with Liz on the third night of our stay. Even if it was simply Liz’s crackled voice over the radio, I still felt her sitting on the bench beside me. I did not know how late it was or how long I had been there, for when I spoke to Liz, time ceased to matter, except knowing it went by a lot faster than it should. The shy moons were going through their new phase, and the shier stars didn’t bother keeping me company that night, a thin upper layer of cloud dust being enough to hide them. We were reminiscing over memories we had at one time considered with scorn and would have once liked to do away with, but were now serving as testaments that we had at one time lived in a paradise-like existence.

“What I wouldn’t do to have your mother be my biggest worry again,” my significant other expressed.

“I can get her right now and tell her to nag about your revealing hospital clothes,” I said with a smile I knew she heard. I don’t know if she found my attempt at humor amusing or not, for she kept her end of the radio off. “Are you sure you’re okay, Liz?” I reticently asked, conveying as much degree of concern as possible. It killed me to think she was forcing herself to suffer in silence only for our sakes.

“I’m...” She produced a negligible pause that would have been missed by anyone who didn’t know her. “I’m fine.”

“Lizeth,” I said more directly, “You need to tell me if something’s wrong. Are you in pain?”

“No, Roym, I mean... it’s, strange,” she said, hesitating more than I was ever used to hearing from her.

“What is it, Liz?” She had always been such an open book with me. What could have disturbed her enough not to instantly tell me what she was feeling?

Exhaling deeply, she said, “Ever since I realized I was infected, I’ve felt... wrong. I know I should be grateful I haven’t gone insane, or worse, but what I’m experiencing now makes me feel so... so unholy.”

“Unholy? What do you mean?”

There was a short silence, but this was different from all the others she bore before. This was a silence born from shame.

“Are you sure you’re alone?” she next asked me. Her voice was the frailest I had ever heard her speak, an inopportune breeze would have been more than enough to break it.

“Yes.”

“Incredible.”

“What?”

“That’s how I feel,” she clarified, her voice intensifying after every divulged word. “That’s what I feel all over my body. Do you understand, Roym? It’s like a wonderful drug that won’t stop. I feel like I have the energy to climb a mountain or swim through an ocean, like I’ve just made love to you. Do you understand now? I’m enjoying this, this fucking curse!”

She was practically unintelligible near the end of her explanation. The radio on her end was shrouded in temperate static for the next minute. I wanted to speak with her again, I needed to. Despite all my efforts and pleas, she wouldn’t reply. However, even with all my endeavors to try to hear her voice again, I didn’t know what I would say to console her. Her revelation had staggered me. I could not fathom what it meant to be attaining pleasure rather than agony from this artificial pestilence. I should have been glad she wasn’t suffering, but why did the back of my mind tell me this was far worse?

Finally, her channel cleared and I heard her ask, “Roym? Promise you won’t tell anyone. Please, promise me.”

I knew arguing with her would have been a futile contest at that moment, but as a scientist, I knew this piece of information could lead her overseers to a more accurate path in their search for the critical cure. I had to convince her that telling the scientists she was experiencing the complete opposite of the expected feeling would be the best course of action for all of us, but I decided it was best to approach the subject when she was more tranquil and keep her at ease for a little while longer. Regardless, I had a strong suspicion her room was bugged

with microphones and that the scientists had heard her declaration just now. Moreover, there wasn't a way I was going to refuse anything she asked of me after her disclosure.

“I promise.”

## Chapter Twenty-Two Retrieval

It was the fourth night of our stay. I was in the cafeteria having a late snack with Yitro and Bervin, which had become somewhat of a ritual, when we were upset by what sounded like a wrecking ball crashing into the first floor below. The reverberation was stifled by the walls and floor, making taking a refined guess as to what had created the crash impossible. The whole room was then swallowed by an influx of red light as all the emergency bulbs turned on. Next, separated only by the difference in speed between light and sound, the piercing blare of the alarm siren choked the previously composed air every two seconds. Bervin and Yitro ran for our room while I left to discover what the cause of the disturbance was.

As I was running, I attempted to contact Liz with the radio I never parted with, wishing more than anything that this wouldn't be the first time she would let me down.

"Liz!" I screamed closely into the radio. "Are you awake? Lizeth!"

"Roym?" she responded. "I heard something. What's going on?"

"I don't know. I'm going down right now."

I was running too fast to feel my legs moving and I paid no attention to my heavy breathing. When I reached the foot of the western stairs, which meant Liz's lab was to my right, I attempted to ask anyone who passed by me to tell me what was happening. Most ignored me. Only a woman, who appeared to me to be a lab technician, turned back to say, "We're being attacked! I think one of the Injectors is inside!" She was gone in another blink.

Almost on cue, my ears began ringing with the discharge of gunshots rushing from farther down the hallway, near where Liz's lab resided. Next, briefly overpowering the barrage of bullets, I heard the shattering of glass, steel, and concrete. Screaming followed.

Not that I needed any other confirmation of what had just occurred, as the chillness that encased my bones made it irrefutable, but Liz exclaimed, "Roym! Something is breaking the lab doors!"

Without any thought for my own life, I ran down the hall. The gunfire magnified the nearer I drew to the lab, and the spectacle itself shortly became discernible. The half dozen soldiers lining the hall appeared to be bestowing their ammo into the barren air, that is, until I saw the towering, but still crouching, undefined outline of an unyielding object placed before

them. Even without ever witnessing one before, I knew exactly what it was; the invisible foot soldier of our enemy. I observed the fiend begin to rise what I could only assume was one of its arms and aim it toward the source of its provocation. My body dethroned my mind and it instinctively rushed me into an adjacent room. Luckily, the door was not fully closed and easily gave way, leading me into an empty office. It was less than a third of a second later when I heard a strange and intense whizzing sound rocketing down the hall. The gunfire was severed in that very instant.

Out of wonder and inevitability, I stuck my head out the door, with as little exposure as possible, to see what I expected to see, but still wasn't prepared for. Each soldier was lifeless on the ground, blood seeping out from the small holes in their heads. Many of their eyes were wide open, haphazardly staring at whatever they happened to look at when they unceremoniously toppled to the floor. Some seemed to have perished in mid-blink. I had a suspicion their lives had been forced out of them so quickly that their eyes did not yet know their possessors were deceased. Deceased? Why had the Injector killed them instead of infecting them? The Injector's indistinct form was nowhere to be seen, but that did not mean it could not be detected. It was still alongside the lab doors it had smashed and was now walking over the remains, uncaringly crunching the glass and debris with every step it launched forward. Its presence was made even clearer when the second access door and walls splitting the lab from the hallway was effortlessly broken through by the Injector making its way in.

The screaming of those inside conquered my ears and I was just able to catch Liz's voice yelling out from the radio, "Roym, stay away! It's in here!"

What could I do? I prayed to the Spirits for an answer to my predicament, but they must have been as stumped as I was, for no reply came. My heart was at war with my mind. Consequently, my body would do nothing. There was no stopping it. Millions more capable and with more means than I had already clashed with them, and they had failed miserably. Ignoring Liz's warning would be on the verge of insanity, but insane I was. I couldn't leave her alone, and most certainly not helplessly trapped in a derelict cage. No one would or could help her, evident by the many people passing me by as they ran out from the lab. Again, something was off. They were escaping, freely. The Injector was obviously letting them go, but why it decided to pity its supposed targets and spare them either the fate of the soldiers or of the accursed was less so.

I sprinted to the newly formed entry the Injector had fabricated, disregarding the dead I had to step over, and peered inside. The glass that once separated Liz from me laid fragmented on the floor. I didn't even hear it shatter, which I blamed on my negligent rumination. Liz's brief shriek was cut off in an apparent fainting spell as her body became flaccid and collapsed to the floor. I would have thought she died if I didn't catch her chest still heaving with heavy breaths. Her body then slowly started lifting into the air, as if possessed by a demon. I knew that was not far from the truth. Starting from her lower torso, she began blending into the background as some tentacle-like cables wrapped themselves around her until she was completely made invisible underneath them. It was taking her? The theory did not offer any more variety of options. Firing my gun was suicide, as the earlier combatants inexorably discovered, and was as likely to bear as much fruit as sensibly arguing with the abductor. Between the alarm's blares, I started to hear the drumming of boot-laced feet advancing on the lab. I saw the faces to the marching drumbeat belonged to more warriors taking the worn path I had taken.

"It has my wife!" I told them. "Don't shoot! It will only kill you!"

The sharp cracking of glass behind me stopped my dire appeals. It was faint, but it didn't matter, the sound punctured and twisted into my brain like a serrated spear. I gingerly half-turned my head. There was nothing for my eyes to focus on, but I didn't need them. I knew it was only two, maybe three feet from where I was standing. Imagination or not, I sensed it. No warmth did it release, no sound did it eject. There was nothing to indicate it was there, but I still felt the aura of a great hallowed entity consuming my presence. So much so, I anticipated it to breathe down my neck at any moment or snuff my life out with a mere thought. The thought never formulated. The aura began to fade away as the otherworldly construct headed for the access it wrought when it first entered the building. I was left deliberating whether that thing was truly a machine.

My pleas proved to be spent on deaf ears. The freshly arrived soldiers rifled for their target, not knowing their probing would be to no avail. Some stayed in the hall, others roamed the lab. By the time one of them asked me if I knew where it was, it was far too futile to ask such a question.

"Back outside by now," I answered.

He was staring at me, but I was not staring back. In truth, I do not know if I had answered out loud or not. I tried to think, but my brain felt as though it had been squashed to strain out all the notions of structured thought and only allowed me to recreate what I had just experienced.

Liz was being taken and I did nothing but watch, as though it had all been some sort of production on a stage. My wife, the mother of my child, was carried away by a monster, in both spirit and body, and I didn't attempt to impede it, struck cold by doubt and trepidation.

The soldiers left me, undoubtedly seeking to catch up to our enemy. I was holding an assault rifle in my right hand, picked up from the cooling hands of a fallen soldier by a mind set on autopilot. I was led down the kidnapper's path by sporadic nerve pulses, not letting me know what they were planning, if they were planning anything at all. Before I left, I thought I caught a glimpse of Liz's deserted radio at the corner of her chamber.

An enriching breeze swept across my face. Along with the night's darkness, distant gunfire enclosed the building. I had now partially stirred and, once I recognized where I was, I gathered that there wasn't just a single Injector making a foray into the base. I looked down at the gun I was still holding and no small part of me desired to join the soldiers. There was no better way to end it than to fight alongside soldiers much braver than I and die alongside them. It would have been preferable than having to go back to my group. How could I face Neves and Delphnia and tell them I couldn't take care of their daughter after I vowed to do so in front of them and a cleric? How could I face Dayce's big, pure eyes and tell him I was a coward? In the end, I was simply prolonging the unavoidable. Between my walk from the open air to the staircase, the building's alarm had terminated for an unknown reason. Halfway up the stairs, I met Bervin coming down them.

"Roym!" he said, looking relieved to see me. "Are we being attacked?"

I nodded meekly.

"Are you okay?" he asked, with equal parts confusion and worry. "You don't look well."

"It took her," I said feebly, not knowing who was speaking for me.

"Her?" Bervin processed audibly. "You mean Liz? Who took her?"

Hearing the words spoken aloud turned it into scripture. My feebleness went to my legs and they obliged me sit down on the steps. "An Injector. It came into the lab and just... snatched her."

"Spirits..." Bervin sat down next to me and placed a fatherly hand on my shoulder. "I'm so sorry my boy."

Knowing saying any more was pointless, we sat there for an untold sum of moments.

I don't know how long his hand lingered on my shoulder, on account that my entire body froze to the point of numbness. Whether my own skin was still attached to me was left in uncertainty. There was the perception my thoughts were crisscrossing and zig-zagging in every direction, and yet, I never had less cognizance in my life during that suspension of movement and speech.

At some point after the abduction of Liz, I heard Bervin say, "We need to join up with the others. Can you walk?"

I rose without saying a word or giving him any kind of gesture and trailed him to wherever he would lead me; into euphoria's gate or into pandemonium's abyss. He coaxed me into our room where the first person I saw, as usual, was Dayce. He was sitting on a bed next to his grandmother, not noting which one, and our eyes met. I could not stare straight into them and lowered my own. He ran toward me as soon as he saw me and put his arms around me tight. I thought them stronger, but it wasn't until later did I realize my rubber-like body provided the extra sensitivity. I suspect I did not embrace him in return, not like I normally would have, at least. He knew immediately something had changed, that something was not right in his father's demeanor. It hurt me so much to know I did not have the strength to hide my depression from him.

"Daddy?" he asked, with his inquisitive eyes boring into mine once we separated.

Using its attached strap, I slung the rifle behind me and mutely picked him up. Bervin was with Neves and Delphnia, quietly telling them what had happened. He whispered, but to me he was shouting the verses. He told the rest soon after and I was merely left standing there, holding my son in my arms and letting the guilt sweep over me, imagining what they were thinking. Of course, I knew they couldn't blame me, but none of that really mattered. In the corner of my eye I saw Delphnia fall into Neves' arms as she started to weep. Silence disbursed to everyone else, including the handful of strangers, and their eyes stared dazedly at no specific thing.

Raging was the battle outside. No authoritative voice told us what to do or where to go, so we stayed where we were, not knowing where else to go. There was only one window in our company and we made sure to stay away from it. The fear of needles or stray bullets troubled all our minds and it was without issuing a warning to each other on the subject. Being too careful was no longer an adage, but a truth. The lights of our room had been switched off, but unplanned



darkness soon absorbed the whole base. The reserve power triggered, giving everything an orange hue. I was still holding Dayce as we sat on the edge of the bed. I felt as though he was having a battle of his own, one within his own head.

Finally, the concern for his mother overcame the fear of the question and he asked me, “How’s Mommy? Can we talk to her?”

I grimaced when he said it, even though I primed myself to hear the query. “They’re taking Mommy somewhere else. We can’t talk to her right now.” How could I tell him the whole truth? Was this the time or place to disclose to him such horrid information? Could there ever be a right time?

The outlying echoes articulated the tale of a one-sided battle. Gunfire, the booms of heavy artillery, RPGs, and other weapons I couldn’t recognize, showered upon our auditory organs. An occasional explosion would accompany them, some I knew to be the mark of a crashed helicopter or vehicle, which sometimes shook the structure if it happened close enough. Nothing compared, however, to the bulging, shrill screams of a freshly corrupted soul. I say screams, but they were far worse than that. The screams of this world came from logical emotions and conviction, but these screeches conveyed not agony or death, but something considerably more monstrous; joy. They were the mad exclamations of crazed laughter bellowed out by the euphorically insane.

Time rambled lazily and bleakly. The open air resistance began to abate. The prospect of escape abated with it. Beneath half an hour, the gunshots were fewer, but they resonated closer. We perceived them outside our own walls, the sound waves migrating into our hall. I clutched the gun with one hand as I stared at the closed door, hearing the indistinct beating of footsteps climbing up the stairs.

I clutched the gun tighter before I heard a familiar voice cry out, “Anyone up here!?”

It was the colonel’s, making me loosen my grasp of the rifle, but not completely.

We were all out of the room and observed the summons was not limited to only us, for as many as two dozen other personnel revealed themselves from within their own rooms. Given that they were being as discreet as we were, we never knew so many were sharing in our torment only a few feet away. Among them was another familiar face in Dr. Gaffor. Wanting to know what was happening and what our next step was, I handed Dayce to my mother and went with

Siena, Bervin, and Yitro, who were gravitating toward those huddling in front of the colonel, craving any instructions he would give us as to what we needed to do to survive.

Someone in the front of the crowd was not shy to expose those very thoughts without hesitation, asking the colonel, “Are you getting us the fuck out of here?!”

He responded more tolerantly than I would have supposed he would do when he answered, “We can’t right this minute. There are several Injectors surrounding the base and they seem especially intent on blocking access to the port.”

“So we’re stuck here?!” cried another man in front of me. “Just get us some helicopters! Surround the building with tanks! This is a military base for Spirit’s sake!”

“We have fighter jets with laser guided missiles and two destroyers just offshore,” he continued, his voice not gaining volume, “but none of that matters if we can’t see the bastards. Now everyone calm down. They don’t like coming into buildings, so we can hold out here until preparations are complete.”

“What the fuck are you talking about? One of them came into this very building!”

“And you’re still alive,” the colonel replied. “Its goal wasn’t to infect.”

Dr. Gaffor spoke next, which was a nice change from the others. “Colonel? What preparations?”

“We’re going to make a break for the port,” he answered her. “Within the next ten minutes I’m going to request an all-out bombardment from our ships and fighters. Shortly before then, I’ll order every last man, woman, and child off this base.”

“Ten minutes?” asked the doctor.

“If we wait any longer there won’t be much of a convoy left to escort survivors. If everything is timed correctly, we’ll have cover and a ship waiting for us. Once my men tell me they’ve gathered everyone they could, we’ll make our break. Until then, we need all of you to be ready at a moment’s notice. It’s preferable to stay in this hallway. My men and I will make sure no infected make it up here.”

While I went to hold Dayce again, Bervin and Siena occupied themselves by recounting to the others what was spoken, at least the details of it, for it wasn’t difficult to hear what was said from where they were. The wait was quicker than the colonel said it would be, for it must have been no more than five minutes before he returned to inform us that the trucks were waiting for us and to board them without delay. On arriving downstairs, we saw two canopy-roofed

trucks blocking the crude entrance, the one created by the Injector I encountered, with their beds facing the building, permitting us easy access without baring ourselves to the chaos of the outside world.

The battle seemed to lose decibel levels in the mostly new moon night, signaling the situation was graver than ever. After loading as much as could be filled, one of the two soldiers accompanying us gave a hearty slap to the truck's metal frame, sending us off in a new flight that felt anything but original. The second truck followed close behind a few seconds later. Not much could be seen at first. The truck's canopy hid our surroundings until it became perceptible from the back opening, but with the only lights coming from the head and taillights of each truck, it was difficult for us to see anything. The convoy that the colonel was concerned could not be made in time was presently formed by the merger of other vehicles. The weapons fire became patchy, and there was almost a synthetic serenity that settled over the base as they died away completely, before the pliable atmosphere was radically transformed.

The port was a mile and a half away when a massive explosion could be heard ahead of us. Two ticks of the clock later, a wall of flames fervently ascended a hundred yards behind the procession, but I felt its hot flares as if they were no more than an inch in front of me. A bright, scarlet light illuminated the truck and it quivered with its reception. The detonations were deafening, drowning out all other noise. New infernos would appear unceasingly, and for the first time since the first alien ship fell, I was in awe by the prowess of our military. I was amazed by the precision of the missile strikes and bomb dives, imitating a waterfall made of steel and fire as they dropped and impacted. They felt so close, but not once did I feel as if we were in any danger of getting hit with friendly fire.

A half mile from our desired terminus, a succession of double-barreled tanks, which couldn't be ignored even with the vision of firestorms in the backdrop, publicized to us the extensive defensive measures this military outfit knew they had to undertake to give us a chance. Each tank was constantly firing at every angle, not appearing to aim at anything in particular. Nonetheless, it still looked as graceful as though it were rehearsed, something I never imagined was feasible from these robust machines of war. Their uproars sounded much like an orchestra, with the melodious thuds of their shells exiting their barrels generating a rapturous tune. This unusual arrangement appeared to be working well for the convoy, for not one of us was besieged throughout our escape.

I was so captivated by the scene that I did not realize how close we were to our deliverance until we crossed into the pier itself. The boarding was done hurriedly and there was no incident that befell us. Oddly, I felt less safe on the ship than I did in the truck, which I could not completely explain away. We were corralled below deck into some cramped compartments by several expectant crewmen, making the grand warship shrink considerably. There we restlessly waited for the maternal embrace of the open ocean. The reports from the huge guns of the warship thundered into our enclosure, their pulsations giving no sign of relenting even as the ship began to move. They remained unbroken for a dozen or so minutes before all the reports finally died away. The collective sigh exhaled by everyone's relief temporarily supplanted anything else as the loudest sound. It was not until then did I recognize how firmly I was holding on to Dayce and how tightly he was holding me in return. In any case, the realization did not loosen our grips. The crew was stirring to and fro and they appeared to pay little attention to their new company. All the same, I doubted there would have been much they could tell us.

"Is Mommy on the ship?" Dayce suddenly asked me.

I anticipated such a question and replied with my equipped response, saying, "No, Dayce. She'll be moved somewhere else. We might not be able to see her again for a while." While it was not technically a lie, I still could not look into his eyes for long.

"Oh," was the only reply he muttered as he looked sadly at the ground.

I wondered if he knew I wasn't telling him everything.

Time did not penetrate the floating transport. The sole reason I knew time persisted at all was the crumpling of the unceasing waves against the exterior of the ship, rocking it from either side and letting us know who still reigned over the seas. Several hundred of these watery batterings later, a crewman darted his head into the compartment and impassively said, "This way." With those words, one and all and all at once, like we were gears spun by the same hand, followed him. We went through a labyrinth of narrow corridors before we entered the sleeping quarters. "You can stay here until we can put you ashore somewhere. Restrooms are farther down and breakfast will be served in an hour. I'll come back then."

The sleeping arrangements were as rudimentary as could be fathomed in what was an older model of warship, established by the traces of rust on the floors and walls. Twelve could sleep in one room with cots that could easily be hauled down from the wall they were secured to. Of course, sleep would not come easy for most. Still, there was nothing else but to lie on the

plain green cots, look up at the bare steel ceiling, listen to the isolated sounds of the external tumults, and wait for the beckon of food that was to come.

Late in the afternoon, or so I was told, for not once had I seen the daylight since our arrival, the news was spread of our journey's final destination. It was to be a naval base located on the Boca island chain about six hundred miles northeast of our present location. Over a full day was consumed before we reached the islands we sought. The Boca chain was a picturesque and twisting set of generally small islands with only a handful large enough to be able to cope with the burden of a notable population. The only benefit these islands served before the world was adversely overhauled was for their use as upscale tourist destinations. Now their ports and beaches were congested hubs for absconding refugees who were fortunate enough to have access to a boat.

The island we came ashore on was used purely as a Navy base, so we seldom encountered other exiles, which included sailors and soldiers, who, I imagined, were either assigned to a ship or on the mainland. So with most troops being elsewhere, and as the majority were part of the military anyhow, many of the evacuees aboard our ship were allowed the opportunity to use the barracks, making it a tight fit, though the working power prevented the fit from being uncomfortable. The first order of business had us refreshing ourselves and resting up in housings not dissimilar from those we left, except they were smaller and we did not have to share with other people. A revitalized body did nothing to ease a mind Liz always occupied. The small amount of comfort came in telling myself that the demonic entity did not desire her death, or at least did not take it in front of me, which I knew would have killed me one way or another.

Two and a half days after our preliminary steps onto the island, disquieting new information reached the port. Every last Tower was gone. The last sighting had been the day before and there was the impression that they all went missing at the same time, an action, by all previous accounts, they had yet to achieve before. With their sanctums away, reports of Injector attacks decreased, adding to the mystery. I could not imagine their mission already completed, for I was still standing. In trying to come up with prospective explanations, an image of Liz in one of those Towers flashed over my insight. Had the Injector taken her into a Tower? Where else could it have taken her? And if it did, was it a fluke that the Towers disappeared soon afterwards? Was this a thought created by an insensible mind or did it hold some merit? My reason was too much in ruin to astutely answer it myself, so I decided to seek out Dr. Gaffor. I

found her just outside the doors, speaking to a soldier. The conversation they were having ended as I walked up to meet the doctor.

“Did I interrupt something?” I asked the veteran doctor as the soldier strolled away.

“No, Mr. Rosyth,” she replied politely. “I was just submitting another request to be transferred to the lab at Avron University. I know it’s a tall order for them, but I think it’s important we get back to work studying the data we were able to gather.”

“You were able to share the data with AU?”

“Yes, we had a satellite up-link with them, something our enemy has not touched. They helped put more eyes on the problem, plus they served as a backup. Unfortunately, we are now over two thousand miles away, making it likely my request will be denied again, unless the lack of Towers actually makes things better.” She did not sound so confident.

“Does that bother you as much as it does me?”

“You mean about the Towers disappearing?” she casually responded. Then, as if she had already read my thoughts, she asked, “You’re thinking your wife is possibly in one of them, aren’t you?”

“I can’t help visualizing her trapped with them, doing who knows what to her.”

She inquisitively stared at me as if she was debating if she should tell what she was pondering. She decided to do so. “You know, I constantly worried the microbots living within her would realize she was resistant and would then turn on her. Instead, it seems they must have sent a signal out to the Injectors, telling them where she was. Given everything I’ve seen, only one conclusion makes sense. I believe your wife was exactly what they wanted.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I’ve been mistakenly using the word ‘resistant’ to describe Mrs. Rosyth’s stability, but I now think ‘compatible’ is a more appropriate word.”

I absorbed what she was telling me for a moment. I then said, “So, incidentally, you’re saying this is not an infection, then? That most of the infected are, what, failed subjects of some kind?”

“It would explain why the Injectors took such an interest in your wife and why neither the infection nor the Injectors kill outright more often. I highly doubt Mrs. Rosyth is the only one out of hundreds of millions to experience this compatibility. The Injectors must have taken more with them as well, but for what purpose, I cannot say.”

“If this line of thought proves correct, then even if we find what made Liz so compatible to this pseudo-infection and spread it to others, it could simply attract the Injectors to us. Maybe not the best way to find our salvation.”

“Salvation?” she mused. “Perhaps that’s what they think they’re giving us.”

## Chapter Twenty-Three Groundwork

The world was not the better when the Towers made their leave. According to the dreary intelligences coming in, no weapon fired or defense raised was recurrently effective against our invisible foes. Every once in a while, it was said someone somewhere managed to disable an Injector, which would have been highly commended, if each time it did not come at such high a cost. Suicide bombers were becoming a more common option, especially in areas absent of a military shield. Dozens of the desperate, either wearing explosives or driving vehicles laden with them, would charge an Injector, or at a spot they believed an Injector occupied, leading to certain death for all but their adversary. Some commanders were ordering the bombardment of entire regions, with no regard to civilian casualties, no matter the expense to the number of lost souls, including their own.

Even after the rare times someone incapacitated an Injector, there was seldom an opportunity to obtain its fallen figure. One of three events would usually happen. The most common deterrent was the presence of another Injector or two, not to mention their infected thralls. Otherwise, even if it was unaccompanied and in the process of being taken to some base or facility, the advanced apparatus was adept at restoring itself—likely using a similar process its massive caretaker used—and would reawaken as lethal as ever. The third occurrence sounded as though they used a type of self-destruct mechanism to dissolve their frame if they were beyond saving, leaving only a smattering of undisintegrated scraps to be studied.

Through all that was being done to stop them, the Injectors were only half of a two part quandary. The infected, both people and animal alike, compounded an already challenging fight. No matter where they were or what they were, they were unrelenting in their tenacious pace, covering dozens upon dozens of miles in a single sun's emergence. Hunger, thirst, and sleep did not appear to exist in them, at least, not in their familiar forms. The microtech that possessed them had evidently staved off the merciful grasp of death for not merely a short period of time. Therefore, the idea of waiting for them to perish on their own accord seemed a poor prospect. The greatest nations this world had ever seen were barely capable of holding back this onslaught alone. Inevitably, there were those who resorted to wielding our most supreme of weapons to oppose these mass of bodies, however, ever since the attempted bombings of the principal



spacecraft, military bases and silos that held a nuclear weapon were relentlessly besieged by Injectors, with resounding success. Overwhelmed was too insignificant a word to describe what our defenders were going through over a daily and nightly basis. The numbers of the infected and the precision assaults by the Injectors were two obstacles that combined to be a virtually insurmountable dilemma. Whether a military concentrated on evacuations or on confronting the enemy directly, planned or not, they made themselves the aims of corruption.

Keeping ourselves busy in our presently ignored home seemed to be the only remedy for the fretting disease we could not cure. We knew we could not be in a military base where soldiers were risking their lives at every moment and we stood by doing nothing, apart from taking up precious space. As often as we were able, Siena, Eloram, Dayce, and the remaining men joined some military personnel and other refugees to help build shelters, allocate supplies on the adjoining islands, or simply go wherever we were wanted. We didn't feel as though we belonged among them, but they never made us feel unwelcomed. Meanwhile, my mother and Delphnia stayed on base to cook and clean for our proprietor's behalf. We did not expect, nor did we receive, any gratitude.

The days passed on and I dare say they started to become routine. Some bonds were made and others reinforced. Enjoyment of the little things was now the only foundation of any pleasure we had. It was in these days that I was able to see the not so subtle companionship between Eloram and Dayce. Not a day progressed when they were not in each other's presence for no less than half of the sun's appearance. It was not uncommon to see them helping around the base with the very few, but very well done, tasks they undertook. They also spent a decent part of their time playing instruments they found in a small music hall, which Eloram was teaching Dayce to play. Eloram undeniably understood the composition of the musical instrument. I could hear from fifty yards away the strings melodically move with the careful meticulousness of her fingers swinging through them, one by one, or dancing from key to key. I could not say the same about Dayce. I could also hear him from fifty yards away, but for a different reason. He was not a musically gifted child, as Liz and I learned early on, but there was an even bigger reason Dayce was not grasping it as effortlessly as he might have been capable of. My son couldn't hide his growing innocent emotions for Eloram, and everyone saw right through it, including Eloram herself. His strengthening crush had him vying for her attention whenever he could, even attempting to steal her away from his idol.

Their conversations characteristically ran along the lines of Eloram proclaiming, “Dayce, I’m like your older sister now!” Then Dayce would reply with a variation on the lines, “Just give me a couple years and I’ll be a real man, then you’ll see!”

I would ache for Liz more than ever during these interactions. I would imagine what she would say to me; such as our boy was growing up too fast, or he was just too young, but I was never able to guess what her words would have been. Nothing I said sounded like her.

For the first time in our life together, I sensed Dayce was not the same. Not only in appearance and age, though I did believe the clothes he used to wear would not fit him anymore, and not only in wisdom, for what could force a child to grow up faster than tragedy? It was in his attitude toward me. In the life we originally held, never before would he have stowed even his most covert thoughts away. Even in the few times that he did, it was never something a mere glance by me wouldn’t make him pour out in a cascade, if anything, that’s what he wanted. Now, as I explored the features of his face, looking for any part of his old self, it was a statue. He sought me out less and less to ask questions or give a comment. The worst part was knowing I was doing nothing to stop the growing gap between us. I couldn’t envision this is what I truly wanted... unless it was. Could it be I was wanting for him to feel less for me? So that if I was killed it wouldn’t hurt so much for him? What horrible thoughts ruled my mind in the brightest hours of the day!

Sleep was becoming impossible to catch respite in. Peculiarly, it was no longer the nightmares that were the dissenters of my slumbers. No, those familiar confidantes I could more or less handle. It was the robustly vivid dreams holding my old memories. Whatever they pertained, the brightest moments or the gloomiest of days, it didn’t matter. I would awaken and my mind would linger on those memories, unable to let go. I wasn’t alone. Talking to Bervin and Siena one hot day, they too stated they were having an abundance of lucid memory-dreams. I doubted stress on its own could explain why we were experiencing this same phenomenon, but it was not as if we had any chance to solve it. If we could not explain what was happening in our reality, how could we explain what was transpiring in each of our unconsciousness? Beyond taking sleeping pills to alleviate some of the pressure, there was little else we could do except sleep with the nightmares we were accustomed to.

Our barracks fell under a commotion on the forty-first evening since the Towers were last seen. In one of three rooms that contained a reverent satellite television, an assembly gathered in

front of one of these last links to broadcasted news from around the world. I, along with my mother, Bervin, and Siena, fused with the crowd a few doors down from our own to enter the crowded rec room and stare at the screen set in the far upper corner.

Placed sinfully on the monitor was a live image of a Tower taken from a soaring kite's vantage point. I expected their return, not that I felt any gratification at being proven correct, but what I could not predict was what they would do in their resurgence. On first spotting the miniature monolith, I saw it was already partly shrouded by its incalculable microtech fog. The darkening grayish cloud persisted to take up a greater sphere of influence, ominously publicizing how much more of the micro-machines were being expelled compared to the times I had previously witnessed the performance. The Tower was soon obscured beneath its own haze. The image began to wobble as the helicopter, already about a mile away, had to retreat to a safer distance, being sensitive to elude the madness of the expanding vaporous hand. I felt the hand's ire as its quarry fled from its grasp. As the camera became more distant from the notorious miasma and revealed more of the backdrop, I was able to glimpse a bulky lake behind it. Farther beyond, I observed the vague constructions of a city, matching in proportion the adjoining body of water.

A couple of fleeting hours later and most of the Towers were confirmed to have returned, once again presenting themselves on any gathering of significant populations, each one exhibiting the same updated distribution system.

Everyone on the islands knew it was only a matter of time. Some didn't risk for Time's blade to mercilessly overtake them and felt compelled to leave the massing sanctuary. They stayed long enough to gather the supplies they could obtain and left on their boat, or any boat, for that matter. More commonly than boats being shared were them being stolen, or there was an attempt at the bold coup, at any rate. Many sailors left alone, sometimes leaving their families behind, wanting to provide only for themselves. Where they were sailing to, no one could answer, and I wasn't completely sure the mariners themselves had a clear destination in mind. I did hear from a few refuges that somewhere in the currents of the sea, shortly before we had arrived, a cruise ship had set off with about a hundred people and would try to survive purely on the assets of the seas for as long as it was possible. Others, acting out similar concepts, headed for more ambiguous islands, electing to strand themselves in the middle of nowhere, going against all former reason and in contradiction to the warning in our bodies.

While I was grateful to what the military had done for me and my family, a growing part of me felt remaining with them would encumber my struggle for survival by making us targets in the long run. The constant anticipation of an attack was twisting every nerve. The sun continued to ascend and descend leisurely, teasing our suspense, however, the mother star gave no challenge to the mistresses of the night. The sibling moons somehow gleamed more terrible as they leered down upon us, surrounded by their droplets of admirers, glowing with guiltless relief to the fact they were not suffering in our evils. The underlining threat was always there, and I knew it could come at any hour, but I felt so much closer underneath the night sky.

Each day followed the last and I learned what could be worse than relentless bad news. One after another, the few airwaves and radio waves we still held, the only reminder to prove to us that we were still somehow connected to the rest of the world, were becoming hushed, the kind of silence that ardently struck my ears more than any other message could have done. The base personnel believed the Towers must have sent out a new wave of Injectors, ending the little control we still had of our air with incursions occurring more and more frequently. The infection itself was more potent, more callous. The time was cut in half, maybe more, of how long it required the infection to take hold of one's body. It did not matter if it was inhaled through the sordid air or impelled by the tap of a needle, the surrender was quicker and greater. I couldn't stop myself from thinking that the faster subjection was more merciful for its victims in the end.

A week came and left after the return of the Towers, and another was about to leave with it when I noticed the port and bay had several new occupants. New warships had decided to settle not only near our island, but on many islands of the chain. They were part of a considerable group retreating from the mainland. The line between warrior and refugee was waning away. The option of arising victorious from this takeover was beginning to be seen as more and more futile in this part of the world. The future of our species became the military's only aspiration. Their only goal they had left was to make certain we had a chance to somehow outlast our unbreakable adversary, no matter how infinitesimal that chance may be; that was the last hope we had.

Preparations for the unavoidable onslaught were being made every minute. They included surrounding the islands with mines both above and below ground, and I was sure they would have floated them in the air if gravity would have allowed them to. As it was explained by a soldier I spoke with, the mines were not positioned with the purpose of deterring the Injectors from these lands, since they were not powerful enough to hinder them from doing so. Instead,

they made a decent alarm system, as the intruders seemed to take no heed of them and set them off indifferently, granting us a precious few seconds of warning. Trucks were parked just outside the barracks and other facilities to be ready for the command to take us to the ships, who were anticipating our arrival five hundred yards away. The roadway was, in turn, protected by a succession of tanks and other assorted military vehicles. It worried me that they did not look as menacing as they should be. Radios were given to most refugee groups so they could listen and report any possible emergencies at any time. They also handed out guns to some of us, for, regrettably, there were more of them than there were trained combatants who could make use of them. When we could, we started saving as much canned food and bottled water as we judged suitable to carry. The bags were packed, the route was set, and now all there was left for us to do was wait, which I knew very well how to do by this point.

## Chapter Twenty-Four Decisions

I was dwelling in a dream reliving a memory, just like I had been doing for many a night, but I momentarily recognized that this particular remembrance was different from the others. I found myself standing in Neves' living room, surrounded by the large open windows stamped to the ivory colored walls, making the influx of sunlight white wash anything outside the room. Neves' antique longcase clock was in front of me, a family heirloom Neves was heartbroken to leave behind. The only family relic he could bring was an aged wristwatch belonging to his late father. I heard the ticking of the robust mechanical timekeeper, but I saw that its hands and numbers were missing. What I saw next gave me my first real inkling that something was off in what my mind was conjuring, that perhaps this was no memory after all. In the corner of the room was Mr. Tillar's chair. It was a bulky lounge chair made from the expensive hide of the thick-skinned bi-bi species that no one else would ever sit on. I remembered him sitting on the red-stained seat the first time I went to visit Siena's family. The chair itself was improperly placed beside the stairs of the Tillar home, where I observed, with no small amount of foreboding, the dead kite's sprawled out body, looking as if I had just blown off its brains.

Adding to the assorted imagery, a sound I could not exactly label sprang up behind me. The enigmatic sound was fleeting, broken, deep, and more than enough for me to impulsively turn around. The room was suddenly cast into a dim twilight, but it was still bright enough for me not to mistake the womanly outline standing (or was she hovering?) no more than a yard away from me, a figure who made my heart beat back to life. Lizeth. While her facial features were what I had always known them to be, her eyes were changed somehow. They were fuller and uncompromising. I next noticed another mistake. She was dressed in a familiar green nightgown, but it was the nightgown Siena wore on the night we were engaged. I was about to say something, but Liz pressed a bony finger to her lips. She lowered it when she saw I had complied with her bidding.

Then, in a muzzled tone not belonging to any voice known to me, she asked smoothly and firmly, "Do you want your son to live another day?"

I languidly nodded. I began to make out my name being called from high up in the sky, but my focus remained steadfastly on the form of my wife, who continued with, "Then don't

board the ships-” The echo-like voice was cut off from saying anymore by the voice in the sky shouting my name in a swiftly rising pitch.

Another split second had the spell vanish completely and replaced by my mother shaking me awake and proclaiming, “Roym! Roym! Get up! They’re attacking!”

I rose my head to see Neves and Bervin desperately packing a few items to leave. I distinguished a crackling voice coming from the radio Yitro was holding. It was loud enough for me to hear every term being said. There was Injector activity to the east of us, which was the opposite side of the port; a fact I found odd. After I bent down to grab my backpack, I felt my leg become seized just as I rose. I looked down to find Dayce.

He stated with a combination of purpose and anxiety, “Daddy, I don’t want to go.”

His small voice was no louder than a whisper, but it staggered me more than any jolt from a lightning bolt. It prompted a flash of my recent reverie. I knelled down and, with much reluctance, he let go of my leg.

“Why don’t you want to go?” I asked of him.

He did not want to look me in the eye. Not a letter more he spoke. He merely hugged me with an emotion I had not felt in such a long time. He started sobbing. Was it possible? Was he brought a dream similar to my own? And from whom? It seemed incredible to fathom, yet, so did everything else taking place.

“We have to go,” said my mother urgently.

My thoughts raced faster than I could process them. Before I knew it, the sentence, “I’m not going,” was blurted out.

“What?!” my mother cried hysterically, detaining the attention of everyone in the room. “You’re not going?! Why not?!”

While my mother was fuming in disbelief and catching her breath, Siena asked, with a tone in stark contrast to the former speaker, “Roym?”

I stood up, lifting Dayce with me. Tears were still running down his cheeks, but he stopped being audibly distressed. “Something’s wrong,” I answered. “I-I can’t really explain it, but the ships... they aren’t safe.”

“And we’re safe here?” Yitro alluded.

“I believe we’re safer, yes,” I replied, perhaps not as convincingly as I would have liked, but, then again, I had not fully swayed myself to the decision. “I guess I think the enemy will concentrate at the port.”

“Are you sure about this?” Bervin asked me, gazing at me with the same expression of concern everyone else used.

“I wish I was... The rest of you can go. I can’t stop you, but... I don’t know. I just don’t think it’s a good idea.”

No one flapped their tongues as my company stared dumbfounded at me, attempting to judge how cracked I was. I couldn’t fault them, of course. After all, I was advising for them to do the one thing that was against all nature for them to do; not run.

A sizzled voice broke the stillness of the hardening air. It came from the radio and it stated, “Those in the barracks have one minute before we go!”

“I can’t leave you,” said my mother as she embraced me, sounding resolute, which by itself wasn’t novel, but the softness in her voice was. There was also something in her eyes, something I knew only came out when she thought about my father.

“I’ll stay too,” Siena was the next to say.

“Well, I wouldn’t be much of a grandfather if I left my only grandson,” said Neves firmly.

Delphnia didn’t say anything, although, by the look she gave Neves, it made me believe she wasn’t as committed to staying as we were, but considering she didn’t say anything to challenge our decree, I assumed she thought persuading her husband to leave their last connection to their lost daughter would have proved fruitless.

Bervin couldn’t contain his laugh, which was hearty and brief. He then professed, “Dammit! We’re all officially crazy! Spirits guide us!”

“You all serious?” asked Yitro. “What do you think?” he went on to ask Eloram.

“I think we’re screwed either way,” she amiably replied.

“Couldn’t have said it any better,” Yitro responded with a smile meant mostly for her, but also given to everybody else. “Shit, you better be right about this, old-timer.”

We only had each other’s company in the entire building by the end of the minute. The rumble of the engines of the evacuating vehicles dwindling farther into the distance made it official; there was no turning back. The gunfire came next, along with eruptions from the tanks



as the defensive line provided the convoy with cover fire. We still had the radio, or the inside of building would have been perfectly silent. It was bursting with several voices either issuing out commands or asking for assistance.

The doubt started to creep deeper into our minds. Everyone avoided eye contact with one another, particularly with me. Each new revolution of the tires outside took me closer to total lunacy. My dream was probably not a message at all, but a delusion of a weary mind that wanted to see its other half again, so much so that I let it induce me to accept whatever form she came in and execute anything she demanded. The radio continued on in the background until I heard a dispatch that placed it back at the forefront.

The man's tone sent a biting chill through all of our bodies when he said with an agonized tone, "The propulsion system has failed!"

Before we could comprehend what was just expressed, we heard another voice, even more vexed than the last, say, "We're dead in the water, sir!"

Additional desperate assertions packed the line.

"...on board! Get everyone below deck!"

"We request immediate pickup!"

"That is a negative on the pickup. LZ too hot."

A miserable feeling wrapped over me like a heavy winter cloak during a heat wave. I was correct to avoid the ships, but at the cost of thousands being wrong. The declarations in the radio only became graver and more horrific. I couldn't help feeling guilty, but it was a new form of it, for I knew I couldn't have done anything differently. Even so, the contemplations of what might have been buried all others. I could not allow Dayce to listen to this increasingly ill-fated situation, and neither did I, for that matter, so I ferried Dayce into an adjoining room. The lights were left on in the rush and I paced the room with him still in my arms.

In an inquisitive tone that surprised me, Dayce asked, "Dad, what happened to Mommy?"

"I don't know," I answered gently, knowing it was time to stop pretending to him. "I don't know where she is, Dayce."

"I saw her, but I don't think it was *all* of her," he said with great delicateness, forcing my heart to catch its breath.

I sat Dayce down on a bed and asked, I'm assuming not at all steadily, "You saw her?"

He nodded, seemingly not surprised at my bewilderment. “I was sleeping and she told me not to get on the boat. I don’t think it was really Mommy, but I believed her.”

Before I could even begin to comprehend the meaning of my son’s confession, my mother walked in. Without so much as an inspection, she informed me, “We’re moving to the third floor.”

I nodded my acknowledgement and mechanically followed her and the others upstairs. Any meditation of my son’s words and their implication had to be reserved for another time. Bervin, Yitro, and Neves listened to the radio in a room separate from the rest of us. The rooms we chose faced out to the setting eastern sun, or they were supposed to be, for its brilliance was blighted by a vast opaque smoke cloud rising wildly in the distance. The oil reserves on the eastern shore must have been ignited and were now aflame. For twenty grueling minutes we couldn’t elude the accustomed sounds of the battle enclosing us, and the sky once again began to envelope itself in a cycle of darkness.

“Get away from the window,” my mother anxiously told Siena.

“A group of soldiers just entered the building,” Siena replied. “I’ll go see what they know.”

“I’ll go with you,” I automatically decided. “Eloram, take care of Dayce. We’ll only be a minute.”

Siena and I went downstairs, cautiously, but not necessarily slowly. We soon stepped into the first floor of the living area where we found three young soldiers (younger than we were, in any event) crouched together behind some of the pillars. One of the two women saw us at the stairs entrance and motioned us to remain quiet and stationary. All of us were as still as sculptures from an antique age for a minute or so before the female soldier gave another signal to release her group from their inertness, allowing them to come toward us. As for Siena and I, we stayed in our sculptured state, though it was not something we fastidiously planned. The soldier, the one who had signaled up until now and whom I assumed was the superior of the others, was the first to speak.

“Sorry for the silent treatment, but we just had to be sure we weren’t being chased.”

“You mean by an Injector?” I asked.

“You went to college, I see. As far as I know, there’s only one reason we shook off an Injector-”

“They went after somebody else,” keenly finished the male soldier.

“You’re learning well, corporal.” Her gaze returned to us. “What about you guys? Did you oversleep or something?”

“Something didn’t feel right about the ships, so we stayed behind, lieutenant,” said Siena.

“Good instincts, but now comes the most expensive question of our lives. Now what, right? Well, never fear, your humble saviors are here.” The last statement was not said without her share of sardonic gallantry. “Those of us who can are heading for the northern shore where some boats can float us out of here. Care to join us?”

“That’s our best option?” I inquired.

“Beggars can’t be choosers,” she responded, with feigned disappointment. “The real port is fucked and any available aircraft can only be used if the mission is deemed critical. Now, while I’m very willing to deem myself critical, the rest of the military sees differently. So, let me ask again, you in or out?”

“Could you give us some time to ask the others?” requested Siena.

“Others? Sure, go ahead. Tell you what, while my corporal here claims a transport for us, you can go have your little meeting.”

In a necessarily concise discussion, Siena and I were disclosing to the rest of the interested party the opportunity that presented itself. Deciding we had to take a chance on this prospect was not a challenging verdict, however, that did not mean I was any less edgy. This was not something I could sleep on in the hope I received another visit from the apparition and expect her to offer more guidance. Two blinks later and we were all downstairs standing before the lieutenant and the private, who were waiting by the western entrance. We waited unmoving for a few minutes alongside them. Taking us out of our petrification was the sound of our means of exodus, coming from the rumble of a potent engine heading for us. The lieutenant signaled for us to go meet our emancipator.

In the blurred glow of the smoke-veiled moons and stars, I felt the touch of an unusually warm breeze hit my face. I expected to find a truck or jeep waiting for us, but the corporal brought what I would later learn was an armored personnel carrier, or what others conveniently call an APC, instead. There was easily enough space in the rugged, tracked vehicle to hold all of us. Even before we settled in and the rear doors were able to fully shut, we had already moved a few yards away from our parked position. I couldn’t see much of anything at first, exempting the

night sky visible through the open roof, which was uncovered to allow the stand of a .50 caliber machine gun to rotate in any direction. The private procured this weapon. The rapidly revolving tracks churning against the gravel of the road made me feel safer than I had felt in many other places. The warm wind I had first met became much cooler as the vehicle moved with more strength, replacing it with air not fed by flames. It wasn't necessarily the cool breeze or the streaking stars above us that comforted me. It was what they represented. They were signs we were doing what I believed was the safest enterprise imaginable; moving as fast as possible.

I held this solace for as long as I could, knowing it wouldn't last, and it didn't. The APC was losing some of its haste when I felt the tracks move over the uneven ground as we went off road. Some stars became concealed by the leaves and branches of the tallest parasol trees. Our transport eventually came to a complete stop. Everything became quiet enough so that I could faintly hear the breathing of the effervescent ocean close by. The lieutenant stood up onto her seat to survey the area. Bervin and I did the same. We were alongside a line of halted military vehicles, situated near a strip of trees with broad leaves larger than the branches they were attached to. I expected they came from the refugee defensive line, as there was nothing else to presently defend.

"Why did we stop?" Bervin asked.

"There are mines on the beach," said the irked lieutenant. "They have to be cleared out before we can move."

"How?" inquired Delphnia, shifting nervously in her seat, though she could not move much between Neves and Siena. "Won't that take too long?"

"Just give it a minute," the lieutenant replied with the same impatience.

The stretched moments that passed us by had trouble moving through the stagnant slush the air had been converted to. The pacifying breaking of the ocean waves on the shore changed into fuming and writhing swells.

"Fuck, where are they?" wondered the private in a whisper, as if she did not want to completely disturb the stillness.

As those words were being articulated, the calm was snapped by the sharp hissing sounds that could only originate from the expelled projectile needles of the enemy. Succeeding the despairing yelps that came from the unfortunate souls who couldn't escape the enemy's strike, the unyielding and frenzied onset of weapons fire vibrated the night. It was directly afterward

when I heard the screeches of jets zooming over us. Taking a glance above me, I was able to see their silhouettes blending with the night sky, but the starry black ceiling soon distorted and became interlaced with hues of crimson, yellow, and auburn. The roars of the bombs impact temporarily dominated the effects of all other weapons. The beach was briefly buried in flames brilliant enough to rival the command of the sun in her highest splendor.

“Finally!” announced the lieutenant. “Move us out, corporal!” I knew she had said it loudly, but it was meager compared with the ensuing battle, the newly shaped fire crackling, and the tumultuous waves of the ocean governing much of my hearing.

It was as if the entire line of vehicles obeyed her command. Each transport in the ensemble lurched toward the beach. Night enshrouded us yet again as the flames in the distance fizzled out just as quickly as they were created. The roar of the ocean seethed through the line of forest as we moved closer to her call. The APC next came into contact with the sand as we traversed the beach, leaving all trace of the trees and their shadows behind, instantly revealing the true image of the island’s majestic coastline. The moons at once came out of their hiding over the placid sea, forming a panorama only conceived in gladder tidings, beckoning us to the bosom of the shore. The sea was its own lighthouse as the lustrous yellowish rays of the moons reflected their light across the coast, rendering it clearer than crystal itself. The convoy journeyed thirty or forty yards before we came to a sudden standstill, immediately bringing back the reason we were there.

“Where are the boats!?” asked the corporal from within the APC’s cabin.

“Turn the APC parallel to the water,” ordered the lieutenant. “Then everyone off and get behind it! We’re easy pickings in here!”

We did what was desired of us. I found myself crouched behind the APC only a couple of feet away from my toes being submerged in water. In my peripheral vision, I saw a jeep, not distinct from the other military jeeps, pull up next to us and the four soldier passengers mimicked our movements, though I’m sure we did not look as composed as they did.

“Major!” I heard the lieutenant say to one of the newcomers.

“Lieutenant Crosst,” one of the men responded in a raspy voice. He looked to be my age and did not strike me as someone who could carry such a high rank. “Glad to see you made it this far.”

“I would like to get a little farther,” said the lieutenant. “Where’s our ride?”

“They won’t come until the threat is neutralized,” regretfully explained the major.

“Okay, I’ll just start swimming then.”

“I’m sorry, but they won’t risk becoming the likely targets if they get close.”

“Is there a plan?” my mother asked the major.

“Just give me a minute, ma’am,” he told her.

“I can at least do this,” said Yitro, lifting his arms just enough for me to notice that he did. A wall of sand and rocks rose about five feet from the ground, surrounding everyone in the group and leaving open the view of the rolling sea behind us.

“You’re a spirit warrior?” the lieutenant asked, the other newcomers remaining in speculative silence. “And I thought you looked good before.”

Whether anyone else said another word or not, I didn’t notice. Grabbing my whole attention was one of the recently arrived soldiers maneuvering himself for an enhanced position within the sand wall. As he moved to stand near me, I saw him step into the water as it swelled onto the shore. He created a small splash, but the gentle ripple in the water created a tidal wave in my mind. Seeing the indent of his foot gradually fading with the ebb, an idea coyly circled around in my brain and exited my lips.

“Yitro, how large a wall can you create?” I asked him, sounding as eager as I felt. “I mean, do you think you can make one like this, but big enough to surround the APC?”

“Probably,” he answered, sounding as perplexed as I was sure he felt, but he didn’t seem at all tentative. “What do you have in mind, old-timer?”

Ignoring him for the moment, I turned to the major and asked, “Can you order all vehicles to group up in front of this APC, especially tanks, and get soldiers on foot to us here?”

“I suppose,” he said with the same perplexity as Yitro. “What are you getting at?”

This was one of those times I wished they all could just read my mind so I wouldn’t have to explain, so I expounded as hastily as I could. “The biggest advantage the Injectors have are their invisibility, but they’re not ghosts, they still affect the area they’re in. So if they step in water or wet sand, we should still see the ripples and their footprints.”

“I see,” the major responded. “You want them to flank us, to force them in the water so we can see them.” He looked at me with a sort of excitement, but it transmuted into shrewdness. “But then what? Those things don’t fall easy and we have no idea how many there are.”

“I don’t think any plan will work if more than one comes at us,” I said, using a tone to assure him I had thought ahead, “but they’re not stupid and they’re not too afraid of our weapons. I think they’ll only send one to flank us and see what we’re doing, but when we see where it is, that’s when we can get it stuck. And by ‘we’ I mean Yitro.” I turned to him, as did everyone else who knew his name.

“Me?” he said, almost as if he was lost in his own thoughts before coming back to what was in ours. “Oh, you mean sink it in the sand?”

“Yes,” I said. “Do you think if you knew where it was you could hold it down for a little while?”

“No, guarantees,” he said plainly. “It depends on how strong that thing is.”

“It would only need to be long enough to get every tank and jet the chance to have a few shots at it. Do you think that’s possible?” I generally asked the soldiers.

None of them seemed all that enthusiastic or especially confident with what I was saying. I wasn’t expecting it, but a little affirmative reaction would have been helpful. It was quiet in our compact group for several seconds before the lieutenant spoke her mind.

“We can laser target it. That usually doesn’t work, but if we can get enough of us to do it and if it’s immobilized-”

“Fuck it,” brashly interjected the major. “It’s not like we have a shit load of options. I’m on board.”

Once he gave his orders over the radio, every capable vehicle began to gather in front of and alongside our APC to construct an impassable, at least to us, barricade of metal. The imposing wall of steel, stretching halfway to the forest, fortified my confidence in my plan. About forty to fifty soldiers then joined us behind the metal hurdle that many of them had some part in forming. With them following orders that undoubtedly made little sense, and seeing the wall of sand and rock around us that looked to have taken hours to gather, it was no wonder to see many donning a befuddled look on their faces, as no one had time to clarify the strategy.

Their confusion soon changed to absolute amazement when they all saw Yitro taking his command of the beach’s sand and began warping the ground around us to formally begin the arduous undertaking. I began to detect the preceding confusion the soldiers carried had all but disappeared, almost as if everything now made sense to them, even if nothing had become any clearer. I watched the stimulated sand and rocks start to tremble between our APC and the tank

in front of it. Faster than I thought possible, thousands of pounds of Evon amassed and rose to an impressive fifteen feet into the air. I was ready to believe the seashore wall was going to keep rising until it reached the company of the stars, but I was soon reminded of its true charge when I saw it began to curve around the APC. The bulging beach embraced our group from either side, and the mass tapered toward the seawater behind us, decreasing its size significantly when it stretched beyond the APC until it completely shrank away into the soothing bearings of the ocean. The barrier, and the first phase, was complete.

Even being so close to the riotous blasts of weapons fire stemming from the artilleries in front of us, I could still hear the heavy breathing of Yitro, the effect of what was indisputably a strenuous feat. Eloram was holding on to his shoulder while he struggled not to meet the ground, but I could not say he shared her concern for himself, for all I saw was a pleased smile that could not be abated, gazing at his work in much the same way an artist might regard his masterpiece. It could be assumed that this was the most he had ever warped thus far, but I didn't put it behind me that there was more yet to come. The tanks and vehicles that were so gracious as to join us were commanded to continually fire into the thin forest. It didn't matter if there wasn't any sound to be heard or movement to be seen from the enemy. It must be made certain the Injector, or Injectors, would not simply climb the blockade. I prayed that there was only one to contend with. The unbridled shells were raging incessantly, shaking the beach and Yitro's arresting creation, but nearly every grain of sand and granule of stone held on to its trifling place in the vital structure.

All there was left for us to do was to wait for whatever shape the future melded into. There was no use anymore to pray for the best and there was no preparing for the worst. We wanted to face our enemy. If we were going to die, then it was going to be fighting. I had heard what many commanders did when many of their underlings became infected. They would order airstrikes on their positions if their army became overwhelmed, preferring fiery death to living as sullied creatures. I felt easy knowing I could die in a swathe of flame rather than turn into one of them. All eyes stared intently into the ocean, waiting for a sign to see if the bait was taken. I was squatting at the right side of the wall, up to my hips in water, scanning the surface with everyone else. The waves came and went, sheathing my legs for a moment before they drew back to the sea, ensnaring me in their endless cycle. I did not know exactly what I was anticipating, but I did understand that, when it happened, I would know.



Suddenly, all colors developed into a grayish hue, except for what I noticed to my right no more than fifteen yards away. Between the crests of the illuminated waves, I saw something on the water's surface that I knew not to be of nature's creation. To call it a splash or ripple would be inaccurate, for all I saw was a strange shimmer on the water's surface. I waved over Yitro as soon as I perceived it and pointed it out to him. He turned to me, with no mark of surprise or horror on his face, but one of conviction, understanding our next step.

"Major," I called in as loud a whisper as I could make it, apparently afraid the Injector could hear and understand what I was saying. "Can you have your men fire there?"

He nodded as he glanced in the direction I had pointed out to him and composed hand gestures that only soldiers could recognize. He then yelled, "Open fire!"

Without delay, a hail of metal struck where not one eye was deviated from, revealing the colorless being's misty outline. Before it could take another step forward, it appeared to have clumsily staggered backward. I turned to Yitro to see his arms extended and aimed at the Injector's slice of the ocean, wearing the most focused look his face could ever fashion. Eloram was still by his side, lest he would need her to catch him. Whirling back at our foe, I saw it continue to skirmish against the whirling sand beneath its feet, sinking a little deeper with almost every movement. There were numerous red laser dots coming from the soldier's guns placed on the besieged machine. The laser beams scattered much of their light when they reached the cloak of the Injector, much like how regular light bounced off a mirror. I hoped the quantity offset the quality. Through all of this, I would occasionally see the Injector free itself from Yitro's grasp, which made my heart reach my teeth each time, but the spirit warrior always managed to reclaim his hold.

"Target designated!" howled the major into his radio. "All forces fire at will!"

Every one of my senses were bombarded by the storm of weapons fire from all the armaments within reach—assault rifles, grenade launchers, machine guns, and tanks—causing my adrenaline to skyrocket to its utmost point and blurring my surroundings. At some point, massive pillars and cavalcades of water engulfed the Injector's scrawny frame as aircraft missiles struck its position at the brink of the coast.

Once this cascade of water settled, I thought to have caught a glimpse of the demon's true form, its cloak ripping open in places to reveal sections of its alien visage. From what I was able to surmise, the Injector was of a pearly white shade in nearly every portion of its main body.

Flailing in disarray at the ends of its two gaunt arms were dozens of cable-like apparatuses, the same ones I had seen dexterously bind my wife. These were of a metallic hue of silver and were probably as thick as the needles they likely fired. The last feature I caught was a featureless face at the end of a long, flexible neck of silver. There were no discernible eyes, sensors, indentations, or markings of any kind on the triangular-shaped head, which didn't have any sharp corners or sides. It was merely an unsympathetic, bleached blankness staring at us for the split moment before another curtain of water rose up to shroud it from view. Its features, or lack thereof, reinforced the idea that these were machines, but the life-filled aura I experienced from before was not so easily shrugged off.

Two more stampedes of airborne projectiles collided with the partly entombed target, concealing it longer than I liked. Virtually all weapons ceased shooting at once, leaving the ringing in my ears as the only sound I could perceive. The major must have ordered the cessation, but I never heard it expressed. The waves created by the blasts continued to lap on those standing in the water. Progressively, the water stabilized to what nature had intended. Yitro was exhausted from his toil and he couldn't stop himself from collapsing on his knees this time. Eloram was on her knees alongside him, but their sights were at the same spot, brightened by the light from the moons and stars. It was difficult to make out, but there was something resembling metallic crumbs resting lifelessly on the surface, rising and dropping with the waves.

“Designate it again!” instructed the major. “No chances!”

However, before more than two laser dots supplanted themselves on the remains, the Injector submerged. Whether if it was by its own choice or not, we didn't know, but that did not stop us from mindlessly taking a few steps back from the water's edge. I did not hear anything for a long minute. No ruffle of clothing on the wind, not the dwindling ringing in my ears, not my heart beating, and certainly not the waves meeting the shore.

With nothing occurring after that minute, the major said to his radio, “Pickup team, the target was successfully repelled. No sign of multiple targets. Requesting immediate pickup.”

## Chapter Twenty-Five Adrift

I felt afraid to be relieved, fearing it would only be pulled away as soon as it established itself. The water was lapping up on shore without any sign of irregular movements, that is, until my eyes refocused farther out on the horizon. The silhouette of a form I had never seen before appeared, not seeing how it could have been any ordinary boat. It ballooned as it cruised toward us in haste. A dull roar also became perceptible. I then realized some measure of the roar came from a couple of huge fans at the back of the transport. The rest of the droning resulted from the engines sucking in the air, allowing the craft to glide over the water using a cushion of air. It was a hovercraft. I always knew they were large, but I was not prepared to see something capable of carrying a few tanks. The amphibious vessel propelled itself onto the beach and greeted us by lowering its ramp. A few vehicles also joined our evacuation, but I was in too much of a haze to notice anything else. Actually, being atop the craft did not help my spirits too much. It was obvious we had the space to fit a group twice as large, making it feel far too empty. For the first time, I felt the number of survivors diminishing.

With another Injector likely not far behind, the hovercraft glided off the beach as soon as the ramp elevated off the ground. Using my knowledge of lunar astronomy, I saw that we turned east. We clocked several more miles in that direction before sighting the stern of a large Navy ship in the distance. As we neared it, I saw that the ship had a large ingress, permitting the hovercraft and other similar vessels to dock within. Siena later informed me in her quiet way that it was known as a well deck. We entered the ship with no sign of the evil presence in pursuit, not that I still didn't feel like it was there.

"Oh, this is the *Arians*," said Siena when she caught the rustic name written above the entrance.

"What about it?" I asked, watching her eyes gazing intently at the words.

"Nothing," she replied, shaking her head to release the trance she was in. "I just remember Helmtor was almost stationed here before someone changed their mind."

Her voice was practically imperceptible. She walked away, leaving me to stare at our newest haven's name until we passed under it. The hovercraft docked inside the ship behind another of its kind.

As we were disembarking the hovercraft, I overheard someone inquire, with a voice that would be hard to neglect, “Who’s the spirit warrior?”

I turned to find a tall naval officer addressing the now dwarfed major, who in turn pointed out Yitro in response to the shipmaster’s question. Yitro had regained most of his strength and looked to be his normal self again, with the added glow of having just escaped death’s corner.

“Not bad, son,” the officer respectfully said to Yitro. “You helped save a lot of lives.”

“Thanks, but I just followed his idea,” Yitro responded as he turned to regard me.

In a single long stride that covered the length of three ordinary-sized steps, the naval officer came up to me and scrutinized my drooping frame, which made me feel more than a little uncomfortable. I never thought myself as short. I knew I was above average in height, but I felt no better than a child with him towering a head over me. He would have made a good defender in shockball in his younger days, if not at that moment.

“Welcome aboard my ship,” he said in his domineering tone. “I’m Captain Fideon. You are?”

“Roym Rosyth,” I answered, my drained voice by no means rivaling his.

“Well, Mr. Rosyth, I’m glad to meet someone who can keep their head long enough to create any kind of plan, especially one that works.”

“We got lucky. There was only one.”

“I’m sure you and your group are famished,” he said abruptly, relaxing his tone as he skimmed the other members of my party. “I’d like to hear all about your ‘lucky’ plan in detail over a meal, if you don’t mind. Info on any defeat of theirs is always useful and hard to come by.”

“Sure, that sounds fine, uh, sir.”

“Good. My men will show you to some sleeping quarters to clean yourselves up. Not everyone in your group has to eat now, of course. If they would rather get some rest first, that would be completely understandable.”

It was Neves and Delphnia who were not ready to eat and talk with the rest of us. They let themselves retire to their chambers. Those who wished to eat were led into the mess hall, where the captain was already waiting for us at a table in the middle of a room that could fit four hundred people, and which currently held less than thirty. Various plates of fish and fruits were

also prepared for our arrival, the biggest feast I had seen in a long while. The captain and another officer to his right let us eat for a few minutes in peace. The captain ate with us, but at a methodical pace, as his eyes were, more often than not, on me. About halfway through our meals, I could sense the captain was eager for us to start the description. Yitro and I were the ones who recounted our recent history. Seeing as I came up with the plan, I did most of the talking. The narrative went by uninterrupted, our hosts hanging on to our every word, looking as if they were hearing a fairytale. When the last word was spoken by Yitro, the captain remained silent for some moments, his eyes casted down at the brink of the table with his finger circling the rim of his half-filled glass of white wine. The silence persisted as he mulled over the new data. His eyes finally rose back up to us.

“They’re pretty arrogant, aren’t they?” he rhetorically asked, taking a long draught from his glass afterwards. “Of course, that saved your lives. In nearly every report I’ve read and heard, our armies have encountered multiple Injectors in most battles, that is to say, unless there is a larger force nearby. In these cases, the smaller force is usually flanked by a single Injector. In most circumstances, the smaller force tries to regroup with the larger one, which I believe to be a mistake. Your story has just abetted that theory. A relatively small force can indeed defeat an Injector without relying on an overwhelming effort. It seems counterintuitive, doesn’t it? Wanting to split apart our thinning forces?” He drank the last mouthful from his glass.

“We had air support, tanks, and a spirit warrior, sir,” I thought best to point out to him.

“That’s not a problem for most major armies, expect perhaps spirit warriors,” he retorted coolly. “Unless we’re attacking a Tower, the enemy largely ignores tanks and the people inside them. They know we can’t see them for accurate shots, and their needles can’t penetrate the armor. In fact, there’s no indication that they have any other type of projectiles in their arsenal. In the few times they do shoot to kill, they only seem to fire their needles at a greater velocity, not use a different type of weapon. Our enemy is clearly not a conventionally equipped or a conventionally thinking war machine, and that has led to our predicament. Far too many of our leaders react as if we are fighting an invading army, but I don’t see it that way.”

Siena was the first to respond to his enlightenment, for she was always the most comfortable in this type of setting. “I’ve never seen them as an invading force either. Technology as advanced as theirs should be able to more easily, um, for lack of a better phrase, wipe us out. I

believe you're right, captain. The Injectors are not war machines. As a scientist myself, I equate them more to elaborate syringes."

"Ah!" the captain stated with an impressed grin. "Then you've taken it a step further than I have. I was going to say they reminded me of scientists going about a mad experiment, but your metaphor is more apt, Miss Tillar, seeing as they are probably mere instruments rather than the designers."

Siena smiled politely in return, but more out of awkwardness than pride.

Meanwhile, the captain regarded everyone, as I imagined what I might do at the end of a lecture, but I was never that respected, and continued by saying, "So keeping all that in mind, I hope to refine my strategies and hopefully convince my superiors to try more unconventional tactics. In any event, I'm pleased my men have now seen tangible proof that our enemy is not invulnerable."

It seemed as if he was about to stand from his chair as a sign of our parting, but he was interrupted by Bervin asking, "But what about the Towers? I mean, aren't they the origin of the whole thing?"

"A valid point," said the captain, readjusting himself in his chair. "However, until we can adequately fight back the Injectors, and those they infect, they will have to remain a long-term goal. While obviously a problem, the more people scatter, the less effective they become."

"I always wondered why the Towers choose to remain fixed in one spot for as long as they do," I conjectured to no one in particular. "You think they would remain in the air to spread the infection, but their shape and actions are specifically meant to bury into the ground. I can't come up with a purpose for this."

The captain said, "As far as I know, no one has been able to study a Tower's impact crater. In truth, I doubt anyone has really tried. Still, an interesting reflection, Mr. Rosyth. What was your occupation before all this?"

"I was a biology professor."

"A science teacher, eh? I'd soon make you a field commander," he said with a tone that was complete opposite of one I was expecting, for it was completely serious.

"I appreciate the compliment, sir, but I've seen more than enough battles."

The captain's demeanor unexpectedly changed with my statement. His expression became grave and his voice deeper. "Unfortunately, Mr. Rosyth, fighting will be a part of our

lives for a long time to come. It would be best that you, as well as everyone else in your group, to start accepting that fact now. If there are enough people left who still have a fighting mentality, we might still have a chance.”

His keen eyes stayed unwaveringly on mine and I knew by them alone that he was right. This floating town could never be our permanent haven and I should not treat it as though there would ever be an ounce of a possibility to stay indefinitely. It didn't even matter if the war miraculously ended tomorrow. There would still be an entire world waiting to be rebuilt, an endeavor that would take generations in of itself. But our generation was now cursed to fight for survival. Perhaps it was time to stop pretending I could remain on the sidelines.

“How long can we remain at sea?” I heard my mother inquire of the captain.

“Depends how often we can be refueled,” he answered, leaning back in his chair. “We've been lucky so far. Our enemy has not targeted many of our oil fields and fuel reserves. We do have less, naturally, but we have less machinery to fuel as well.”

“Are we planning to dock somewhere, then?” asked Siena.

“Not for now. The higher-ups will unlikely tell us to go ashore anytime soon, seeing how this last attack went. Some refueling tankers are in our convoy, which should keep us running for four to five weeks, longer if we're frugal and are able to add to their flotilla.” The officer leaned in and whispered something to his captain, who then stood up reluctantly. “It has been a pleasure to meet you all, but there is much to do. I would give a proper toast to our survival and to those who perished if I had any drink left, but hopefully raising my glass will suffice.”

Everyone soberly mimicked his deed.

## Chapter Twenty-Six Resignation

On the third evening of our revisit with the sea, I was lying in my cot with the thought of Dayce's birthday in mind. It would be in a couple of days and I was not sure whether to acknowledge it, and, if I did, how much I should. I was sure Dayce had no idea the day of his birth was close at hand, since I had not really kept him up to date with the calendar. I was leaning toward not acknowledging it at all when some heavy breathing entered the sleeping quarters to distract me from my conundrum. The distressed respirations came from Eloram. I had never before seen her so disturbed without the threat of immediate death looming over us.

"R-Roym," She faltered and began catching her breath for another few seconds before continuing. "It's Neves. Someone found him collapsed. They took him to the medical rooms."

I was standing before she finished her explanation. My eyes went to Dayce, who was sleeping soundly, and I glanced back to Eloram, with a face now surely as pallid as hers.

Eloram understood and said, "I'll stay with him."

I grabbed my mother from the neighboring room, repeated what Eloram had told me, and she followed me as I ran through the hallways to find sick bay. My legs seemed to know the way to the area, even with my brain temporarily absent. I could only tell that my mother was not far behind going by the clangs of her steps on the metal floor. I soon came upon the section of the ship that housed the numerous rooms meant to hold the sick and injured, and that currently held the clarity to the obscurity dominating my outlook. Yitro was the first I met, who stood by the closed intensive care room. Delphnia was sitting on some nearby grated metal stairs, simultaneously wearing a face of agony, defeat, and affliction. Her tears flowed uncontrollably down her cheeks. Siena and Bervin were next to her attempting to console the distraught wife, but it was all in vain. She would not be held and she would not be comforted.

"What happened?" I found myself asking Yitro, hearing my question at the same time Yitro was.

"I think some soldiers found Neves unconscious outside," he began whispering. "I don't know what his condition is. They haven't told us anything."

At the end of his report, an old memory came rushing to the forefront of my mind. Liz was sitting next to me in the waiting room of the Hornstone hospital as I held on to Dayce, who



was just a baby then. Delphnia and Orins were also there. We were nervously anticipating something. I was more anxious for her than for myself. A decrepit doctor calmly informed us that Neves had a minor heart attack and would be fine. Liz lowered her head with relief and I smiled. Neves was going to be fine. I was transferred back to the present. He had one before, could he have had another?

I was standing this time around, without Liz by my side or Dayce in my arms. Someone opened the intensive care entry. He was a military doctor about my age and his face was grim. He said something. His words came out languidly and deliberately, but no sound reached me yet. I saw Delphnia stagger back to the floor with a wretched face that I wished I had never seen. The doctor's words finally encompassed me in their echo.

“He appears to have suffered a severe cardiac arrest. I'm sorry, we couldn't save him.”

I heard Delphnia howl a piercing shriek, one that I wished I had never heard. The distraught woman stumbled to the doctor, and with a voice that fractured my ears, she cried out, “I want to see him!”

Adhering to her forlorn plea, the doctor stepped aside to let her pass. I involuntarily shadowed her, hearing other footsteps merge with mine. Only Yitro stayed behind. The room was small, but it did not feel crowded, even if there were more bodies inside than the room was meant for. The steel walls were dull, the lights too bright, and the air impenetrable. The only operating table nearly filled the whole room, and it was where I saw Neves had been laid. His shirt was torn from his chest and I saw the remorseful defibrillator on a small metallic tray table beside him. I exonerated the defibrillator for its unfulfilled duty as soon as I saw Neves' face. The expression I was seeing was not one of someone who had experienced suffering or anguish in the final hectic beats of his heart. No, it was veiled in a serenity that told me he was at peace, as if he was now living out a pleasant fantasy that he had waited his entire life to see. Delphnia's tears stopped and her cries ceased for just a moment as she stayed staring over his tranquil face. She placed her quivering hand on his cooling cheek before outright embracing his lifeless body, setting her head on his chest, as if she wanted to hear the sound of his heart or feel the rising of his chest. Then she wept a thousand tears, and we all let her.

Slowly, I saw the room begin to dwindle away from my perceptions. There were no sweeping emotions that stirred up in me as everyone and everything became more distant and

foggy, including myself. I could see as my progressively friendless figure became smaller and thinner until it too was wiped out from existence.

Ultimately reaching my eyes and ears was motion and sound. Dayce had just awoken. I was sitting in his bed with my eyes looking past the floor and my ears heeding Dayce's rise from his pillow. For a moment, I attempted to recall just how it was I arrived there and what it was I said and did, but it was pursued without success. Fragments and jagged pieces were all I could gather, not that I necessarily tried all that hard to seek out those remembrances. My last clear memory was releasing Eloram of her charge and seeing her leave the room in search of Yitro, leaving us alone.

I could sense Dayce's eyes on me, though my own still did not deviate from the leaden floor. He already knew. Of course, he could not know exactly what had transpired, but, undoubtedly, he knew. There was no point to pause or hesitate in telling him everything there was to tell. I looked at him when I had pronounced my last word. His eyes stayed watching me. Not a line altered from his countenance, not a tear formed in his dry eyes. I saw my own face in his, and I realized that my own reaction must have been not so different from what he displayed.

After a long while in reserve, Dayce finally asked, "Do you believe we turn into Spirits?"

"For a long time I didn't think about things like that," I said in a tone I had never utilized with him before; one of a sage. "Remember you told me you saw Mommy in your dream and she warned you about going to the ships? I saw her too, but like you said, she was... different."

"Maybe you change a little when you become a Spirit," he suggested introspectively.

"Maybe."

I was standing on the top deck at daybreak, the sun's swelling presence caressing the unbroken morning sky and being redirected back up by the unworried sea. I couldn't help resent the scene, even though I knew I had no tangible reason for the feeling. The wind was gusting, but it was drowned out by the axioms of Neves' memorial behind me. He was not a soldier, he did not save countless of lives countless of times, but that did not hinder the war cleric from bestowing him a warrior's farewell ritual. Neves was cloaked in a black veil, at least, from afar that's what I made myself believe. His body rested inside a dusky body bag. Placed alongside him were a few of his last remaining possessions, the ones he elected to carry with him to the end of the world. It was not very long ago when I was alongside Delphnia as she tenderly placed the pictures he had always carried with him. Each one was of his family. Our family. Before

Delphnia parted with the last of her husband's images forever, she would kiss them, each more earnestly than the last. Among them was a photograph of myself, one I had always hated. It was of me sitting alone on a park bench, looking far too serious for the occasion. I told him to replace it the first time I saw it, which was probably the precise reason why he hadn't. Also with him was the watch that was always in his pocket no matter where he traveled. It was too old to be worn and too tarnished to work. He never wanted to get it fixed, for he had received it in that condition by his late father, the last link to his most recent ancestor.

Neves was lowered into the sea. As was custom for navel soldiers, there were sinking stones embedded in his casing to quickly lower him to the innermost depths of the fathomless ocean. There he would rest forever and where it was hoped he would not be disturbed by the vile creatures swarming over the surface. I appreciated that at least we had this opportunity to say goodbye, knowing few others had even that luxury. I thought of Liz. I wished she were here to comfort her despondent mother, to give her last valediction of her father, to comfort Dayce like only she could, but in the end, it was mostly for me. I wanted her for me.

Just as the water swallowed the last remaining glimpse of the man I was lucky enough to describe as my father-in-law, I heard the maddening cries of Delphnia; cries signifying more than just the end of her bond with her soul mate, but quite possibly the end of every meaningful bond tethering her to this world. How much misery can one endure before the soul can be deemed defeated? I could tell her that she still had Dayce in her life, but how could I, when every time she looked at him it was as if she was looking into the eyes of her daughter and husband? I actually felt Delphnia's vitality waning in front of me and I found myself not blaming the widow if she desired to lose it completely. This train of thought made me recall a period when I was reading about the wonders of nature, captivated with the minds of species that were not our own. I would think about how they would not allow their wills to break and never consider the option of suicide, even when under the greatest of stresses. An animal could witness its entire family or brethren being killed by a predator or calamity, and it would merely attempt to find a new mate and start again anew, only looking toward the future, not for themselves, but for their species. That's what we had to do. We had to emulate the strength in primordial nature to overcome the most horrific tragedies suffered during modern sapience. Living for ourselves was no longer possible, but perhaps living for someone else's future was still not too late to achieve.

The memorial was over. Siena approached me. Her eyes were vapid, so much so, I thought them colorless. She too was worried about Delphnia and she told me she would keep a close eye on her.

Idle hands are the gateway to an active mind, which was a dangerous thing living in a world such as ours. Our time in the ship was spent doing any job we could manage, as long as they did not require expertise of the mind or hand, though the sophisticated technology on the ship didn't seem so sophisticated to me anymore. It was like we were children playing inside a plastic toy boat. In any case, any deed that could keep us busy was done, lest futility should grip a hold of us entirely.

To prepare for the inevitable, I agreed to allow Dayce to consort with the soldiers and have him learn how to operate and clean various weapons in their arsenal, knowing he would have to put his knowledge into practice one day. From time to time, I would sit and watch him, becoming absolutely entranced by the scene, literally watching him wipe away what little innocence he had left. I knew that every time he would raise a weapon and pull the trigger that it would be a failure on my part to protect him. Liz would hate me if she knew. She would loathe every part of me for accepting that her son needed to perform this now necessary affair.

Now and again the *Arians* would welcome personnel and refugees from various other ships in the area we cruised, so as to waste as little fuel as could be helped by emptying less critical ships. There were over two thousand passengers aboard, the vast majority of which were soldiers from all corps, divisions, ranks, and titles. The *Arians* obediently followed her convoy on a generally northeastern path, keeping a fair distance from the coast of the continent. We were far away enough away to feel safe from the vigilance of our enemies, but near enough to feel we were not completely deserting the land and its resources. We were often moving so slowly that I was sure the headwind was able to stall us, as though we were as susceptible as the mariners of old.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven Crippled

It had been two weeks since another light in my life was snuffed out, two weeks of living in a boiling haze. While I was allowing my body repose in the form of a nap one afternoon, I overheard a multitude of dashing footsteps just outside the sleeping quarters. At first, I was certain they were only tricks derived from a lingering dream, but the first scene I viewed in reality was of my mother, Bervin, and Eloram standing in front of me and watching the doorless entrance, where the origins of the upheaval came from the stampede of warriors moving to and fro.

“What’s going on?” I asked, not directly to anyone. “Where’s Dayce?”

My mother answered, “Siena took Dayce to the mess hall to eat, along with Mrs. Ave. Then the captain began booming some orders over the intercom a few minutes ago.”

“It sounded like they were preparing to attack a Tower to me,” Bervin added.

“A Tower offensive?” I said to myself. I wasn’t yet awake enough to trust what I was hearing. “Are you sure?”

“I interpreted it that way too,” said Eloram. “There weren’t many details in the orders though.”

Before my awareness could catch up to my actions, I had already risen and was heading out the entrance.

“Where are you going?” asked my mother with her characteristic combination of confusion and irritation.

“To find out what I can.”

The halls were crowded, more crowded than I had ever seen them before. I didn’t notice their faces as I made my way through the bulks of bodies going every which way, but I felt their focused intensity like a powerful current of electricity surging through the innards of the ship. The command deck was my only goal, hoping to meet a higher up to divulge the details of the announcement. I eventually found it, or maybe luckier to come upon it, and there, coming down a hallway and heading in my direction, I saw Yitro conversing with Lieutenant Crosst. I broke my hurried pace.

Crosst, the first to spot me, said, “Ah, professor, here to volunteer for my squad, too?”

I turned to Yitro as they both stopped right in front of me. With a look of general surprise, I inquisitively said, “Too?”

He shrugged, and bearing a poised air only he could wear, said, “I’m a spirit warrior, aren’t I?”

This rhetorical question Yitro posed to me revealed his metamorphosis and the several exchanges he must have had with the lieutenant to wholly convince him to become part of the fighting force. After the initial surprise made its round, I returned to my aim. “I was unable to hear the announcement. Is it true we’re going to attack a Tower?”

“That’s right,” the lieutenant replied, continuing our walk as a trio, with me following their lead. “A Tower landed near Morva last night, a small city not far off the coast, or about a hundred miles north of our current position. According to the report I heard, some of the local forces decided to attack the thing, and wouldn’t you know it, they think they’ve damaged it.”

“Damaged it? How?”

“They believed something was wrong with the Tower,” she continued, not seeming to pay any attention to anything but what was in front of her. “It didn’t really spread much of the infection after it landed and its shield was visibly on the fritz, so the forces there decided to take a chance on an attack. Our sources there think they were able to disable its engines.”

“But now they need reinforcements.”

“Yep, the Injectors wiped out most of the small group. We’re the nearest, so we’ll see if we can finish the job before it can potentially repair itself.”

“And you’re one of the squads going?” I asked, though it could have easily been a statement.

The lieutenant came to a stop and explained with mock anger, “Thanks to you, professor, my little squad is now known as part of the group who defeated an Injector. We’ve no choice but to go.”

“When do you move out?”

“Three hours before we can get close enough to make an amphibious landing, but we’ll start the bombardment when enough ships are in range. Meanwhile, I have to get my new recruit here some proper gear.” I noticed we were standing in front of some supply rooms. “Anything else, professor?”

My eyes gravitated toward Yitro's, and in them I saw a fixed resolution he had never carried before. Still, the rest of him was as *laissez-faire* as I had always known him to be. What next shocked me more than learning he was to attend the resistance was me wishing I could be by his side as a fellow combatant.

"No, nothing else for now, lieutenant."

As I once again entered the sleeping quarters after a much less vivid journey back, I found Bervin, Eloram, and my mother in much the same positions I had left them. I told them all that I had learned. Their reactions to our vessel's new mission did not rival that of their astonishment to hear of Yitro uniting with them as a soldier in his own right, with the exemption of Eloram, who did not seem to elicit any emotion at all when the news entered her acoustic expanse. She merely stayed staring at me, with no deviation in her docile expression. She must have been distressed, but at the same time, I felt it was a sorrow she must have already been bracing for.

As I was in these contemplations, Siena, Delphnia, and Dayce arrived, so we were all present to see Yitro silently reveal himself in his new tanned camouflage about an hour later.

To disrupt the tormenting silence that conquered the room for the first few moments on his entry, I heard the question, "Are you sure about this?" I looked for the origin of the inquiry to discover that it came from none other but my mother. I did not recognize the aberrantly low, gentle voice.

Before Yitro could respond, Delphnia petulantly interceded, exclaiming, "Let him join our ancestors if he wants!" While she said it harshly, only pity filled my soul.

Without a sound, Eloram stood up from the cot and left the room, not taking any glance to Yitro and neither did he take a glimpse at her. He did not move to impede her, if anything, he was more still than before. Seeing that Yitro was not going to follow her, Siena chased after her instead.

Bervin subsequently counseled Yitro. "You don't have to do this, son."

"Thanks for your concern, but it's already decided," he replied. It was close to his usual tone, but I thought it had a newfound seriousness in it. "It might be pointless, but back at the island I saw I could do something more to help besides just keeping myself alive. Basic math says if I save just two people then I've given us better odds at surviving this thing. That's how I feel, anyhow."

Dayce moved for the first time, walking up to embrace his hero. I don't believe he truly thought about what he was doing, for he seemed to be under a spell as he wrapped his arms around him. I knew then that Yitro was no longer only his hero anymore. Yitro kneeled and returned the tight hug, not so different from how I held Dayce the morning I parted with him at the gated community. Over the room's stillness, the feeble sound of Dayce's tears escaping him could be heard.

"Hey, Dayce, I have to go save the world now," Yitro said as he looked copiously in his eyes. "When you're a bit older you can join me and we'll make an unstoppable team, all right?" Dayce sluggishly nodded. I saw his lips try to form words, but he couldn't, for his sobs would not let him. "I guess I should find your future wife and bring her back to you." He stood back up and strolled out the room.

We were all in the well deck not long after to see Yitro set forth in his new mission in life. I briefly looked around and realized that Yitro was lucky. He had people to say goodbye to. The late afternoon light creeping through the deck's opening grazed Yitro's uniform, making it seem he was always meant to wear it. Sayings of farewells were exchanged, handshakes given, and hugs made. There was Bervin's strong handshake, Siena's pure tears, my mother's maternal words, Dayce's admiration, and even Delphnia was able to show him a hint of goodwill. For my part, we shook hands and I told him that I wished I could join him.

He smiled lightheartedly and he said, "Nah, an old-timer would just slow us down."

Then there was Eloram. She didn't say too much, but there was no need to, as it was already said in private. Her eyes were ones of sheer tenderness as her tears smoothly moved down her kind face. She enveloped her arms around him, resting her moist cheek on his shoulder. She closed her eyes and held on every second she could.

While he was walking down to the craft that would take him away from us, and after a last parting wave from him, a thought came to me of how I would be so blessed as a father to know that my son would grow up to emulate him. Almost as quickly as I could blink, he was gone. They all were. The soldiers had boarded their various transports, Yitro in the first of the two hovercraft, racing toward their daunting target. They drifted farther and farther away until I could see them no more as they wrapped around the *Arians* and out of our sights. One by one, what was left of our companions started their return back to our quarters until only Siena and I



remained. We had decided beforehand to go to the command center and attempt to persuade Captain Fideon to allow us to listen in on the approaching mission.

We found him without difficulty in the expected compartment, tangibly feeling the veneration in the room he presided in. As it turned out, it did not take much convincing for him to gladly give us permission to listen in. I had no doubt he saw this as a proactive attempt by me to learn all I could on the responsibilities and particulars of leadership. Truth be told, he was not as far off as he would have been before Yitro disclosed his recent transformation and new chosen path. He showed me how I should not confine myself to the rules of my former self, not to live my life as if I was still hoping for everything to work out without taking on a more active role in the solution. He was now using his strength and the gifts bestowed to him by the Spirits to help as much as he could give. I did not have his strength, nor did I have his spiritual gifts, but what I could do was accumulate knowledge and concentrate on learning a useful skill to better my chances of survival and those of others. All the same, my chief concern and curiosity rested on knowing how the mission was progressing. Any information I could acquire, status updates or the sounds of the battle itself, would be the nourishment for my anxious soul.

The room where we were in was, for all intents and purposes, the brain of the ship. It was similar in size to that of a large bedroom or a small living room. Led through, I was greeted by the glare of computer screens positioned in every direction, excluding the wall where the entrance was located. In the center of the hectic room was a large white table, however, it would not do it justice to label it as so. Integrated on its surface was a computer screen of its own, and though it shined brighter than any of the others, my interest couldn't be retained to it, seeing no relevant information being conveyed. My eyes examined the whole room, twice, maybe thrice, and still it was impossible for me to navigate all that I was seeing. Frantic feet moved periodically across the room, their focused eyes dissecting the screens in front of them. I did not count more than a dozen soldiers, but there were times when I was certain there were three times as many. Different voices were bouncing off all directions, some not germinating from the room we were in, and none coherent enough for my head to make sense of the chatter. The captain motioned for Siena and I to sit by the table at the center of the room, joining a few others who seemed too focused to heed our arrival. The captain continued to wander from one computer to the next, with an air of dignity that I was sure few people could still effectively bear. I peeked at Siena to expect her to be in admiration of the presentation as I was. I found that she wasn't. Not a

hint of wonder touched her countenance, in fact, I thought her more somber looking. It didn't take me long to remember why she would be so.

I wouldn't say it took us all that long to eventually identify what data most of the accessible screens displayed, along with better distinguishing the conversations we were hearing spring off the walls. The crackling voices emanating from the radios during all the simultaneous exchanges did hinder me from concentrating on one discussion for too long. Even with all that was happening around us, Captain Fideon appeared to be able to effortlessly absorb the steady stream of information coming to him from every corner of the command center and from command decks beyond. I was in complete awe of him, not only in the poise he aired, but in how so unpretentious he was in the way he carried it. The room continued to grow more alive every moment that passed. All the while, Siena and I became quieter and more motionless, careful not to disturb the cadence sight. It turned out we did not need to wonder aloud how the mission was going, since we were provided updates from none other but of the captain himself. While I believed this was something he did habitually for the benefit of all those in the command center, I suspected my presence made him do it a little more than usual.

"Shore bombardment has ceased, captain," stated an older female soldier sitting at the head of the room, who appeared to act as his chief aide. "Waiting for ground teams to take their positions."

"It looks like the first wave is safely ashore," said the captain in one of the first updates he gave himself. His voice was so much more stanch compared to when we dined in the mess hall. "No sign of trouble, yet," he added a few minutes later.

The aide next informed, "Sir, one of our birds has a visual on the target."

"Main screen."

In the same moment his order was vocalized, I became enticed by a large screen that was black an instant before and was now doubling the volume of light in the room. It was set on the wall opposite the entrance and above a line of smaller computer screens. The image it imparted was not one I much desired to see again, but I knew I had to fight the loathsome feeling draping over my eyes to be able to receive the information I wanted. Whether only in my imagination or not, I believed the whole room became silently enthralled during the split second the blacken frame of the target first flashed on screen. It did not at all ease my trembling nerves to know that

it was rooted over ten miles away from where we were, not that it was longer possible for any distance to feel safe enough.

Oddly enough, the Tower was fairly far from the city of Morva, its alleged objective. The small city was only a fuzzy splotch in the background and the area it was in was devoid of settlement. The contemptible Deliverer had sequestered itself on a plain of cracked soil and the bare twigs of petrified trees. Conversely, combined with the revulsion and condemnation I felt, there was an undeniable sense of attraction and esteem. I tried to ignore it, to cast it away, but observing the Harbinger of our unreserved destruction getting struck so impeccably by the light of the setting eastern sun gave the object a sanctified sheen, making the darkest form of black ever perceived become even more juxtaposed by the dainty evening colors that assailed the sky. I began to wonder for the first time if the creators of this Harbinger of chaos had any appreciation for art and, if they did, what that signified. My thoughts were interrupted when I detected a disruption at the Tower's surface. Starting from its flat summit, the Tower suffered a distinctive wave of distortion that quickly journeyed down to its tapered base, giving me the impression that the Tower was a mere illusion. I presumed this to be a sign of its impaired shield.

The Spirit of Time lurched forward in ever indolent increments the longer the ageless deity dragged on. The ground teams had to move into their positions before the attack resumed, all the while, anticipating to be met with resistance by the Injectors. Yet, as they progressed closer to their goal, our nemeses did not demonstrate their presence, excluding a handful of infected persons and animals. Even when the forces were well within their optimal range to begin the offensive, the enemy remained eerily absent.

I then overheard a domineering voice stemming from the radios loudly advise, "Aim for the two engines!" A moment passed and much of the chatter from the radio terminated. The authoritative voice arose again and ordered, "Fire at will!"

I watched as the first missiles and shells tore through the sky and assault the shield of the Tower from every conceivable direction. The scene very much reminded me of our first attack on the Towers. I was even anticipating for everything to go dark just as it did then, however, they never did, the implication being that the Tower had lost its EMP ability. The majority of the expertly aimed projectiles created a visible impact ripple on the shield and, every so often, I would see some of these ripples rip open when the detonations were severe enough. In the span of these short-lived intervals, the newly exposed black surface was susceptible to our warheads,

allowing them to stream through and directly strike the formidable structure in its actual form before it was able to restore itself. This cycle repeated itself for the next several minutes, with increasing success. There were strong winds, especially in the altitude it was able to reach, but even they could not prevent the buildup of smoke and surges of flame from veiling much of the Tower's peak. The Injectors still restrained from assisting their possession.

All at once, the accumulation of smoke dispersed from the Tower's crown. Both the Tower's engines had awakened and were clearing the air with the force of their thrusters. The anxiety in the already highly anxious room reached its furthest height. The bluish light of the engines turned darker and darker and looked to be giving a significant amount of thrust, compelling the Tower to tremble, though it did not yet lift off. For the time being, the arsenals and munitions maintained their assail. With our view once again unhindered, we were able to see the shield easily tearing with each strike it suffered and was significantly slower at rearranging itself. Now it seemed every projectile was achieving a direct hit, but the advanced material was just as great an obstacle as the first barrier.

Our weaponry continued concentrating their full devotion to the two engines, but the flaps that encircled them held firm and prevented any meaningful infiltration on the most defenseless sections of the ship. The only hope for a precise strike on them was if they could be struck from directly underneath, but the intense draft emitted from the engines prohibited anything from getting too close. We next noted the support legs of the Tower begin to retract into the drill, revealing the Tower's intention to extract itself from the land. The interstellar engines seemed to gain an upsurge in propulsion, but they could still barely move the fortification. With what looked to be tremendous and strenuous effort, I could finally start to see the quivering engines succeed in giving the Tower enough of a push to pull it out of the soil. After climbing inches at a time, the spiraled base completely exited the hole it had twisted open when it had landed.

It could not hold on to the taste of triumph for long. The entire shield surrounding the Tower radiantly flashed in a transparent light, and then wholly disappeared. The foreign craft was still striving to rise higher, but as it did so, its engines were becoming more exposed to direct strikes from below. Without any warning, a sudden and ferocious explosion cloaked the entire engine on the right side of the screen, causing the Tower to stop ascending. It laid suspended in the air for a long moment before it ultimately began to tilt to the right, seeing as it could no

longer be supported by its lonesome engine. It collided crudely with the ground after a rapid descent of fifteen hundred feet. As soon as the black edifice, which still didn't appear to have a dent on it, met with our reclaimed topsoil with a crash, my ears were joined with cheers, expletives, and applause coming from both within the room and through the radio channels, which included those of Siena and I.

The cheering was not long lasting as every eye was still fixed the scene of our exultation and wanted to watch what happened next. The working engine of the nightmarish vessel was now positioned as the uppermost segment and which now served to gradually propel the gigantic structure forward, transforming the advanced craft into a glorified bulldozer. It pathetically skulked for half a mile, forcing our nearest war machines to retreat, until it eventually lost all its potency and stopped dead. With the dust settling around the combat zone, the battle was deemed formally over when a ceasefire was declared and another spurt of cheers and applause ran about the room, though it was more subdued than the first torrent. I saw the smiles all around me and I turned to Siena. She was smiling, but it not as vibrant as it conceivably could have been. Perhaps she was thinking the same about me. There was something encumbering our full joviality.

I was able to hear the captain's severe voice amid all the congratulatory acclaims. His eyes were fastened to the fallen Tower that persisted on the screen and he said, more to himself than anyone in particular, "Imagine what we'll find in there! What we can use!"

Before we could take our leave, thinking the captain had forgotten we were there and wanted to inform our group of what we witnessed, he walked up to us and asked, "So, Mr. Rosyth, Ms. Tillar, a bit too easy, wouldn't you say?"

"I thought it was trap," Siena answered without reluctance, as if she had been prepared for the question, "but I can't imagine they would sacrifice a Tower for this kind of tactic."

"I agree," I said, the captain now on top of us. "They've been too successful and self-assured to resort to setting traps. The lack of any Injector resistance tells me they must have believed the Tower was beyond their saving and gave it up willingly. Something was obviously wrong with it, even before the initial forces had a chance to damage it."

Finishing my thought, Siena continued, "And that's not to say they won't return if we linger."

"Then you don't agree in staying to study it?" the captain asked Siena, a trace of surprise escaping with the query.

“I can understand the impulse,” she answered, “but I don’t believe leaving anything but a small force is worth the risk of attracting Injectors or another Tower.”

“And just give them back their ship?” he grimly asked.

“If they want it back, do you really believe we could stop them?” Siena calmly but persuasively replied.

“If we can learn to use their technology inside that ship, then maybe we can.”

Siena shook her head. “An unlikely prospect,” she said contritely. “It would be like giving our primitive ancestors a laptop. It would take many years for them to even begin to understand the symbols on the keyboard, and that’s assuming they didn’t break it. Moreover, if they were someday able to turn it on, they would have no way to charge it when the battery wasted. Reverse engineering technology we have no knowledge of would take the effort of thousands of the smartest minds working for many decades, and that’s if the world were more stable.”

“All the more reason to start as quickly as possible.”

“I know I sound fatalistic,” she said meekly. “I pray we quickly find something that can give us more of a fighting chance, but what I know for certain is that those soldiers out there are our most valuable resource.”

“That I can agree with. What say you, Rosyth?”

My eyes revolved to meet Siena’s. Any other wouldn’t have been able to see it, but it was clear to me that they contained a tinge of regret; a regret at saying the words she had just spoken without giving a more optimistic outlook. Though she spoke low and the talk of the soldiers smothered some of what she said, she was still in listening range of some of the warriors who were protecting us. Returning my attention back to the captain, I responded with my impression of the situation.

“Personally, I’d finish evacuating everyone in the area and set off a nuke. Leaving a large force here for the slight chance of a long-term reward feels like pushing our luck.”

He contemplated for a moment before saying, “The two of you make a strong case. I don’t completely agree with it, but you’ve at least convinced me to call back as many of my men as possible and counsel others to do the same. Unfortunately, your spirit warrior friend will have to stay there. Removing him would be detrimental to morale.”

Complete darkness had soon reclaimed the sky. Neither the moons nor their stirring lights were anywhere to be seen, preventing untarnished views of the grounds where the fallen Tower laid, so Siena and I left, feeling we would not gain more much by staying. When we did make known our experience to the others in our assemblage, their reactions did not differ much from ours, a reception I could only describe as cautious jubilation.

Over the next few days, engineers went to work studying the dethroned monolith, the first of its kind. It was a great misfortune that many of the brilliant minds and scholars that would have given anything to analyze and scrutinize its unguarded form did not have the fortune to be this close to it now. As expected, there were just a few superficial cracks and scratches on the harden exterior. It could have never been guessed by foreign eyes that it had been through a crusade of our most vengeful armaments. It was actually more of a surprise that it showed any signs of our reprisal at all, and most were actually satisfied with that. Ironically, the only ingress the crew was able to access was the engine that managed to remain intact. However, they were barred from exploring any farther than forty or fifty feet by mechanical impediments, but it still must have been an impressive ingress. Every engineer that was privileged enough to enter had a different story to tell once they emerged.

One talked of hearing smothered voices whispering in his ear, while someone else spoke of hearing nothing at all, a dead silence that was maddening to her senses. There was discussion of feeling the fringe of a ghastly and heavy aura that packed the labyrinth within. Others described impromptu changes in atmospheric density that made it difficult to breathe fluidly. There were many other tales, some of which were so peculiar that they were impossible to remember in detail, but all of us believed them, no matter how outlandish they sounded. The armor itself was equally as remarkable. Anything less than our mightiest tanks was entirely futile to manage the slightest of fissures, and even they required the most acute inspection to notice the mark it left, like leaving a kiss on a mountain. Any progress would indeed be insufferably languid.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight Crippled II

It had been two days after the overthrow of the Tower when bitter rumors began to make their rounds. It was reported that the scope of the infection was worsening. The infection was heard to have made its appearance where neither the Towers nor the Injectors had been confirmed to have shown themselves before. It was difficult for me to comprehend at first, given how little I wanted to ponder worsening conditions, but I had to consider that escape from the infection could be made impossible if the Towers were capable of saturating much, if not all, of the atmosphere with their miasma. And if that was possible, how long did we have? Still, these were simply rumors and the hearsays originated from another continent. All I could do was hold on to the present.

It was not long afterwards that I was standing outside at the bow end of the ship, starboard side, absorbing much needed sunlight alongside Siena and my mother. A considerable amount of our time in the open air was spent watching Dayce and Eloram joking around with a few soldiers they had befriended. It was never difficult for Eloram to make friends, which I thought fascinating, seeing as she was more bashful than most. They were cheerful and laughing aloud and I didn't bother wondering why. It reminded me that a little joy was still possible in this malevolent world, and it would not need much of a chance to flourish again.

"Are we slowing down?" Siena asked me, cutting off my mother in mid-sentence.

I perceived our backdrop more closely to find that the *Arians* was indeed losing its speed, detectable by the steady breeze and slower passing water. It was rare for Injectors to attack a moving ship, so it was a rule not to tempt them with a mired target, making it unwise to do what it appeared we were doing. Feeling the momentum at my feet abating, I saw an apprehensive sailor appear from below deck and run up to one of his fellow comrades in the group of seafarers Eloram and Dayce were merged with. The sailor then whispered something that entirely changed the listener's once placated expression. The sailor hastily departed back down the stairs as soon as he had relinquished his words, while the other turned to his company to excuse himself and left to join the messenger, both now wearing the same agitated countenance.



Siena saw what had transpired as well, for just as both soldiers disappeared in the dwellings of the lower deck, she said to me, "I'll go check to see what's happening. Stay here." She proceeded to follow the footsteps of the mariners.

I was about to trail her, more out of habit than anything else, until I recognized that Dayce and my mother would not feel safe alone. The *Arians* came to an unconditional halt within a few minutes of Siena's leave. The wind was unusually repressed, making the sea and world seem unpleasantly still and lifeless under the heat of the day. I suffered through this calm oppression until Siena made her return some twenty minutes later. Her face inherited the same aspect I had seen spreading to the other crew members.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"It's the engines," Siena answered, her worrisome face transpiring to her voice.

"Someone has.... sabotaged them."

"Sabotage?" I repeated, furrowing my brow at hearing that specific word. "Are you sure?"

"I checked with a few soldiers who were there or heard it from someone who was. A Special Forces fighter entered one of the engine rooms and apparently set off some grenades and plastic explosives he planted. He then began shooting everyone he saw until he was killed. No one can understand it. He didn't appear to be infected, and those I spoke with said he never exhibited any signs of mental instability. I don't know what to make of it."

"Have you heard how long it will take to fix the damage?"

"Nothing definite." Her hands began to tremble. "But I know we're stranded for at least a day or two." Her concluding words mimicked her shuddering body and she crossed her arms across her chest, an act I recognized whenever her dominant emotion was unfiltered fear.

Seeing her reveal her frail condition, something she rarely exposed for the sake of the group, I went to hold her in my arms, hoping to bring her some comfort. As I stood embracing her, my peripheral vision caught something reflecting the sunlight on the eastern horizon. There was no true skyline, for it was difficult to know where the cloudless sky ended and the sea began in their harmonized state, but I did see that there was something that preserved their dividing line, and I was witnessing its growth. I pulled away from Siena somewhat and curled my fingers around the railing. Suddenly, in an epiphany, I identified it to be a large navy ship. I was almost ready to be relieved by that discovery, but a strange feeling came over me when I saw that the

ship was not parallel to our own. I would not claim myself as an expert on military formations, but seeing the other ship's bow heading straight for where I stood activated an alarm bell in my head. Completely letting go of Siena, I turned around and walked up to the two soldiers in Dayce's group.

Pointing to the ship of interest, I asked them, "Is that normal?"

I gathered their attention easily enough and they looked at the ship that seemed to be being drawn to us by a lengthy string. They lingered on it for few seconds before giving each other an uneasy look, answering my question. The two of them next started to attract the attention of others nearby, who became just as gripped as we were.

"It's a G-class destroyer," I heard someone label it.

"Why is it moving so fast?" another wondered.

A sailor, who was standing a couple of people in front of me, was holding binoculars and pointed out, "There's another ship further out, but that one is going toward the carrier north of us... and both of the inbound ships are being escorted by some choppers."

Closer and closer did the nameless ship creep, showing no signs it was deviating from its collision course. The uneasiness I felt all around me had become a silent terror as we comprehended that there was nothing I could do to alter its course. The hush of anticipation was sharply broken when the alarm in my mind transferred to the *Arians'* horns, each blaring a shrill siren that could awaken the monsters of the deep.

Eloram, who was holding Dayce in her arms, frightfully asked Siena, "What do we do?"

Nearly drowned out by the siren, I just heard someone yell out, "Incoming!"

I saw bodies all around me drop to the floor. I was going to do the same if I wasn't forced to do so an instant later by a pulsation of dense air. It was just before the ground welcomed me that the sound of an explosion pounded out every other sound from my ears and replaced it with a high-pitched ringing. The floor quavered, although, I could have mistaken it for my own quaking body. I couldn't make out what I was seeing for the first few seconds. Sometimes I saw images, but I might as well have been looking at a hundred shredded abstract paintings at once. My body would not heed to my instructions, but I somehow sensed it was more a consequence of a dazed mind than from a severely wounded body. I could smell the hot smoke, and it was rapidly becoming stronger.

I wondered how it was I got there. I couldn't remember. I was just lying there until I felt my body rise from the ground, though not from my own power. In some ways, I felt as if I had been sleeping. I felt the soporific smoke stroke my face. I opened my eyes, realizing they had been closed. I saw the face of the person who had aided me to my feet and I thought he looked familiar. I wanted to thank him, but the words were replaced by coughing. He was wearing a sailor uniform with binoculars dangling from his neck. Everything started to become more distinct; the screams, the sirens, the blaze burning the side of the control tower. A terrible fright ran up my spine when I caught sight of Siena holding a bloody faced Dayce. It was such a deep color of red streaking down his forehead, that it was the only color I could see, everything else becoming a shady gray.

“Dayce! Are you okay?” I shouted, thinking I sounded like someone else.

He slowly opened his eyes and he could barely keep them open, as if it took every ounce of his strength to do so. He turned to look at me and seeing all the blood made me believe I was going to cry. I wished he would smile, knowing it was a futile wish, even compared to the other absurd wishes I had made. He looked at me with a confused gaze that would not relent. I noticed the sailor who had helped stabilize me was now steadying Eloram. I saw where her gaze traveled and I heard her scream even before it left her throat.

“Oh, Dayce!” she cried out, while the sailor kept her from falling. “I'm so sorry! I fell and I couldn't-”

“Elo-” I began to say, but a loud crash violently vibrated the entire deck.

The origin of the impact was right above me, where I saw that a helicopter had plowed into the side of the control tower. Fiery fragments were hailing down on us as the attack chopper largely remained intact and began to spin out of control, passing over us to its final end. It belligerently struck a stationary helicopter no more than forty feet away from where I was having trouble standing. No sooner had these new flames begin to dissipate when missiles arose from the sky itself and started striking all along the deck, sending fresh plumes of hot fervor into the air. I felt the scorching heat from the liberated detonations scrape my skin and watched as a throng of people were running, burning, and dying on every side of me. A sailor, whom I had never seen before, or perhaps his mien had altered far too much for me to recognize him, beckoned me and others to head below deck. I grabbed a still stunned Dayce from Siena's arms and we advanced to the stairs, Siena helping my nearly immobile, but uninjured, mother. I

looked back to the sea, despite the chance that it could be my final sight, and glimpsed the destroyer. There was no way it was any more than three minutes away.

On reaching the stairs, we were met by a voice stating, “Head for the well deck! Hurry!”

We came to the bottom of the stairway, feeling as if I had just ran across the gateway of death, only to find that it was only one of many. The lights were flickering clumsily, showing our ship’s weakening strength, except when they would become outshined by an occasional turning red light, as if we needed to be reminded of our danger.

My mother asked, “What about Bervin and Delphnia?”

I turned around to hear Siena unhesitatingly reply, “I’ll go get them!”

I couldn’t feel that much, not my heart palpitating, not my body aching, not the sweat that oozed uncontrollably from my skin, but what I did feel was the unyielding knot in my stomach that only grew tighter when she made the resolution, and I felt the sting gore right through me. Equal to an impulse, I said to her, “There’s no time to go back for them! We might not even reach the well deck in time ourselves!”

Siena’s face formed into one of apprehension and shock. I knew what her eyes were troubled to see; to see someone not willing to attempt to risk her life for that of others. There would be no argument and no chance for her to go against my desire. I could not risk the chance of not ever seeing her again. Still, I could not face her shaken stare and I turned my face elsewhere. Before she could render a word of protest, I grabbed her arm, maybe with more force than was necessary, and forced her to move with me. We moved through the halls, through the indecisive lights and the red beams, through the piercing sirens and the deafening explosions that continued to strike from every direction. No matter how fast our legs strode, it always seemed we labored through the gelatinous air and were in opposition against a reality that fluttered at twice its usual speed. This was not to mention the myriad of sailors and soldiers alike who were roving up and down the cramped halls, likely knowing, as we did, that they had little hope of ever reaching their destination before the *Arians* encountered its irrational sibling. With each fateful encounter we suffered against the wrath of a missile, our balances were temporarily lost, compelling us to slam a wall at times and further slowing our pace.

Then, just as an ember of salvation ignited when the confines of the well deck came within my aspiring sights, it burned out. I felt the most viciously adamant tremor shove the entire ship to my right, vehemently hurling everyone to the hallway floor. The destroyer had finally

arrived and was certainly living up to its designation. Fortunately, my presence of mind was still with me and I was able to shield Dayce from experiencing the full brunt of the ground by adjusting my fall enough to land on my right shoulder. I looked at him to see his small eyes open meagerly, only to drop again. I thought I heard him groan, but the sounds of our carrier's demolition, expressed through the concentrated grating of metal somewhere behind me, obliterated all other noise in my sagacity.

At the same time, while I felt the entire *Arians* careen farther to the west in an unrelenting motion, I also noticed the stern itself was commencing to drift in the opposite direction of the whole. Standing and turning to behold the well deck, I saw that it was becoming filled with the element of the ocean as it started to slant from the constant heaving. The pining hope I had to reach its boats of deliverance were being buried below sea level right before my eyes. Gradually, as if my senses had finally returned from a black hole, the sounds of the roaring water washed into my ear drums. We were trapped between the submerging well deck in its last belches of life and the destroyer's callous incursion, still heard by its sharpening call, as the metal innards continued to pulverize themselves. I didn't have time to deliberate a plan of escape, for as the cringing vibrations reached our bodies, so did the stern continue to list on its side and so deeper did it sink. Standing upright was becoming a strenuous task, if not completely impossible to accomplish. We all had to lean against the wall on our right and place our feet on the opposite wall for some stability. I shuddered with every harsh groan the walls echoed with and I was beginning to truly believe we would drown in the water-packed steel coffin.

To release me from musings of my demise, the stern gave a sharp, staggering lurch to the east in an attempt to return to its original position. The unbearable scraping noises took a different and slightly more bearable pitch with the adjustment. The seeping in of the rushing water now had an unwavering rhythm, one that made me afraid of looking at the well deck. Despite the stern being released from the unwanted forces that had been pushing it, stabilizing the ground somewhat, it was too late for it to go back to its initial bearing. The stern was simply struggling not to wholly yield to the sea for as long as it could. Amid all that was befalling, I had the courage to look at the well deck with my better foothold. The water was surging into our domain after it surpassed the well deck in its relentless vigor. The ocean was determined in claiming our vessel as her own and there was nothing the *Arians* could do but surrender to her.

“Go back!” I boisterously yelled to the girls, though, considering I said it as loud as I could, it was heard by everyone in the vicinity.

The newfound and, most likely, only too brief, reasonable evenness of the floors permitted us to move briskly through the hall, the roaring surge behind us providing more than enough motivation to have us move at our quickest pace. Every so often I would become charmed by streams of light ahead of us. It was not unwelcomed, as it was now the chief birthplace of illumination, but as we were within the labyrinths of a ship, I could also say it was unanticipated. The farther we traveled, the more radiant the light became and the more it resembled natural sunlight. It did not take long before we were forced to come to a halt behind a crowd and where I discovered the inexplicable entryway of the enigmatic daylight. I gazed with copious scrutiny and still it did not seem possible.

Laid out in front of us was the flank of the destroyer. It had completely cut through our *Arians*, creating two halves of it, and it was now moving inside the chasm it had carved. Not including all the heads in front of me, I calculated we must have been separated by no more than three yards from the destroyer’s hull. Jumping into the water at that moment was senseless, for the propeller blades would not be sympathetic to our plight. So here we all waited for the betrayer to pass by in its entirety to make our escape, the last that was left in our hands. The seconds passed on and I felt every single one of them bury deep into my being and take away another year of my life. Dayce’s eyes were no longer closed. They stared blankly at the destroyer as it floated past our sinking scrap of steel. I analyzed every facet of the warship as it leisurely slipped in front of us, as though it cherished nothing more than for us to behold its triumph. It was crumpled in places and tarnished in others. Nowhere was there a space left untouched by the ruthless impact it bestowed to us, though I imagined its bow was left unrecognizable. The battle scared machine was supposed to be one of our own, yet, there it was, the reason of our ruin. By the time my eyes finally saw the end of the procession, marked by the flood of more light, I felt as thin and frail as if I had lived five years too long. The roar of its engines steadily became fainter and I began to hear both the swirl of the water echo again through our open encasement and the ripples of the ocean as the destroyer was dragging it behind.

When the ship left my line of sight, I began to hear splashing. The crowd in front of us had wasted no time in making their exodus. I noticed those in the decks above us were also doing the same. It was not long before it was our turn to join the departure of the *Arians*. Dayce was

awake, but he was under no condition to swim on his own. Providentially, I was not insecure in my own swimming capacities, it being the only form of exercise I did, so carrying him did not at all daunt me. My mother was the same as I, or I was the same as her, for she was the one who first motivated the activity. It was not a hassle for us to receive the sea, since it was already greeting our ankles. Eloram jumped in after me and I felt that she would have followed me even if I were to swim to the poles. As for Siena, she was the best swimmer I had ever known. My body welcomed the water for its warm and soothing influence on my strained and weary muscles. Under vastly different circumstances, I would have felt reinvigorated as soon as my form felt the therapeutic magic of the ocean, but even the most powerful enchantments would not have been able to recapture the years that had so suddenly left me. All we did, and all we could do, was swim.

It was unwise to linger near the plummeting stern more than was necessary, for jumpers continued to fall and fill the crevice between the halves of what was once the *Arians*, which were no more than forty yards apart from each other. People in the bow end of the ship were also leaping into the water, their half, likewise, becoming gulped down by the watery leviathan. When I felt I was far enough away from the most crowded section of the channel, I stopped and looked at the scene behind me. Amid the two descending halves were hundreds of crewmen, soldiers, sailors, and refugees treading water with more waiting to fall, and still more already waiting for rescuers of some type to show themselves. The destroyer was still moving away, but it was tilting on its portside as it did so. It too did not have long before it yielded to its stark lesions.

Only seconds went by before I saw our former stern submerge entirely beneath the sea's surface. Many kinds of debris reshowed themselves, not desiring to know the secrets of the bottom of the ocean. They were eagerly held on to by those that were near. One sailor, who must have seen I was holding Dayce, came to us and generously gave his life vest to him, which I could not be too indebted for. It wasn't until my burden was lessened did I realize how tired my arms were from carrying him all the while. A circular flotation device also made its way to us, which humbly allowed us to clamp on to it.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine Terminus

In a rare occurrence, time was kind to us. The sound of an approaching engine could be identified well before I could waste all my energy treading water. Of course, it made more than a few become frightened on hearing its grumble, and I would be lying if I said the same did not happen to me, but where the noise arose, we saw a hovercraft emerge from the horizon. Other boats followed her lead. It was soon clear they carried noble intentions when they began fishing out the stranded. It was as if a Spirit of Grace and her legion of helpers were liberating us from the desolate abyss, even if they were only to lead us into the gates of a dank dungeon. With a closer scrutiny, I thought the hovercraft to be the same one that rescued us from the island base, but I suppose they all looked alike.

The five of us were picked up by the primary rescuer and once my feet felt the haven of its surface, I felt myself become disoriented from exhaustion. What brought me back to some semblance of feeling was the vision of the crystal blue ocean lapping around us, but I had to shut my eyes from its beautifully placid view, not wanting to turn the seascape into something I would grow to hate. It too should not be defiled by the ones who made us grieve so much. I could then sense a cool, salty draft already begin drying my soaked skin. When the hovercraft filled with as many stranded as it could hold, our ride turned north, where I eventually saw the shoreline, growing wider with each passing second. No voices were heard for much of the short trip. Silence said more of what we had endured than anything comprised with words. Dayce by now was awake and no longer bleeding. His cut was shallow and he told me it only tingled a little, though I was afraid he was ailing from a concussion, since he still acted fairly dazed.

It was only after our tender feet touched the softness of the empathetic sand did conversation begin among us. The highest ranking soldier, or I assumed him to be so, ordered us to remain where he left us, while the vessels returned to the crash site to retrieve more stranded. I would call them survivors, but that would be redundant, and perhaps incorrect. More exchanges ensued after the engines of the hovercraft and its fellow vessels faded away. These interactions never went as loud as murmurs. There was something coarse in the tightly wound air that even made the wind too afraid to breathe naturally. I saw my mother perusing all the faces in the crowd. I knew she was looking for Delphnia and Bervin, for I was guilty of doing the same.



There was no success, which, I'm sad to confess, I was only too prepared for, but that didn't stop my mother from continuing the quest. Near where the sea caressed the land, sat Eloram. She had collapsed on the sand and allowed the low tide to come to her as it may, her eyes fixated toward some incoming navy boats. She was drained no doubt, as it took all of my own strength to not let my legs fold beneath me, and I was surprised that she was able to sit up at all. I slinked through the crowd and came closer to where she rested. When I was beside her I noticed that her weariness came second to the anguish glimmering in her avid eyes, the sun's rays impressing their brilliance on them. She was on the verge of crying.

"Why?" I heard her ask in a near whisper. "Why would our own kind attack us?" I don't believe she was talking at any one in particular and I even distrusted that she heard her own words.

Her question was the main topic of discussion taking place on this stretch of the coastline. It had also been stirring in my wrecked head since the moment Siena informed me of the saboteur.

"Roym?" said my mother. She had followed me, as well as Siena, to check on Eloram. "Do you think the Injectors controlled the ship?" Her voice was timid, knowing, no matter my answer, it would not bring us comfort.

"Probably not," I answered. "At least, not directly. All this started when someone sabotaged the engine. Psychologically snapping is one thing, but for it to coincide with another ship arriving to collide with us? It obviously points to a plan, and one that would do the most damage to both ships." When I saw Siena's eyes widen, I knew she realized what I was starting to imply.

"Why would they want to damage their own ship?" a voice behind me probed.

I turned around to see an old male sailor, who had evidently listened in to the launch of my explanation, along with the four others that were with him. They all had turned their attention to me, staring vacantly at me as they waited for my answer.

After faltering, I said, "Because, much like the soldier who sabotaged the engine, they weren't really in control of their actions."

"What do you mean?" asked the same interrogator.

“I mean, the only explanation that makes sense... that answers everything, is that the Injectors were able to control them using their nanotechnology. They didn't want to betray us, they were forced to.”

“So they can control us?!” said the horrified sailor. “Like fucking puppets?!”

Another one of his fledgling comrades investigated further by asking, “So, even now, an Injector could tell us to go crazy and there's nothing we can do about it?”

“It's only a theory,” I explained somberly, “but, hypothetically, if we were exposed to enough of their nanotechnology, then it's possible.”

My theory was quickly unfurled across the group and largely treated as a legitimate fact, as there was no better justification to most of the actions and complications to what we had experienced. The more it propagated, the more I bemoaned being the designer. The possibility that our nigh invulnerable enemy had yet another trick in their arsenal gave many faces a new coat of tension. Nonetheless, if there was any trifling consolation that came from this dark hypothesis, it was appreciating that we were not deliberately betrayed by our own.

Before we were allowed to grieve or have a moment where we could lament our woes and say our prayers, the static-filled sounds and shouts of more chaos arose. Being released from numerous radios, we could hear a battle brewing from where the Tower fell as clearly as though it was happening before us. A large force was still there and we listened to their days painfully come to a close. Adding credence to my supposition, since there were no reports about any Injectors or infected in the area, they were fighting amongst themselves. If able to muster enough courage and resolve to heed the calls coming forth, it was made known that the nanotechnology's treacherous influence was not restrained to only a few, but wrought to a significant percentage of the forces there. Yitro was there. Was he too among those attacking his brothers and sisters, whether from self-defense or delivered madness?

The shore was met with an influx of freshly arrived men and women after several more drop-offs by the rescue teams, giving the beach over a thousand salvaged stranded by the end of the hour. As our resplendent star started her descent, I saw a growing cloud of dust approach the beach from the barren northwestern vista. Before I could derive a guess as to its source and decide whether I should be glad to see it or begin to wish I had not parted with the sea, I perceived the ever familiar and bumpy hum of diesel engines. The caravan of mostly military vehicles had already begun lining themselves at the edge of the beach. Without a word or

command that I could hear, many had begun pouring into them, as though this was by now set as their routine. I myself become reawaked by a sailor who urged me and my assembly to follow their lead. I ended up sitting in the passenger seat of a jeep with Dayce in my arms, having never let him go since we were retrieved. He looked to be soundly sleeping, but I knew no one could have sound slumbers anymore. The girls were in the rear seats and, with a glance at each of them, I saw them as mere shells of their former selves, knowing that they were thinking the same of me. On the driver's seat of the jeep was a young male soldier. He was too young, I believed. I wondered if he was even old enough to drive, seeing as his eyes had too much depth for them to properly make out was right in front of him.

“Do you know where we're going?” I asked the driver.

He seemed to be contemplating, but of what, I was unsure of. “There's a town not too far from here,” he presently said. “We've been using it as a base of operations. We're falling back there.”

His voice caught my attention, more so than his words. Even though it was strained and weak, it still carried such great weight that, regardless of the jeep's idling engine, I could hear it as clearly as though we were in a hollow cave. I was certain if his voice held on to all its strength, it would have sounded just as authoritative as any of the highest-ranking generals. We began our trek northward once the convoy had gathered all those it could. Though the fleet kept in its single file order, there were no other vehicles on the desolate two-lane motorway we reached. Watching the parched wasteland we were now in, with barely the skeleton of a shrub to break the bare and boundless fields of sand, it was easy to think that not only might we be the lone survivors left on this world, but the last living beings in all the cosmos.

Miles lapsed, our voices in reserve for most of them. The only conversations I could catch in these deserted miles were those that flew from the radios. I would have preferred not to hear anything at all, as nothing was said that we did not already know, including the forsaken cries begging for help. Ten miles we crossed before I saw the outlying formations of squat buildings, followed by a sign coming into legible view. It welcomed us to the town of Dekulo and read that it had a population of 16,500. A military checkpoint was just ahead, which I wanted to make me feel protected, but it did no such thing. After a brief wait in line, as most vehicles seemed to know where to go, our driver told the soldier at his post that he was transporting civilians.

“Follow Rusee Road.” stated the frontier soldier. He had his shades on, but it could not hide his fatigue. “Then turn at Inway and go on until you reach the center”

Deeper and deeper we journeyed into the environs of Dekulo. None of the buildings were particularly tall, as was the case for most constructions found in the deep northern and southern deserts, and it was obvious that many of the buildings had not been built in the last century. For the fleeting moments when a modern building was absent from view, I deemed we had entered a portal and were traversing an antique kingdom shaped by the Evon Spirits themselves. A majority of the architecture consisted of thick stone structures that had seen their share of battles with the weather over the years, for there was enough wear and tear on them for a thousand years, but they were all impregnable and fixed solidly in their place, eager for a thousand more. All comprised the feature of rounded corners that I knew to be for the purpose of gaining improved resistance from the powerful sandstorms that were oftentimes a daily occurrence in these parts. Fortunately, there was no sign of a dust cyclone on this day, in fact, we seemed to be the only ones moving in this static region, and, before long, even we had stopped. We parked in front of a wide one-story building. It was encased in stone like the others, but it was not as bruised and had some contemporary flares, such as a thin coat of white plaster on the lower sections, and more windows, though these were boarded up. Labeled in white, bold letters in the front above the doorway were the words ‘Dekulo Community Center.’

“They’ll help you out in there,” said our escort, more out of habit than anything else. “Good luck.”

Once we walked through the double doors of the center, we were greeted with the rush of something that reunited me with the concept of comfort, the cooling waft that could only come from an air conditioner. There were also working artificial lights in the small lobby we entered, something I had not seen in the other buildings we passed, though I did not know if that was due to a deliberate regulation or if it meant a generator was powering the impromptu crisis dwelling. Behind the counter to our left was an elderly gentleman, his features shadowed as he looked down while he penned something on a small white pad. He didn’t seem to realize we came in, for he continued to write without any diffidence. Only by standing directly in front of him did he lift up his stern face, looking as weather worn as any of the buildings.

“More refugees, eh?” he said under his breath. “Welcome to Dekulo, I guess. If you don’t mind, jot down your names on the clipboard in case anyone comes looking for you.” He casually pointed to the clipboard that rested on the counter, then he resumed his writing.

Siena took the clipboard from the table and had begun the process of signing everyone’s names. I attempted to discreetly see whatever it was the old man was inscribing, curiosity getting the better of me, but my pursuit ended without triumph, as the old man shielded much from my sight.

As Siena gave the clipboard back him, he briefly looked over it, then proceeded to say, “All right, did you see that red truck right outside? We’ll hop in that and I’ll take you to your assigned house. Just let me get my replacement.”

“We’re not staying here?” asked Siena, as she watched him rise from his chair and place his documents in a drawer.

“No room,” was the only answer he gave before he turned and went through a door that led him deeper into the offices of the center.

After hearing the old man’s steps dwindle away behind the door, which closed behind him using its own momentum, I heard some chatter coming from within, but they were too indistinct to make anything out. The footsteps resurged themselves less than thirty seconds later, being accompanied by another pair. The door opened to reveal the already familiar old man’s uninviting face followed by one that was even older and crustier than the previous. His countenance was not as grim, but he paid no heed to any of us, merely walking to the chair his companion had left and instantly began to write on his own pad, mirroring the first author. While he was occupied in that furtive endeavor, the other brought a case of water bottles with him, which he carried with only one hand, making it look as light as the pen he had held. He walked past us to go outside and we trailed his tracks. He handed each of us a water bottle as we entered the truck’s bed, not allowing anyone to actually enter the passenger seats. We all drank the cool bottles with great greed, not realizing how long it had been since the invigorating nectar last trickled down our throats. We were soon on the road.

Only a splinter of the sun could be seen breaking through the horizon. The moons were coming out of their new phase and the stars were just as scarce as the modern homes in the remote town. Only by passing the occasional military vehicle was I reminded that we were still not entirely alone, for no home emanated light or activity. We stopped in front of a hefty two-

story building in what seemed to be the oldest neighborhood. It was also the oldest building I had seen yet, excluding the new garage added alongside it. Charmingly, there were chiseled carvings of desert creatures and Spirit emblems hemming the stone walls, though the details were difficult to make out with the shadows prevailing and time wearing off much of their protrusions. Spoiling my appreciation of the picturesque view was the jarring blare of the truck horn that the old man took full advantage of more than once.

“Just do what the girl tells you,” he said with a coughing grunt.

As his words were spoken, the heavy wooden doorway of the abode creaked open. Through it came out a girl around Eloram’s age. Unlike Eloram, I thought she had not yet lost her innocence that this vile world had so cruelly taken away from so many. I began to see her more clearly as she strode closer. She was quite beautiful and looked to me like a young Liz, the one I first saw while she sat on a campus bench near some golden flowers that were no match for her eyes, but perhaps I was only imposing Liz on her. As we exited the vehicle, she jogged up to the driver’s side to meet the old man, who had not stirred from his station.

“Are you staying this time?” she expectantly asked the old man.

“Sorry, sweetheart,” he replied, at least I believed it to be him, for his attitude was completely different in her presence. “I’m needed at the center. I’ll try tomorrow, okay? Now show these people inside.”

She lightly kissed his cheek and gave him a sweet farewell smile. She turned to us as the truck was beginning to vanish in the darkness and her smile grew even more amiable and welcoming. “This way,” she said as she began to stroll to the door. “My name is Sendai and that was my grandfather, Hernan Kay, since I’m sure he didn’t tell you any of that.”

We introduced ourselves in return. Dayce was awakened by the ride, but still groggy and unable to announce himself. She opened the door to invite us all into the home. Stepping within the household, I was immediately met with the quaint sight of its living room, simply lit by a lamp in the corner. Although it was not diminutive in size, it appeared much smaller than it actually was, there being four corpulent couches that occupied the room. Also there to play a role in the deception were the many people who were seated on the couches and chairs, all of whom were women and children. Most granted us a quick eyeball before returning to their quiet contemplations or feeding the children.

“How many others are in the house?” my mother asked our benign hostess, while we continued to advance toward the stairway of tanned stone on the right side of the living area.

“Fourteen, including myself,” she answered. “But there’s still enough space and sleeping bags for the five of you on the second floor.”

Once we climbed up the rough stairs, I found an open bedroom to my right. Inside it laid a small, artfully ornamented chandelier hanging from the center of the ceiling and below that were three small children playing a board game on the floor. The room was completely painted in a soft purple and it was attractively decorated with various painted desert blossoms. Sendai came to the door at the end of the hall and unlocked it to expose another bedroom, considerably bigger than the other I saw, but by no means as ostentatious. The scent that met us as the door swung open told me it was her grandfather’s room.

“He’ll hate his room being used by strangers, but...” Sendai paused while walking into the room, gazing from the floor to the ceiling. Spinning back around to face us, she said, “He’s a good man, he’s just traditional. Anyway, I’ll get your sleeping bags.”

While I handed Dayce to my mother, I said, “Siena and I will help you.”

“Is it just you and your grandfather?” Siena queried our hostess as we exited the bedchamber.

“It’s usually just my grandfather here, at least since my grandmother died a few years back. Actually, I was visiting when everything started happening.”

“I haven’t seen any men here,” Siena noted, making it sound more like a random thought than it actually was.

“Gramps is a bit distrustful of most men beyond the age of thirteen around me. I was actually surprised to see he allowed you in the house, Mr. Rosyth. He’s a good judge of character, you know. I suppose he had a good feeling about you.”

I was roused in my sleeping bag by the prickly sound of many miniscule taps on the darkened window, but that was all I remembered, for I instantly fell back into a deep sleep with the aid of the tranquilizing beats. I awoke the next morning by the same sound, though it was not as overt. A little investigation confirmed we were in a sandstorm. According to Sendai, it was the first one in nearly a week, which evidently meant it could last for two or three days. Though I knew it was foolish to feel so, I felt safer shrouded by the tempest of sand. The strength of the storm fluctuated throughout the day and it was during one of the lull periods in the afternoon that

Sendai's grandfather reappeared. Keeping the assurance he had made to her the night before, he stayed in the house.

While eating some canned rations in his dining room later that evening, I thanked him for sharing his home with us.

"You're welcome," he said without any coldness from the day before. "I never imagined I'd ever have to share this home with this many people, or this town, for that matter."

"Why not?"

"My granddaughter hasn't told you about the history of this house?"

I shook my head.

He sighed and smiled wearily to himself. "I ask as if there's nothing important going on. I forget myself sometimes. This building is what's known as a Dekulo house, named after the town's founder. There were six others like this one spread throughout town, including the Spirit Temple. Dekulo was an ancient spirit priest who traveled the world helping to spread the Spirits' Message. In his later years, he discovered the ancient nomadic desert people here and settled with them. It's said the Spirits blessed his efforts by giving him the warping ability, which he then used to help build the town."

"Then the Dekulo buildings were personally warped by him?"

"Yes. Over twenty-five hundred years old they are, and without any significant restoration to the main structure. As you can presume, the sacred buildings are revered by the people here. It's an unwritten rule that only those with old connections with the town are allowed to live and maintain the homes, even outsiders are discouraged from staying long. I know these are trying times, but I still can't help but feel a tinge of blasphemy. My family has held this house for eleven generations without fail. My only son preferred the modern hustle and bustle of city life, but his daughter showed promise of returning. It's one of the reasons she was visiting. Ah! You don't want to hear an old man babble about shit that doesn't matter, right? How 'bout a little reward for listening?"

"I'll give you my left arm if it has alcohol."

"Don't bother, I wouldn't have a need for it." He opened a high cupboard, pulled out two glasses, and grabbed a large liquor bottle already two-thirds empty. "Emergency ration."

Thanks in large part to the sleeping aid I was bestowed with, I was able to tumble into an impermeable slumber that I had not experienced in weeks.



## Chapter Thirty

### Defiance

The sandstorm howled with increased ferocity early the next morning, vexing even the resolute frame of the thick circular windows. I awoke with all the adults still sleeping and I found I could not return to their states. Not knowing what else to do, I sat in the kitchen and began eating my morning rations in solitude. There were a few children who were up and about, as there always was, since everyone's schedules was a little different, but they had little interest in accompanying me and I had less zeal in commingling with them. When I was half finished with my meal, a faint thud came into contact with my ears, followed almost instantly by another. Despite the sandstorm's constant bellowing muffling the sound, there was no doubt in my seasoned mind that I was hearing tank rounds.

I intuitively rushed into the living room where Mr. Kay slept in a sleeping bag and stirred him from his sedated state. It wasn't long before he too heard the ominous resonances over the charging sand. He was on his feet in a blink and began to awaken everyone in the room. I echoed his actions on the second floor. By this point I had accepted my charge as the courier of nightmares. While the sandstorm weakened her howling a tad during the next fifteen minutes, the barrage of the other storm would not relent hers. The deluge of gun and tank fire sounded as if they came from all directions. I could sense the whole town becoming swallowed by their reverberations as they crept closer and closer, with the occasional scream thrown out to remind us that we were helpless to help the helpless.

We had all congregated on the unlit second floor, thinking it would be safer than the first. The only words expressed by the scared, powerless, and jilted faces were the murmurs of prayers. What I first found curious was finding my prayers entwining with theirs. With greater reflection, I realized that ever since I was warned in my dream to not board the ships, I discovered my faith more intact than it had ever been. I suppose I accepted that the Spirits were indeed watching us and must have been feeling humiliated at their ineptitude. Were they too just learning of unholy powers beyond their comprehension? In front of me, while I leaned near the master bedroom door, I saw a small child of three or four years being held by his mother. The fallout of ordnance was bursting all around us, but he did not cry or flinch, making me feel disturbed that he knew better to keep silent than to cry or gripe. To make everyone cower even

more than they already were, there arose from the struggle a dismal scream that was able to gash the air itself. Five seconds had barely elapsed when demented screeches more repulsive than the first verified that several infected had broken through the military's perimeter.

"Shit, sounds like quite a few have made it in town," said Mr. Kay between his teeth. "All the military did was attract them."

"What do we do?" Sendai worriedly asked her grandfather.

"We can't stay here," one of the mothers interjected. "We'll be trapped! We have to leave while some of the military is still left!"

"We have to wait a little longer," calmly advised Mr. Kay. "For what it's worth, the Army told us they would send escorts to the shelters if the worst happened. We were designated a shelter like the community center. They'll come for us."

Thankfully, it was not long when his expectation came into fruition. Coming from beyond the windowpane, we heard the honking of a horn just able to breach the repercussions of weapons fire and the hammering of the sandstorm. A quick peek behind the delicate curtain and through the veil of sand riding the wind showed that the army was waiting in front of the house with three tarped-roofed trucks, which were led by a jeep and an APC. Not worrying about what the sandstorm might bring to us, we sprinted downstairs and exited the home, trying my best to shield Dayce from the stinging sand particles. He did not make a sound as I ran to the trucks, though I could not hear much of anything at that point. Amid the haze of sand in my eyes, I saw that we were not alone in our endeavor. The forms of additional individuals could be detected leaving their houses and heading for the only hope we had of getting out alive. My toiling legs continued to trudge through the whipping sand, their only goal being those blurred forms of the trucks before me. I couldn't hear what was happening around me and I dared not take a glimpse, not hazarding to lose sight of my aspiration. Little by little, I outline of a truck became more definite, but looking into its bed showed that it had already become filled by the many others who dreamed the same dream as I. I spun to head for the second of its comrades lined up behind it.

As I passed the headlights of what I hoped to be my transport, my peripheral vision caught some movement on the roof of the neighboring house from which we came. Opening my eyes a little more revealed two skeleton-like figures watching the street from their roost, scarcely discernible by the clouded lights of the dipping moons and rising star. With the best inspection

my eyes could give, I saw these pair of heart wrenching forms plunge to meet the ground. One settled on all fours while the other much more gracefully, but not at all less disturbingly, landed on its pair of legs. The drop was twenty-five feet, but that could not have been guessed by how effortlessly they came down to receive us. Their vicious eyes burned in the most ghastly kind of red that I could see exactly where their eyes gazed. The quadruped one expressed the vilest animalistic shriek that could ever be howled by a living thing, making certain that all eyes were upon it. Its horrendous shriek never seemed to abate. I felt as if it was striving to hypnotize and overpower me with the vocal salvo alone. It very nearly succeeded, but a volley of gunfire interrupted the hex. The first bullets did little to faze their targets, going by the way they began charging at us. Without a coherent thought, I handed Dayce to my mother and grasped the assault rifle that was almost always strapped to me. I began to fire alongside the soldiers and, for just a second, I knew what it felt like to be one of them. I aimed for the infected that remained on its four limbs, since it was nearer. It didn't stay the most immediate threat for long.

The two-legged menace lunged at us in what must have been a leap of thirty feet. It forced me and all others to recede from its presence, with much of my group and I pulling back just behind the truck's front bumper, though not completely, so as to keep an eye on the situation. The fiend presently stood behind the last truck, a mere seven or eight yards from me. While this was the closest encounter yet with this type of enemy, the haze of the sandstorm made it a little easier to endure. Still, I could recognize how emaciated its loathsome figure was. Its rubbery skin was tearing away from bone in places and blood never seemed to stop pouring out from its wounds and orifices. An ill-fated soldier was now the central focus of the creature's bloodshot eyes. He desperately relinquished his bullets as his fear consumed the air. Paying no attention to the point-blank rounds striking every part of its frame, the senseless monster seized a stranglehold of the soldier's neck with a bare hand and slammed up the nuisance against the side of the truck with such force that the truck nearly tumbled over. At that moment, with my eyes fastened to the horrifying sight that was too horrific to look away from, the soldier was engulfed in flame. It was redder and brighter than any flame I had ever come to witness, having me believe I was looking into the epicenter of a star. The soldier was soon completely replaced by an orb of white hot fire that the infected must have created. There were no more sounds emitting from the victim, neither scream nor bullet, though the writhing of the soldier showed he was still alive. I couldn't tell if the soldier did it on purpose or if the flames activated it, but the detonation

of a grenade was triggered, leaving both the attacker and victim lifelessly on the ground in my next glimpse. The comrade of the fallen creature was more successfully dispatched without danger to anyone else.

With the horror casted away, we resumed embarking the vehicles. I entered the second truck, where my mother already rested, along with Siena and Eloram. The only space left for me was by the corner of the tailgate. Not feeling comfortable taking back Dayce in my precarious position, I allowed my mother to keep her hold of her grandchild, fighting the potent instinct to take him in my protective arms. Moreover, I contented myself in believing I would be of some use in aiding the soldier sitting opposite me, with the notion of offering him cover fire, if it proved necessary. Mr. Kay and his granddaughter were unable to move into our transport and had to take the truck following our own. As the convoy launched forward, I saw that despite the marring the tires the third truck suffered in the grenade blast, it still rolled on its way relatively smoothly, though it was difficult to see it in the slipstream of sand that seemed to derive from every which way, which was exasperated in the drive. I, for one, was glad that I was spared the opportunity to look upon its scars and the bloody traces of the lost soldier.

My eyes labored against the wake of the dusty storm, unmistakably sent by an unseen force that desired to see us squirm. I didn't know how much longer I could have taken its bitter foray, but as if someone wondered if the sandy blizzard could get any worse, it did. In the first opportunity the truck was able to turn east, it did, meaning the gale was funneled into the opening of the truck. Surveying my surroundings became almost impossible without needing to rub the sand out my eyes for as long as a minute, only to see no more than a second of my surroundings. What I did see mainly consisting of a repetitious, speckled image of the lowly road, lighted by a scattered light of unknown origin. I was positive that the same grains of sand were zipping by me and were being recycled to strike me later.

I certainly felt the truck moving below my feet, but the calamitous situation we were in forced it into a sluggish caution. Time became a muddled concept as I could sense her losing sway over this world. Minutes morphed themselves into days around the crawling truck. I felt every pebble we bowled over, and the adrenaline boiling fervidly in my veins caused the unrelenting impact of every sand particle on my aching skin to count weeks like seconds. So in what must have been anywhere between four seconds to eight years since the commencement of our journey, I heard an unusual gravelly sound, promptly followed by the much more familiar

noise of a crash that had to have originated in the direction of the third truck. I barely had the time to turn my head in the attempt to discover the cause, when our own truck took a sharp swerve to the left. I was not fully braced for the sudden motion, in effect, my body pushed against the tailgate. It could be that the tailgate was destabilized from a previous exertion, or it was faulty to begin with when an apathetic manufacturer didn't take as much care as usual, but whatever the exact reason, the barrier easily gave way. In the fraction of time between being in midair and the confrontation with the road, I could cite the truck's rasping engine, some pithy gasps, shocked screams, and exclamations of alarm. At first I thought these sounds to be twisted from my disordered mind, until there were two voices that bested all others. I heard Siena scream out my name and Dayce yell out "Daddy!" before they too dissolved into the sand with the others.

Before their echoes could disappear completely, I met the unfriendly ground with an impact that convinced me that my previous estimation of the truck's leisurely pace had been severely underestimated. The pain that stabbed my left shoulder was worse than I ever deemed feasible, however, the worst of it lasted only for a split second, for my head also met the terrain. The resulting blow deadened all other sensations and sent me into a stark daze for an indefinite amount of time. While these brutal indicators had signaled the completion of my tumble, my wildly spinning brain could not send or receive any clear data, not even the obvious fact that I had stopped falling.

The first credible message from the outside world was my fingertips telling me that they were attempting to stabilize themselves on the road and use it as leverage to force my body to stand up. I was sure I had not given the command to begin standing, but I did not oppose it. It required all the strength in my body and more than all the power in my mind to finally succeed in lifting myself to my feet. I searched for signs of my truck, but it had already been inhaled by the sandstorm. The sense of isolation struck me hard and gave me the set idea that I was the last living being on this world. That is, until I found the only thing that I wasn't searching for, and yet, the only thing that would have given me some nature of clarity at that moment. Blocking much of the road to my left rested the answer to a question I had not yet asked myself, and being the sole reason why I was standing where I stood. Propped up like an overzealous speed bump was a wall of dirt several feet high. This was what the obstruction the truck had veered to avoid and what caused me to nearly vomit from every type of pain.

Before I could contemplate this striking feature any longer, some movement caught my attention. At the fringe of my vision, stirring on the ground three or so yards to my right, was a desert-colored soldier, and even across the sandy air I recognized him to be the same soldier who had been opposite me in the truck. Just as I was about to move to aid him, a raving phantom materialized from the monsoon of sand and tackled him before he could rise. That moment of pure fear expanded exponentially when I realized my hands no longer held my rifle. I began to desperately seek every which way of me, returning my gaze more than once back to my hands, praying I would see it once again in my grip.

Century-like seconds befell me, each one acting like an iron chain clasp every limb, before I was able to behold the weapon laying a few feet to my right, wishing for my hand to save it from being buried by a future sand dune. I felt the chains that were heaved upon me break away. As I reached for the primitive projectile weapon, I could make out the stomach-churning, squelching sounds of the helpless combatant being cyclically pounded into the ground, all while the infected grunted heavily and satisfactorily with every sickening drubbing. No matter how badly I tried to take away the image from my mind, I could actually feel the helpless soul's bones being beaten and crushed enough to become a permanent lump on the road, and I saw it all in my mind's eye as clearly as if I was the one performing the callous act. I hoped his life wasn't stubborn and had let go long ago.

I held the gun tight in my hand and, with one fluid motion, I whirled around to face my imminent executioner, and toward what was possibly be the last image I would ever witness. My eyes settled on the most sordid excuse for a face that I ever deemed conceivable, whether in the realm of the living or in the abyss of our dead. The skin on the infected being's face was ruptured around the eyes, making it a wonder its eyeballs did not roll out of their sockets. Nevertheless, it was these blood-filled eyes that possessed a sheen of intuition, as though it understood something important that I could only comprehend if I joined in its malady. Due to its tattered lips, its red stained teeth were eternally exposed. It was already halfway en route for my soul by the time I heard the bullets being relinquished from the barrel. Since my left arm couldn't aid in lifting my gun, I was forced to aim low at its lurching legs, the only chance I had to just maybe live to see another moment of this life, as dismaying as it had become.

One of the bullets I let loose found its mark in one of the creature's knees. As it stumbled and fell, its engorged, distorted hands reached out for me. It was too far out to reach my body

proper, but the contorted hand was able to clutch the rifle's barrel and wrench it away from me with one monstrous tug. I had never felt such a disparity in my mind and body. One was in the greatest state of disjointed haste while the latter was as immovable as a granite mountain. The demonic eyes of the infected never unglued themselves from mine. I could hear it craving for my life, wanting to quench its thirst with my blood, squeezing every ounce out of me. Oddly, the idea to make a run for it never fully established itself. Perhaps I was more frightened of what I couldn't see in the storm, or knew that even its hindered form was still more than a match to outrun me, or maybe I simply wanted this fucking thing dead.

With time becoming more merciless in its rapidity, and as the creature at my feet was convulsing and twisting its way to me, I drew out my less formidable revolver, not knowing if it was powerful enough to accomplish its purpose. I aimed the firearm at its head, but the mixture of blinding sand and its erratic movements converted the two feet that divided the gun from its target into a good two miles. I understood that anything less than perfection would leave me vulnerable to its incursion and it would all be over. Suddenly, all the thoughts filling my mind completely vanished, leaving only one left. Acting out this lone plot, I stepped closer and shoved the barrel into its mouth and pulled the trigger until the chambers were empty. Its vile, gooish blood splattered in all directions and the abhorrent eyes continued to stare at me, but the flames they once held were extinguished, leaving me staring into unreserved pits of hollowness. Its bulk became limp and crumpled on the street, looking to be half the size of what it was a moment ago.

I stood static for an unknown number of eons, expecting to awaken at any moment with Liz by my side and having Dayce rushing up to jump onto our bed. In contrast to my expectations, the singing and beating of the sandstorm hooked themselves into my eardrums, latching the sense into this version of reality. It was through this open pathway that a stifled scream was able to revive my other sensory organs, helping me recall that the dead infected at my feet did not represent all that threatened me. Gunfire rang loud across the desert to the west and the cloudy silhouettes of fleeing people came into view. They headed for a line of buildings lining the southern section of the road. Feeling I had little choice but to find safety in numbers, I decided to fuse with this assembly of the damned. I had taken only a step in their direction before the high-pitched shrieks of the unholy sprang from every way. Even the discharge of bullets that had come from my revolver did not sound as crisp as those shrieks.

As I continued to run closer to the terrified, I passed a scene that needed an extra-long, dissecting glance. Lying sidelong between two walls of rock and sand was a military truck, which I figured had to be the last in my lost convoy. The design of the four-foot wall was exactly as the one I had seen farther up the thoroughfare before being attacked, except my truck was adept enough to avoid this eccentricity. I could only conclude that these obstacles had not been set hours beforehand, but had been warped by our enemy, the only technique fast enough to raise that much rock to surprise a driver, the only method that explained the coarse sound I had heard just before the vehicle crashed. But was it truly possible? Were the infected learning to warp lucidly and using the Spirit-given ability to set traps against their worshipers? Such as it was for most things, there was little time to think of the implications. More motivating cries of the infected signaled their morbid approach.

The vague ciphers absconding before me were now becoming clearer, and so were their voices. One despondent voice in particular reverted all others to shadowy paradoxes. It was a youthful cry that tore more of my heart open, a broken exclamation that wanted to return to her grandfather. The search of its possessor bore fruit when I saw Sendai being steered away from the crash site by a soldier.

I never stopped running once I had begun moving and no soul around me could even think about stopping to take a breath, even though we were all in need of it. The assemblage collected into the nearest building, which also happened to be the easiest to enter, with its wide double doors allowing the crowd to enter without stampeding over one another. The blustering wind became gagged and the sand before my face shifted into a dim light, as the heavy wooden doors were bolted behind us—the deep echo telling me we were inside a spacious room—and for the first time since I could remember, the searing on my tender skin had ceased. It wasn't until I rubbed the residue of sand from my eyes did I see we were inside a Spirit Temple.

A hasty assessment had me believing I had wandered into one of the oldest buildings in existence. There were no modern materials that composed the globular building, except for the glass in some small triangular windows circling twenty feet above us and nestled between archways ten feet below the domed ceiling. Everything seemed to have been birthed from Evon herself—the podium, the pews, the decorative carvings on the wall, the bare floor, even the two dozen or so people I was with. This was an ancient and pure Evon that could not be touched by the blight outside, standing as pristine as it had been built from the sands of this desert the day



before. Not including the smoky, pale light that fell from the brittle windows, the only sources of illumination came from two small oil lamps suspended above the podium, burning small but intense flames. The fluctuating shadows and light that flowed from the flickering flames and the kaleidoscope-like windows gave the stagnant room the appearance of movement to the engraved wall and statuesque people. I frequently saw images and scenes that were not there. There was no life in anyone's eyes, a great contrast from those of the infected I had encountered, giving me awareness to the fact that the living were now more lifeless than the roaming dead. Then I saw Sendai, who appeared more like a sculpture than anyone else. She was alone, simply standing and staring in calm terror at the two doorways, as if knowing their closing meant a great deal. She did not notice my approach.

Gently, I said, "Sendai?" It was less not to startle her and more because I did not want to tempt the ghouls from reawakening on the other side, for at this moment they were silent. She abruptly turned toward me, as though she had not heard her name called in years. I first noticed her eyes. They were like staring into a deep, empty lake after a long drought.

"Mr. Rosyth?" she said, almost in disbelief. I thought some kind of relief tried forming on her face when she saw me, but it was never quite able to come through. "Oh, Spirits, did your truck crash too? Where's Dayce and everyone?"

"Still on the truck, I hope. I was the only one who fell when we swerved to avoid that wall. Are you hurt?" I did not know why I asked such an obvious question.

Her eyes strayed from mine and she slowly shook her head as she lowered it. I was relieved I could not see her face, as her voice alone carried the weight of the world.

"One of those things was coming for me," she said quietly, but that couldn't stop her voice from trembling, "and... and grandfather got in front of it... and..." She covered her face with her hands and began crying, but even then she was quiet while she tried filling those dry lakes.

I reached out to console her, something I was only too familiar in doing, but the jolting pain in my arm reignited itself and I couldn't stop myself from wincing from the flare up.

Sendai noticed the grimace and asked, "Are you injured?" which I barely heard through a pain that briefly affected all my other senses.

On cue, the agony raged to its utmost when I lowered my arm, and all I could say in return was a weak, “Don’t worry about me,” with a tone the most gullible wouldn’t have believed.

At that moment, the soldier who had escorted Sendai could be heard at the center of the temple speaking into his radio. The youth was requesting an extraction, but the only answer he could obtain was the dreaded sound of static.

A man about my age then loudly asked, “Is anyone coming for us?!”

The soldier ignored him, continuing to try to get help from the other side.

Without any kind of audible warning, something clashed into the doors, bending and splintering them at the seams, but they held fast. The contemptible snarls heard from the other side confirmed who our enemy was. Sendai and I backed away from the doors, as did everyone else. Anyone with a gun, which numbered about half the group, including myself, aimed for the entrance.

A hoarse voice yelled, “In here!” but any attempt at a glimpse behind me to see what the voice was referring to was interrupted by another slam at the main doors. “Fuck! It’s locked! Someone help me get it open!”

Both entrances were being charged upon for several cruel seconds, time I used to refill my gun’s chambers. After listening to the creaking and grating of the chargers, the doors to the main entrance ruptured first. Sendai was still beside me. I suppose she did not want to leave my side. Strangely, I let her stay there. Before the outside light reached the floor of the temple and the drifting sand swirled with the temple air, we were firing at our intruder. The barrage of bullets could not hinder the creature’s excitement in finally joining us. A single lurch propelled the infected over a pew and to a man wielding a shotgun. The infected trademark of ignorance of pain allowed it to go as far as to cleanly rip off one of the arms of its victim before succumbing to its injuries. Its chorus of death throes drowned out the whimpering of the one-armed man.

Hardly had the monster fallen on the accruing pools of blood when I heard the door behind me burst open. Finally able to look behind me, I saw a huddled group of people entering a room labeled “Catacombs.” Going through the entryway exposed a descending flight of steps leading to the depths of the Spirit Temple. With Sendai leading my way down the steps, I saw the basement-level room was much wider than the one above, so as to hold the several dozen sarcophaguses with ease, which were either stacked against the walls or amassed in the center of

the room. I envied the fact that those inside their tombs didn't have to personally face the final destiny of our species. The space was lighted by a line of small candles dangling from thin chains, many quenched, and a few low-power light bulbs. The air was thick and the clay ground cold and damp, generating an atmosphere that treacherously constricted my breathing and the chamber's size. The soft ground absorbed all footfalls and words on our short trek. The silence was only sporadically broken by the amputee's moans as he was helped down the staircase, though they did not last long, as he soon slipped into an unconsciousness he would never awaken from. I wondered if this place had muted him because it preferred its hallowed silence.

Sendai and I found ourselves in the farthest corner of the room, clustered on the floor near a crumbling wooden desk. While it was difficult to hear them, I could feel the unremitting vibrations of their howls engulf the desert above and travel through the walls and floor. It resembled the steady beating of drums, playing to the fear in our souls. Every so often, however, a shriek would be loud enough to cleave into our refuge of death, making it seem like the company inside the ornamental tombs were bursting forth from their slumber. Whispers encompassed the room, but only a few shards were made intelligible to my dulled mind. There were attempts of formulating a plan, desperate declarations and lamentations, and the soldier explaining how he had never seen anything like the newfound organization the infected had demonstrated. I was certain the soldier talked to no one other than himself. Even so, he had listeners who were profoundly troubled at his descriptions.

Visions of my family came and went, flashing memories in no real order. How many times I prayed they would find a way out of this heartless sandstorm and find sanctuary somewhere in this callous world! How many times I prayed they would come across decent people and plenty of supplies, and to never shed one tear about me and maybe forget about me all together! More ardently than all those things, I pleaded to the Spirits of Demise for them to find a death more peaceful than mine. Still, against all of the pain and all of the grief we suffered through, I did have the past to hold on to. At least I could look back and smile at the memories we shared, the times we laughed, the tears we shed, and be happy that I was lucky enough to have them in my life at all, to have had this life at all. That is something the slayers of our once promising future could never take away from me...

It must have been half a day of waiting before my senses were able to awaken from their overwhelming dreariness. Observing the room revealed the door was obstructed by a couple of

shelves, a table, and the desk that was once beside me. Replacing the writing table was some of the debris that had been on top of it, which included a thick tome. The leather cover was crinkled and of a deep blue color, which I only discovered once my fingers removed some of the friendless dust. Opening the book to its brittle pages exposed a list of names, and after reading a few dozen I realized they belonged to the dead of this town. Seeing the occasion as fitting, I began writing the story of my end between its margins and the handful of blank pages...

I don't know how long it's been since I first began this account, which seems more unreal now more than ever, but my thirst is great and my eyes are heavy. I can hear the infected outside, sounding as ravenous as ever, almost as though they are calling for us in a sick game of hide-and-seek. Sendai has not left my side, but words we rarely speak, not until I told her of my future intentions. Her initial answer was to inhale sharply. She stayed silent for a time, but she eventually reached for my hand and held it tightly, telling me she wanted the same. It would be quick, clean, and, most vital of all, painless. There are three bullets left in their chambers for the event. Maybe someone else can find their own mercy in the last...

There are heavy footfalls above us and their growls are at the back of our necks. They are inside the temple. It won't be long now. Sendai and I have not let go of each other's hand. Farewell Evon, may your future be more promising than ours. I hear a clamor by our door. They are coming... They are here...

## Epilogue

A solitary and distinctively human figure was standing by his office's eight-story window, indifferently gazing at the emerald colored campus grounds as Sol began her decline behind Earth's horizon. It had been another long day of molding fledgling minds and the middle-aged man was absorbing the last of what this day offered. He only stirred when a data file began to download in the cybernetic portion of his brain.

At the same time the file finished downloading, a female colleague entered the small room and said, "Professor, one of the remote surveyors has picked up something interesting."

"Really?" The professor kept his eyes focused on the scene out the window. "What's so interesting about it?"

"Readings are a little bit hazy, so there's some type of interference, possibly from the star, but there are obvious signs that the last world surveyed contained sapient life at one point. I've passed the data to your account just now. It's under surveyor 2X79-K."

The professor mentally chose said file and began overlooking the information that started to stream into the necessary sections of his brain, still keeping his spot by the view.

"Let's see... Yes... Fascinating! Archaic buildings, many collapsed or in decay, and... What's this? Yes, possible signs of nuclear type weapons being used. A lost civilization right at the edge of Coalition space! Tell the Parliament Archaeological Society about the discovery and, for the love of the Sacred, make sure to use the secure line! We don't want looters to get there first. If we're lucky, we can be knee-deep in forgotten knowledge within five years!"

The woman bowed, which he customarily returned, and then left the room to carry out his instructions. The professor was as excited as he had been in decades. The heavens were finally aligning for him. It was a rare opportunity for an archaeologist of any era or species to delve into a lost people's past for the first time. The readings presented no recent meddling by rogue mining companies, unprincipled governments, or scavengers. The planet was unlikely touched by sapient hands since its ruin, which, if the radiation from the nuclear impact sites were any indication, happened around twelve hundred years ago.

He wondered about so many things. How much had their technology deteriorated? Why the unusual interference? How many should he bring on his team? Who exactly should he bring? He smiled at the thought of his contemporaries and some of his graduate students kissing his ass

for the next few years in the hopes he would pick them. He smiled a little further when he imagined bringing only female cohorts. But no! As the director of the department, he must remain professional. Sacred forbid an important detail was missed because he was fantasizing foolishly; not to mention that he was married. His wife, an expert in alien culture and a fellow professor, would certainly join him.

He sighed when he sat down, realizing years of red tape lied between him and his grand adventure. No matter. Thanks to his vida training (he could warp air fairly well) and the nanotech flowing through his blood, he was still in the prime of his life at 187 years of age. Yes, surely the heavens had aligned perfectly for him.

### From the author

Thank you for reading! If you enjoyed this story and want to delve deeper into this universe, you can buy the sequel, *Ember's Echo*, for 0.99 cents at Amazon. I also welcome you to leave a review at your favorite retailer.