

PLAGUE WARS

THE FIRST
TRILOGY



DAVID VANDYKE and **RYAN KING**

**Plague Wars:
Infection Day
The First Trilogy
of the
Plague Wars Series**

Book 0: The Eden Plague

Book 1: Reaper's Run

Book 2: Skull's Shadows

A Kindle Book Review Best Indie Award Winner semi-finalist (The Eden Plague, 2013).

"Everything needed for a great story is right here in its pages... (Reaper's Run is) a fast-paced read that raises the questions we've come to expect from near future thrillers, but it has a freshness and a vigor -- and dare I say it -- a moral compass that isn't as common as with others of its ilk." - **Charles de Lint: Books to Look For, Fantasy and Science Fiction Magazine** (July/August 2014)

"Although I did not originally like the character Skull, after reading the book and getting inside his head, I liked him a lot more. If you like Lee Childs character "Jack Reacher", you will like "Skull's Shadows". Of course the story line is totally different but the characters are similar. Overall, I LOVE the Plague Wars Series. This series is one that I just want to read and read. Work gets in the

way" - Patricia L.

What trumps everything else, turning a government against its people?

Fear.

When the Eden Plague is loosed upon the world, the forces of order and chaos, good and evil must battle it out in a struggle for control and supremacy. A PTSD-damaged combat medic, a female Marine with no legs, and a sniper with no remorse might be its only hope of survival. Can these flawed heroes drive back those who would enslave humanity? Or will the darkness spread and swallow them up?

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The Eden Plague

by

David VanDyke

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Author's Note:

The Eden Plague is Book 0, a prequel. I present it here in chronological order, but you may find the series faster to start and easier to absorb if you begin with the tighter, shorter, single-character book 1, [*Reaper's Run*](#) (also in this volume) and return to The Eden Plague afterward.

Click here if you'd like to read [*Reaper's Run*](#) first.

Chapter 1

“Just do what I tell you, Elise,” she heard Jenkins say as she stared at the weird weapon. Growing up on her father’s ranch, she’d fired handguns and shotguns and rifles before, but this thing...he said it was an automatic shotgun, but it looked more like a blaster from a sci-fi movie.

“Hold it tight in to your shoulder. It’s going to kick like a mule but you shouldn’t have any problem with that.” His unsettling eyes locked with hers, and she asked herself again why she didn’t point it at him and use it once he gave her the ammo.

Because I can’t, she answered herself half-bitterly. *I never was a killer, and I can't fight my own conscience.*

She’d made her peace with her morality, even if it did mean she was under Jervis Jenkins’ thumb. Her current jailer, she loathed him to the limits of her ability. She considered biting him and seeing how he’d like to deal with the consequences, but then others would come to stash them both away in some deep hole and throw away the key.

At least now she was a pampered pet.

At least now they needed her.

For a while.

“Come on, Elise. Focus. Show me how you like to hold it.” Jenkins played with the ziploc bag of special shotgun shells, relishing his cheesy sexual double-entendre.

Ignoring him and his innuendo, she snugged the weapon in tight like any other shotgun, dry-fired it, then cocked it again. “Nothing to it,” she said confidently.

Bravado kept Jenkins happy. Sometimes. She had to play his games, and the Doctor’s games, and even though they never took advantage of her *that way*, she was still emotionally dead to them, held prisoner as she was.

Though she was an atheist – *I’m a scientist, after all, dammit!* – at the end of her rope, she had recently begun praying the same prayer, over and over, to the Universe or whoever: *somebody save me.*

Jenkins snapped his fingers, master to bitch. “Okay come on, step in there, and let’s go over the plan again.”

Something seemed out of place when Daniel Markis came home from work that afternoon. The side door to his house stood open. Turning into his driveway, he pulled his beat-up old van to a stop and switched it off right away, listening. Suburban Dale City was quiet, just the *thwock - thwock* of tennis balls in the court across the street.

Daniel stared at the open door. Something was wrong, because he lived alone. Ever since Becky left so long ago...alone.

Echoes in his head: *crazy brain-damaged loner.*

Reaching under his seat, he pulled out his car gun. The stock full-sized semi-auto rested comfortably in his hand, with two extra mags in a clip-on holder. His carry piece became his backup, nestled on his right rear hip.

God bless Dixie, the Commonwealth of Virginia and the Second Amendment.

Daniel lived on a corner – *generally a bad idea*, he thought, *far too much traffic* – he'd usually lived on military bases before – *getting off track. Keep it together, DJ.*

They'd said it was the organic damage, so that he couldn't think like he should. Explosion, concussion, brain injury, three-two-one-boom.

Focus, Daniel. He forced his mind back to the now.

Debating calling the cops for three seconds, he realized his phone was dead. *Forgot to recharge it last night in the house. Stupid car charger's broke. Gotta get a new one. Hell with it.*

The serpent in the back of his head woke up.

Chemical concentration... Pharmaceutical brainpower, that's what Daniel needed. He pulled a ziploc bag full of jelly beans out from under his seat. The purple ones were gel-caps. It was a good way to hide his stash from the cops, and he couldn't afford to get busted. He chewed two of them, along with some of the candy to kill the taste. The stimulant-painkiller combo flooded into his bloodstream while he sat there wishing he had a cortisone syringe handy for his knee.

Taking a deep breath, he readied himself.

Exiting his van onto the concrete, he kept his weapon in front of him and low in a tactical crouch. His left knee remained stiff, courtesy of that Taliban IED, but the pain was dulling now. Gritting his teeth, he concentrated on the job

in front of him and powered through it.

Probably some kids doing a daylight break-in, though they were stupid to have left the side door open to be seen.

They hadn't broken the glass storm door, so he opened that with his left hand and looked at the inner door, ajar. Nothing seemed damaged. Letting his eyes adjust for a moment, he then eased in, listening.

Quiet.

He took a quick look at the door hardware. It didn't seem broken, and the deadbolt was intact.

Did I forget to lock it this morning before work? What if I hadn't come home early? Maybe they're already gone. Yeah, that's it. Odds are they already ripped me off and they're long gone. Still, Daniel Markis goes by the book. Always do the right thing.

His heart hammered and he was having less difficulty focusing now. Better living through chemistry: Dexedrine, hydrocodone and a little epinephrine made it all better.

Clearing his house room by room, he searched for anything out of place. On the ground floor, his widescreen and computer were still there. Moving upstairs to the bedrooms and bathrooms, he found no one. *Nothing missing or disturbed.*

Daniel left the basement for last. If there was anyone in there they should have heard him moving around. At least he hoped so. The house was forty years old, and it creaked. He really wished they had bolted out the basement walkout into the back yard, over his useless waist-high Housing-Association-approved rail fence and across the neighbors' yards to escape.

No need to shoot some stupid kid or pathetic junkie. I've killed better men for better reasons.

He crept down the basement stairs, bad tactics to catch someone unawares. Obviously he should have gone back outside, and tried to sneak in the sliding glass door of the basement walkout. Actually he wanted whoever it was, if there was anyone, to leave by that exit.

Never corner a rat, unless you mean to exterminate him. Always leave him a way out.

At the bottom of the stairs he turned sharply left, back along a short hallway which opened out into the main finished part of the basement. He didn't hear anyone, but he smelled him.

It was easier for Daniel than some people, because everything he used was

fragrance-free. Artificial scents bothered him; they made his eyes water and his nose clog up. This smell was faint but unmistakable, man-cologne. Something expensive. Rubbing the bottom of his nose with his offhand finger, he kept from sneezing.

From being fairly relaxed, comfortable on the chems in a combat-mode sort of way, everything inside him shifted sharply into overdrive. *This isn't some kid*, he thought, *and he isn't running away*. The world crystallized in that way it did when he felt close to death. He'd been there before.

The serpent in his head knew someone wanted Daniel J. Markis dead, erased, blotted out. Charging out of its cave, it sank its fangs into his hindbrain like a terrier on a rat. Everything took on a cut-glass clarity, with slightly rainbow edges.

Surveying the part of the basement he could see from the end of the hallway, he saw no one in the open room. There was a door into the unfinished part to his left, another door to the three-quarter bath to his left front, the walkout glass doors right front, and the door to the basement bedroom to his right.

A faint sound marked someone in the bathroom and his front sight post swung left automatically. He crouched behind the end of his battered sofa, set the weapon comfortably on the armrest, and called out, "Come on out of there, you."

Not eloquent, but it got the message across.

A moment's pause, then the door exploded from the inside. *12-gauge shotgun*, a part of him said, *and the shooter was hoping to catch me napping*. Some kind of semi-automatic, since he fired four rounds quick, bang-bang-bang-bang, and Daniel didn't hear the distinct *chack-chack* of a pump.

Sweeping the room from his left to right, the shooter fired blind through the thin hollow-core door, spraying clouds of splinters with each shot. The sound deafened Daniel briefly, and the final blast struck the top of the sofa about a foot in front of him, sending pieces of cushion flying. Already fading back and moving left, he avoided the next one that never came, low in a duck walk.

Cursing himself for not retrieving his own shotgun from his bedroom, Daniel realized he couldn't expect to penetrate two thicknesses of wall at the corner and do any damage with a pistol. He certainly wasn't stepping in front of that door.

But local knowledge is always a huge advantage, and this was his own house. Opening the door to his left, he slid silently into the unfinished section of the basement, pushing the door almost shut behind. Now, immediately to his right stood a single thickness of drywall behind two-by-four studs. No

insulation, and on the other side, that bathroom and the shooter.

From point-blank range Daniel unloaded seven rounds through the wall, walking them diagonally left to right and slanting from low to high, knee to chest level. The expanding loads punched through the thin gypsum, leaving thumb-sized holes as they went, and he heard a grunt and the thud of a body falling.

The serpent cheered.

Moving quickly, he took cover to his left behind the water heater and finished off the magazine, firing into the tiny bathroom at about calf level.

He then reloaded, waiting.

No sounds, but he smelled blood and worse. That was a good sign, in this case. It usually meant death.

The serpent rejoiced.

He glided silently up to look through one of the holes in the drywall. Bright red splash, a jumble of flesh and dark clothing, the stink. Standing back up, weapon held in close to his sternum, he kept it pointed forty-five degrees down, still in a shooter's grip. None of that aiming skyward Hollywood crap you see on TV.

Moving carefully back through the portal, he took his left hand off the weapon and pushed at the shattered bathroom door. The shooter's body blocked it, and as Daniel was fairly sure the man was down and out, he moved to brace himself to shove it open when he heard something behind him.

Clap. Clap.

The serpent coiled, wary.

A slow, sarcastic clap.

Crap.

Chapter 2

Hoping the clapping meant the source held nothing in his hands, Daniel didn't do anything sudden. Instead he turned around smoothly, weapon still ready but pointed low.

There stood a *suit*. Mid-twenties, about five ten, dark hair cut short, straight and expensive, the five-o'clock shadow curse of the swarthy on his face and chin. To Daniel he looked like Agency. *You know*, he thought, *OGA, the Other Government Agency that everyone likes to talk about in those breathless hushed tones, like they think it's so cool, like they're in love with its very existence. They don't even actually use the acronym: CIA.* He realized it was this man's cologne he'd smelled, not the dead shooter's.

"Hello, *suit*," Daniel said. "What the fuck ...what do you want?" He'd made a promise to try to curb his vulgarities after all the jams his Higher Power got him out of, and Daniel was a man that kept his promises, even if he'd missed a few of the Twelve Steps along the way.

Taking a breath, Daniel asked, "Why are you in my house, and why'd you just make me kill a man?" He hung on to the tension between them, because he could feel the post-kill nausea trying to make itself known, and if he started on that he'd get the shakes and he'd want a drink and he really needed to stay away from that dark hole.

Pharms, he could control.

No, really.

But alcohol was a treacherous serpentine thing.

"Not a man," the suit said, "but don't worry about her. She'll keep."

Flippant. Cold son of a bitch. The kind that expends people like cartridges, like the one on the floor in there dead.

Then Daniel did a double-take. *She? Dammit, have I just killed a woman? I didn't have much choice, right? Can't think about that now. Deal with what's in front of you.*

"Let's go upstairs," the suit said jauntily.

Up they went, the intruder first, the handgun's front sight fixed on his spine, center mass, just out of reach if he suddenly turned and made a grab. They angled right at the top of the stairs, walked through the kitchen, and the suit sat down in the dining room.

Daniel reached over and pulled the curtains shut, flipped on the light. The suit took out a silver cigarette case, a matching lighter, and lit up. "Smoke?" He took a deep drag.

"I don't smoke," Daniel said automatically.

"Of course you do. You have a display case of Turkish meerschaum pipes right there, and some of them are used. And a humidor with some nice Cohiba. I was tempted to get one." He gestured toward the case in Daniel's living room.

"I mean, I'm not a smoker. Are you a liar?" Daniel asked him.

His eyes widened, baffled by the conversational turn. "No. Not the way you mean."

"But you've lied before?"

"Sure, occasionally. Most people have."

"I rest my case."

The swarthy man rubbed his eyes, the gesture condescending, as if dealing with a child. "Okay, I get it," he sighed theatrically. "Occasional user, no dependencies, right? You quit drinking, quit smoking cigarettes; you're an exercise junkie now. Nothing but endorphins, meditation, yoga, martial arts, the Quantico Shooting Club, going to church, anything to keep the nightmares and the demons at bay."

Shows how much you don't know, Daniel thought, but that's good, since it means my little chemical issues are well hidden.

"I'm surprised you don't have a dog or a cat," the suit went on.

"I have a serpent." Daniel barked laughter, a little too loud, on the edge of control. "And I had a dog. But my ex took him. But to hell with all that. Start talking." He sat down, because he was coming down, and wanting a drink, but he clamped down on that desire.

Resting the gun on the table, Daniel kept it pointed at the other man's chest, his fingertip off the trigger but close, very close. The serpent kept trying to wrap around that finger, make him squeeze. "What's your name, anyway?"

The suit took another drag, then looked at his cigarette, speculatively. "Jenkins. J. Andrew Jenkins the Fourth." He said it as if it should mean something.

It occurred to Daniel that Jenkins had no ashtray, so he got up, took a cereal bowl out of his cupboard and slid it across the dining room table to him. Since he was up anyway, he filled a tall glass with orange juice from the fridge. After violent action, the next best thing to alcohol was sugar. He didn't get the suit any; he had his smoke.

Daniel sat back down and sipped, feeling the cold sweet run down his insides. It steadied him a bit. He took a deep breath. “Okay, Jenkins, talk.”

The suit smiled, smarmy, superior. “Just like that. The secrets of the universe?”

The serpent coiled, and then Daniel kicked the man under the table, hard, somewhere near his left knee.

Jenkins convulsed forward, dropping the cigarette and clutching for the pain, and Daniel reached over, put his left hand on the man’s head and mashed his face into the table. With his right he used the magazine extension of the automatic to grind out the burning cigarette. “Now you owe me for a new tablecloth.”

With his weight still on the man’s head, Daniel put the pistol down out of his reach, picked up the still-smoking butt and singed the man’s skin, right behind his ear, drawing a yelp. Then he dropped it in the bowl-ashtray. He scooped up the gun again.

“You can’t play conversation control games with me, you stupid *suit*.” Daniel made that word into an epithet. “I’ve been through every resistance training course, every combat psych and psy-ops and mind-freak exercise, and you are in *my house now*.” He felt violated, and it fueled him and what control he had left drained away like water through a colander of pasta.

The serpent egged him on.

“MY HOUSE!” The snake and the Dexedrine seized control, the worm in his hindbrain that he tried so hard to keep caged every day since the IED and the brain damage, his nemesis, that satanic serpent. *This idiot, this suit, is a child playing with blasting caps and batteries in a toybox full of explosives and he might die, right here, right now, for that ignorance and stupidity.* Daniel was on the edge of a whiteout, and the snake longed for it, longed to throw itself and the body he possessed into that bright hot place where all he had to do was destroy. Annihilate every threat, kill everyone that wasn’t on his side, and this *fool*, the serpent screamed, *IS NOT ON YOUR SIDE*.

He wrapped his fingers into the intruder’s hair and dragged him to his feet, moving around the table. Daniel stood a bit under six feet, 200 pounds and muscular, but the berserker gang closing in let him shake the smaller man like a rag doll, lifting him onto his toes with one hand. Nose to nose, the muzzle of his weapon jammed hard into the man’s solar plexus, he screamed into Jenkins’ face, “I just killed one person, and I *just. Might. Kill. You. Too So. TALK!*”

Then he threw the man into his chair. The suit almost fell over backward,

but caught himself against the wall as Daniel stood over him, shaking. They were both shaking, Daniel with barely suppressed chemical rage, the cologned man with dawning fear.

Finally afraid. "You can't kill me," Jenkins said, shuddering.

Wrong thing to say. Oh, so very, very wrong.

A silent explosion in Daniel's head, and then the serpent took him, wrapped him up and dragged him under. He watched his hand move of its own volition, watched himself as he shot the man twice in the chest.

It felt so good.

The serpent writhed in ecstasy.

Jenkins gaped upward, then looked down. Touched the entry wounds. Tried to speak. Slumped and was still.

Crap.

Chapter 3

Elise came to consciousness wondering what had happened, then knowing but hardly believing it. *This is the guy Jenkins was supposed to recruit? The softhearted special operator who would help us with a minimum of trouble, who would be grateful, who could be controlled?*

Then why do I hurt so damn much?

First thing the stench hit her, blood and her own body stink mixed with the surreally mundane odors of soap and shower gel. A shampoo bottle lay shattered by her arm, its gooey contents a puddle on the shower floor. *Well, might as well make it useful.* She reached over, scooping the stuff onto her hands and then rubbing it into her medium-length auburn hair. Rolling over, she got painfully to her feet.

She saw her clothes were torn and so was the nylon cloth that covered the heavy Kevlar vest. The bulletproof helmet she had worn showed a couple of scars as well. *Good thing; that saved my life.* Eden or not, bullets in the brain tend to be fatal.

Eden. She laughed to herself. The one and only, the first. *Call me Eve. If they'll only let me find my Adam. I'd thought it might be Daniel Markis. Little chance now.*

Reaching out, she turned on the water in the shower, letting the hot soothing liquid run over her clothed body. It still felt wonderful. She lathered up her hair, then awkwardly used the soap to wash off what she could of the blood and fluids as she waited for Jenkins to make his recruiting pitch.

Silence wrapped him as Markis stood there, and he suddenly felt dizzy, ice cold, drenched in sweat. Numbly he reached over, bumped the thermostat up a couple of degrees, leaned against the wall. Listened to the silence. Mostly silence. The serpent still gibbered in his hindbrain. Too many chemicals, he knew. Steroids and painkillers and speed, and they had betrayed him this time.

But he heard something else. A rushing sound, not the forced air of the heating system either. Water. It sounded like the shower in the basement was on. Had a pipe broken? Did one of his rounds damage something?

Reloading automatically, he retraced his steps back down to the basement. *No way that guy – sorry, that woman – got up. No way, after the mess I made of her.*

The serpent in his head slithered forward again, eager.

Edging around the bottom of the stairs, Markis glided forward with all the stealth he could muster and slipped back to his position in the unfinished part of the basement, behind the thin wall with its sixteen or so holes. Yes, the shower was running, and something moved within. Several of the rounds had gone right through the tile and now the water was soaking back, drizzling through the holes.

What the hell?

He waited, took up a position behind the crack of the door, and waited some more. It took several minutes but finally a figure came out of the shower, out of the bathroom. It looked to him like she had rinsed with her clothes on, to get rid of the blood and filth, but amazingly she was up and walking around. Toweling off. Not fast; she moved haltingly, like an old woman, or a hurt one. With an exotic-looking weapon by the barrel in one hand, she dangled a Kevlar helmet from the same wrist, and dragged a mangled vest. Five or six scars showed where his rounds had hit the armor and helmet and not penetrated.

So I tagged her, but didn't kill her after all? But I fired sixteen rounds, and I smelled the stink of the body letting go, which normally only happens at the moment of death. At least some of her legs and arms should be out of commission, but she's using all of them. One, two, three, four. Yup, all four limbs operating.

Weird.

Markis stepped out from behind the door while her back was still mostly to him. "Freeze, you."

She dropped everything, held her hands up away from her body. "Don't shoot, please. It hurts."

"I bet. Turn around. All the way around. Keep turning."

He inspected her. No visible weapons, just torn up slacks and a ragged button-down blouse, with holes and rips in interesting places and still some bloodstains. Angry red wounds on her arms and legs, at least five that he could see. Spreading purple bruises. Cute, too, about five-six, reddish-brown hair, gorgeous blue eyes, nice curves under all that mess.

She was standing, she was walking. Somehow. Woman or not, she had fired a very deadly firearm at him. The gun didn't care who used it, and dead

was dead.

Wasn't it?

The serpent in Markis's head was not pleased.

"Turn right, go up the stairs. Don't think about it, just do it. Up, up!" He followed her ascent, déjà vu, just like with the suit. He marched her through the kitchen and told her to sit next to the suit's body.

The woman looked at the dead man, at the entry wounds, and made a choking sound. Stringy and wet, her hair did not hide a face ugly with bruises and what looked like a shot through her cheek.

Markis snarled, "I tried to talk to him. He gave me the wrong answers." Looking at her, he tried to be dispassionate, but still liked what he saw: average build but fit and perfectly proportioned. His eyes traced the contours of her form and something stirred within him as his baser instincts threatened to take control.

The serpent was pleased.

Markis shook himself. *What's wrong with me?* Reaching inside for the anger, he used it to regain his balance. *Remember, this woman tried to kill me. The body reaches for sex after violent action, the urge to procreate, but I swore off all of that when...* he pushed painful thoughts away again and concentrated.

In a field interrogation it was useful for the subject to be afraid, to keep from recovering composure. Markis figured he needed to push this woman through that window. Besides, she had genuine reason to fear him. The serpent hovered behind his eyeballs, threatening to take over again at any moment.

Markis spoke. "So tell me, and make it fast. I really want to shoot you again." It came out in a croon, husky, like a lover. He placed his finger on the trigger again and the serpent danced in the dexe-codone fog.

"Okay, okay, please don't," she tried to reason with him. "We're here to help you. Recruit you! Come on, Daniel, throttle back!" She shivered from the cold and the fear.

Markis could see in her eyes that she was confused. Obviously the situation hadn't gone the way they expected. "How do you know me?" he growled.

She spoke quickly, perhaps hoping to keep him distracted until he relaxed. "Jenkins had your file! It's true! You fit the profile, all the skills, high moral index, ruthless but not corruptible, the Company wants you. But it's going to be harder now." She made a weak gesture at the dead man beside her, avoiding looking.

"The Company" is what the CIA's employees call it, like it isn't even part

of the government. Maybe it isn't, really, Markis thought.

“Please, we can help each other.” She sounded unsure, but hopeful, and took a deep breath.

Markis saw she was settling down; he needed to keep her momentum going in the direction of explanations. He gestured with the gun. “Keep talking. What was the plan?”

She responded quickly, trippingly. “Jenkins was in charge – I had no choice. I was just supposed to provide the demonstration, which I did, as you see. I couldn't kill you anyway, even if I wanted to, but you were supposed to think so, to get your attention.”

He wondered what she meant by “couldn't kill” him. Seemed like she could have if he'd been in front of the shotgun.

Elise reached across with her right hand to scratch vigorously at her left arm, where one of the bullets had taken out a chunk of flesh. She looked pleadingly at Markis, as if willing him to understand, to give her a break. “I tried to talk him out of it but he was an arrogant son of a bitch and he wouldn't listen.”

Which reminded him. “So how come you aren't dead, or at least bleeding out on my bathroom floor? How come you're still on your feet?” This whole conversation was surreal, but he couldn't argue with his own two eyes so he figured he might as well just go with it until he figured it out. “Are you some kind of vampire? Werewolf? Immortal? Alien? Zombie?” He ran out of possibilities.

She continued her explanation, even as she clutched her gut, as if in pain. “It's a new thing. A kind of healing booster. Do you have anything to eat?”

Markis noticed she was looking sallow, white almost, and shivering. It seemed like she was getting sick, and her veins and muscle definition showed through paper-thin skin.

“I'm starving,” she pleaded again.

His stimulated mind raced, and he threw mental rocks at the serpent reluctantly slouching back toward its cave. Healing booster, super-healing. When she said starving, she meant literally starving. From his extensive medical training Markis figured that her body was already catabolizing itself, cannibalizing at the cellular level, trying to heal those wounds. Biology can't be outrun: healing takes energy and materials, no matter how advanced the drug or technique. And he needed this woman for answers, and maybe to keep him out of an Agency cell. He'd brushed up against the spooks Over There, and he had

no desire to be “rendered.”

Funny, how similar the two meanings of that word ended up being. One, to be boiled down to fatty paste. Two, to be given over to a foreign country to be tortured.

So he got her some food. A big bag of lunch meat, a package of cheese slices, mayo, mustard, a loaf of bread, apples, paper plates, and a plastic spoon. A plastic cup for orange juice. No metal. *Dad didn't raise no dummy. Used right, a steel spoon can kill a man. I've already seen she's dangerous, no matter how attractive she might be. That was part of the plan, probably.* Even with that wet stringy hair he couldn't stop thinking about her eyes. “Make me a sandwich too,” He said gruffly, not wanting to put down the gun. “And keep talking. What's your name, anyway?”

“Elise. Elise Wallis.” She lined up six pairs of bread slices with shaky hands and started to construct sandwiches, after stuffing a piece of the loaf into her mouth like a slumdog orphan. Taking a moment to choke it down, she continued. “It was just supposed to be a demonstration. You were supposed to shoot me, of course. Not quite so many times. And I didn't really shoot at you, did I? Those rounds I had were filled with salt. Not even rock salt, just table salt. Nasty within five feet, but after that it just stings. Special ammo. It's in his pocket in a plastic bag. See for yourself.” She sounded whiny, defensive. Querulous.

Markis laughed tightly. “Well, that didn't work out so well. And now some poor arrogant tailored-suit schmuck is dead. I guess he didn't have the super-healing. Why not? Experimental? Some kind of side effects? Doesn't work on everyone?” His mind was racing now, the adrenaline and the problem keeping him on track. It felt good, to be firing on all cylinders again.

Outrunning the serpent.

“Yeah, there's a downside, mostly for the Company.” She finished making the sandwiches, pushed one across the table to him, and demolished another in four bites.

Markis had to wait for her to keep talking anyway, so he took a cautious bite. *Too much mustard.* The woman looked into his eyes then, with a kind of haunted compassion or...something. Something hard to pin down. Maybe pity. He liked the eyes but he didn't much like that expression, and he resolved he wasn't going to fall for her sneaky womanly wiles, but there was still something in her that attracted him. Maybe it was because she had guts. In some other circumstances...

She kept eating. Kept staring at him.

Dragging his mind back to the now, he barked, “Come on, talk between bites.” Markis still felt on the ragged edge of control, and his weapon hand started shaking.

She stared at the gun and those shakes and said, “All right. Just let me tell it my own way, okay?”

Another quarter of a sandwich went down her throat. She finished a cup of juice, poured herself some more. “I was a terminal patient. Cancer. Hodgkin’s. I had maybe two weeks to live. I was already in hospice, doped up. The Company made me an offer I couldn’t refuse. Be a test subject for a new cure, they told me. Of course I said yes.”

She paused to eat another sandwich, and as she did she watched him fidget impatiently, watched his flickering eyes.

She’s worried about me, Markis realized. *Thinks I’m losing it. But I’m not.* He thought she was looking much better now, and her wounds were visibly shrinking. The bruising was getting smaller, the holes were closing, everything. His eyes moved all over her body, watching it happen. Unbelievable. But he had to believe it. It was right in front of him.

As he took the last bite of his sandwich the woman across from him sighed, as if regretting something. The next second he found himself falling over backward as the dining room table flew up in his face. He forced his finger not to pull the trigger in reflex, and by the time he disentangled himself from the chair, table, tablecloth and sandwich makings, she was gone.

Story of my life. The good ones always leave.

Chapter 4

Staring down the barrel of Daniel Markis' gun wasn't Elise's idea of a good time. There was no guarantee he wouldn't snap and shoot her like he shot Jenkins, so as soon as she had enough calories in her to survive, she'd gotten the hell out.

It didn't mean she felt good about it.

Everything in her wanted to stay with him, to explain what was going on, to hold his hand and ease the confusion in his tortured eyes. She could see the pain underlying the bravado, with compassion hidden behind his need to control an uncontrollable situation, but as a scientist, she knew there were just too many variables.

So she ran.

But she didn't want to.

She'd driven them in Jenkins' SUV to Markis' neighborhood, so she had the keys. Where the usual controlling jerk would have insisted on driving, Jenkins' privileged upbringing meant he liked to be chauffeured. *Serve me* had been the subtext of his every move, just like his father, who was far more powerful and frightening. They'd parked around the corner and out of sight.

Running to the vehicle, she hoped that Daniel wasn't so out of control that he'd try to chase her down with a gun in his hand in broad daylight. Hopefully he'd just accept what happened and calm down.

I have a plan, she thought as she climbed into the seat. *Or the beginnings of one, if only he'll cooperate. He's exactly the man I need.* Her mind flirted with what that might mean for the future, then forced it away. *No time for such thoughts, Elise. Not now.*

Driving away briskly, she checked the rear view mirror, seeing nothing following. A mile later she pulled into the back of a strip mall and changed out of her rags and into the nondescript clothes she had brought for that purpose. Sight of the crisp man's suit hanging there on the back seat hook sent a wave of nausea rushing over her. *Thank God it wasn't me that killed him, but I'm still glad he's gone and can't hurt me anymore.*

In Markis's teens, when he was young and foolish, he'd thought war would be fun, or would make him a man, when he went to the Gulf. In his twenties he deployed to Afghanistan to get some back for the Twin Towers, when Bin Laden seemed so near, just over the next mountain, and everybody in a turban might be Al Qaeda and he thought *who cares, shoot them all anyway, let God sort 'em out.*

If you listened to Dr. Benchman, you'd think he'd be having flashbacks right now. The VA psychiatrist had convinced himself Daniel Markis was a full-blown PTSD case, a danger to himself and society, and nothing Markis said could convince him otherwise.

He'd been ordered to see the shrink because he'd clocked a Marine lieutenant who started mouthing off about Air Force "blue-suiters." They'd both been drunk, and it had been a mistake, but it sure felt good at the time. *About broke my hand along with his pretty jaw, he thought. Of course, I never told Benchman about the serpent in my head. Thank God he never thought to try to get my carry permit revoked.*

Markis felt lucky, really, because he'd had more than nineteen years in, and by the time the whole JAG process was done, what with his lawyer successfully drawing it out and staving off the threat of a court-martial, he was happy to make a deal, sign that Article 15 and get his retirement orders. Twenty years, thirteen days, but it was enough to qualify, and life was much better as a retiree with fifty percent disability than as a disabled vet with nothing but the VA to help out.

Sitting there at the righted table, he tried to concentrate on the present. Brain fog was closing down again, because the speed was wearing off. He wanted a drink. He wanted a nap. He stared at the dead man leaking all over his old wall-to-wall carpet, and the body wasn't going to resurrect itself if it hadn't already, he was pretty sure. *Elise, if she was telling the truth, had said Jenkins didn't have the healing drug, or whatever it was.*

At least there were no sirens racing for his house, so it appeared no one had reported the gunshots. His basement walls were thick, cinder block set mostly below ground. *I guess no one heard the two extra pops when I...his mind shied away.*

On the other hand, Elise was probably already reporting to her Agency masters and there would soon be a cleanup team on the way. They might make it all go away, or they might set it up to implicate him, or they might come try to recruit him using a different approach - something a lot more certain. Like eight Men In Black with body armor and tranquilizer darts and beanbag rounds.

Imagination spinning, he tried to stay on track, tried to stick to the facts.

Instead, he sat there staring at the body.

Should he call the cops? Was it easier to deal with the local authorities, claim a righteous shoot in his own home? If he did, he'd have to rearrange the scene, because he'd simply executed Jenkins. No matter how you sliced it, he'd killed him in hot blood, without just cause.

With Miss Wallis, had she stayed dead, he'd have had justification. She'd had a weapon, she'd fired on him. In fact, the weapon should still be down there, all the proof he needed. Elise had bolted out his still-open side door. She'd had no time to detour to the basement.

No, he had to either deal with the Agency, or he had to run.

Flight was an attractive option. Disappear, get out of the country. Slip across to Mexico before the alarm went out, from there to points south. Take a tramp freighter to South Africa maybe, sell his skills. Private security firms there liked guys with combat experience. They'd get him a new identity, if he were willing to be one of their quasi-mercenary security contractors and kick back part of his pay. He'd made some good contacts in the Green Zone in Baghdad. The Zone had been a patchwork of embassy territories then, with South Africans, Pakistanis, Sri Lankans, Filipinos, even Gurkhas providing security for each little walled compound.

Shaking himself out of the fog of reminiscence, he told himself he had to do something, he had to act, or he was going to be acted upon, but he didn't want to run. It was not in his nature.

His phone rang.

He stared at it stupidly for a couple of rings. Nobody called his home phone but telemarketers and work, and he didn't have the kind of job that called him after hours.

Heaving himself up he grabbed the handset, looked at the number. He didn't recognize it but it was local, Northern Virginia. Telemarketers had other numbers, weird ones from foreign countries that tried to scam people. He decided to answer.

Maybe they wanted to talk, whoever 'they' were. Maybe he wanted to listen. Maybe there was some way out of this mess.

"Hello?"

"Daniel?" It sounded like Elise.

"Yeah. Elise?" *Bitch. Shoot at me then run away when I try to be nice.*

"Yes, Daniel. We have a little time. They don't know what happened yet.

When they do, they will probably want to clean up and they're going to insist you join up. If you don't play ball, they'll either do you the hard way, frame you or disappear you." She had a trace of Texas in her voice now, if he knew his Westerns.

"About like I thought. What are we gonna do about it?" He suddenly had a feeling she was in a tough spot, too, having failed to recruit him, and lost her boss as well. *Or maybe she wanted out of their grip. She'd said she'd had no choice. Maybe I misjudged her.*

Or maybe it's all a crock of bull.

"I want to talk with you, but not on an unsecure line, and not at the wrong end of a gun. Especially not when you're all amped up like you are now. Somewhere a bit more friendly."

He wondered at the tone of her voice, no-nonsense but with an undertone of concern. Or was he imagining it? "How do we do that? You could be armed next time, and I can't come back from the dead like you can."

"I didn't come back from the dead, I wasn't dead. I can be killed. It's just harder. And it still hurts to be shot."

"So you say. How and where? And don't you think they *are* listening right now?"

"Possibly." She sighed, audibly. "Look, I'm sick of being their slave. I have to get out from under, no matter how dangerous it is. So we have to meet, and we have to do it soon, before they can keep me from giving you everything. And I need your help too. You must have contacts. You spec ops guys always keep in touch."

"Maybe. So if they *are* listening, why don't they cut this line?"

She laughed, shaky. "You know, it's not like on TV. They can do a lot but they're only human. Don't give them too much credit."

"Or too little."

"Yeah, well, even if they could, they would want to hear where we are going to meet. They'll be waiting if they can."

"Well, you're the secret agent," Markis said sarcastically. "How do we do it without getting caught?"

"Daniel, I'm just a scientist that happened to get cancer and got sucked into this. I'm not a field operative. But I picked up a few things in the last couple of years, so here's what we're going to do. Go to a nearby shopping center drugstore. Don't tell me which one. Go buy a fresh prepaid cell phone. Call this number." She rattled off a phone number. "Add the number of shots I fired at

you to the digit in that position. Get it?”

“Got it.” *Right*, he thought. *Add four to the fourth digit*. Writing it down on a scrap of paper, he stuck it in his pocket. He couldn’t trust his memory.

“Call that number in half an hour exactly. First and last number you ever dial on that phone. We should be able to talk freely on that connection for long enough to arrange a meet. As soon as we have, you stomp on the phone and throw the pieces into the nearest storm drain. Got it? And do the same with your own cell phone, right now. They might be able to track it.”

“Okay...”

“And don’t go home after that. Take anything valuable you can carry, but somewhere along the line you will have to ditch your own vehicle. I don’t think they have a tracker on it but they will eventually. And get as much cash as you can out of just one ATM near the drugstore. Then drive away and make that call.”

“Got it.” He thought, *I’ve got to keep my focus*. It was getting hard. His head hurt.

She hung up.

He slammed an energy drink and swallowed two black-market but genuine Ritalin. He stuck the bottle in his pocket, grabbed an old rucksack and started packing. Magazines and ammo, granola bars, water, energy drink, his work badge and ID, and his runaway packet containing twenty grand cash in several currencies and two passports, one his, one Canadian with a different name. He wasn’t a covert field operative but any special ops guy learns a few things in the black world.

Also, he wouldn’t visit that ATM. Grabbing his travel Bible, he tossed it into the rucksack. He might need it, and he was sure to need the twelve hundred dollars he kept zipped inside it. It made him feel better anyway. *Sorry, Lord, and please help me out of this one*.

He pulled on a hoodie, then a windbreaker. February was still cold on the East Coast, especially at night, and the sun was going down. He threw his laptop into the ruck, too, then booted up his desktop computer and put in a suicide code, watching the special software start to burn his hard drive one sector at a time. *They won’t get anything off that*. Then he smashed his cell phone.

He also grabbed his M4 in its case, ten full magazines, his Remington 870 pump shotgun, and an Army surplus ammo box, heavy with cartridges. The last thing he tossed into his van was his aid bag. Everything imaginable from band-aids to Benzedrine, scalpels to syringes.

Doing as Elise had said, more or less, he drove to the second-nearest drugstore to his house in case “they” had been listening, and bought a disposable phone with cash. It was all cash from now on.

Back in the van, he drove out of town on the main road heading west as he waited for the half hour mark after pulling over into a gas station and filling up. As soon as he was done, he drove around a corner onto a side street, parked, and then dialed the number.

“Yes?” He heard Elise’s voice.

“It’s me. I’m mobile, I got money and some supplies.” He could hear traffic sounds behind her. He figured she was at a pay phone. *Not many of those around anymore.*

“All right. You know the Iron Saddle?”

“Biker bar, on Route One south of Quantico.”

“Yeah. Meet me there, one hour.”

“Roger wilco.”

After the call ended he started wending his way south, then back eastward to pick up US-1 at Dumfries north of Quantico Marine base. He was glad to stay in Virginia, where it was legal to carry around loaded firearms.

Laughing to himself without humor, he realized he was a recent murderer, or at least a manslaughterer, and no matter how justified it seemed, he had lost control. He was guilty, but he didn’t want to become a guest of the state just yet, and maybe he could do something to make up for it later. Some kind of penance.

Right. I keep trying to convince myself of that. The serpent doesn’t believe it either.

Chapter 5

Elise put the pay phone receiver down and walked casually back to the SUV parked at the side of the old station. She rooted around in the glove compartment and came up with a thick permanent marker. In back and front she performed some simple alterations to the license plates – a K became an R, a C became a G, a 4 became a 9. It might foil a computerized webcam-image search.

She drove through a fast-food place, a one-off frosty-freeze that didn't have any security cameras as far as she could see. A couple thousand more calories went into her gullet, helping to rebuild her torn flesh.

Driving away, she wended slowly southward toward the rendezvous, thinking, trying to formulate a plan. *I have to find a way to give it to him, she thought. It will improve his mental state, the PTSD his file talked about, and fix his lingering injuries. The trick will be passing it without him freaking out.*

Then the two of us will have it instead of just me.

Thoughts of the treatment filled her mind. With her two female chimps, Bobo and Mandy, as soon as they both had the same strain they became inseparable, like littermates, though they were unrelated. She wondered whether it would work the same way – did the virus somehow connect people in proportional proximity? That is, were those who passed it directly more likely to form bonds with the recipient? If so, did she want to be bonded to Daniel Markis? Or him to her?

But what choice do I have? Needs must when the Devil drives. She laughed at herself. *Or the Eden.*

Arriving at the Iron Saddle early, she parked on the side and went in. Out of place in her business casual, most of the looks she drew were nevertheless appreciative, not hostile – except for a few of the biker chicks. One slugged her man in the gut for looking and he laughed, spinning her around and slapping her on the butt.

Taking a seat at the bar, she shot a pleading look at the leather-clad bearded bartender. He had kind eyes.

Coming over promptly but politely, leaning in close he said, “You all right?” He spoke just loud enough to hear over the hubbub.

“Maybe. Not really my crowd, but I'm meeting a friend. Give me a diet Coke and keep these hound dogs off, will you?” Already she could see them

lining up to make their passes.

He nodded, said “Play along, then.” As soon as he saw she understood, he pecked her on the lips and winked.

Her face tickled with the brush of his beard. *This should keep them off me for a while. How quickly I play the whore...I almost wish I really could. Haven't been with a man in years.* The smell of him excited her in spite of herself and she shrugged away, blinking. *Damn. They're right about that near-death arousal. But I'll do just about anything right now to get away from the Company. Even kiss a few frogs in search of my prince.* “Having a good night, sweetie?” she asked loudly.

The bartender nodded, “Yeah, pretty good.” He shot a couple of bikers a glare and they backed off. Then he smiled knowingly at her and went back to his bartending. Probably he thought he'd just gone to the head of the pass line.

She thanked him with her eyes, then checked her watch. Five till. Looked around, hoping Daniel would show up early. Hoping they'd have a chance, make a chance, to get away. It was a fantasy, to escape with her chosen white knight.

She'd subtly steered Jenkins toward Daniel Markis. Unlike all the other spec-ops files they'd looked at, Markis wasn't a killer by trade, but instead a healer, a combat lifesaver. *Hopefully that will make him different. Maybe just different enough.*

Checking her watch again, she turned to look out the front window. Neon beer and motorcycle brand names obscured her view but the big man in the dark suit was clear enough, as was his weapon.

He burst through the front door, high-tech blunderbuss in hand, but by that time she was off the bar stool and scurrying for the back door. Chaos erupted behind her.

Markis passed the Marine Corps museum in the early dark, the blazing spire on the roof reminiscent of the raising of the flag on Iwo Jima. His grandfather had been there; Gunnery Sergeant Donald James Markis, USMC. He suppressed a strong impulse to turn into the parking lot, to put off this rendezvous for as long as he could. Driving south on US-1 through the cold quiet in his familiar musty van, time seemed suspended for a little while.

He wished he had a cigarette. Since he didn't, he tortured himself with imagination by thinking of the last time he'd smoked one: with Gramps as he

was dying of emphysema in hospice. Daniel had helped him out of the oxygen rig and onto the balcony, to suck down one last forbidden coffin nail before they said good night.

I should have said goodbye. And this healing thing could have saved him. Eyes tearing, he squeezed them with thumb and forefinger. *Goodbye, Gramps. Maybe I'll see you soon.*

Realizing he hardly cared at this point, he didn't think he had much to live for. With his messed up brain and his messed up life, he barely held onto his job, trying desperately to keep up with even the light workload they gave him. Hanging out with the other retired disabled veterans, their green and maroon and black berets and tabs and coins set in their sterile cubes and offices, they were all just marking time, milking their security clearances for a few more bucks. Staring at his own beret perched on the shelf above his computer screen, the Pararescue flash with its guardian angel, cradling the world in her arms, a symbol of what he was and never would be again. Reminiscing war stories. Trying to keep his hand in.

Trying to starve the serpent.

Trying to look himself in the mirror every morning, knowing he was useless. They wouldn't let him put his hands on a patient, wouldn't let him practice his medical craft. He couldn't even drive an ambulance, much less work trauma, for fear of his PTSD. Just push papers. Be a consultant.

A man who can't do his job isn't a man.

But he had done the job today. He had taken a shooter down like the pro he used to be, and if Elise had been human – normal? – he could have patched her up too, if he hadn't killed her. Only he *hadn't* killed her, he'd killed the suit, and Markis couldn't patch him up from dead.

His stomach clenched. No excuse for that murder. He'd crossed the line from watchdog to wolf, and bitten the hand that fed him, no matter how much that hand stank. He'd murdered a duly appointed representative of the United States government.

They never forget that. They will never let me rest.

He could imagine what his father would say. *Come on, Dan, pull your head out. You have a vehicle, you have an ally, you have a mission – and you have resources as yet untapped. Stick and rudder, boy. Take control and fly.*

Now all he needed was to care. That was the hard part.

The Iron Saddle came up on his right, a big parking lot filled with bikes surrounding a faux-Western building with an enormous roof extension to the

front, providing a covered space. Even tonight, temperature in the forties and a bit of a breeze, there were ten or twenty bikers and their old ladies outside, under the roof or sitting on the bikes, knocking back a few. Most of them would be inside, though it shouldn't be too busy on a Wednesday night.

Steering the van sharply to the right, he drove around the building, parking nose-out in the left rear corner under a hanging tree limb. Easy to see out of, hard to be seen. Sitting there for a moment, he checked the dive watch on his wrist. 300M, it said to him, and 18:56. *Four minutes to seven. Close enough, and better to be early than late.*

Using the time to settle his pistol in a belly holster and thread the magazine holder onto his belt, he then got out, crossed the parking lot warily toward the back door. Ritalin still sang in his veins, though he knew it wouldn't last.

Just then the back door flew open and Elise burst through running flat out. A man stepped into the doorway beyond with something big and gunlike in his hands. BOOM, BOOM, it spoke, like a shotgun but twice as loud, and Elise staggered and fell off to Markis's left. Strangely, he felt like it was him that got hit, though at a distance, like a fistful of rocks thrown in his face.

In his hindbrain the serpent hissed as he drew his automatic, to lay down covering fire in the direction of the lighted doorway while he crabbed sideways toward his fallen comrade. He figured that was what she was now. Grabbing the back of her jacket collar with his left hand he dragged her behind a convenient Harley trailer, popping off a couple more shots at the doorway. Blood covered her again, smearing his hand and arm. Somehow that shook him more this time.

Real men don't shoot women. Not intentionally anyway. Bastards.

"Daniel," Elise gasped, "get out of here. Leave me. I'll be fine, they just want me back on the leash. Here..." She reached up with one hand to grab his wrist...

Pulled it down toward her face...

Bit him.

He jerked his hand out of her mouth with a reflexive yelp. "What the –" He throttled a curse. The serpent thrashed, demanding to be set free.

"Just go. You'll understand soon enough. It's all I can do. Now get away. We're both still alive, you're free. Stay that way! Go! Go!" Her eyes were liquid with tears, confusing him.

Right now, he thought, the capture team is probably working their way around both sides of the building, with one guy covering the door that they sure aren't going to come through again. She's right; I have to get out now.

“Thanks anyway, and you’re welcome,” he hissed angrily. *Crazy bitch*, his mind spat unbidden, *I was just starting to like her*. Shaking his bitten hand in disgust, he backed up low, keeping the trailer between himself and the building. Moving behind the scrubby line of pine trees, he then ran to the back of the van and climbed in the rear door.

Through the windshield he could see one man coming around the right end of the building, with that big shotgun-thing in his hands. It looked like a grenade launcher, one of those rotary kind with a dozen shots, like a huge revolver. *Probably loaded with flechette, something to take down a super-healer*.

The front parking lot of the building was filled with activity as bikers roared off or spread out to watch from a distance in about equal numbers. The ones with no record or warrants outstanding stayed for the fun, and to prove they were not afraid.

Lights and activity provided a backdrop and enough confusion that Markis wasn’t worried they would see him here in the back seat of his van, watching from behind the front headrest. They might think it was Elise that had fired at them. It didn’t really matter what they thought, though, for he could hear sirens in the southern distance. Someone had called 911 and Stafford County’s finest were on their way.

Markis was right; as he watched, they just grabbed Elise and dragged her off, three of them, big men in ill-fitting dark suits. A fourth opened the door to the black Suburban at the edge of the front parking lot, and the thinning crowd of bikers parted like the Red Sea as the three men walked through waving their cannons. Moments later they were gone northbound in a screech of tire smoke.

Markis followed discreetly, heading north too, trailing behind. He wished he could follow them but that would play into their hands. Instead, he wanted to duck into Quantico Marine Base to avoid getting pulled over by the sheriffs’ department and having to answer their questions. He’d risk the slight possibility of a search at the Marine gate. Usually the faded windshield sticker with Senior Master Sergeant’s stripes, and his retired ID card, were good for a wave-through with hardly a look.

He got in all right at the commissary gate, to relative safety. Whatever you could say about the Agency, they did not like to tangle with the Department of Defense without all their ducks in order. DOD didn’t much like them either, and Defense was the 800-pound gorilla of the US Government.

The sheriffs’ department, on the other hand, had no problem busting service people on County turf. Lawyer’s fees, court costs and fines kept them in

shiny new cop equipment, so he was glad to get on base where they couldn't reach.

Markis pulled into the on-base McDonald's drive-through and got two Big Mac meals. Hungry, he'd eaten nothing but a ham sandwich in some very strange circumstances since coming home less than three hours ago. Was it only that long? Since then, his whole world had turned upside down.

Sitting in the parking lot with the van's rear against the dumpster-corral wall, he watched and thought. He doubted they knew where he was, or they'd have had him by now, but they must have been tracking Elise. Some kind of bug, like the bloodhound modules used in the sandbox for certain ops. About the size of a pack of cigarettes, a little antenna, a strong magnet, turn it on, stick it under an enemy bumper and as long as the battery lasted you could track him, intel or drone fodder.

He crammed burger into his mouth, sucked down the first Coke in one long pull. Eating the entire first large fries in three big bites, he then slowed down to work on the second meal, and kept thinking.

There was still the mess at his house, unless they cleaned it up. They probably would. And since they had avoided the sheriffs, they didn't want involvement with local law enforcement. They would want to keep looking for him themselves, he figured.

Well, he'd do his best not to be found.

After finishing off the food his belly felt comfortably distended, so he looked idly at his left hand and the human bite Elise had bestowed on him. Had she lost her mind? She didn't seem out of her head. What had she meant, "*You'll understand*"? The wound wasn't severe, just a few blood spots where her canines had cut, and some generalized bruising that was fading already.

Pulling out his aid bag, he unrolled it to access the equipment. He poured some disinfectant on his hand, wrapped it in some gauze, tied it off awkwardly with his teeth and forgot about it.

His watch beeped twenty hundred, eight p.m. The Marine Corps Exchange was still open and it was right over his shoulder, a hundred yards across the parking lot. *All right, time to improve my supply situation.*

He drove over and parked just on the side of the enormous building, then grabbed a cart and went shopping. An ice chest, always useful. A two-gallon water jug. Some MREs, meals ready-to-eat. Field gear. A few other odds and ends, another two prepaid disposable phones and a pack of batteries for them. He'd have to make some calls sometime. Paying cash again, he loaded his

purchases in the van, then drove off down a side-street and parked next to a pair of battered white base engineer work vans, blending right in.

Then Markis and the serpent turned in, exhausted.

Chapter 6

Elise sat crunched between two big men, Karl and Miguel, and kept her mouth shut. They weren't the type of guys to fall for feminine wiles or pleas for sympathy. Knowing what she was, they viewed her with unbridled ruthlessness. Short of killing her or maybe amputating something, they knew they could damage the goods any way they wanted and get away with it. And she didn't like the way Miguel always looked at her, as if he'd like to handcuff her to her lab bench and give his lusts free rein. She was pretty sure he wouldn't, not really, for fear of contracting the virus and giving up his love of cruelty.

Shivering, she remembered just how vulnerable she was. *Super-healing should give me an advantage, but all I can think about is being trapped as a combination researcher and laboratory subject. Studying myself. That's irony for you.* She'd rolled the dice and lost, this time, but she'd given what she could to Daniel and she had to hope that would be enough.

Sinking down into the seat as the Suburban shot southward to the next interstate feeder, she concentrated on not feeling the despair, or hunger. Looking at her skeletal hand in the flickering light, she felt the cramping in her guts. *Maybe...* "Hey, Karl," she said softly. "Do we have any food in here?"

The minder ignored her. She could tell he felt personally betrayed by her attempt to escape, since he'd always been respectful of her. Or perhaps it was because they'd lost the younger Jenkins. Yes, that must have been it. He must feel like he'd failed in his duty.

"Look," she reminded them, "you know my caloric needs. You know how valuable I am to the program. My body weight is under a hundred pounds and falling right now." She held up her papery-skinned hand for his inspection. "By the time we get back to the lab there might be irreversible damage."

"Should have thought about that before you tried to run, *puta*," snarled Miguel.

"She's right, though," responded Karl, resigned. "If we bring her in damaged it will just be worse. There's some kind of burger drive-through up there; pull in."

"You buy the food, then," grumbled Miguel. "I gotta take a piss." He hopped out as they pulled up to the microphone.

"Thanks," Elise said.

“Shut up,” Karl said flatly. “I’m not your buddy, and even if I was, buddy’s only half a word.”

She wondered what he meant. *Some kind of military thing.*

Occupying herself, she thought about Daniel, about his tortured eyes, eyes she had to run from out of necessity, but eyes that perhaps could be part of someone that would – what? Save her? If she’d read his file right, he would. That’s why she had tricked Jenkins into choosing him.

At least it was a chance.

Sleep was a big black scary thing inhabited by dreams where Markis pumped round after round into Men In Black. They either wouldn’t go down, or the bullets would exit the gun with a little pop and bounce off their chests, and he would end up in a fistfight where he’d punch and punch and couldn’t hurt them and they would laugh. Then it would turn into something else, something from his past, like dragging his dead best buddy Hector Koltunczyk into a hollow in the dirt, trying to plug the leaks in him with his fingers, but Hector sprouted fountains of blood like one of those flexible hose sprinklers where the water came out the holes.

Long ago he had come to the realization that not even his new, Pararescue-trained self of several years later could have saved his friend, but if there was any one thing that drove him to leave the Army Airborne and try out for PJ, it was that incident where Hector had died in his hands.

It had taken a boatload of pushing, a break in service, giving up his stripes and starting over to make the move to the Air Force Pararescue program. The Army hated it when people didn’t re-up, and they dangled goodies, choice assignments and choice jobs, in front of him. He’d wanted to learn to save lives as well as take them, though, and they couldn’t guarantee him Special Forces Medic, which was the only other possibility he’d considered.

So he went PJ. That was the nickname for “parajumper,” Pararescueman. Despite the ninety percent odds of washout, he had not only qualified, but had excelled at it all the way through the Pipeline. Seventeen months of training just to graduate, “That Others May Live.” That was the Pararescue motto.

At the end of it Daniel Markis was one of fewer than three hundred of the very best combat lifesavers in the world, cross-trained with a variety of special ops expertise. Small arms, water operations, light aircraft, survival,

mountaineering, demolitions, you name it, he'd done it in sixteen years in the PJs. Some of his Army buddies had thought he was a pogue or some kind of traitor for going green to blue, but none of his real friends did. Nobody that met an Air Force PJ at work ever thought so either.

That Others May Live. That's why he did it.

He was elite of the elite back then, a sky-god in a blood-red beret, before that IED took it all away from him, leaving him with a bum knee and a bad back and a serpent in his brain.

Markis realized he'd gone from dreaming to drowsy reminiscing somewhere along the line, as dawn broke over Quantico. The sounds of Marines at morning PT came from off in the distance, and a five-ton truck drove by his parking place with a rattle.

Sitting up, he sucked down a half-liter bottle of water, then slipped out the side door and took a leak between the vans. He was hungry again, really hungry, so he went to the Mickey Dee's one more time and ate his fill. Nobody seemed to be looking for him, and with hair cut high and tight he blended in pretty well here, though his shave was a day old.

Halfway through his third McMuffin it hit him: no headaches this morning, and the serpent was hiding.

Usually he woke up with a near-migraine that took four ibuprofen, a vicodin and a triple espresso to tamp it all down to a manageable level. His knee should've been locked up stiff too, and his back hurting, but right now he was pain-free for the first time in a long while. Since Afghanistan. And jones-free too, for that matter.

Looking at the gauze on his hand, on impulse he unwound it to check the wound. He rubbed at the dried blood, then finished the sandwich and got up to go into the restroom. After washing his hand he stared at it.

Nothing there.

No bite, no bruise, smooth pristine skin. And he felt good, better than he'd felt in a while. His face stared back at him in the scratched-up mirror for a while, until someone else came in to use the toilet. Shaking himself out of his reverie, he went back out to finish his breakfast, pancakes and hash brown patties and coffee and large orange juice.

He sat and thought about super-healing. Stupid, pulp-sci-fi name, but what else should he call it? X-factor? Sounded like a TV talent show. Wolverine, like that comic-book guy? Maybe H-factor. Or XH, experimental healing. Because it had to be experimental. The government could never keep secrets for long, no

matter what the conspiracy nuts thought. The government was made up of people, good people and bad people and heroes and stupid arrogant people like Jenkins who lost control of missions and secrets. But what was the secret this time?

The obvious answer was it was a kind of drug. Shoot up, accelerate the body's natural healing, instant cure. But a drug couldn't be passed on with a bite, like what he thought had happened. *Elise bit me, deliberately, and said I'd understand. So she transferred it to me, at least some of it.* Already he was grateful to her for that.

Discounting the supernatural – and he wasn't, not completely, but his mind shied away from that for now – it would have to be some kind of parasite or bacteria or virus, that was able to spread from person to person and help them out. Or maybe...what about nanites? Like in science fiction, like those Borg things that injected you and took over your body and mind with germ-sized machines. But no matter what, it had to be something small, and self-replicating, self-sustaining.

He wondered how much the XH could cure. Obviously gross injuries were possible. And cancer, if he could believe Elise. What about AIDS? What about aging? Life extension, even immortality? Did they even realize what they had?

His mind whirled with the possibilities.

If it conferred youth and immortality, it would change the world like nothing ever. The rich would pay anything, and people would kill for it. People would go to war for it. In fact, it might win wars, making soldiers into fearless super-warriors. And who would decide who got it?

But Elise had said something about a downside, some kind of disadvantage...maybe some kind of burnout? Maybe instead of immortality it used up the bearer, ate up his vitality so the more healing he had to do, the shorter his life was. Maybe. But Elise had looked younger than Markis was, twenties maybe, and cute and gutsy, under all that blood and stress.

She said she had been a scientist before her cancer was deemed terminal, that she had worked for them a few years...seemed about right. And what had she said – “Yeah, there's a downside, at least for the Company.” Not for her, but *for the Company*. So it couldn't be a shortened lifespan, he thought. Maybe it had no effect on lifespan. Maybe it froze your age just as you were, like in a vampire story. That might be nice, if you got it young.

He sighed, rubbing his face. Too many questions, too many possibilities. And he needed answers, because whatever it was, it was inside him too.

He had no way to contact Elise, so he would just have to hope she was all right and could get in touch with him sometime. Putting her out of his mind for now, he told himself he didn't owe her anything.

Leave her to rot.

Right.

His conscience sharply disagreed with him. Kind of funny, because the serpent had held his conscience captive for quite a while. Maybe the XH was healing some of his brain damage, and if the XH healed his body too, got rid of the headaches and concussions and bum knee and aching back and the persistent spiral fractures from too many hard landings and everything else, even if that was all it did, then he guessed he owed her a lot. Besides, there was the way she'd looked at him, even while he pointed a gun at her. No terror. Caution, sure, but a kind of trust and hope, too, emotions he had missed for a long time in his life, feelings that tugged at him and made him think of things beyond just rescuing her.

Building castles in his mind.

He pushed that aside for now. First he had to get an idea of what was happening at his house. He wouldn't be any good to anyone, least of all Elise, if he walked blindly into a manhunt. No, he had to reach out, get some help.

He drove to a beer joint he knew of in Quantico Town. This was a unique little municipality, a tenth of a square mile, entirely enclosed by Quantico Marine Base. Residents got passes to come and go, all five hundred of them or so. But what was even more unique, the unusual thing that he needed, was the pay phone inside. Not too many of those around but things didn't change very fast in quaint old Quantico Town.

Ignoring the "closed" sign on the door of the Forward Observer pub, he shoved the door open and went on in. If you looked like you belonged, Felix the owner would ignore the archaic eighteenth-century law still on the books that said you can't sell alcohol before noon. That's why the door wasn't locked, that and they made a few bucks in the morning selling coffee and smokes and breakfast sandwiches and day-old donuts to guys on their way to work. Fortunately, Felix wasn't in to recognize him, just a chesty young thing with a wedding ring, in too-tight jeans and a tee shirt, makeup over acne, probably the teen wife of a teen Marine, making a few extra bucks.

"Whatcha want?" she said with that fake brightness servers put on. Standing hipshot, she pointed with one long nail over her shoulder at the menu chalked on the wall.

Ah, the brashness of the young.

Markis didn't sit down. "Three ham cheese and egg bagels, large coffee to go." He pulled a gallon of milk out of a fridge. "This too. The head that way?" She nodded, and he went back in the direction of the facilities, which happened to be where he knew the phone was.

His first call was to his next-door neighbor Trey, a friendly Creole from Louisiana who'd married a nice German girl on a tour in Bitburg and eventually settled down in Virginia after retiring from the Army. Even in the twenty-first century, a black man bringing a white girl home to "N'awlins" had a tough row to hoe.

"No, nothing unusual going on, DJ, what's up?" he asked.

"Nobody in my driveway, no visitors, nothing like that?" They kept an eye on each others' houses, because there were four schools in the area and a few kids always had sticky fingers.

"Nope. Why, something wrong?" he pried gently.

Markis would have loved to tell him, the way he was feeling right now. Trey was a neighbor, a fellow vet but not really a brother in arms. He could probably be trusted to a point, but Markis didn't want to involve him if he didn't have to, so he dissembled, though it was painful to do so. "No, just missed a meeting with a friend, wondered if he came by there."

"Okay...well, you let me know if I can do anything."

Markis could tell Trey didn't buy it, but he stuck to the plan. "Thanks, Trey. Hey I might be out of town for a week or two, could you pick up my mail and keep an eye on the place for me?"

"Yeah, DJ. Sure." He sounded hurt.

Man, he hated that.

"Look – Trey, I can't talk about it right now, okay? You know how it is. But I'll tell you when I can." With that half-lie and half-promise, he hung up. Then he called work, told them he was really sick and wouldn't be in for a week. In that time it either wouldn't matter or it would be all over.

Markis thought of calling his dad, who was a good guy to have with you in a situation. David Jonah Markis, Chief Warrant Officer Four, US Army retired. He'd fought in Vietnam, driving Hueys, and had been wounded a bunch of times flying guys in and out of hot landing zones. Purple Heart with oak leaf clusters, and a Silver Star for the time he went down and carried his wounded copilot seven miles through enemy territory to the nearest US firebase, with an AK round in his left lung. He lived in South Carolina now, had sixty acres and his

own grass airstrip south of Blacksburg, and an old but airworthy Piper Cub to keep him busy. But if they knew who Daniel was, they knew his dad too and might be watching him. If Daniel wanted to talk to him he'd have to figure out a way to do it without bringing the trouble to the elder Markis.

But there were some that they didn't know about, he hoped. They couldn't cover everyone. No one had unlimited resources, not even the Agency. And they had limited powers inside the US anyway; they had already broken any number of laws and while a certain amount of that could be covered up, it became more and more risky the more they did. He had to depend on them not knowing he had the XH in him. He hoped they thought it was just a missed opportunity and they wouldn't frame a federal charge to get the FBI and every other law enforcement agency in the country looking for him.

He got out his beat-up Army-issue green memo book that he'd had forever, that he'd carried to the Gulf and back. It had long since been laminated and converted into a home address book and retired to a drawer, but he had grabbed it on the way out of the house and now looked up Ezekiel "Zeke" Johnstone's number. He had to risk it, and since he hadn't contacted Zeke since forever, he hoped they hadn't connected the two of them yet.

Calling, he reached a screening service. *Right, this number isn't on his safe list.* He said, "720th" at the beep, waited through *Please Enjoy The Music While We Reach Your Party*, and almost gasped with relief when he heard Zeke pick up.

"Yeah?" he said, his voice neutral.

"It's me, man. Deej. Think a few years back. 720th, Kandahar. I can't say any more, they might have a keyword trace."

"Yeah man, I got it. Let me call you back on a better line."

He could hear a woman's voice, a shriek of childish mirth in the background. He closed his eyes as he hung up. *Damn, I hate to drag him into this.*

A minute later the pay phone rang and Markis picked back up.

"All right, I'm on a one-off. You sure they ain't got your end?"

"Not a hundred percent, but ninety-nine-point nine. It's a pay phone and if they knew where I was they'd already have picked me up."

"All right. What you get into this time? Another loan shark?"

Markis used to gamble, and lose. It was one risk of being an adrenaline junkie – when ops slowed down, you had to find something for a jolt. Some guys drank too much, chased women, or took up high-risk sports. Skydiving, that was

a given. Bungee jumping, jet-ski, flying, racing...he did all of that, especially the drinking...he had also played craps. A lot. He'd gotten stuck. The inevitable mathematics of the house odds had eventually strangled him, and he borrowed from the wrong people. Zeke and some of his guys had helped him out with that. Markis paid him back and he'd been clean ever since.

"No, nothing so simple. This is something big, something black, blacker than black. Man, I hate to involve you, what with Cassie and the kids, but it's either you or run for the border. I don't want to run yet."

"It's all right, man. You know what I owe you."

"You don't owe me your family. I think you need to cut them out. Get some distance."

He could see Zeke in his mind's eye, thinking and chewing the inside of his cheek the way he always did. "All right. Can you find the cabin?"

"I was thinking the same thing. Yeah, I can find it. I'm pretty sure there's nothing to lead them to it. And Zee-man...might want to put out a warning order for a few more guys, just in case. This is some through-the-looking-glass stuff, and I don't know how deep the rabbit hole goes."

"Just don't tell me I'm going to wake up in a tank full of goo with a tube down my throat."

"Well, I got a red pill for you here, if you want it."

He snorted. "All right, Morpheus. When can you be there?"

Markis thought for a moment, trying to calculate the distance and time. About ten hours to Cave Run Lake, Kentucky. "Sometime tonight, I think. Same white van."

"Okay, brother. You take care, and I'll see you tonight."

He put down the phone, used the head, then went out and paid for his food order. He brought it out to the van and ate a bagel sandwich sitting there in the seat, watching Quantico go about its morning routine. After drinking a half a gallon of the milk he started on the coffee. Hunger pangs seemed to come and go, and apparently he had to feed them when they did.

On the road he passed the inbound base traffic piled up at the gate. Then he took it easy, driving in the right lane south down I-95, letting his thoughts flow.

Things were a thousand times better now. Yeah, he felt a little guilty for putting Zeke on the spot, but what were friends for, anyway, and Markis had saved his life, after all. In some cultures that meant he was responsible for Zeke. *Either way, me for him, him for me.*

There was nothing quite like the bond between men who had faced death

together. It sounded corny, even in his mind, but it was the unspoken truth that turned recruits into veterans and boys into men on the battlefield, and had for millennia. It was more important than just about anything else, on a par with the love between husband and wife. In fact, Markis knew guys who would choose their brothers in arms before their wives, maybe even their kids.

Might not be right, but it was strong, very strong.

That didn't mean he even liked the guys, always. Sometimes he couldn't even stand them outside of an op, and Markis was always a bit of a loner, hadn't worried about keeping in touch. He could always find them later, he'd thought.

Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. He hadn't memorized many Bible verses, but that was one of them. He couldn't remember who said it, but that guy really knew what he was talking about. *I hope he died well, saving his friends. Couldn't ask for a better way to go. I know I'd welcome it when it came, if I died doing my duty, so others could live.*

Markis shook off his melancholy thoughts. Maybe the XH meant he didn't have to think about dying anymore, or his buddies dying or anyone. Maybe XH would put him out of business. That was a strange idea. This stuff was going to change the world, if the unknown downside didn't turn out to be too bad.

In any case, physically he felt great, better and better by the hour. His thoughts were clearer, his body hummed with vitality and health. It was an overnight revolution. And all he had to do was bite someone, he figured, to pass it on. He had a feeling of power, of the ability to bestow a gift on his friends and withhold it from his enemies, whoever they were. Then he felt a sudden stab of conscience, realizing that he wouldn't, couldn't withhold it from anyone that needed it. *That Others May Live* was his code. Not *That Others Who I Happen To Like May Live*.

Markis's resolve crystallized. He realized then that everyone had to have this stuff.

Conscience nagged at him as he drove, with nothing to do but think and listen to the radio. He started remembering stupid things he'd done as a kid, growing up in Omaha. He'd hurt people, emotionally and physically. He'd been a jerk, because he could be. He was big and tough and athletic and good-looking and he'd used and discarded girls like paper cups, drinking his fill then tossing them away. He'd had a filthy mouth, he'd gotten into fights, and he'd bullied weaker people around him. It was all for their own good, of course, and they deserved it, of course, and he deserved whatever he wanted from life, of course.

Of course.

He'd kept a purer part of himself compartmentalized, in a box marked "Duty," and that was sacred. In that box he was a paladin. Everything in there he did right, everything by the book unless completing the mission called for a deviation, and the mission was everything.

But outside of duty, he'd been a son of a bitch.

Then Becky came along. God, she was beautiful, with sandy straight hair in bangs, freckles, a generous figure that he found just right - and she had a young daughter. It was fireworks and flame for a while, and they got married.

It lasted five years, until the drinking and gambling and stupidity ruined it all. They didn't have any kids of their own, either. It was Daniel, his half of it, that poisoned the well too, just one more contributing factor.

I can't be much of a man if I was shooting blanks with my own wife, right?
He had too much medical training to deny a low sperm count.

A wave of guilt washed over him and he ground his teeth, tears of regret leaking out in the privacy of his van at sixty-five miles per hour. He had never faced his own culpability, and it was cleansing to just accept it.

Dr. Benchman used to tell him he had to take responsibility for things he'd done and he would feel better. He'd preferred Prozac and Ritalin and Dexedrine, but he realized he didn't want those now.

I think the XH is fixing me.

Was XH going to put the shrinks out of a job too?

An inkling of the downside started to rattle around in the deep recesses of his thoughts, way down there where things he didn't want to think about lurk. He couldn't see it clearly but he figured that given time it would eventually surface.

Feeling better, his thoughts turned to Elise. He'd shot her, she'd made a fool of him by escaping - or had he let her go? Maybe he could have tried harder. He'd never killed a woman - not that he knew of, anyway. Never had a woman fire a weapon at him either. Maybe he'd had a soft spot? It wasn't something he'd thought about much. Then he hadn't kept her out of their clutches at the biker bar, but he might have had to kill four men in front of witnesses to do it, and she'd been so adamant. Turning it all over in his mind, he kept trying to analyze his own feelings.

Okay, he admitted it to himself. He was interested. She'd shown backbone, and every man likes a woman with a spine, a woman he can respect, but there was something more there, a connection he felt. Part of it was the shared experience of combat, of the life and death stress that welds people together in

unusual ways. Still, there was more to it than that. Was he fooling himself? It was the way she had looked at him, like she knew him.

At least he had all day to think about it.

Chapter 7

By the time Elise was back home – if she could call a cheap apartment she never wanted “home” – she was bone tired. But at least she was healed up after they had stuffed her with food. Correction, Karl had. Miguel just sat there and glared into the rear-view mirror after Karl had made him sit up front. He’d kept trying to cop a feel and she’d complained about it. *A true international asshole.*

Russian hands and Roman fingers.

“Pack a couple of bags. Doc says you gotta live at the lab for a while.”

“Great. Just great.”

“He says it’s for your own protection too. He said Jenkins had powerful friends and they won’t be happy he’s dead.”

Elise protested incredulously, “It’s not like *I* killed him. I did *exactly* what he told me to, and almost died for it. As far as I know he just pissed off the wrong guy.”

“Doesn’t matter. Pack. As much as you like. It might be a while before you come back.” Karl was a bulldog, and she knew she couldn’t change one bit of his mind.

She started packing.

When they got to the lab, Karl threw her bags down in one of the sleeping rooms, the one right across from the security cubby. *They probably have cameras in my bedroom, too. Have to change in the dark or give them a show. At least I’ll have work to do – Bobo and Mandy and the computers and gene sequencers and Arthur and Roger...I’ll be all right.* She told herself to cheer up, then took a shower, turned off the light and threw herself onto the lower bunk.

She awoke hours later when the door opened. Miguel stood in the doorway staring at her. “Get out!” she snarled.

He only smiled, an evil thing. “Doc wants to see you. He says get your cute ass up.”

“Really.” She didn’t move from under the blanket. “Fine. I’ll be out in ten minutes.”

He stared some more, as if he expected her to get naked in front of him.

“Get out or I’ll tell the Doctor about you.” She sat up suddenly, the blanket held to her neck. “Or maybe I’ll bite you!” She hissed, showing unimpressive, very human fangs, and made as if to lunge at him.

Nevertheless he jumped back, and then spat on the floor and slammed the door shut with a curse.

She laughed darkly to herself, then opened her bags and began to dress.

Nine hours after he left Quantico, Markis was muscling the van around the twists and turns of State 211 south out of Salt Lick, Kentucky, looking for Clear Creek Road, then Buck Creek Road. After that, it was all by memory, looking for the unmarked gate with a “Trespassers Will Be Violated” sign on it, then off into the wooded hills on the rutted dirt track. Branches scraped along the roof and sides of the van, adding to the innumerable dings already there. He’d got it cheap in a fleet auction, and never regretted it. If anything scraped too deep he just sprayed some white enamel over it.

After ten minutes of rollercoaster he drove up to Zeke’s cabin, rustic but well maintained. There was a big barn next to it, and he pulled up midway between, headlights shining on the large door. He turned off the engine and the headlamps, leaving the parking lights on and turning on the dome light overhead. He put his hands on the steering wheel and waited.

A moment later he heard something and froze in place. If it were hostiles, he was screwed anyway. He had to believe it was Zeke or one of his guys, checking him out.

A faint sound, like a breath, came from behind his left ear. His eyes flicked to the door mirror and he could see the barrel of an assault weapon with a short, dark figure behind it. About the same time Zeke came around the corner of the barn, dressed in some old BDUs. He was easy to identify, big and bearded. He’d gotten paunchy since retirement, but he still moved easily. He would be in his early fifties, about ten years older than Markis. He walked confidently up to the open window, waving the gunman back. Reaching through, he clasped hands with Markis.

“DJ!”

“Zeke. Really good to see you, man. Is that Spooky back there?”

“You know it. Still doing his thing.”

Spooky was a little Asian guy, what Markis’s dad would have called a Montagnard. His name, what ended up on his documents anyway, was Nguyen Pham Tran. The Vietnamese equivalent of John Smith. He had come over as a teenager in the Boat People wave of the 1980s, and joined the US Army as soon

as he could. Ninjas had nothing on Spooky in the bush. His family had been anticommunist insurgents until they got sent to the reeducation camps. Spooky didn't talk about it much.

"Hey, Spooky," Markis called over his shoulder, now that he felt he could move without getting shot. He heard a grunt in reply. When he got out of the van, he didn't see Spooky anymore. He'd faded back into the woods.

Markis hugged Zeke, slapping his back. "Good to see you, man." He stretched, then bent over, touched his toes, loosening up his muscles after the long drive.

"That physical therapy must be working, if you can stretch your back like that," Zeke observed. "Let's go inside. Spooky's enjoying having woods to play in. We're lucky he was between jobs."

The little man kept busy working for defense contractors, personal security. Sometimes that meant just what it sounded like – keeping VIPs safe in rough country. Sometimes it meant off-the-books clandestine and covert work, all plausibly deniable.

"You still teaching at that gun club?" Markis asked.

"Yep. Certified Master Instructor, senior Range Safety Officer, all that. Once the relic holding the top job finally retires or croaks, I'll be in charge of all range operations. Nice and cushy." He paused, chewed his lip. "Too cushy. Run your van into the barn, will you?"

Markis did that, as he opened and closed the big door behind him. There was a Jeep Cherokee, a Land Rover and a Porsche Cayenne parked inside. *I bet the Porsche is Spooky's. He always did have champagne tastes.*

As they walked out the side, man-sized door, Markis said, "Well, if what I got to tell you doesn't get your cushy butt off the couch, I don't know what will."

They went into the cabin, grabbed a couple of cold ones out of the fridge – Zeke a beer, Markis a diet peach iced tea. They sat down in the dim glow from the coals of the fireplace, no artificial lights on. Markis breathed in the familiar, comforting smells of canvas and wool, old fish and deer's blood, wood and smoke.

Setting his tea on a side table next to his elbow he stared across at Zeke. "I only want to tell this once, so can we get Spooky and anyone else you got around in here? He needs to hear it too."

"It's just Spooky and me so far." He pulled a little sport walkie out of his jacket pocket and keyed the mike twice, then twice more. Private code for "bring

it in,” Markis guessed.

A minute or so later he felt the faint stir of air that accompanied a door opening, but try as he might he didn’t hear a thing until the hot pot in the kitchen started boiling. He saw Spooky moving around in the next room with a stainless steel tea ball then heard him pour. He came in with the mug, sat down across from Markis. His face was sharp and closed, wary as always. He wasn’t Markis’s friend, but he was Zeke’s, and that was good enough for now.

Markis told them the story, then, from the open door at his house to departure from Quantico, leaving nothing out but some of his own private thoughts.

Spooky’s face showed nothing. Zeke’s more open countenance displayed doubt and wonder. He ran his left hand repeatedly over his face, smoothing his beard, his eyes distant, thinking. Markis was sure his mind was running down some of the same tracks his had, and he would come to some of the same conclusions pretty soon. Now he would see what these guys were made of.

Zeke got up and began pacing. Spooky nodded at Markis, then slipped out of the cabin again, probably to make another sweep. Markis would have bet cash money there was nothing to worry about out there, but Spooky wasn’t taking any chances. Hopefully he’d swept the van for bugs, too.

“Got anything to eat?” Markis asked, uneasy in the silence.

“Yeah...” They went into the kitchen and Zeke turned on the little light over the stove. He pulled out a fragrant pot of something from the fridge, set it on a gas burner and lit it. “Cass sends her love. And her stew.”

Markis laughed. “Ditto, and I get to enjoy the stew.” Then his face fell. “Maybe you shouldn’t have mentioned me to her.”

“Yeah. Well, I’m fresh out of the habit of lying to my wife.”

“I hope you didn’t tell her precisely where you were going.”

“I’m not *that* out of practice. I just told her I had to help you out for a few days, and I couldn’t tell her where. She’s a Special Forces wife and a retired spy. She understands.”

He got out a loaf of bread and sliced it up, next to a bowl of butter. They waited for the stew to warm up, and for Markis’s story to sink in.

Zeke opened his mouth a couple of times to speak, then closed it, false starts. Finally he said, “All right. So you say you got this XH in you, whatever it is. So you can heal like magic, almost, if you’re the same as Elise now. If it doesn’t take longer to get to its full strength. If it doesn’t have some unknown freaky side effect. And you can pass it in a bite. But maybe you’ll turn into a

werewolf when the moon is full, or maybe you'll burn up your years of life, or maybe you'll get a taste for blood and go Dracula on our asses, or who knows. But I have to see it for myself. I mean, I wanna believe you, man, but..."

"Trust but verify, right? Yeah, I figured. Well, as far as I know it doesn't protect from pain, so pardon me if I don't chop off a pinky. This ought to do." Markis picked up a paring knife, put his hand down on the butcher-block counter, palm up. He stabbed the tip into the meaty part of his left hand. He had some callus on it from working the bags, but it still caused a pretty deep little cut and a welling of purplish blood. He held it over the sink and dripped for a minute, just for proof.

Markis could feel something happening, a nervous surge, like a jolt of adrenaline. His mouth started watering, and he had a definite attack of the munchies. He buttered a piece of bread one-handed and ate it, which calmed them down for a bit. After a couple minutes of waiting, he ran his hand under the cold tap, rubbing the spot with his other hand until it was completely clean.

Then held it out for inspection.

Zeke grabbed it and looked closely, pulling Markis's hand over under the stove light.

The wound was gone.

The stew was starting to smell really good.

"And all that happens besides the healing is you get hungry?"

"Yeah, so far, just like I told you Elise did. She was tore up and she wolfed down four or five pounds of food like it was nothing, and a quart of orange juice, and I bet she needed more. It must take energy and building blocks – sugars, protein, amino acids, vitamins and minerals, stuff like that. Just like recovering from a hard workout but a thousand times more and faster."

"Not much of a downside, if you get your bum knee and your bad back and your concussions and whatall fixed." He licked his lips. "I wonder about Ricky."

Markis raised his eyebrows, shrugged sympathetically. Ricky was Zeke's son. He must be about eleven, and he had muscular dystrophy. Duchenne's. He would already be in a powered wheelchair. Markis had volunteered at a Jerry's Kids' camp a few times, so he knew. He also knew that pretty soon Ricky wouldn't even be able to use his hands to control the chair. By twenty or twenty-five he would be almost helpless, probably bedridden. Most people with DMD didn't make it to thirty. It made Markis feel a little guilty, because it smacked of manipulation, holding out a cure for his friend's son.

Zeke wondered, "But what happens if it heals him, then whatever ticking

time bomb of a side effect is even worse? Until we know that, we can't even try. What if it didn't cure him, but did...whatever? Turned him into a monster? His mother would never forgive me."

"You're starting to get it, what I've been agonizing over. We have to know what the downside is. And there's only one person I know of that knows anything."

"This Elise Wallis woman."

"Yeah."

"Then we have to find her and spring her." He made it sound like running to the store to pick up a quart of milk.

Markis frowned. "Spring her, I can see. But how do we find her? I'm just an operator, and a pretty fine stitch. You're an A-team leader; hell you were, what do they call it, a detachment commander? There are a couple more guys I could call that I can count on, but nobody with the skills and contacts to find someone like that, just from a name."

Zeke smiled, wicked. "Spooky does. His company also does corporate intel."

Chapter 8

Elise walked into the office and sat down in the chair by Doctor Durgan's desk. This put her well away from Miguel, who couldn't exactly hover nearby with the Doc in his usual spot – the place of power behind it. She ignored the man, since she couldn't do much else. She did notice he was wearing gloves, long sleeves and body armor.

That made her feel better. *The virus really terrifies him. If he gets it he knows no more rough sex with the hookers downtown. Actually, she mused, two Edens could have sex as rough as they wanted, as long as it was consensual. It's giving up the genuine violence and the fear in his victims' eyes that he's afraid of, surrendering the power and the forcible dominance – call it like it is, the rape. Giving up that thrill. And he hates me all the more that I refuse to knuckle under even a little bit. He's just another bully.*

Durgan cleared his throat, and she realized she had been sitting there woolgathering. “Look Elise,” he said reasonably, “we can't have any more of this running away. Not just because you're an important part of the team, even though I know you're holding out on me. We can't have you passing the Plague on before we perfect it. If you'd just figure out how to get rid of – or even just reduce – the undesirable effects, we'd be able to start using it to help people. To cure people.”

Elise sighed. “Look, Doctor, we've had this argument before. The best thing about it is that the worst people in the world won't want it, and if they do have it, they will no longer be the worst. Like him.” She jerked her thumb sideways in Miguel's direction, never taking her eyes off Durgan. “Infect him and you won't have to worry about him hurting anyone anymore. How many times have you bailed him out of jail?”

“Ah, but if I did that, he might want to run off too. One of the reasons he's staying here, one of the reasons he is so angry with you, is that he does want the Plague. He just doesn't want the side effects. If you alter it properly, if you give me a strain that we can use, he'll be off your back. I'll make sure he gets reassigned to some other project. In fact, I probably won't have any choice. He'll become so valuable to...those above us, they will want to use him for special tasks.”

“You mean he'll become a more effective thug.” She spat on the floor in

Miguel's direction, and laughed as he jumped back. "Wow. See? His biggest fear is that his evil will be cured."

"Come on, Elise. You're a scientist. You don't believe in evil."

"Oh, I'm beginning to come around. Just because evil has a basis in neurology doesn't make it any less horrifying. I've seen that 'good' – to give it a simple name – can come out of a virus. That means evil is just mental illness. And you're sitting here refusing to cure someone who is certifiable, because he's useful to you. What does that make you?"

Durgan's voice was droll. "You are a master of the obvious, Elise. You know you *are* right. Miguel *is* useful." His voice hardened. "And unless you want to suffer, you'll stop even talking about spreading your infection. If I have to, I'll have you confined and your food intake reduced. I can keep you at the edge of starvation for as long as I need to."

Fear shot through her but she refused to let it show. "I won't be able to help in the research if you do that."

"But perhaps it would motivate the others, knowing how much discomfort you are in. And if that doesn't work, perhaps I will reverse the roles." Durgan leaned forward, his balding head shining with the sweat of stress – or perhaps it was excitement, power. "Perhaps I will have Miguel abuse someone you care about. Roger. Arthur. Or...how about Bobo?"

In spite of her resolution not to show them any fear, she blanched. *I can't let them hurt Bobo*. The chimp would never understand. She would never trust a human again. And even though primates could be carriers, it didn't affect them exactly the same. They didn't heal fast like humans did, not in body or in mind.

She couldn't let them do it.

"All right," she whispered. "I won't cause any more trouble."

Durgan's face broke out in a big, false smile. "You see? I knew you could be reasonable. Miguel, go get Karl." When the man had left he went on, "You like Karl, right? Well now that we're all friends again, he can be your minder. I can be reasonable too."

"Thank you," she ground out. The courtesy cost her something. Self-respect, perhaps. But what could she do? Until Daniel showed up – and she hoped he would – she was helpless.

The next morning at the cabin the men awoke at dawn. At least, Zeke and

Markis did. Spooky was already up and around somewhere. That guy doesn't sleep much, thought Markis.

Zeke talked to Spooky for a minute before they started their morning run, out of Markis's earshot. He realized he wasn't really one of the team. Not yet. All he'd done was fast-rope down to a bad situation and save Zeke's life on a Kandahar mountainside, and knock off a bunch of Taliban. He hadn't done any actual ops with him or his people.

Zeke and Markis walked down a trail that connected to a jogging loop. Markis hadn't run for exercise since the IED explosion, and he was eager to find out how healed up he actually was. Zeke was an indifferent runner, and he was getting kind of flabby, but he wanted to see too. They started off slow, real slow, just a little airborne shuffle, but pretty soon Markis had to hold down his pace. After about a mile, Zeke slowed to a walk, huffing.

"Go on, man. I'm out of shape. I'll make the circuit at my own speed."

Markis nodded, then took off at an easy run. Soon he was feeling really good, kind of floating. Runner's high, he guessed. The second mile took him around past the cabin, and he kept on going, waving at Spooky looking out the upper barn window. He sped up again, stretching out. He breathed deeply and easily, and felt like he used to, before the explosion that broke his body. Better, even. He felt like he was in his teens again, qualifying for track and field. He might have had a shot at the Olympics if he hadn't enlisted in a fit of patriotic fervor. He was pretty sure he was running at nearly a four-minute-mile pace.

Fantastic. Whatever the downside, this makes it all worthwhile.

He lapped Zeke in the next quarter-mile, blasting past him to the cabin, then jogging back, cooling down. He walked the last couple of hundred yards along with Zeke.

Zeke looked at him sideways, like he had two heads. "Holy crap. Holy crap," he kept repeating.

"I try not to put those words together anymore, but I agree with the sentiment," Markis answered dryly. "I *am* a bit hungry, about what I expected. And thirsty." He ran his head under the outside water pump, then took a bunch of swallows. It tasted metallic. He pumped it a few more times for Zeke, then they walked over to the barn to see what Spooky was doing.

Inside, they found another vehicle, a Toyota SUV, and another, younger man of about twenty-five. He was talking to Spooky, and looked a lot like him, at least to Markis's eyes. He was saved from a charge of racial insensitivity by the introduction.

“Vinny Nguyen,” the man said as he stuck out his hand.

Spooky gave him a glare.

“Or Nguyen Van Vinh, if you ask honorable Uncle-san here.”

Double glare.

“I work tech and IT for Brownstone.” At Markis’s blank look he went on, “The security contractor. Uncle Spoo-”

Spooky lashed out like a striking snake, to slap Vinny on the back of the head. “You have not earned the right to call me that,” he said harshly.

“Uncle Tran Pham,” Vinny started again, heavily, with a careful sideways look at his elder, “called me last night and said I’d be helping out. With something. Which he hasn’t explained yet. Nor has he told me how much it pays, or how long the job is, or anything that normal people get to know when they do a job.” He crossed his arms to glare back at Tran.

Spooky snapped, “This is not normal job. Maybe pay a lot, maybe pay nothing. I don’t call you as a favor to you, I call you because you are family and supposed to be trusted. If you can keep your mouth closed. Do not shame me in front of my commander and his comrade.” He might speak English pretty well, but his heart was still in the mountains of Vietnam, and his diction tended to fall apart under stress.

It occurred to Markis that his dad and Spooky would get along famously.

Vinny dropped his eyes, the rebelliousness of youth warring with his family, his inherited culture and the force of Tran’s personality. The latter bunch won, and he nodded his agreement. “Okay, okay. What do I need to do?”

Tran pointed at Zeke. “You do what he tell you to. He your boss now.”

Zeke nodded, said to Vinny, “We need to research someone – who she was, who she is, where she works, where she might be now, everything. And we can’t be noticed. There’s big mojo against us, maybe even NSA, so it has to be very clean and light. You up for that?”

“Duh. Nothin’ to it.”

Markis noticed they had already set up some kind of satellite antenna and a control box up in the barn loft, aimed at the roof. Looking closer, he saw the ceiling seemed different above it.

“Plastic insert, invisible to the satellite signal,” said Zeke, following Markis’s gaze.

A cable trailed from the setup down to the floor nearby. The two Nguyens quickly set up a couple of tables and started breaking out computers and mysterious electronic boxes from the Pelican cases in the back of the Toyota.

By the time Zeke and Markis were done showering and cooking breakfast, the electronic setup was done. They carried the food out to the barn and everyone ate while Vinny started on his hacking and cracking. Markis wrote down everything he knew and could think of that would help, which was little enough. He kept himself busy by breaking out his own laptop and doing some general searches – the police blotters near where he lived, anything on his street, Trey’s name, and innocuous things like that. He got nothing, so after an hour or so he went back to the cabin to help Zeke with some home repairs, make-work while the wiz kid did his thing.

By lunchtime Vinny had a preliminary outline. “All right, here’s the gist. Is this your girl?” He showed Markis a picture of Elise, with longer hair.

“Yeah, that’s her.”

“Okay, Elise Wallis is straight up until about five years ago, when she gets diagnosed with Hodgkin’s lymphoma. She gets treatment, goes into remission, finishes her Masters in microbiology at Texas A&M, gets hired by the CDC – Centers for Disease Control. Cancer comes back with a vengeance after about two years just as she’s finishing up her PhD, at which point she goes on disability and into aggressive treatment, which fails this time. So she’s in hospice, and a month later, she gets hired.” Vinny had a smug look as he spun around in his chair.

“Hired by who? Not the Agency, or you wouldn’t have that look on your face.”

“Nope,” he grinned. “By a little company called Integrated National Strategies, Inc. get it? INS Inc., in-synch! Like the old boy band.” He laughed uproariously and spun again, until Spooky stopped the chair with his foot and a hard look.

“All right. It’s indistinguishable from about a hundred little consulting companies that usually hover around the big defense contractors looking for scraps, usually because they have some Federal set-aside. Except this company isn’t a set-aside, and they have never subcontracted with a big company. In fact, I can’t find who pays them, but they seem to have about fifteen employees... most of whom have worked in the black world before.”

“Huh,” said Zeke. “So Elise isn’t working directly for the Agency...but indirectly...”

“Right,” answered Vinny. “These guys got ‘Separate Cell’ and ‘Plausible Deniability’ written all over them. There’s probably only one guy in the company that really knows what’s going on and reports to their masters. The rest

just do what the nice people that are paying them gobs of money tell them to.”

Markis said, “That means when she said ‘company,’ she meant a real company, not ‘Company,’ not Agency. That means we actually don’t even know who they are working for. Could be anyone in the black world – could be any government agency, could be a corporation, a rich individual...could be one canny operator that got ahold of this treatment, and is trying to develop it or market it or whatever...Vinny, what kind of people do they have working for them?”

“Umm...if you can believe their online resumes, six bureaucratic types and six personal security specialists. Those are your door-kickers and shooters. All of those have military or law enforcement backgrounds...Special Forces, Ranger, Airborne, Force Recon, sniper...Texas Ranger...if the dossiers are real, a bunch of badasses.” He tossed a pile of stapled papers down on the table. “Figured you’d want to see these.”

“Anyone named Jenkins?” Markis asked.

“Yeah,” he picked one of the packets up. “Jervis Andrew Jenkins the Fourth, listed as a program manager. Yale grad, BA business, MBA, Skull and Bones, recruited by these guys straight out of school. Old money, family has investments and concerns up in Connecticut and Massachusetts. Lumber, shipping, some other stuff. Probably being groomed for bigger and better things.” Vinny looked smug.

“Ah. That’s not good.” If he had to kill someone, Markis thought, why did he have to have a rich and powerful family?

Vinny shrugged, looked down for a moment. In fact, unless Markis missed his guess, Vinny was holding something out on them, savoring the drama and triumph.

Markis looked at Spooky, raised an eyebrow.

He got it and shifted his stance to convey impatience to his nephew.

“Okay, here’s the kicker,” Vinny continued hurriedly. “The other two employees are scientists as well. So we got a microbiologist – Elise Wallis – a virologist, and an epidemiologist.”

“Only three. Ah’m only a po country doctah,” Markis put on his best hick accent, “but that sounds like they were working on the XH. And that narrows it down to some kind of germ. A virus, or other disease pathogen. And I’d have a tough time believing that a team of just three people could come up with something like this, though stranger things have happened.”

Spooky spoke up. “Then they did not make it. They study it. Experiment.

Decode. Perhaps replicate. Try to fix it, to get rid of the problems.”

Markis nodded.

“Where are they located?” asked Zeke.

“They have a Norfolk, Virginia office address.”

Markis felt a surge of relief, and he could see that Zeke had gotten it too. “That means we’re not going up against a well funded, well supported Agency effort. It’s something off to the side, something maybe they don’t even know about. Just a couple people probably, maybe only one, and like all bureaucracies, they have been slow to realize what they got. And maybe INS, Inc. hasn’t seen fit to tell them. Maybe their top guy – who’s the CEO?”

“Raphe K. Durgan. Medical doctor, biologist. Formerly of the USDA, at Plum Island Animal Disease Center.”

“And the Department of Homeland Security took over the island in 2003, with the USDA becoming a tenant,” Zeke chimed in.

“How’d you know that?” Markis asked, surprised.

Zeke grinned. “You get all over in spec ops.”

Markis shrugged. “Okay, smart guy. So he’s working on disease, maybe some black projects there, because you know the USDA ain’t the only people doing biological work on the island. Not with Homeland Security running the show. He gets recruited because he has the clearances and has worked on stuff, maybe anthrax or weaponized smallpox or something we’ve never heard of. He gets put in charge of the research effort in this little company because somebody doesn’t want it in the regular system. The heavies are there to keep control of things. Must be the same thugs I saw at the Iron Saddle.”

Markis felt better and better about things, now that he believed this wasn’t an official effort. It was compartmentalized, maybe even rogue. And while the memory of executing Jenkins still pained him, it pained him less now that he knew Jenkins was off the reservation, maybe making up his own op as he went along. *Probably read too many cheap spy novels. Unfortunately Jenkins ran into me. The old me.*

I think the new me could have kept control.

One more little piece of the puzzle clicked into place, somewhere at the back of his mind, the part that worked unconsciously. He didn’t know what it was, he just knew it was working, and it would come up with something eventually.

Zeke replied, “That means we got a shot here. They don’t have the resources, unless their sponsor decides to call in some favors.” He looked at

Markis. “Doesn’t mean you shouldn’t be careful. They probably put you on federal fugitive lists, no-fly lists, terrorism watch and report lists. But that’s routine, low-level threat. It means we got breathing room, and it means we might be able to extract your girl Elise, get her away clean and pump her for everything she knows. Figure our next move from there.”

My girl Elise. Funny how that sounds good, though I only spent maybe fifteen minutes with her total. They all stared at each other for a few seconds, then Markis stuck his hand up. “I’m in.”

“Me too,” said Vinny.

Spooky grunted affirmatively.

Zeke grinned even wider. “God, it feels good to be operational again.”

“On your own dime, though,” Markis said wryly.

“If this thing turns out to be real and usable and helps Ricky, I’d sell everything I have to get it.”

Markis knew Zeke was dead serious. He loved that kid.

“Well, I got twenty grand you can use.” He took out and tossed Zeke the packet of cash.

“Sweet.”

Chapter 9

Elise ran the gene sequence simulation for the ninth time. It showed what every other test had – that the virtue effect couldn't be separated from the other parts of the healing effect. If the virus healed the body, it would heal the brain. If the brain was healed, the mind tended to follow. Old dysfunctional patterns might stay for a while, like a drug addict cured of the physical addiction but remembering the habits – but sooner or later those evils would be cleansed. A healthy mind just wouldn't let people be comfortable with their cruel, hurtful, antisocial ways anymore. Oh, it wasn't a perfect cure for bad behavior, but it would take a strong will and a really good reason to override the virtue effect, the strengthened conscience.

Durgan was just a medical doctor, and a rather out-of-date one at that. His real skills were bureaucratic and political. He wasn't current enough on genetics and virology to see the truth that she saw: that what he wanted was impossible. It simply couldn't be done by manipulating the virus. The only approach was to somehow counteract it within the brain and endocrine system, the main regulators of mood, emotion, ethics – conscience.

She had thought of many possibilities – electrodes that stimulated the medulla oblongata, the seat of anger and aggression, or heavy doses of stimulants, or manipulating blood sugar, or psychotropics – but nothing that was reliable, or permanent.

Nothing she was willing to try, either, or tell them about.

If Durgan – or his shadowy boss – was half as smart as he thought he was, he would have a completely different lab team, hand-picked for their ruthless amorality, doing those kinds of experiments. Like the CIA tests back in the sixties, with LSD and things like that. Mind control.

Maybe they were. But she couldn't do anything about it. All she could do was keep wasting her time running useless tests that she already knew would fail. Burning up time. Hoping her long shot would pay off.

She reached out with her soul, not really believing in anything so... unscientific... but hoping anyway. *Daniel, where are you!*

Markis watched Vinny at his cyber-research, with his uncle Spooky standing over him. That probably didn't help much. Zeke eventually said

something to the elder Nguyen, so he stalked away to do sneaky Spooky things.

Zeke and Markis cut back a few bushes that were crowding the cabin, and caught up on personal history. Markis felt elated but a bit fidgety, waiting on information, like the part between the warning order and the op order, when he knew he had to prepare for something but not for what. Waiting on the intel, which was always the best that could be had but was never as good as you wanted.

Intel specialists. Poor schmucks, usually scrawny googly-eyed nerds with oversized Adam's apples and way too much trivia packed into their noggins. And the worst thing was, for them, if they provided a perfect assessment, everyone just got on with the mission and no one remembered. If they missed anything, everyone hated them and no one forgot.

He'd rather be an operator any day.

He fidgeted until dinnertime, but a lot less than he would have. He could tell Zeke was a bit awkward around him, acting like he might pop or break or grow another head at any time. He tried to cover it, but Markis could tell. At the same time he was sure Zeke very much wanted to find out what they needed to know. Desperately wanted to cure Ricky, if it could be done. Probably had other plans, as well. Zeke was a thinker, more than Markis was, and Markis never thought of himself as a dumb jock. A smart jock at least, if not a geek like Vinny. But Vinny was too young to think more than one or two steps ahead. Zeke was deep. Dummies don't get to be senior officers in Special Forces.

They had venison for dinner, along with powdered mashed potatoes, boiled peas, bread and butter. It smelled heavenly. Spooky had brought a deer in, a little buck scrawny from winter, but he cooked up fine. Markis had no idea if it was deer season or even legal. He laughed to himself. *My conscience has worse things to beat me up about right now than a deer out of season.*

Over dinner, Vinny laid it out. "INS's office is in Norfolk, but a few phone calls and some pretexting found out that only two people work there. One office, a front desk, a conference room and a closet. Most of the employees live in Onancock."

Markis looked blankly at him. In fact, they all did. He waited for someone to make a vulgar joke about such a funny name.

"It's a little town up on the peninsula north of Norfolk. Here." Vinny spun around a map he had printed off, showed them.

"Why there?" Markis asked.

Vinny smiled, kitty-cream. "I'll show you. Look over here." He pointed to

the west, off the inner coast of the peninsula, at an island about ten miles off shore from the town of Onancock. There wasn't even a name printed, but he'd handwritten "WATTS."

"Watts?"

"Watts Island. Uninhabited for about a hundred years. The INS company bought it from the State of Virginia five years ago for five million dollars. Way overpaid for three acres of usable land and a bunch of wet rocks, but the state didn't ask too many questions. For that price they got an easement to build a facility and do 'environmental research.' Here's imagery." He laid down three overhead photos of the little island, with good commercial resolution.

Vinny had marked the facility with a red circle. It looked like a big all-steel building, with two smaller ones of similar design, one at each end offset, with a parking lot between the three. In it was a lone white jeeplike vehicle. The buildings made a kind of 'C' shape with the open end to the east. There was a short paved road leading from the parking lot to a pier with a boathouse on the east shore.

On the west side of the complex there was a white "H" in the middle of a cleared circle, the universal symbol for a helicopter landing pad. No helo showed on the photo and there didn't seem to be a hangar. The only other distinguishing features were some sort of utility installations inside a fence next to the building, probably a pair of generators and what looked like a large and a small satellite dish.

"That's where they are. I'd bet my next paycheck on it."

"No deal," said Zeke. "You make more than I do, and you're probably right. Great work, Vinny."

Markis said so too. Even Spooky looked pleased, which wasn't something people saw very often.

"So here's this thing," Markis said musingly, "maybe the greatest discovery since fire and the wheel, and it's all pretty much out in the open to be found."

"That's actually the best way to hide something anymore," said Vinny. "Buried in a mass of innocuous data. I had to dig for this stuff. Without the idea that they had something valuable, they would be just another consulting company among hundreds, sucking down the government cheese and churning out reports nobody reads."

"The Scarlet Letter," Markis said. "Hiding in plain sight."

"I think you mean the Purloined Letter," said Zeke. "Unless you think

these guys are wearing a mark of shame.”

“Oh, yeah. Well, you never know.” *I guess my brain isn't perfectly healed yet. That's my story and I'm sticking to it.*

They all looked at the photos for a while, and started familiarizing themselves with the stack of resumes of the employees. No one had formally spoken it into being yet, but they all knew they were going to be planning a rescue operation.

Markis felt elated, but uneasy. He didn't want to be put in the position of injuring or possibly killing someone. While he had no problem with killing in self-defense – he'd done it before, to defend his patients or himself – one of the reasons he became a PJ was to get out of the business of assaulting the enemy as his primary mission. It was a fine line, he knew, maybe so fine that some people couldn't see it, but saving lives is what he wanted, not to take them. But even if they, yea verily, opened the benighted eyes of the poor misguided researchers and consultants, there were six security specialists, probably good Americans all, who would be doing their duty as they saw it by trying to stop him. To kill him, maybe, protecting their people.

And the idea of putting Elise at risk, of her becoming collateral damage, made him positively sick, almost frantic. He had no idea why he was feeling this way, unless it was from the XH. *Maybe it's because she bit me? Like there's really some biological connection between us now?* It made no sense, but he knew how he felt.

The good thing was, as far as he knew, he would be very hard to kill. This might give him some leeway to not kill them, strangely enough. Normally, when it was a matter of a split second, you didn't hesitate, just put two or three center mass, and if they died, they died, because if you didn't, they would do the same to you. But now, he could pick a shot. He could take a hit, maybe, especially if he had a Kevlar vest and helmet. He felt confident that wounds to his limbs would take care of themselves, as long as he had food and water and a little bit of time. Elise had recovered from a hideous amount of damage in just a few minutes, though she might have collapsed from starvation if he hadn't fed her.

That was a scary thought. if he were captured, he was as vulnerable as anyone, especially if his captors knew about the XH. Someone could torture him, and the XH would try to heal him even if it killed him to do it.

Another piece of the puzzle fell into place, but it was still fuzzy. That couldn't be the whole downside. That was like saying a revolutionary super-tank got bad gas mileage. The tradeoff was obviously worth it, if it ruled the

battlefield.

Suddenly, Markis felt exhausted. He had to get some sleep. He never used to sleep this much. Maybe that was part of the XH too. Might as well store it up while he could. He said good night and turned in.

Chapter 10

The next day dawned cold, with a few flakes of snow and a sharp wind. Markis popped out of bed while the other three were still stacking zees, ate some toast and jam to still the growling and went for a run. His nose and ears burned red with the cold by the time he came back but he felt like a million bucks, better than he'd ever felt in his life. He made breakfast for everyone, ate and drank his fill, which meant he consumed as much as all of the rest put together. He wondered if this state of affairs was going to continue. It seemed like if the XH put his body into peak condition, he should actually be eating less, using everything more efficiently.

They really, really needed to get Elise, to find some answers.

Washing the breakfast dishes, he heard a vehicle approaching. The white stuff was coming down lightly and Spooky slipped out the back, dressed in winter camo.

Zeke and Markis grabbed assault rifles while Vinny looked worried and went to the window. Zeke came up beside him and looked out too. He put a hand on Vinny's shoulder and said, "Relax. It's my guys."

It was a big black Suburban – no, Markis saw it was actually an Escalade, with gold trim and those spinning hubcap things, blacked-out windows, running boards, fender flares, and other geegaws and add-ons that he couldn't name. It blasted a multi-tone horn as it pulled to a stop in front of the cabin, and a big black man in a fancy track suit got out of the driver's seat. He looked to be about three hundred pounds, fat but fit, like a football lineman. He was in his thirties, with gold chains and a short but expensive haircut, some kind of logo shaved into his hair.

"Larry!" cried Zeke, wrapping him up in a bear hug.

"Come on, man, it's 'Lawrence.' How many times I gotta tell you?"

"Oh yeah, I forgot." Zeke grinned.

Markis didn't think he'd forgotten. *Must be some kind of inside joke.* He nodded to Lawrence, then held out his hand as the man approached.

"Hi Lawrence. Daniel Markis. Call me DJ. I was a PJ." It was an old joke, DJ the PJ.

"Air Force? Aim High, baby. Call me Larry, Larry Nightingale," he said, with a smile full of gold and white teeth. He squeezed Markis's hand, just to see

what he was made of, he guessed.

Markis returned the grip effortlessly. “Okay, *Larry*.”

Larry’s eyes went wide, and he grinned even wider. The XH had restored Markis’s strength, and more.

“Larry was my engineering and demo guy before he decided to chase the green,” Zeke said, mock-disapproving.

“Hey, E-6 pay wasn’t squat compared to what I make now. Dolla dolla bill, y’all. And I expect to get paid now too. Honeys give it up for the bling.” He made some kind of urban hand sign, laughing with those golden teeth showing again.

Markis thought the man was caricaturing himself, but one never knew. The urban gangsta shtick was so ubiquitous now that it was hard to tell what was real and what was just image. Culture was a funny thing.

The passenger door opened and another man stepped out, tall and thin, with a shaved head and deep-set black eyes in a narrow face. Late thirties, very fit. Skin and bones and wiry muscles, and a trace of Native American in his background for sure. He looked like an undertaker stuffed into tactical pants and polypropylene, and he peered distastefully at the thinning flakes falling from the sky, waving a hand as if to shoo them away. He had a Patek timepiece on his wrist that probably cost more than the Escalade, pure functionality and understated elegance.

“Skull!” Zeke cried, seizing the man’s hand enthusiastically.

Skull looked pleased, but his smile stayed tight and reserved. “I’m here, Zeke. Hey, DJ.” He nodded at Markis, Markis nodded back.

Markis and Alan “Skull” Denham were acquainted. He had been a Marine sniper, a very closemouthed guy. They’d only met a couple of times, through Zeke, and didn’t really hit it off. Markis never got the full story of how Skull ended up working with Zeke, and had the feeling he always looked down on anyone that wasn’t a jarhead, hiding it well but not well enough. Still, they were all Zeke’s guys, and if Zeke vouched for someone, that was good enough.

“Where’s Denny?” Zeke asked.

Larry’s smile faded and he dropped his eyes. “Dionicio? Couldn’t make it. Got a woman and he’s whipped.”

Zeke shrugged, playing it off. He was hurt, but didn’t want to show it. “He never could say no to a skirt,” he said, sighing.

“Said he’d try to get away, but you know him...”

“Forget it. This one needs to be rock-solid, no weak spots. Let’s go inside.”

They got the Escalade into the barn. Markis noticed it rode heavy. Probably armored. It was getting crowded in there. They had a whole motor pool.

Inside, they made some coffee and heated up a pie from a box. Markis slipped another one in the oven when Zeke wasn't looking. At this rate they were going to have to make a grocery run soon.

Seated around the dining room table, they briefed the two recent arrivals. It took the rest of the morning, what with the questions and disbelieving looks. Markis had to do his healing thing again. He let Skull stab him with a fork this time, just to make sure they knew it wasn't a trick. He wasn't ready to get shot just yet. Once they'd settled that, they started brainstorming the operation.

Markis began, "We have to assume Elise is locked up on the island. They know she wants to run, and she's a test subject too, so it makes sense. That means one, probably two shooters to keep an eye on her and the others at all times. Two or three shifts, but they can't keep more than two guys in prison-guard mode all the time."

"They could have a jail cell," Spooky said.

"Yeah, that would make it easier for them, but that's good for us too. Fewer shooters means fewer problems," Zeke said.

"Do you think the researchers stay there or go home at night?" Markis asked.

Zeke replied, "If it was me, I'd keep to a normal schedule. Ten miles by boat or helo – probably boat, much lower profile – makes for an easy commute. Thirty minutes each way or so. Probably have facilities to stay overnight, though, if they need to or want to. So we figure Miss Wallis, one or two guards, maybe a scientist."

"Recon?" This from Skull.

Vinny replied, "Yeah. I'll find some more recent overhead imagery. That right there is three months old. I need to buy a drone if you want really good stuff from up close."

"No drones for now."

Vinny looked disappointed. He obviously liked the toys.

"No need to get that fancy, and it might draw attention. We just need a fishing boat."

"Pleasure fishing in February? In the Chesapeake?" Markis asked.

"Crap," replied Zeke, rubbing his bearded chin. "How do we get close?"

"A boat is fine," Markis said, "but we'll have to just do a few slow passes on the way to and from Tangier Island." He pointed to the map.

Tangier Island was a fishing and tourist destination, with quaint bed and breakfast places, crab shacks and fancier seafood restaurants, and its own marinas and an airport. Anyone leaving from the mainland near Onancock would naturally pass by Watts Island on the way to it.

Spooky spoke then, softly. “And surveillance on their houses. See what their routine is. See where their boat is. Find the helo. Also exfiltration plan. Snatch will be the easy part. Getting away clean is harder.” He pursed his lips, brooding. Took a sip of his special tea.

“Element of surprise, boys, element of surprise,” Larry rumbled. “They won’t know what hit them. But Spooky’s right. We’re going to blow the lid off this thing. We can’t expect to get everyone, so someone will go to their boss or bosses, and then there will be some heavy-duty blowback. If word of this gets out – and it will – we’re going to need a bolt-hole deeper than this cabin. No offense Zeke, but this place is a matter of public record, right?”

“Sort of. It’s in my wife’s maiden name.”

“Well, that will take them an extra hour to find out,” Vinny said sourly.

“What’s wrong, you getting cold feet?” Skull asked accusingly. Vinny glared at him and folded his arms.

“My nephew’s manners may be in question, but not his courage,” said Spooky quietly, and Skull sniffed, mollified. He looked away, as if he didn’t care. He probably just didn’t want to cross the little man.

“We have a bolt-hole. Never you worry.” Zeke showed off that *I’ve-got-a-secret* grin. “All right, team, because that’s what we are now, a team, let’s start acting like one,” he stated with emphasis, “Let’s get planning. DJ, put some more coffee on and start making more stew out of that venison, will you? I know you can cook.”

Markis nodded, going into the kitchen and rattling, getting things together. Zeke obviously wanted to talk to the others without him around, reassure them a bit, he guessed. Right now they needed space. So he puttered around, unloading and repacking his van, poking through the barn, checking out Vinny’s gear. He didn’t touch anything – it was mostly out of his league, though he recognized a frequency-hopping tactical radio base station of the latest type, and what looked like an encryption module, designation KY- or KV - something.

And a flashing red light.

He looked at the light, which was attached to another box of unknown purpose, and the computers. There was a little noise, *bip, bip, bip*, each time it flashed. He thought it had to do with the satellite uplink, though, so he figured

Vinny might want to know.

He went toward the cabin to tell him.

It looked like he already knew, since he bolted past Markis as he was coming to the cabin door. Vinny had a smart phone in one hand and made a beeline for the barn, slipping once on the thin snow cover, cursing under his breath.

All the rest of them came after, not moving quite so fast, except Spooky, who somehow managed to get around everyone and follow Vinny into the barn first. By the time they all trooped into the structure, Vinh was furiously banging away at keys and cursing like a sailor on speed.

“What is it, dammit?” asked Zeke.

“Alarm and repeater transmitter for my smart phone, local mode. It means one of several things happened...” He started hammering furiously on the controls, switching views, windows, displays.

“Transponder...it’s my ATC back door – air traffic control. Something flying at low level...” He brought up a map of the local area with an overlay of moving dots with tails and numbers beside them. He pointed at one flashing. “Rotor-wing...someone turn off the overhead light in here. Uncle, unplug the transmitter please? It isn’t sending but might as well be sure.”

Larry flipped the wall switch and they were plunged into cold darkness, lit only by the glow of the computers.

Vinny held up a pointing finger, straight up. “Hear that?” Everyone fell silent. There was a faint eggbeater buzzing somewhere, which grew louder.

“Helo. Sikorsky. Probably a Black Hawk,” said Skull.

Markis agreed.

The sound swelled, then burst overhead. Spooky moved off to a side door, weapon ready, but the helicopter continued on, flying fast, fading.

“They’re looking for us,” said Skull. “For him,” he said, looking at Markis accusingly.

“Maybe,” said Vinny. “Probably. Military transponder. Huh.” He grunted in irritation. He pulled up another display, flashing.

Zeke leaned over Vinny’s shoulder. “What’s that?”

“It’s a threshold alarm on all the things related to this INS Inc. situation. It means my bots have detected a certain level of cyber activity looking at what I have been doing. Nothing from NSA yet, thank God, but there is one hot node that I know is Langley’s.”

“Somebody finally reported the feces impacting the rotating oscillating

device, and the Agency is waking up. The helo probably has ELINT gear on board. Our timeline just got shorter.” Electronic Intelligence equipment would try to find transmitters, cell phones, anything that radiated.

“How much shorter?” Markis asked.

“At a guess? I’d say we should have twelve hours, less if I transmit on anything but the Harris net.” He meant the frequency-hopping secure tactical radios, almost impossible to detect or intercept.

“Well, shut it all down!” cried Larry, looking around as if for an off switch for the gear. He started to move toward the main power cable running to the lone outlet in the barn.

“Leave that alone!” Vinny yelled. “We already shut off the transmitter. Don’t panic.”

Larry stopped, looked sheepish.

Vinny went on, “I’d say fifty-fifty they find us at all. They probably have us to within two to four hundred square miles right now, but unless we transmit, they have to do it the hard way – with people. That means identifying your acquaintances, friends and family, you know, six degrees of separation stuff. Nodal analysis. Then they have to dig through everyone’s records, and even digitized stuff isn’t necessarily textual data.”

Blank looks.

“Like if it’s a document that’s been scanned in, but wasn’t generated on a computer – it’s just a picture. Needs a lot of processing power and human-in-the-loop to dig stuff out. If it’s a handwritten document they might miss it entirely except by a human. How much manpower do you think they have devoted to this?”

“You tell me,” Zeke said.

“Well...if it’s just one bigwig in the Agency, he could probably form a small team of three or four analysts and set them to work without drawing any attention. So...it’s a crap shoot. At least twelve hours, more likely several days, and like I said, they may never make the connection to Zeke’s wife’s maiden name.”

“What about HUMINT?” asked Spooky. He meant human intelligence. Boots and eyeballs. “If they come here and ask the sheriffs, ask people.”

“No way,” said Vinny. “That would take forever. There are at least five thousand residences within ten miles of here. Besides, people around here aren’t going to tell tales to a stranger, or the Feds.”

“Okay,” started Zeke, “no panic, but we tear it all down. We can’t risk

being caught. Take it all apart, pack it up. And everyone pull your batteries from your cell phones if you haven't already. Dan, your van is going into the lake. Sorry, but it's the only vehicle they have positive ID on. Spooky, you have to park the Porsche somewhere, it's too noticeable. We'll use the other four SUVs. Pack everything in there. And rip out your lo-jacks, your GPS units, everything that can be traced. Come on people, chop-chop." Zeke clapped his hands.

Everyone tore down and packed all the gear in a flurry of activity. Boxes went from vehicle to vehicle, all sorts of cases and high-tech-looking containers. Markis wondered what all they had besides weapons and Vinny's commo gear.

He cleaned out the van really well, took the plates off and tried to sanitize it. Spooky helped. They couldn't get rid of every identifying mark and number, but the more they could slow those guys down, the better. He put all his stuff in the Land Rover, his long gun case, his ruck and his aid bag. One or two men in each vehicle meant they had plenty of cargo room.

Zeke took the van, Spooky fired up his Porsche, and Skull drove the Jeep as the recovery vehicle. An hour later they came back in it, having sent the van into the lake in a hidden cove. If they were lucky it would be months before anyone found the site.

In the meantime Markis had cooked some food, trying to use up everything that they couldn't bring along. He laid a huge spread, knowing he'd eat a lot of it, and the others wouldn't be too far behind. Stuffing their faces, between bites the talk naturally turned to the coming operation.

"How soon do we go?" Markis threw out. "And how?"

"*Qui Audet Adipiscitur,*" quoted Skull.

Markis furrowed his brow at Skull. "Latin?"

"Who Dares, Wins. The motto of the SAS." He meant the Special Air Service, British special forces.

"You mean you think we should go in fast and hot."

"Yes."

Markis nodded, thoughtful.

Zeke looked at him, then at Skull. "I agree, to a point. And I think I want the treatment."

"What?" That caught Markis off guard.

"Hey, I'm the oldest one here, I'm getting fat, my feet are flat, my cholesterol is high, I got a hernia, and it ain't gonna get any better. And we have to do this right and do it fast, for Ricky's sake if nothing else. I'm willing to take the risk."

Markis shouldn't have been surprised. The payoff looked too big, too rich, to ignore. "Anyone else?" He asked around, challenging.

Skull shook his head. So did the rest, though more slowly.

"Not yet," said Nightingale. "What if it makes my...makes me not be able to...you know." He looked down at his crotch.

Everyone burst out laughing, but it was a legitimate question. They just didn't know anything about the side effects.

"Well, I haven't noticed any problems."

"I don't see any women around here to test yourself on."

The next few suggestions were vulgar. After the laughter died out and everyone had finished their dinners, Zeke drained his beer and said, "Well?"

Everyone stared expectantly at Markis. "Well what?"

Zeke held out his hand, palm up. "Bite me."

"Oh, man...this is creepy," Markis answered. "Maybe we should just cut our thumbs and mix our blood."

Zeke shook his head. "We don't know that would work. We do know this does. Bite me."

"Bleah, bleah," Markis did his best Dracula. "Okay." Grabbing his hand he bit Zeke, slobbering on the wound a bit for good measure. "Yech. I'd make a bad vampire." The skin tasted like cheap after-shave, which meant really, really horrible. To his credit Zeke hadn't flinched, just rubbed the bloody spots a little and looked.

"It took a little while. Overnight, for me. Don't expect anything before that, except to get unusually hungry and sleepy," Markis put in.

Zeke shrugged. "*Que sera, sera.*"

They tidied up, locked up and moved out.

Markis called his neighbor Trey with a clean phone on the way. "Hey Trey, Dan here."

"Hey, man. Glad you called. There is a truck parked in your driveway. It says Dominion Power on it, but I saw four guys get out and they went in your side door. Which seems weird since I know you're not home, and it's after hours. You want me to call the police?"

Markis really didn't want him to. He actually wanted them to clean up the body, if that was what they were doing. He hoped they weren't setting up a frame for Jenkins' murder, but pushed that thought away.

"No...Trey, it's some classified stuff, national security. I think these guys are bad guys but I don't want to tip them off. I'll just report it myself, okay?"

Don't get involved. They might be dangerous." He didn't think Trey would. He was a nice guy, but not the adventurous type.

"Okay, man, your call. You got a number I can reach you at?"

"No, sorry, I'm moving around. I'll call you now and then, okay?"

"All right now. You take care." Trey hung up.

Markis pulled out the batteries and tossed the phone out the window when they crossed the next river. It traced a sweet arc downward to splash fifty feet below. Then he went to sleep.

He woke up when their convoy was pulling into Outdoor Mountain near Richmond, a mecca for the hunting, fishing, and nature sporting crowd. A hundred thousand square feet of gear, from the smallest lure up to bass boats and ATVs, and guns and ammo.

Lots of guns and ammo. They did some shopping.

They didn't actually buy any guns. That would take a background check, ID, and an hour or two of waiting even if the record is clean. They couldn't be sure any one of them wasn't on some watch list somewhere.

Ammunition, however, can be purchased like candy in Virginia. Echoes of carpetbaggers and Reconstruction and the Federal city right on its northern border kept Virginia's gun laws libertarian. Thomas Jefferson, native Virginian, had said, "The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants." A few million Virginians stood quietly ready to prove him right if the Feds ever tried to take their liberty and the guns they protected it with.

Markis picked up a few things he wanted to try out, a few things he thought would be useful. They all did. Then they drove on, well stocked.

Chapter 11

The sun was coming up the next morning over Onancock as they deployed around the apartment complex where the Integrated National Strategies people lived. It turned out that they all had units at a place called Seaside Acres, built in the last ten years, cookie-cutter. Made it easier to recon. Made it easier for their security people to keep an eye on their own guys too.

Zeke, Spooky and Markis sat in the Land Rover, parked down the street from the apartment complex's single gate. Zeke munched cheerfully on his fourth ham-and-egg croissant. The XH had taken hold.

They'd already watched one little nerdy-looking guy get into a black Suburban driven by a big Hispanic minder. The Suburban was parked just inside the gate, by the leasing office. It was easily visible from the angle the guys had chosen.

"That's Arthur Davidson, virologist. The heavy is Miguel Carrasco, former Texas Ranger."

It was hard to say for sure, but Carrasco didn't seem to be all that alert. Just another day on the job for him.

He got out of the vehicle again as another guy walked up. Caucasian, thin, grey and balding, thick glasses. His pants were too short and he had on a stained white shirt, and dirty leather shoes like fry cooks wear on greasy floors. "Roger Auprey. Epidemiologist. Nominated for a Nobel prize once, but apparently he has to be reminded to shower and change his clothes. Mad scientist." One more of the watchers followed behind him.

"The guy behind him must be Rogett." Karl Rogett, Master Gunnery Sergeant, USMC retired, Markis remembered from his file. Looked tough as nails, like you might expect. These two hard cases seemed more focused on controlling their charges than protecting them. *I guess they expect me to run and hide, not gather up my own personal A-team – well, Zeke's - and come after them*, Markis thought.

Markis really wanted this thing to go smooth, no casualties. He wasn't sure the other guys were on the same page, despite his insistence.

Skull, Larry and Vinny had gone in the Cherokee, over Larry's strenuous objections. A flashy Escalade just wasn't any good for surveillance, so they'd parked it back at the chain motel where they were staying. They should be down

at the biggest marina nearby, renting a nice big pleasure boat that would accommodate everyone. If they were lucky, INS's corporate vessel would be at the same marina. If not, it would be easy to keep an eye out for them from the water between there and Watts Island. The harder thing would be not to be noticed themselves.

The Suburban pulled out of the gate and Zeke, Markis and Spooky shadowed them from well back. They drove like locals, not too fast and not too slow, and pretty soon the Suburban pulled into the marina where Zeke's guys should be. Sometimes things do go smooth. For a while.

Zeke called the other vehicle on his walkie. "They're here. Look alive."

They turned left where the Suburban had turned right, to go down to where their boat waited. They parked, schlepped their cases with various supplies and ordnance onto the boat, and loaded up.

Vinny stayed on shore to do some surveillance of everyone's vehicles and residences. He had hinted he might try for something more than that; maybe sneakiness ran in the Nguyen family. Maybe Vinny was a younger version of Spooky in the techno-urban jungle.

Skull piloted the boat like a pro, taking them out about a mile then slowing down. They loafed along like lubbers out for a pleasure cruise. It was chilly but sunny and they bundled up and broke out the coffee thermoses, doughnuts and binoculars.

Pretty soon a nice thirty-six-footer came out of the marina and angled off to the north fast, toward Watts Island, which could barely be seen about seven miles off. They crossed to windward of Zeke and the others doing twenty knots, going northwest, and by this time Skull had them on a parallel course at ten or so. They didn't want to look too eager.

They watched the other boat all the way in to Watts Island, a tiny patch of scrubby pines and rocks with the all-steel buildings showing quite clearly. The highest tree on the island didn't stand more than twenty feet tall. The complex was on the southeast corner, and everything looked just like it had on the satellite imagery. They could see the white Jeep parked at the pier, with someone standing next to it, smoking.

They tooled along, not too near, not too far, and observed as the cruiser pulled up to the dock next to the boathouse. Three people got out onto the pier, then into the Jeep, which drove the hundred yards or so to the tiny empty parking lot. The boat pulled away and headed back for Onancock.

By this time the team was looking at the south side, and then the back of

the complex as they rounded the island. There were no windows in the big building, but there were two in the small one facing south. They could see the helo pad, which was empty except for a short pole and a wind sock standing stiffly in the north-by-northwest breeze.

“All right, that’s enough. We don’t want to get made. Head for Tangier Island,” Zeke ordered.

Skull turned the wheel and ran the throttles up to comfortable cruising speed. Less than half an hour later they came into Mailboat Harbor and docked at the marina at the north end of the island. Slightly less conspicuous than usual in a New York Yankees cap, he paid the docking fee and got the boat topped off with fuel. He could still frighten children with a look.

They wandered around the tiny island, splitting up to act like they were interested in the little shops, museums and restaurants along Main Ridge Road. The whole piece of land they stood on was barely a square mile, the southwestern-most of three sub-islands that were all that remained of historic Tangier Island. It used to be much bigger, just like Watts Island, but rising ocean levels and erosion were slowly washing it away. In a couple of hundred years it would probably be completely gone.

They met up for an early lunch at a seafood place overlooking the water, within sight of a dozen fishing boats trying to eke out a living in the Chesapeake and the coastal Atlantic nearby. It was hard to hide, because the tourist season hadn’t started yet, and it was mostly locals. At the same time, that made it easier for them to spot anyone out of the ordinary, and none of the team reported seeing anyone that looked like they were watching. That was good news.

They headed back as soon as they were done, just a bunch of guys on an outing. Watts Island looked the same on the way back, though they went around to the north of it this time. It was about noon, and not a creature stirred except for the sea birds.

They met back at the motel, and went inside Vinny and Tran’s room. Larry had been complaining because of the crowding in the Land Rover, so he was first out of the vehicle. He was a big guy.

On the other hand, Zeke was getting smaller. He didn’t seem as hungry as Markis had been, but he was still eating more than normal and he kept grabbing the roll of his gut and shaking it, with a big pleased look on his face. “My pants are getting looser. Hot dog, this stuff is a weight-loss miracle too. It must boost the metabolism like crazy. I feel awesome!”

Markis looked at him soberly. “Every high has its low, and every benefit

has a cost. We just don't know what this is yet."

"You won't just let me enjoy it, will you?" Zeke laughed again.

"All right, enjoy it while you can. I'm a pessimist by nature, I guess."

Markis had lived with that serpent too long, though he hadn't seen it in a while. *Maybe I never will again.*

Vinny dragged the round motel table into the spot between the two beds, so they could sit on chairs and bedsides and all see. He had a row of portable computer stuff on a folding table on the other side of the room, and he'd printed out hardcopy photos. "Pictures of everyone's apartments. Nothing much to see. They are either not home or staying indoors. If they take the two scientists back off the island this evening, then we can expect just Elise and one or two minders when we go in for the snatch."

"What if some don't leave the island? Or what if different ones come off? What if they rotate some overnight?" asked Skull.

"Does it matter?" Zeke asked. "Once we see, we'll know something. We'll go in with all five of us. Sorry Vinny. Wrong skill set."

He shrugged. "No problem, man. Until I get some superhero powers too, I'd rather stay away from bullets, thank you very much."

Spooky glared. Vinny shrugged again.

Zeke went on, "Okay, general plan. Skull will drive the boat and provide overwatch, secure our line of retreat. We'll pull in here, into this channel, and disembark behind these scrubby trees. Spooky will take point. Then me and DJ, with Larry and Skull watching our backs. We'll move in quiet. Here's the objective rally point, where you post, Skull." He pointed at a spot just inside the tree line, about fifty yards from the buildings. "Spooky, you'll do the forward look and report back to us there. If we can't pinpoint everyone, or anyone, we'll enter, search and clear the buildings.

"We will try to stay quiet as long as we can. Once it's time to enter the main building, DJ and I will breach and go in heavy. Presumably we can take more hits than you guys now, with the XH in us. Our objective is this woman, Elise Wallis." He held up the picture. "Use your best discretion when engaging armed resistance." He looked across the table at Markis. "DJ, I know you want to keep this clean but I'm not going to tell people to add risk to the op just because you want to avoid hurting anyone."

"Avoid killing anyone, you mean. Hurt them all you want; it will give me something to do," Markis said sardonically.

Zeke chuckled. "Either way, I hope we get in quiet, they surrender in their

beds, we zip-cuff them, then get outta Dodge with our answer girl. That's the overview. Larry, what we got?"

"I got flash-bangs for everyone, some boom-boom for me, and all sorta body armor, and a lot of other miscellaneous gear. Since we're only moving a quarter mile or so, I suggest you carry all you want."

Spooky snorted.

"Ev'body 'cept you, I guess," Larry said.

"Cannot be quiet in body armor," replied the Vietnamese. "I will take the chance. You got NVGs?"

Larry nodded. "Yeah, I got goggles for you and anyone that wants 'em."

Markis shook his head. Night vision gear was fine for certain circumstances but as soon as any shooting started or someone turned on a light, they were useless. They would be useful for Spooky for the first look-around, and for Skull on overwatch, maybe.

"Okay," said Zeke, "Any immediate concerns?"

Spooky nodded. "Better to clear both small buildings first. Probably living quarters, separated from main building. Main building has no windows and this," he tapped a photo, "look like NBC filter." He meant nuclear-biological-chemical, a containment system. "See, negative pressure system to make sure nothing leak out. Maybe jail cell in there, but nobody normally want to sleep in dangerous laboratory."

This was an unusually long monologue for Spooky, so Markis knew he was concerned.

Zeke asked, "Anything else? All right, everyone start making your personal prep. We'll meet back here at six, go over it in detail. I'll order pizza." He slapped his shrinking gut again and smiled.

Chapter 12

Since returning to the island Elise had been unable to sleep much, or well. Most of her time was spent puttering around the lab, until the wee hours of the morning. Durgan was putting more and more pressure on her for results and the stress was keeping her on edge. He wouldn't believe her that it simply couldn't be done. Not by three researchers with this tiny lab.

She was glad they didn't lock her up but Durgan constantly threatened her with the possibility. Her mind knew the threat was empty but her brain still reacted with worry.

She had the run of the facility but the ankle bracelet tracker they'd fitted kept her from even thinking about escaping. Not that she could swim very far. She didn't even know how to drive a boat and it's not like they left the keys lying around. No, she'd missed her best chance already.

Zeke's men spent the evening going over the op plan. Then going over it again. Then again, ad nauseam. That's the way to succeed at special ops: meticulous planning, perfect execution.

They went aboard their boat at about 2300 hours, eleven p.m. They figured it would be suspicious to go out much later than that. Skull took the conn again, threading their way among the moored and anchored boats toward the Chesapeake.

Vinny had kept watch while they went over the details, and had reported that the same four people had returned to the marina around sundown, on the boat. That meant one or two more of the shooters, and at most two civilians there, plus Elise, if their chain of reasoning was correct.

Vinny stayed in the motel room, monitoring his cyberware and the team's tactical voice network. They were using the latest frequency-hopping radios with self-generated encryption keys. Vinny said nothing short of the National Security Agency or a full-blown signals intelligence unit would be able to even find them, much less break the encryption in time.

The team took a wide course that slowly circled Watts Island to come in from the northwest. It gave them time to do their final preparation.

Larry kept fidgeting with his mask, trying to get it fit to his satisfaction. He did the same with his body armor. He was wearing a full rig, head to ankle including the skirts, which was usual only for a full breach urban scenario. *I wouldn't be surprised to see him outfitted in a bomb suit*, thought Markis. He must have been carrying a hundred pounds of gear. Good thing they only had to move a quarter mile. Markis prayed Larry wouldn't fall off the boat.

The big man carried an AA-12 automatic shotgun. It took someone Larry's size to really use one of those effectively. It could spray an awesome amount of firepower at short range. The recoil would also pound your shoulder to a pulp if you didn't know what you were doing.

Spooky was all in black, and as they slowly wended their way toward the island he wiped camo onto his face in a tiger-stripe pattern, black and green. He repeatedly adjusted his web gear, everything carried and fastened to him, until he was satisfied. He walked fore and aft on the tiny deck, jumped up and down and then grunted, satisfied. No rattles, no clinks. He carried a suppressed P90, which was very good for a little guy like him – handy, lots of short-range firepower in a small package.

Skull was using a venerable HK91 7.62 NATO, night-scoped. Markis had talked him out of the Barrett, because they didn't need that kind of range, and a .50-caliber rifle bullet tended to kill with one shot to any body part – it could tear a limb right off a target. Markis had insisted they limit casualties. The HK was also a lot handier in a general firefight, if Skull had to move from his position.

Zeke and Markis both had their old standbys, M4 carbines. These were descended from the M-16 family that was first widely used in Vietnam. Markis's fit his hand like it was made for him. Old friends. The serpent stuck his nose out of his hole for the first time in a while, flicked his tongue. But Markis had a surprise for the old snake, and anyone else who got in his way. He had a workaround for his conscience's killing problem. Maybe.

He had his aid bag in his ruck, along with extra ammo and all the usual stuff any grunt carried – tape, zip cuffs, parachute cord, protein and granola bars, water, the list went on and on. Never knew what you might need. He also had his trusty XD on the thigh rig and his XD compact was in a holster on his left inner ankle. His right calf was taken up with a wicked-sharp KA-BAR combat knife that had gone with Gramps to Iwo Jima and back.

Waiting was difficult. Most of them dozed, with the thoroughly ingrained ability of every combat trooper to sleep anywhere, any time. But even the longest wait ends.

Coming up on 0300 hours they made their last commo check with Vinny and each other on the small tactical radios buckled high on their chests. Each of them had an earpiece in his shooting ear and a slim mike extending from it, snugged on the same-side cheek. The earpieces not only connected to their tactical radios but contained high-tech noise suppression circuitry that kept them from being deafened by their own weapons. A tiny counterpart was in each man's opposite ear, so they could hear as well or better than normal, while maintaining sonic protection from the violence they were about to cause.

They motored slowly and quietly up to Watts Island, approaching from the north, out of sight of the buildings. Markis lowered the anchor when Skull told him to, then watched as he filled a six-man rubber boat from a compressed air tank. They loaded from the dive deck off the back. Once they were in, they paddled the short distance to the rocky shore.

They startled some sleeping seabirds on landing. Markis saw a Great Blue heron fly off, skimming up the shoreline like a living hang-glider. Other than that, they got in nice and easy. They carried the boat into the scrubby tree line, then locked and loaded weapons.

Despite the many missions under his belt, Markis's heart still thudded in his chest. It had been several years since he had been on a real, deliberate combat operation, not counting the bizarre actions that started this whole thing off. He wasn't afraid for himself, but something in him was still sick at the thought of killing.

He'd never been this way before, and he was starting to wonder about it. The XH had improved him a lot; it had stilled the serpent and healed his body, but it had also made him different in some way. He had been trying to ignore it, to wish it away, but it was really making itself felt right now. He was starting to worry he couldn't do the job. Only his choice of ammo was letting him function right now.

Markis tried to imagine himself treating combat trauma, visualizing the blood, the pressure bandages, the IVs, the pain and the screaming. Nothing. But visualize shooting someone, and suddenly he felt sick. It was not too bad if he thought about shooting an arm or a leg. Deliberately recalling his execution of Jenkins, a wave of nausea and regret almost overcame him. He pushed it out of his mind as they moved through the low dense woods. He couldn't indulge in thought experiments right now, or he would screw something up.

At least he knew he could treat combat injuries.

They came to the edge of the open space right where they expected,

outside the northeast corner of the small complex. They were looking at the corner where the small northern building and the big central building almost touched. This was their ORP, their objective rally point. The helipad was to their right, next to the back of the big building. They could see the white Jeep through the gap between the buildings. Their angle blocked their view of the southernmost small building.

Zeke made a hand signal and Spooky moved off to their left, vanishing into the woods. A few minutes later Markis saw him crouching by one of the windows at the back of the small building. He had been looking but had not even seen Spooky cross the open space from the trees to the building.

“Damn, he’s good,” he breathed.

A derisive snort from Skull was the only answer.

The wind sock at the helipad swung on its short wooden pole in the three to five knot breeze. Markis watched the black shape against the white building move along it, looking in the windows. It slid around the corner a moment later, and they waited some more. While they waited, Skull prepped a hasty sniper position there at the ORP.

They heard a faint click, then Spooky’s voice. “North small building clear. Quarters, kitchen, office, rec room. I leave east door unsecured, advise occupy. Proceeding to south small building.”

“Acknowledged.” Zeke led them fifty yards eastward, staying inside the tree line. Then they hustled across the open space, shielded from sight by the empty small building. As they crossed the space they could hear the low grumble of a generator, well muffled, and a whining hiss that was less identifiable.

They slipped around the corner of the building to enter the door Spooky had left unlocked. Inside, they found everything as he had reported – two bedrooms with two single beds each, a shared latrine and shower, a kitchen, a recreation room with a pool table, and a small windowless office with a low-end computer, a printer combo, and not much else. They did a quick search, finding nothing of significance. The fridge held enough fresh food to indicate that they brought groceries at least weekly.

Zeke unlocked the door at the other end of the building, which if opened would face a door in the north end of the large building across an angled gap. He put an eye to the crack in the blinds of the door window, watching for anything amiss.

Markis took the other side of the door and did the same, with Larry watching their backs.

About that time they heard Spooky report, “South building all clear. Quarters and kitchen, rest of building is general storage. Rally at north door of large building ETA one minute.”

Zeke replied, “Roger, we are inside north small building at south door, standing by.”

A moment later Markis saw Spooky slip around the big building’s nearest corner and ghost up to the door in the near end. Spooky did something at the lock and then gently turned the handle. It looked like he had got it open. He reached into a cargo pocket and took out some kind of telescoping rod, like an old-fashioned radio aerial, and extended it. It had a little box on one end with a faint yellow LED, which he ran around the edge of the whole door frame. The light stayed yellow.

Some kind of alarm detector, Markis thought.

Spooky collapsed it back to pen-size and slid it into his pocket. Then very, very slowly he eased the door off its jamb the tiniest of bits, not even a crack. He stayed that way for a full minute before letting it go gently back. He then pushed his NVGs off his eyes up onto the top of his head, lay prone on the ground, to open the door enough to press a naked eye to the crack at the very bottom corner.

Markis observed, fascinated. Watching a real pro at work was interesting.

“Hallway whole length of building. Low light,” Spooky reported. “Eight doors, some with windows and lights inside. No activity. Negative air pressure confirmed.” Markis figured Spooky was able to feel the air rushing into the crack in the door, as the air system kept the pressure inside slightly lower than outside. This would ensure any stray organisms floating in the air were unlikely to make it outside, except through the filtration system. In fact, that was probably the strange hissing they had heard crossing the field. It was kind of the opposite of NBC overpressure systems, which were usually meant to keep bad things out.

Zeke responded, “All right, we go in. Larry, hold the door, me and DJ go first and start search and clear. Spooky, go around and watch the far door from the outside. Unlock it and be ready to come in. Skull, you got clear lines?”

“Ay-firmative,” Skull answered under his breath.

“Larry, you hold the door from the inside, watch our backs and keep the line of retreat open. Remember everyone: the civilians are non-hostile unless proven otherwise. Don’t get twitchy.” Zeke pulled the end of a sheaf of zip cuffs out of his cargo pocket, easy to grab. He then took off his gloves. So did Markis. They were trained to shoot with gloves on, but anything delicate, such as

threading a zip cuff or sticking in an IV, required tactile feedback.

“Spooky in position.”

“Skull in position.”

“Vinny in position,” came a faint sardonic voice.

Markis strangled a laugh. He’d hate to be Vinny, just listening back at the motel, but someone had to do it. He took a deep breath, and tried to reassure himself, his twitchy conscience, that he wasn’t out for blood. A part of him felt like a total pussy for worrying about such things; a part of him was proud.

Elise sat staring at her screen as the machines in the lab ran more useless experiments, modeling drugs that might mitigate some of the virtue effect. She studied the data on her computer screen, the results of her latest batch. Nothing new. No progress. Part of the problem was that most of the new designer drugs were, of course, made to make the user feel good.

Durgan wanted something that made people feel evil and like it. Or feel nothing.

Something like that.

Dammit, I’m a microbiologist, not a neuroscientist. Roger is a virologist and Arthur is an epidemiologist. We need a couple of dozen specialists to do what he wants. But Durgan’s not listening.

She paced the floor absentmindedly chewing her nails then walked over to the small kitchenette in the corner of the lab and poured herself a steaming cup of coffee. Caffeine. Maybe that would help her think. Maybe she’d rather not.

As she stirred in her usual teaspoon of cream and two packs of sugar she inhaled the comforting aroma and her mind wandered back in time. Funny how scents and smells are often so vividly connected to memories.

When she was a girl the wonderful smells of coffee, bacon and toast would wake her from her slumber every morning. She would head into the kitchen to find her father sitting in his usual place at the table eating breakfast and reading the morning paper. Sneaking up from behind she’d scare him with a loud “boo.” He would always play along, clutching at his chest as if she had frightened him, then he’d scoop her up with a reassuring hug and kiss. *I really miss you, Dad.*

She thought about her father, a good man, solid, loving, dependable, honorable, and her thoughts turned again to Daniel. *I know deep down Daniel is all of those things, too.* She wondered where he was and if he were thinking of

her at that moment.

“Execute.” Zeke pushed the door smoothly open, and Larry crossed the thirty feet or so to the unlocked door where Spooky had been so recently. They followed right behind, and Larry opened the door quickly, drawing it out of their way so all they had to do was go straight in.

They entered in two-man tactical stack. That meant Zeke was in front, Markis slightly crouched right behind him with his left upper arm firmly pressed into Zeke’s back, so Zeke knew where he was. Markis held his M4 to the right and down, covering the right side. His eyes swept the hallway automatically, center-up-right-down and back to center in a fraction of a second, the barrel of his weapon following in a tight circle. Zeke did the same on his left, and they heard the click of the door behind them as Larry closed and locked it from the inside, then took a knee.

They needed to get out of the hallway as fast as possible, to let Larry dominate it with his street-sweeper, and to give him a covered position. They took the first door on the left as planned. Markis stayed stacked behind Zeke as Zeke reached out with his left hand to try the door. It opened into a tiny closet with cleaning supplies. Markis turned and waved Larry forward. This would be his best position, allowing a right-handed shooter like him to keep good cover and still lash the hallway with heavy fire.

The plan was to stay to the left side of the hallway. They might find doors between rooms, and they wanted to avoid causing confusion if Larry had to start firing. Crossing and re-crossing the hallway unnecessarily to opposite doors was asking for trouble. So they moved along the left side of the hallway to the next door on the left, passing a solid steel door on the right. Larry would have to cover that.

Zeke tried the handle. It was locked. They could call Spooky in to try to pick the lock, or they could break in.

Sticking to the plan, Zeke decided to break in as quietly as possible. The building was filled with the low rumble of the generator and the rushing sound of the air system, so there was a good chance they could get away with it.

Zeke pulled a crowbar out of the small of his back, where he’d had it taped. He fit it between the door handle and the jamb, leaning his weight on it slowly until it popped with a muffled clang.

Elise thought she heard a noise. *It's probably just Miguel doing a security check of the building. Dammit, I hope he doesn't come in here and bother me again.* She checked her watch. 3:17 a.m. *No, Miguel went off duty over an hour ago, so he'll be fast asleep, and Karl's on watch now.*

When no one materialized in the doorway she shrugged to herself, figuring it was just the sound of the building settling or the wind. She finished her coffee, rinsed her cup and set it on the counter. With renewed energy she returned to her station and began another drug model run. *Beta blockers. Who knows, might have some effect.*

Zeke immediately shoved the door open and swept the left side of the room. Markis followed him in and swept the right. Each of them moved to his side and out of the death funnel of the doorway.

A dark figure on the lower bunk of two rolled heavily out, tangled in blankets. "Wha—" they heard before Zeke stepped forward and gave him a left-handed whack on the head with the crowbar. The man dropped to the thin-carpeted floor like a sack of potatoes.

The room was lit only by the dimness of the corridor and the green numbers of a clock radio on a night table. It read 3:17.

Perfect. Markis poked the upper bunk with the barrel of his weapon, finding no one and nothing there but bedding.

Zeke whipped out zip cuffs and hog-tied the fallen man, then taped his mouth shut. He popped a pillowcase over the man's head, then taped that loosely around his neck.

Markis checked his pulse. *Good and strong. Zeke knows his club work.*

"One hostile neutralized," Zeke reported over the net. "Still quiet."

Markis hoped that was true, and he hoped it stayed that way. He rolled the man under the bunk bed, out of the way. If he were smart, he would stay there until it was all over.

There was a door with a mirror on it in the wall to the right. Logically that would be a bathroom or closet. Zeke reported quietly, "Interior door. Opening." It was a closet, with some security uniforms and civvies in it. The wall at the

back seemed solid, made of the same thin industrial steel construction as the rest of the building. Too bad. If it had been drywall they might have tried to breach it through to the next room.

“Emerging left,” Zeke called, and they moved back into the corridor. It was going to get harder fast, because the next door on the right had a big square window in the top half, with wire mesh inside, the kind designed to let people look into the room before entering. Or vice versa. But this window was dark, and they hoped that meant unoccupied. The next one up on the right was lit.

Their door to the left was not going to be as simple as the last one. There was an external deadbolt fitted, like an afterthought. Maybe it was meant to keep something in, not out. They retreated back to the room they were in before, and spoke in low tones.

“That must be Elise’s cell,” Markis offered.

“Maybe. What if it’s a berserk gorilla with the XH in it they are keeping for experimentation?”

“Ugh,” Markis said. “Yeah, point taken. We can’t be sure. All we know is it’s built to keep something in, not out.”

“Jury-rigged for that, anyway. So we clear the rest of the building and tackle that door last, with more information.” Zeke’s tone brooked no argument.

Markis nodded in agreement.

Zeke called softly, “Zeke to Larry. We’re changing to the right side of the corridor. Emerging left.”

They moved out into the corridor and Larry moved behind them up to the open door of the bunkroom. They went back to the windowless door on the right side of the corridor. It turned out to be a half-full storeroom with lab supplies and machinery in it, unlocked. They came back out.

Edging up the right side to the next door, Zeke looked in the dark window for a long moment. He shook his head, unable to see anything. He reached over to test the door handle. It turned. He pressed it gently inward, and it opened a tiny bit. He nodded, then gave a three count with his fingers; one-two-three and in they went.

Murphy always wins, they say. Nothing ever goes smooth. All hell seemed to break loose inside that room. Screeching sounds, zoo sounds, howls and a clattering of metal together. Something soft and smelly spattered on the wall next to Markis, and it was only lack of targets in the dark that kept him from firing.

He flipped on the light.

Monkeys. Apes, animal figures in cages stacked along the far wall, and a never-ending racket.

Elise heard the sudden commotion in the next room. The lab animals were all going...well...ape. Maybe it was Miguel after all, trying to mess with her by provoking the animals. Maybe they had changed their shift times.

She pushed her chair away from the screen and stood up, mentally preparing herself to have it out with Miguel for screwing with the chimps. She knew Durgan would be on her side on this one.

“We’re blown,” Zeke spoke into his mike. “Execute Bravo.”

That was plan B, though Markis. Always good to have one of those, because Plan A never survived contact with the enemy, or even with Murphy.

Zeke led the way back into the corridor, fast. They hugged the right wall to the lighted-window door and Zeke dove across the doorway to the other side, low, below line of sight. From there he reached up to the door handle, gave a quick three-count and went in low from that side, flowing around to the left.

Markis went in right and higher, trusting to his helmet, vest and XH. He was the biggest target, and an alert enemy would have had ten seconds to prepare.

He saw Elise standing inside, her mouth agape, getting ready to yell. Markis held up his left index finger to his lips in an emphatic gesture for silence. He closed with her quickly, crossing the big laboratory in two long seconds, still holding the finger to his lips. A rush of emotion swept through him even while he was supposed to be paying attention to the mission. *So good to see her; thank God she’s all right.*

Elise’s face whitened with shock. In the middle of the night, she seemed slow to react, slow to realize just what was going on. Markis imagined her dull brain just had time to register the face-painted and heavily armed men bursting in before one of them charged her.

She backed up in reflexive alarm, but not fast enough, and Markis let his M4 fall to his side on its retractable sling to free up his hands, making the “shush” sign the whole time. *Funny how most people obey emphatic, familiar*

signals, he thought.

She stared stupidly at him with obvious disbelief. Finally she seemed to recognize him.

Markis gently tackled her in a modified martial arts move he dredged out of his subconscious, which ended up with them both on the ground out of sight behind a big heavy lab bench. He covered her mouth with his hand and said into her ear, "Stay down, don't interfere. This is a rescue." He was so close he could smell her perfume, her skin.

She nodded, her eyes wide. "Daniel, thank God," she breathed.

He absorbed her big blue eyes, the splash of freckles across her nose, her auburn hair, and a delicate scent that made his mouth dry up like a lovestruck teenager. He started to get dizzy. *Oh God please no. Not now.* He had the weirdest feeling, like he had known her all his life and she had known him too, déjà vu times two. With an effort of will he pushed her and the feelings away and went back to the job.

As he was turning back toward the door, gunfire exploded in the corridor.

He saw Larry, framed in the doorway, open up with his AA-12. Shots roared out as he walked the gun from floor to ceiling, shooting at something down the corridor to the right. The recoil kept the barrel climbing up, up and then all the way over with his hand spasm-locked on the trigger.

Time seemed to slow down with Markis's adrenaline surge, and he saw pieces of Larry's armor blowing off in chunks as return fire slammed him. It was something big and heavy and deadly, because he saw Larry's back plate lifted off his body and flap like a sail as something went all the way through him from the front.

Larry! Markis's whole being launched forward like a Border Collie bolting for a frisbee, every reason for his existence condensed into one pure moment, driving for the goal. *That Others May Live* thundered in his head as he sprinted for the doorway. He saw the big man's automatic shotgun stop firing and fall out of his hands, and then Larry crumpled to his knees, going down slow and heavy.

Before the wounded man hit the floor Markis threw his body into the kill zone, between his comrade and the shooter. He wrapped his hands behind Larry's neck, grabbing the carrying handle of his armor between his shoulder blades.

Markis felt a hot tearing burn in his thigh and then in his side below his ribs as bullets ripped through him. One round hit the SAPI plate in the center of his back and punched like a fist into his spine, but the armor held. Markis

ignored everything but the job, glad the shots weren't hitting Larry.

As soon as he had a grip Markis put up a foot against the opposite wall, pushing off of it like a gymnast. He threw his whole weight back through the doorway into the lab, dragging his wounded teammate with it and out of the line of fire. Markis screamed with effort and pain. His leg filled with liquid fire and his muscles burned.

Scrabbling on the floor, he dragged Larry backward as if he were in a strongman competition. He frantically hauled and lifted and jerked almost four hundred pounds of gear and bloody dying man back behind the heavy lab bench. Markis dropped him, popped the quick-release on his ruck and pulled out his aid bag; he went to work, ignoring his own wounds and his suddenly acute need for food.

Elise rushed to Markis's side, but her face turned queasy as she saw the blood pouring out of the big man's body.

Zeke took the door position and yelled on the net, "Hostile, hostile, southwest corner room. Man down, man down. Skull, put a few rounds through the corner of the building."

Immediately they heard heavy, measured popping sounds begin, metallic and deadly, rifle rounds punching through the thin lab walls. They hoped Skull knew where he was aiming.

Markis glanced up over the bleeding mess to meet Elise's eyes, kneeling there. She looked horrified. *Nothing I can do about that now.*

He pulled out Gramps' blade and she shrank back, but he ignored her and cut the body armor off of Larry. The knife sliced through the armor's straps and seams and in ten seconds he had the man's shell off in pieces. Markis's hands moved with the practiced speed of his younger days as he slid the pig-sticker back into its sheath and ran his hands over Larry's body, searching for the trauma in his flesh. He would have to let the other three deal with the hostile if he were going to save Larry's life.

The worst injury was a sucking chest wound, front and back penetration. It looked like a large-caliber full metal jacket round, maybe coated with something to defeat armor, .50 caliber or .44 magnum. He cursed all fans of big-bore handguns as he grabbed Elise's bare hand and put it against the bloody hole in Larry's chest.

"Pressure, hard, HERE."

She did as he told her, shaking tears out of her eyes.

Markis rolled Larry onto his side to keep the fluid buildup in his lungs

under control. Air wheezed in and out of the puncture in his back as his body struggled for breath. He needed to seal that up.

By this time Zeke was squeezing off single shots left-handed in the doorway, firing down the corridor to the right, suppressing the hostile. With part of his mind Markis heard the electric-chainsaw sound of Spooky's P90, slim 5.7mm rounds shredding in short bursts like hail drumming on a steel rooftop. Then he heard a flash-bang go off, and Zeke moved out into the corridor. He and Spooky were assaulting the shooter.

Markis had unrolled his aid bag and was reaching for the tools of his trade when Elise leaned over and planted her mouth full on Larry's.

No time for smooching and no need for mouth-to-mouth ran through Markis's head unbidden. His fingers slowed down as his disbelieving brain watched her lay the mother of all French kisses on Larry, like a drunk chick at a Saturday night meet-market. The uncomprehending part of him was suddenly jealous. He heard the snake giggle from somewhere deep inside.

Elise lifted her head, coughing and retching, and he saw her expression, a mixture of horror and hope, as she wiped her mouth out with the sleeve of her lab coat and stared down at Larry.

Markis realized this must be an attempt to transfer the XH to Larry. It was the only thing that made sense.

He had to put that question on hold along with many others as a tall cabinet in the corner behind Elise swung inward. It had hidden a door from the next room. A man stood thus revealed, a scarred man with a very, very large handgun in a shooter's grip: Karl Rogett. He fired two more quick shots back into the room he was leaving and then turned toward Markis – and Elise.

Markis dropped his right hand to his thigh where his trusty XD was holstered, quick-drew and fired, double tap. Unfortunately the hard rubber bullets he had loaded stung and bruised the gunman but didn't put him down. His experiment with nonlethal ammo had betrayed him, and he frantically pulled the trigger over and over, peppering the man with riot rounds at close range. One hit Rogett's face and tore a hole in his cheek, but the shots that bounced off his arms and chest did little but annoy him.

The pistol's slide locked open and Markis was out of ammo.

Karl had been shielding his face with his raised arms, and began to bring his weapon back to shooting position. Markis released his pistol, snapped his hand to the blade on his calf. He drew the knife with his fingertips and in one motion extended his hand with a flip of the wrist. It was poor technique but he

was very close, less than ten feet away. Gramps' legacy turned end for end once. The razor-sharp tip of the blade punched right through the meaty part of the man's left forearm, between the radius and ulna.

Unfortunately the man was right-handed. Rogett gritted his teeth and his right hand kept swinging that hand cannon in Markis's direction, and he knew this was going to hurt. He prayed for God to save Larry and the XH to save him and surged to his feet to rush his enemy.

But it was neither God nor XH; it was his own angel that saved him. Elise was closer and wasn't carrying a load of gear. She bounced up and stepped in front of the gunman and Markis saw the explosion as the first round blasted through her shoulder upward, a spray of red that covered him in a fine mist. The bullet, slowed, thumped off his Kevlar helmet, staggering him.

Elise screamed as the bullet passed through, but stayed up. Karl fired the second and last round just as Elise got her hands on his weapon. It tore through her right upper arm to plow into the wall somewhere off to their rear. Impossibly, she hung on to the big black automatic with a death-grip, preventing him from firing with her fingers jammed through the trigger guard, for just long enough.

Karl struck her weakly, once, with his wounded left arm, Markis's knife still sticking out of it like some bizarre fashion accessory.

Then Markis had him.

Without thought or planning his right hand had dropped to the pistol grip of the M4 hanging on its retractable sling and he lined it up between the man's eyes. He didn't fire, though, as he would have a few days ago, before his conscience started acting up, before the XH. Instead, he punched the weapon forward, driving the tip of the barrel into the big man's forehead with a meaty thud.

Markis had to hit the man twice more before he finally slumped and let go of his gun, wheezing on the floor. Markis kicked it aside. Desert Eagle, like he'd thought. He pulled his blade out of the gunman's flesh, wiped it on his pants leg, and slid it back into its sheath.

Elise slumped to the floor. Just then Zeke came through the same secret door. He took in the scene and pulled out his zip cuffs again.

"Double them," Markis said, turning back to Larry. "He's one tough son of a bitch." He was worried about Elise but the triage medic in his head made him work on the wounded man first. *Compartmentalize and stitch*. Besides, she had the XH and had survived worse.

The irony was that the "worse" was something he himself had inflicted.

Zeke dragged the hog-tied hostile out of their way. With the corner of his eye Markis saw Elise sitting on the floor bleeding, propped against another lab counter, both arms hanging flaccid. “Zeke, can you look at her?”

Zeke pushed his M4 back on its sling and knelt down to tend to Elise. She opened her eyes and smiled. “I’ll be all right. The Plague will heal me.” She lifted a shaky hand. “See? Getting better already.”

Skull appeared in the lab doorway, having come to join the fight. He looked disappointed, until Zeke yelled, “You and Spooky clear the rest of the building.” Zeke needn’t have shouted, since they were all still on the tactical link, but sometimes men do things in the heat of battle that don’t entirely make sense.

“You guys all right?” Vinny broke in on the radio. He had been pretty restrained until now. Of course they had emphasized the importance of no chatter, but he finally couldn’t help himself.

“Larry’s hit, but I think I got him.”

But Markis had lied. Larry was bleeding out fast. The delay dealing with the last hostile had cost him and he was racing to save the big man’s life.

He made sure Larry’s airway was clear, got plugs into the chest wounds front and back, and wrapped him tight and quick, putting him on the wounded side again to keep him from drowning in his own fluids. Then he slapped pressure bandages on the rest of Larry’s wounds, of a type with the infused clotting agent. A large-bore IV of saline was next, into a vein. Markis looked around for something to hang it on, and found Elise there.

She grabbed the bag with her left hand and held it high. Her wounds had closed fast, much faster than he had expected. She smiled reassuringly, encouraging.

Markis’s own remembered need for food, food to heal his wounds, cramped his gut, almost doubling him over. He grabbed his rucksack, opened one of the pockets to pull out a handful of protein bars. Ripping the wrapper off with bloody hands he held it out toward Elise’s face.

Their eyes met, understanding passing between them.

She grabbed the bar with her free hand and stuffed it in her mouth, chewing furiously. She moaned with pleasure, a sound that reached Markis somewhere below the belt.

A part of him marveled at the human male’s ability to think about sex he hadn’t even had with someone he didn’t really know, even in the middle of a death struggle. Maybe because of the death struggle. Markis dropped the rest of

the bars on the floor within reach and went back to treating Larry.

He had got out another I.V. and was prepping whole blood when Elise asked, her mouth full, “You got dextrose?”

He nodded.

“That’s what he needs, more than blood.”

That made no sense to his training, but something about her look convinced him she knew what she was talking about. So he prepped dextrose instead and slid it into Larry’s femoral vein, the biggest available vessel in the body and the way to get it in him fastest. It drained rapidly through the short tube as Markis held it up.

Elise fed Markis a chunk of protein bar. He gobbled it from her fingers. It was unbelievably sensual, like that first taste of water in the parched desert. She fed him another, felt his mouth on her hand, wanted his mouth on hers...

“More,” he gasped, working between bites. She fed him.

“Give him more dextrose,” she said, gesturing at the I.V.

“That would be too much. It could make him hyperglycemic. He could go into shock.”

“No,” she disagreed. “The Eden Plague is taking hold of him already. Look, his wounds are closing. He just needs to be fed. Give him more, now.” Her tone brooked no argument.

His mind’s eye flashed back to the bizarre lip-lock she had given Larry. That confirmed it. She had passed the XH, the...the Eden Plague she called it. Just like a bite, only a bit gentler. He was right, this stuff would put him out of a job. He didn’t have time to care about that right now, switching out the empty I.V. for a full bag. “This is the last one of dextrose. Just whole blood and saline left.”

“Wait,” she said. She stuffed one more piece of protein bar into Markis’s mouth, then hung the saline drip on a drawer handle next to her. Standing up, she ran to the other side of the big laboratory, rummaging in a glass-fronted medical refrigerator. Larry looked like he was stabilized, breathing easier and not bleeding much.

She came back with four one-liter I.V. bags of something nonstandard, a pale pink liquid Markis didn’t recognize. It had “NS” handwritten on it in marker. “It’s a nutrient solution they use for the primates, when they do tests. It’s better than dextrose. It’s IV food in a bag. Only for Eden Plague carriers.”

He waited for the last of the dextrose to drain, then switched the bags. The pink stuff started down the tube, and they knelt there, watching Larry. After a

moment Markis felt her staring at him. He looked up into her shining blue eyes, confident for the moment that the Eden Plague was doing its work. *Thank you*, he mouthed to her silently.

She blushed.

“Larry’s gonna make it,” he said over the link, his voice hoarse. “Anyone else need medical attention?”

“Neg.”

“Negative.”

“No.”

“Excellent.” Because he wanted to keep staring into those azure orbs, to lose himself there. He wanted to do it forever.

Chapter 13

Markis opened up an MRE, Meal Ready-to-Eat standard field ration, and started sharing it between himself and Elise. It was twelve hundred calories in a package about the size of a bag of potato chips, but they ate it all fast.

Zeke gave Vinny a summary situation report, then came over to the rest of them. By then everyone was gathered around Larry, who seemed to be out of danger.

Markis thought about giving him a dose of morphine but decided against it. If Elise could deal with the pain of being shot, Larry could too.

“We have to extract,” said Zeke urgently. “That last bastard had a radio and a phone in the security room there. No doubt he made a call. If they’re brave and stupid they’ll react with their helo. If they’re smarter, they’ll get together something we can’t handle. Either way, we don’t wanna hang around. Larry, can you move?”

Larry’s eyes were open by then. He opened his mouth, coughed, and said, “Yeah, I think so. Hey, pretty lady.”

Elise pressed her lips together in a wan, tearful smile. “Hang in there. You’ll be fine now.”

They helped Larry to his feet, leaving the shreds of his armor and most of his clothing in a bloody heap on the floor. Markis handed him an MRE, then opened another one. *Mmmm, chicken a la king.* He could have eaten raw chicken at this point. He laughed to himself. *Actually yes, I could. Salmonella is no threat anymore.*

Skull dragged in the hog-tied man they had caught sleeping, slung him next to the other one. “What about these two?” he asked, gesturing at the immobilized men on the floor.

Spooky walked over to them with his P90 aimed.

“No!” Markis yelled.

“Shut up, Markis,” warned Skull. He swung his HK Markis’s direction, an implicit threat. “It’s not your call.”

Markis stood up, stepped up to Skull. His forward motion stopped with the flash suppressor of the HK in his chest. One twitch of the man’s finger and he might be dead. He wasn’t at all sure his armor could stop a high-powered rifle bullet at point blank range.

Their eyes locked.

“I’m making it my call. This guy’s not the enemy, he’s just doing a job.” Markis reached up to grasp the barrel with his left hand, shoving it aside. Then he stared Skull down.

“They almost killed Larry,” the thin sniper grated, his eyes cold and fixed.

“But they didn’t. And we saved his life. Nothing to avenge.” Markis stepped into Skull’s personal space, put a hand on his chest, pushing him inexorably back. Skull stumbled, and Markis shoved his skinny frame. The thin man sprawled on his back as Markis pointed a finger at him. “Next time you aim a weapon at me, you better shoot me, or I’ll shove it up your ass.”

Skull spread his hands, backing down for the moment, but Markis could tell it wasn’t over between them.

“He’s right,” rumbled Zeke. “Nobody kills anybody if we don’t need to.”

Markis let his breath out with relief. Elise stepped up behind, staring at the unconscious man on the floor. “It’s Miguel,” she said softly. “He’s a slimy bastard and rapist. This is the first time I’ve regretted the virtue effect. I’d like to teach him a lesson he’ll never forget. But I have a better idea.” She reached over to open a drawer and pulled out a syringe. She filled it with blood from her own arm, then plunged it into each of the prisoners in turn.

“Great. You’re rewarding them for being assholes?” Skull asked disgustedly.

“Actually,” she said, “this is the best revenge. The virtue effect will make him regret his own misdeeds, and he won’t repeat them. Maybe it will keep other people safe from him later. And he’ll be useless to the Company now. They both will be.”

“That’s smart, and kind,” said Markis approvingly.

Elise brightened with his praise. She reached to embrace him, putting her head against his chest.

Skull snorted.

A note of envy in there I think, Markis said to himself.

Zeke broke the moment. “That’s enough of that. Time to get out. Listen, you,” he poked Miguel, “tell your masters that we got the healing stuff. If they want it kept under control for a while longer, they’ll stop coming after us. Otherwise, maybe we’ll just release it into the water supply. Or start biting people.”

Elise shook her head, started to say something.

Markis held up a hand to stop her. Rogett remained out cold. Miguel was

blindfolded, and Markis didn't want him to see Zeke or hear any commentary, because he knew Zeke was bluffing.

Or Markis thought he was.

He also didn't think the bluff would work. Governments, or government employees, generally don't react well to blackmail. *We've bloodied their noses, embarrassed them, stolen their secret formula, and the person or people behind the whole thing will want it back.* The only question was, would they still try to do damage control, or would it be confession time, bump it up to higher authority and turn it into an official reaction by the whole Agency or worse. Markis really didn't want that. "Sure wish we could destroy this lab," he remarked. "That would slow them down a bit."

Spooky said, "We could burn it. Best we can do. We have to go."

"Oh, I got something better," answered Larry in a gravel voice. "I got claymores. And thermite. In the bag in the first closet." Claymores were command-detonated explosive mines. Not ideal for blowing up buildings, but good enough as a field expedient. Thermite was a high-temperature incendiary that would melt its way through damned near anything.

Zeke nodded. "Excellent. Set them up. Find the fire suppression system and turn it off. Skull, Spooky, get some flammables. Miss Wallis, are there records?"

She pointed at one wall, where several computers sat, with rows of disks and a big commercial-grade hard drive.

Markis walked over, started dumping all the recordable data media and drives he could find into a pile onto the floor. "Make sure we pour some accelerant over here," he said.

Elise went over to the computers, opening a drawer and reaching far into the back. She came up with something in her hand, something small, about the size of a pack of cigarettes. "Flash drive. It's got a secret copy of almost all of our work on it, just in case."

In case of what, Markis wondered? He supposed in case of something like this.

"Take this and go over there." She handed him the flash drive and pointed toward the door.

Puzzled, Markis complied, moving away.

She picked up a strange heavy device with a handle and a thick three-prong cord on it. She plugged it in and flipped a switch. It started to hum with a noise that made his teeth hurt. "Electromagnet," she said. "It'll wipe everything." She

started running the thing over the computer cases and hard drives. He saw now why she sent him and the precious flash drive away.

Skull came in with a five-gallon jerry can of diesel and started pouring it all over everything. The guy in the hood began to scream through the gagging tape when he smelled it.

Probably thinks we're going to burn him. Markis thought, watching Skull carefully.

Zeke shoved Skull out of the way, dragged the bound man outside.

Spooky kicked Karl, who was either still unconscious or shamming. "One of you strongmen grab this one. I am no weightlifter."

Markis left Elise to her magnetic wiping and grabbed Karl by a leg, then dragged him none too gently out into the parking lot and left him with the other one by the Jeep.

It was quiet outside, except for a faint buzzing sound, like a weed-eater heard from two yards over. Or a helo a few miles out. It was getting louder.

"We got company coming, fellas," Markis said. "ETA one to two minutes. I can hear a bird inbound."

Zeke answered for everyone. "Roger. Rally at the ORP, go go go."

"Wait, I have to let the chimps out!" cried Elise. She ran for the other room, frantically opening cages. She led the two apes outside, holding each by a hand.

"We have to leave them, you know," Zeke said gently. Elise looked pleadingly at him but he shook his head. "They'll be fine; they will want them for the future research program. Just lock them up in the other building."

Elise nodded tearfully and quickly did so. The childlike primates did not want to let her go but she had no choice.

The six of them streamed for the rally point, flames licking at the laboratory behind them. They heard two explosions inside, rattling the walls and spitting dust and debris out the doors. Larry's claymores and thermite had done their work.

Zeke counted heads as they arrived, then led everyone quickly through the woods by moonlight. Markis stayed right behind Elise. A couple of brief minutes later they got to the rubber boat.

The buzzing of the helicopter was closer, but the only thing they knew was it was coming from the east, and the trees blocked their view. They couldn't embark on the raft until they were sure the helo wasn't a threat. They heard it making a couple of passes near the burning lab, then it turned toward them.

It raced overhead, suddenly visible as it passed above the tree line and then out over the water. It looked like an OH-6 or Hughes 500 variant, commonly called a “Loach,” or “Little Bird,” perhaps the best light helicopter ever made. It made a sharp turn south, paralleling the shoreline two hundred yards out.

Suddenly tracers spat from the helo’s open door, striking the rented boat. Two assault weapons on full auto responded from the little squad on the beach, reaching out to intersect the insectlike device in flight. The helo’s tracers started to shift toward them, then the bird staggered in the air and lost power. Smoke started pouring from it, and they could see flames. A moment later it made a hard splashdown in the water beyond the boat, pieces of rotor flying.

“Stupid,” said Zeke, pain in his voice. “Dammit, why did they do that?” It sounded like the Eden Plague was plaguing his conscience as well.

At least it isn’t just me, Markis thought.

“Arrogant,” responded Spooky. “Be glad they did. Is one less variable.”

“We have a bigger problem,” said Skull, standing up and walking out of the trees onto the rocky beach. “Look.”

Their rented boat, their way off the island, was already listing noticeably. The helo’s shooter must have holed it badly below the waterline before it was knocked down.

“Dammit,” said Larry, staring. “What now?”

“What are you doing, DJ?” Zeke asked. “We can’t save the boat.”

Markis was singlehandedly dragging the rubber raft toward the water. “How about the people in the helo!” he yelled. “There might be survivors!”

Zeke stared at him for a second, then grabbed the other side of the raft and helped him get it to the water’s edge. “Spooky, you and DJ paddle out there.” Zeke ran back to the tree line. “Elise, is there a boat in that boathouse?”

“Yes there is! An 18-foot powerboat. Let’s go get it!” she said eagerly. She started back into the woods in the direction of the dock, Skull and Zeke following right behind.

Markis and Spooky rowed out to where the Loach had hit. Wreckage was still floating, and there was one man clinging to a piece. They dragged him into the rubber boat and he lay there gasping. Spooky kept a weapon pointed at his nose. They looked around but couldn’t find anyone else. Markis kept his mouth shut. They’d saved one man anyway.

By this time they heard, then saw, the powerboat screaming around the south end of the island at thirty knots or more. Markis hoped they didn’t hit a submerged rock at that speed. As they got closer he could see Skull driving, with

Elise in the back. The boat soon pulled in close to shore.

They got their feet wet loading up, leaving the helo survivor on the shore with his hands zip-cuffed and his eyes taped over. He could peel off the tape, walk back to the burned complex, find a sharp piece of metal to cut the cuffs, and free his two buddies, but by that time the team would be long gone.

It was crowded in the boat, but Markis didn't mind. Elise was pushed up against him, shivering in the cold spindrift wind. He wrapped his arms around her, just enjoying the feeling of survival, freedom and healthy woman.

She responded, pressing herself against his muscular warmth, but suddenly pushed him gently away. She put her left foot up against the coaming and pulled up her pants leg. Strapped to her ankle was an electronic device with a light on it, flashing angry red. "Cut it off," she instructed. "They said they could track me with it."

While the rest stared, Markis took out his knife again and carefully sliced the strap. He tossed it into the blacking sea. *Track that, spy-boys.*

"Anything else you want to tell us?" Zeke yelled into the noise of the rushing air. Elise shook her head, looked down, embarrassed. Markis squeezed her hand.

Spooky remarked over the net, "If I was them I would have a tracker on this boat."

"Right. Zeke to Vinny, meet us at alternate marina Charlie with a bug-finder. We'll pull in and you can give it a once-over. ETA maybe five minutes, so haul ass."

Vinny met them at a little marina a couple of miles down the coast from where they had rented the boat. He went over the speedboat with an electronic detector, soon yanking out a fist-sized GPS transmitter. He tossed that into the water.

Larry, Elise and Markis piled into Vinny's Toyota and drove back to the motel. Skull roared off in the powerboat, to a different marina. Vinny dropped them off, then went to pick up the rest. Good thing there were dozens of landing places up and down the coast.

In the hotel room Markis phoned in a huge order of Chinese for delivery. In the meantime they ate and drank everything that was handy. Crackers, cookies, cans of vegetable juice, full-sugar soda, tuna, it was all shoveled into their gullets like pelicans at a fish farm. When the take-out arrived, they plowed into that, too. When the others returned to the hotel, they found a half-eaten styrofoam buffet and two stuffed Eden Plague carriers sitting on the floor half-

asleep. The third, Larry, was in the bathroom cleaning up.

Zeke caught a whiff of the food and grabbed the nearest box, eating with a grim determination. Markis saw his rigger belt was cinched up tight and he looked like he had lost twenty pounds today. The other three started eating as well, though with only normal human urgency.

“We gotta get out of here,” Markis said over the noise of the gobbling. He forced himself up to sit on the bed. “Even if they don’t make us here, they know we’re in the area.”

The rest nodded.

“All right, people,” Zeke said between bites. “Tear it down. Get ready to roll out.”

“Wait,” said Skull forcefully. He swept everyone with an even harder look than usual. “The lab’s burnt and unless there’s a lot of data stored off-site, we set them back years. But there are two loose ends. Or three.”

“Yes,” agreed Spooky. “The scientists and the doctor.”

Markis preempted their argument. “So we go snap them up. Now. We know where they are. We know four of six shooters are out of the picture – at least two in the helo, two from the lab. We can probably snatch the scientists in their beds not three miles from here. Does the doctor in charge live here?”

“No, Durgan lives in Annapolis,” said Elise. “He comes down once a week or so. But he’s just an educated manager; he couldn’t recreate the work, though Arthur and Roger and I together could. Daniel is right.” She hugged his arm, sitting there next to him, and he felt warm all over.

“Much easier to just put a bullet into their heads,” observed Skull. He was staring at Markis, like he was ready for the inevitable argument.

Zeke beat him to it. “No. No murder.”

“It’s preemptive self-defense,” retorted the sniper.

“No, it’s assassination. It’s not justified.” Zeke was firm.

“The hell it’s not. Those guys were trying to kill us at the lab. That’s war in my book, and that makes them targets. Enemy combatants.”

“Those were their shooters. These guys are just scientists.”

Skull insisted, “You don’t think all those enemy nuclear physicists that disappeared in the last twenty or thirty years just fell into random holes, do you? We killed a bunch of them ourselves, and the Israelis got the rest.”

“Well, maybe we shouldn’t have done that,” chimed in Elise, her eyes blazing. “Maybe that makes us just as bad as they are.”

Markis put a restraining hand on her arm, knowing she wasn’t going to get

anywhere with these guys that way. She had proved herself to him, but not to them. “Let’s not sink to their level, I think is what she means,” he said mildly.

“Perhaps they would be useful. It is not so much more trouble to take them with us, I think,” said Spooky softly.

Skull snorted. “Zeke, your A-team is turning into a bunch of wussies.”

Zeke locked eyes with him. “Yeah, *my* A-team. Not yours. You want out?”

Skull stared at Zeke a long moment. “Not yet,” he finally said.

“Well, you let me know when ‘yet’ comes. Until then I need to rely on you. Can I rely on you, Skull?” His eyes bored in.

Skull swallowed, nodded once, solemnly. “Yeah. Of course you can, Zeke. It’s your call.”

Zeke grinned and patted Skull’s cheek, breaking the tension. “I love you too, man. Okay, hasty operation, we snatch our mad scientists. Half an hour for planning, then we go.”

An hour later they were on the road with two more guests. Both had been very happy to come with them. Both had been glad to get rid of their ankle bracelets.

They traveled in a convoy of four SUVs. Vinny had wired the vehicles with secure comms for their tactical net. That way they could talk freely as they drove, and everyone could hear. Markis was glad; he didn’t want to wait until the end of another road trip for answers, and he had no idea where they were going or how far.

They sweated some before they got off the peninsula; until they made it through the Virginia Beach – Norfolk area, they were bottlenecked. Fortunately they were ahead of the posse, it seemed, and soon they were wending their way up I-64 toward Richmond, Charlottesville and points west.

They gave the two scientists an abbreviated version of what was going on. Elise said neither of them was an Eden Plague carrier. They both expressed relief at being out of the situation, along with natural fear of the government reaction. *Welcome to the club*, Markis thought. *Welcome through the looking glass*.

Then it was time for some explanations. After a little bit of discussion among the former INS, Inc. employees, Roger mumbled, “Elise should tell it. She’s been around the longest, she knows the most.”

So Elise started to speak, in a kind of detached remembering voice.

Chapter 14

“I was the first to do real research on the Eden Plague, in this century anyway, I think. Before me there was just an MD named Raphe Durgan. He said he was from the USDA, Department of Agriculture, but he didn’t act like it. He acted like an arrogant spymaster, always bragging about being ‘in the black world’ and ‘behind the green door’ and terms like those. Anyway, Durgan had figured out just from his initial analysis that the virus would have some interesting effects, maybe curative ones. He tried it out on animals but it didn’t do much; it seemed made for people. So he wanted a human test subject that would be grateful no matter what - someone dying, like I was.

“With me he got more than he bargained for - a complete cure - so he got me hired for the team and swore me to secrecy with all those government confidentiality clauses. He was ecstatic, and sent me over to Plum Island research center to take a look at the biological materials. He said the things were captured in Iraq from some technology smugglers looting the crumbling Soviet Union. Samples sealed in some Soviet-style containers, nothing but biohazard symbols on them. He’d gotten the Eden Plague virus from those samples - though we hadn’t named it yet.

“I knew there was some sort of politics involved. That old ‘WMD in Iraq’ argument. That’s why they set it up under the CDC, I think – someone outside of the usual national security establishment. I got the impression there was a lot of infighting among the CIA, Department of Defense, Homeland Security, and Justice about it. It was all very hush-hush; I kept my mouth shut and just did the work. It’s what you do when you have a security clearance and you work on secret projects. I just wanted to do the research.”

“What about the containers?” Markis asked, impatient.

“All but one had human remains in them. One had a whole human head, a woman. The others held half-burned pieces of flesh. One of them had a smaller container inside, that had been opened but was still half-full of a purified virus-like organism in an inert matrix.”

“So that was the Eden Plague?” inquired Zeke.

“No, it was something else. But the human remains were contaminated with the Eden Plague.”

“What about the pure sample?” Markis asked.

“I’ll get to that. After a cursory analysis, it was obvious both plagues were never-before-seen stuff, something new. I reported everything to Durgan alone. Pretty soon the CDC informed me the project was being transferred to Durgan’s company under a privatization initiative. He offered me double what I was making, so I gave my notice right away. Actually I’d have done it for the same pay. I wanted to figure out what we had, and I was so grateful to just be alive I was ready to do almost anything he wanted.

“So pretty soon I started work at the brand-new lab on Watts Island, along with Roger and Arthur. The government seems to like islands, though technically it was the company’s facility. They can control islands better. We’ve been working there ever since. Almost five years.

“We started basic testing, deconstruction, gene sequencing on both viruses, plagues. We called them phages or plagues for want of a better term, since they were different from most other viruses. Durgan took our reports, helped a little in the lab, asked some smart questions, but we did all the work. He wouldn’t hire any technicians, so it went slower than it should have. I know now he was more concerned about secrecy than progress. I think he had some notion of cashing in on our discoveries, keeping them from his secret government masters.

“We got whatever gear we wanted. I hear they paid millions for the island, but the equipment cost ten times as much. More. Nothing but the best. DNA sequencers, electron microscopes, virus incubators, whatever we wanted. And they kept raising our pay, too. We worked like demons. That’s ironic; you’ll hear why soon.

“So you asked about the pure sample. It was a far simpler virus, or proto-virus, than the other. It acted like a phage, invading whatever cells we gave it and damaging them, but the effects were much more subtle than one would expect. In simple organisms it didn’t have much effect at all. In more complex organisms it degraded everything, every process, but it was very hit or miss, and didn’t seem like a big deal. I’m compressing years of study into minutes here, okay?

“Also, without getting too deep into why we thought so, it seemed like maybe this virus could be the evolutionary ancestor of all viruses. Virus Zero. So Arthur came up with an idea. We used some powerful modeling software to ‘back out’ the virus and its computed effects from living organisms. We ran the infection process backward in the computer, so to speak, undoing the damage this thing did on our model organisms, all the way up to people, to *homo sapiens*.

“You know what we got in our no-virus model? Incredibly healthy people, physically, mentally, emotionally. They were strong, they didn’t get sick, they didn’t get cancer, they didn’t develop mental illness. They had long life spans, at the theoretical limit of telomere degradation and cell division. A thousand years or more. Like Methuselah in the Bible.

“So imagine Earth before this thing arrived. With no viruses and no degrading effect of this plague, it would be Eden. Everything more healthy, everything in better balance. Then this plague showed up sometime during the last ten thousand years, before recorded human history but after the Ice Age.

“Maybe it evolved here, but I just don’t see how. I think it’s extraterrestrial. If anything can survive a naked journey through space to another planet, a virus could. It could be the result of a life-bearing planet being destroyed, the debris scattered through interstellar space carrying it. Or it could be sent from some aliens that wish us harm. What better way to attack another world on the cheap? Biological warfare, like smallpox blankets and the Indians, or plague corpses catapulted over the castle walls.”

Zeke broke in, “Maybe we should keep that to ourselves. People will say we’ve been infected by alien viruses and are not human any longer...like we’re pod people or something.”

That stopped Elise for a moment. “Yeah, right. Shut up about aliens. So anyway we – mostly Roger – made an extremely sophisticated computer model of our Eden, with humans and animals living in balance, with those long lifespans, with telomeres that didn’t degrade...everything we had learned by the virtual-undoing model. Then we introduced the virtual plague to see what would happen. We ran the infection model forward again.”

Elise took a deep breath. “It spread like wildfire, infecting everything. Living things degraded, subtly but thoroughly. The higher order the organism, the more it degraded. It affected humans most of all, promoting animalistic behavior.

“The plague left most host cells intact, but with a bunch of mutations and other damage to every system in the body. It shortened lifespans, made everyone stupider and weaker, more selfish, more violent, less altruistic and social in their behavior. It also boosted the fertility of both male and female, so it accelerated population explosions, competition for territory. Humans and animals both began overeating, overkilling, gorging on prey, overgrazing land and trees. Killing for sport. Fighting for territory, fighting over mating rights. They stopped cooperating. Humans started tribal wars. Everything just went to hell, hell on

Earth, compared to what went before.”

She rubbed her face with both of her hands. “So we called it the Devil Plague. This devil corrupted our virtual Eden.”

Markis’s mind whirled with the implications. *Maybe those old stories had a grain of truth in them. The Devil was supposed to have come from Heaven to Earth, corrupting the Garden of Eden. This was the panspermia scenario’s evil twin; instead of a life-bearing meteorite jump-starting life, it damaged what was already here.* He said, “So you believe this is what happened in the real world? Like the model?”

“Actually, yes,” she said. “It makes sense. But by this time Dr. Durgan thought we had a biological weapon we could use. We couldn’t convince him that it wouldn’t work that way. He thought we were holding out on him, so he assigned us those...commissars. Minders. Slave drivers. We couldn’t take vacations, or visit our families. He thought we were acting like those German nuclear scientists under the Nazis, the ones that slowed down their atomic bomb program...but we weren’t! We would have resisted if it really were a bio-weapon. Ironically, we were being punished for a moral choice we never had to make.”

“So it can’t be weaponized?” asked Vinny.

Arthur spoke up. “No, the Devil Plague wouldn’t do much to anyone now. It has done all the damage it was going to do more than ten thousand years ago. There is a kind of limit. It will only put so much of a load on the physiological system, and then it just stops replicating itself and goes inert. In fact, it’s everywhere even now. You can find it in everything in a dormant state, in low concentrations. It only flares up occasionally, almost at random. And it’s actually fairly easy to generate resistance. In the real world, we demonstrated that every eukaryotic organism on Earth has enough residual immunity to make it just a nuisance disease. No worse than a cold. It was a dead end, except as a research subject.”

Elise picked up the thread smoothly. “Yes, it seems like humans got lucky. Developed a certain amount of immunity, developed resistance. So we started studying the Eden Plague. Of course we didn’t call it that then, but once we figured it out, the name was inevitable. But this one is certainly a designed organism, probably by humans. I’d guess the Russians created it. They did a lot of research on biologicals, on phages. They have medical phage clinics even now, to treat superbug bacterial infections. Phages to kill bacteria.”

Markis stuck his hand up like a kid in class. “How come you don’t think

the Eden Plague is extraterrestrial too?”

She replied, “Because it looks like it was built directly from the Devil Plague. Genetically engineered with known techniques. You need the poison to design the antidote. That’s the only reason it was even possible, because they had isolated and purified the proto-DP to study it in its non-mutated state.

“So Durgan was hoping this was his bio-weapon, but it wasn’t. It seemed to us that the Eden Plague was specifically designed to reverse the Devil Plague process. To restore certain organisms – in this case humans – to their former state. And it *almost* works! With a few years and a billion dollars I’m pretty sure it could be perfected. We’ve come a long way in genetic engineering since they made this.”

Elise sounded enthusiastic, but smart as she was, Markis didn’t think she had thought it through as far as he had. He said, “Even in its current imperfect form, it seems like a cure for a lot of diseases. So what if the patient has to eat a lot of food. That’s a small price to pay for saving someone’s life. But if word gets out, and it’s in short supply, the whole world will be after it. It could plunge us into World War Three.”

“Oh.” A look of horror came over her face. “Do you really think so? But it would be free to everyone! Even now, it could be passed from person to person. It’s only contagious through bodily fluids...”

He went on, relentlessly. “But people in the government would want to control anything so valuable. Sell it, keep it for themselves or their own citizens first, or blackmail others with it...or finish developing it as a super-soldier serum. No matter how you slice it, it’s power. And word of it would wreck the medical establishment overnight. No need for doctors or hospitals or drug companies anymore, when perfect health is free. Millions thrown out of work, trillions of dollars of value lost, the stock markets crashing, economic depression.”

“But it will free up mankind to do so much more!” she cried.

“Not until after a lot of chaos. And how about overpopulation?” asked the team’s resident pessimist, Skull. “If everyone is healthy and no one dies...”

“Yes, that’s a problem,” Arthur interjected. “The perfected Eden Plague would probably lower fertility, but not the version we have now. Quite the opposite, in fact, because healthy men and women will likely have more children.”

A nagging in the back of Markis’s head finally came to the fore. “Wait a minute...this is the downside to society, to public disclosure, uncontrolled

information. But Elise, you said there was a downside for the *company*. What is it?”

“You haven’t figured it out yet?” she asked him.

“I think I have part of it...it’s about the mental health, isn’t it? And conscience?”

“Exactly. The longer you have it, the more emotionally stable and also altruistic you seem to become. This version of the virus causes what we call the ‘virtue effect.’ Many people that get it will not be able to even contemplate making offensive war, or committing violent crimes. Even emotional violence or oppression will become harder and harder. It doesn’t inhibit abstract thinking, as far as we know. It just creates an overactive conscience. Probably too much of one.”

“And –” Markis broke in excitedly, “– and with people’s fear of disease and violence removed, people who don’t have the Eden Plague will find it hard to oppress or bully people either. But the bigwigs won’t want to give up their status, their ability to oppress people or order them around. And a world full of Edens wouldn’t be intimidated or controllable. It would be the end of the power structure as we know it! Even if it was kept secret. In fact, it’s a ticking time bomb. Eventually it will come to light, if they keep it around. Someone will talk, or use it to cure someone they love, or take it for themselves...and anyone that does becomes the enemy of the power structure. Automatic excommunication.”

“Ahem...” Roger cleared his throat. “That is correct. I believe carriers will be treated with jealousy, suspicion, hatred and fear. They will be targets of oppression, quarantine, imprisonment and perhaps extermination. The four infected people here may be the only carriers left in the entire world. Perhaps there are others, hiding somewhere, in Russia or other parts of Asia. Or perhaps the Soviets wiped it out, all but those samples that someone probably stole during the chaos when their protocols and controls collapsed.”

“That will happen if only a small number of people have it. If millions have it...they can’t quarantine and oppress everyone!” said Elise passionately.

“They’ll try. It threatens the established order,” Roger answered dispassionately, then fell quiet.

They sat there in silence for a time, listening to the rushing of air and the humming of wheels on the highway. They were nine people in a moving convoy connected by radio and by the enormity of what they possessed. They might hold the salvation of humanity inside their bodies. Or perhaps its ruin.

Markis realized he didn’t want that responsibility. He also realized that he

didn't have any alternative.

Chapter 15

After a while Markis asked. “You said four people? What about you two, Arthur and Roger? Why don’t you have the Eden Plague?”

“We didn’t infect ourselves because we didn’t want to be as restricted as Elise was. We also didn’t want to have everyone carrying it in case we had to do something ruthless. It is ironic. And there still might have been some unknown problem. What if some years after infection it suddenly made a horrible left turn – aging, cancer, immune system breakdown. Who could know?”

“But that’s all just guesses. What’s wrong with it for sure? Why isn’t it perfected?” Larry asked. “And can I still...you know...with a woman?”

Elise laughed. “Haven’t you been listening? Yes, and you’re fertile, too, if you want kids.”

Markis sat bolt upright, an expression of wonder on his face.

Elise looked at him curiously. Her hand had crept into his, and now she gripped it hard, concerned.

Markis squeezed back and broke out in a big smile. “Never mind...it’s all good.” He relaxed back in the seat. He wasn’t going to talk about personal plans in front of seven extra people, but the thought kept going around and around in his head. *If it healed everything else...it should have healed that too. We could have kids. A son to carry on my name, and the tradition of service.*

He couldn’t stop grinning.

“It’s not perfected because it’s not,” Arthur spoke up, sounding a bit cross. “Genetic engineering is complex and difficult. And I have to pee. Can we take a break?”

“Next truck stop,” answered Zeke.

Thirty minutes later everyone had had a break and a takeout meal and were back on the road. Markis readied his next question, one he’d had from the start. “So Elise...why me, anyway?”

She laughed wryly. “Why anyone? It had to be someone. You had been in the special operations community. You still had your clearances. You had no family other than your father left alive. Only child, highly motivated, high moral index. And ruthless when the mission called for it, but you didn’t enjoy killing; you were a combat lifesaver. And I was their first human test subject, but I wasn’t any kind of soldier. They wanted someone tough that could follow orders,

but that wouldn't go rogue. They wanted someone driven and ruthless because they thought the conscience problem could be overcome. At least, they wanted to test its limits. And you lived nearby. You popped out of the database. That's pretty much it."

"What database? The Air Force Personnel database would only show my service record and my retirement. You said 'high moral index' at my house too..."

Then it came to him.

"Oh, that slimy bastard. My shrink, Benchman. He collaborated. Turned over my medical records – broke his oath and my confidentiality. I should never have trusted him, I should have done what everyone in the service that wants to avoid trouble does: stay away from the psychiatrists. And...you saw my psych record too, didn't you?" He suddenly knew he was right – knew now why she seemed to know him back then.

She hung her head. "Yes, I saw your file. I'm sorry, it wasn't like I could refuse their orders. I just know they picked you out of some kind of pool of candidates. Then Jenkins said he'd do the recruiting, claimed he had the perfect approach. He came and got me, twisted my arm, you know the rest."

"That approach got him killed." Markis mulled that over, ran the checklist of open items in his mind. "Hmm...back to what you said earlier. How could they overcome the conscience 'problem'?" He asked this with faint sarcasm.

Elise pulled her hand away and crossed her arms before answering. "Doctor Durgan had some ideas. He got drunk and bragged to me once. Electroshock. Brain surgery. Personality conditioning techniques, drugs...it might be possible. Eden Plague is subtle and gentle by comparison. It shapes you with a kind of aversion therapy. The more harmful you yourself believe what you are doing is, the harder it will be to do. It's based on your own basic beliefs about right and wrong. So you can perform surgery if you believe you are helping someone, but you can't make those same cuts if you believe you are killing them. Unless you think the killing is morally right. Sincerely righteous."

He thought for a moment, then asked another question. "One of you said most people infected would act better with emotional and mental health improvement...what about the other fraction?"

He felt Elise tense up beside him, and he looked at her. She dropped her eyes. "There are genetic wild cards, unpredictable effects. The EP isn't perfect, and...maybe even a perfected EP wouldn't fix everyone. Human brains and minds are just too complex. Our models predict some people, maybe people who

are already mentally ill, psychopaths or sociopaths, wouldn't be cured. The ones with no sense of right and wrong at all. Very few, but if millions were infected..."

Markis went cold as he digested that. "So...if you genuinely believe killing someone was good for everyone...even the target...you could do it? Like a jihadist who believes he's doing God's will?"

Elise nodded. "I think so...it's all theory right now."

"Another downside. We're playing with dynamite here." Markis mused aloud. "So we could end up with some kind of amoral superman in charge of the uninfected fearful masses, claiming to 'protect' them. That's always the way people accumulate power. They claim patriotism; they say they are providing security. Play on people's fear. Stalin did it, Hitler did it, and Mao. Though they didn't follow it up with mass murder, McCarthy did it in the fifties, Cheney did it after 9/11, and just about every politician since has done it every time something scary happens. And whoever arises will be a true believer! Maybe someone who really thinks he or she is helping people by enslaving them and killing us Edens. With all the EP's physiological advantages. Self-righteous psychopaths...it could make the Holocaust look mild by comparison."

Elise looked into Markis's eyes, deliberately reached out to take his hands in hers. She shook them in time with her words. "I don't know. I just – don't – know." Her eyes flicked toward Skull, in the front seat.

Markis forced his own eyes away. Skull had been a sniper. Not that they were all bad, or even most, but a significant minority of snipers had serious problems coming back from war. Drawing a cold bead on enemy combatants, ending life after life from an impersonal distance, had to take a toll...unless he was already suited for it by a certain personality quirk. Unless he secretly liked it. Skull had wanted to execute the INS security, he'd wanted to liquidate the scientists...and he'd put a gun to Markis's chest.

Markis wondered what would happen if Skull got infected. Which way would his tightly wound psyche turn? How long would he keep following Zeke's orders? What if he decided Zeke wasn't himself anymore, with the Eden Plague in him?

It was the same excuse uninfected humanity would use for wiping them out, or cutting their brains up, he realized. They would say the infectees weren't human anymore, and that would justify a whole legion of new Doctor Mengeles, the Nazi concentration camp experimenter. The others would say their will was not their own, that they were some kind of monsters, when in reality, *they* were

the monsters.

All you had to do was take a visit to Dachau or Auschwitz or Srebrenica to see what kind of monsters humans could be. Humanity had always been brutally selfish; one slip, trip and fall away from lynch-mob violence, from downright evil. It wouldn't take much of a breakdown in society to push them all across that line.

Because the non-Edens were now the weaker species they would be afraid of Plague carriers, he realized. When people feared something, they hated it and wanted to destroy it.

Markis didn't think the Eden Plague compromised his free will. It didn't stop him being human. No more than being in love – with Elise? – or hating someone or being afraid or winning the lottery did. It was just one more piece of life. But once they got where they were going, things in their makeshift army might fall apart. The center might not hold. The fate of humanity might rest on just how this little group, these nine people, handled the next few days.

Markis looked in Elise's eyes and saw she was thinking thoughts in line with his.

Just then a cell phone rang.

Everyone looked around in confusion. A babble of voices came over the net.

“Shut up!” Zeke roared. “Where is it?”

Elise pulled the offending instrument out of a pocket. “I took it off of Karl...the guy that tried to shoot us.” She looked apologetic. “I'm sorry, I forgot until now!”

Markis grabbed it, still ringing. He looked at the incoming number, pulled out a marker, and wrote it on his arm. Then he opened it up, pulled the battery and sim card out. “Just a minute...” He wiped their prints off it, then waited for the next overpass. Then threw the whole mess out and down at speed.

“Vinny, I took the caller's number. If I use a disposable phone to call it, and they have a trace ready, how long do I have?”

Vinny answered, “At least thirty seconds, maybe a minute. After that, they will know what wireless cell you are calling from, which will snapshot our position within a couple of miles.”

“Thanks.” Markis put the battery in his last disposable phone, sat there thinking about what to say. Then dialed. “Someone call out at five second intervals please.”

Ring.

“Jenkins.” A middle-aged male voice, rich, self-assured.

Markis’s brain stuttered. He swallowed. He hoped he was wrong.

“Mister Jervis Andrew Jenkins the Third?” He asked.

“FIVE.”

“Yes. Who is this?”

“Sir...I’m sorry about your son. I apologize for my part in his death.”

A silence.

“TEN.”

“Markis? Daniel Markis? You have to come in. Everything depends on it.”

“Mister Jenkins, we have the Plagues. Both of them. Leave us alone. I can’t let them be used for what you want.”

“FIFTEEN.”

“What is it that I want?” he asked with forced amusement.

He’s stalling.

“The Plagues are ticking time bombs, and only my restraint will keep them from exploding. Leave us alone.”

“TWENTY.”

“We recovered enough from the lab to restart the research.”

“It will be too late. I’m hanging up now, before the trace. I truly am sorry about your son.”

“TWENTY-FIVE.”

Jenkins’ tone changed then, chill and vicious. “You son of a bitch, I’ll hunt you down for Andy’s sake, I swear to God I will –”

Markis hung up. Took the battery out. Handed it to Elise. “Throw this away, will you?” He massaged his throbbing temples. He had no doubt Jenkins would try to do as he said.

A little while after they crossed into West Virginia they made a last stop for gas and food, then turned northward onto a nondescript two-lane that looked like it had last been repaved in the Eisenhower administration. It wended its way up into the central Appalachians, through towns with names like Cornstalk and Trout and Cold Knob, where bony women in faded pioneer dresses or worn jeans and tee shirts put their hands with cigarettes on their hips and stared suspiciously at them; where hard-eyed men in John Deere and Caterpillar caps spat tobacco juice from their rocking chairs on their front porches or out of their

pickup truck windows; where every rickety house had an American flag on an angled pole nailed to the front post, and every store, no matter what kind, added “Bait and Tackle” and “Guns and Ammunition” and “Beer and Cigarettes” to its signage.

West Virginia was the only state to actually secede *from* the Confederacy to the Union, and they took their patriotism seriously. So did every one of their band, though Markis was sure they all had their own ideas about how to apply it. He studied each of the men in turn.

This Appalachian backwater was a far cry from the thin splash of freeway suburbia along the interstate, where smiling cashiers fat with fast food asked, “Would you like fries with that?” in deliberately flattened accents. They almost expected the sound of banjos to come wafting through their opened windows.

Driving at mountain road speeds, twenty to forty, they turned off on an unmarked gravel track, still more or less northwards by the angle of the chill sunlight.

They passed by beautiful, rugged woodland with patches of snow lingering in the shady spots. They were glad of their high clearances and four-wheel drives when they had to cross a shallow but swift stream of snowmelt that cut the road. Larry had to be shown how to engage his 4WD on the Escalade. To Markis it didn't look like he'd ever used it in urban Atlanta.

After another hour and progressively worsening terrain, they climbed a short way up a steep mountainside on what looked like a logging trail until they abruptly broke out onto a very wide, well graded gravel highway. Turning sharply left, they climbed a couple of hundred yards more onto – into – an otherworldly landscape, a different world.

The road had leveled out and they drove through an unnaturally flattened plateau, with odd-shaped, artificial-looking hills scattered around. It appeared that a giant boy had played with his toy earthmovers, making arbitrary excavations and dumping dirt into cone-shaped sand-castle mounds, all sharp angles and straight sides. The whole thing was about a mile across, overgrown with a thin veneer of scrubby grass and thistle, and the gravel road they were on turned black. It put Markis in mind of a fantasy book he'd read as a boy, where the hero would shift through the thin shadowy layers between strange worlds with his mind, past an evil black road.

“Mountaintop removal mining,” Zeke remarked. “Blast off the top of the peak, scoop up the material and process it for coal or whatever other ore is in it. Repeat as necessary. Not very pretty, but efficient. And our salvation.”

He led the way in the Land Rover, turning off the black road that crossed the plateau toward the only remaining natural feature, a rising piece of the mountain that had not been removed. It loomed more than a thousand feet above, showing a covering of thick, undamaged natural forest. It was as if the miners had excavated up to the perimeter of this peak and decided to stop. Or maybe something convinced them to stop?

Zeke pulled the Land Rover to a halt, still well within the dug-out mining zone.

The rest of them pulled up in a line, getting out and stretching after the long drive. The men moved away from the lone woman in the group to pee behind the last SUV. Like so often happened, the lady was going to have to wait or squat behind a bush.

Markis looked at Elise and smiled, shrugged sympathetically.

She had lifted her eyes to the sky, sneezed, then seemed to notice his gaze. A smile broke out warm on her face. "I hope wherever we're going, we're close," she said, stepping over to him, and he embraced her.

Everything smelled of mountains. Clean. The afternoon sun felt warm but the air was biting with the chill of late winter. An eagle screamed high above, making lazy circles among the turkey buzzards riding a thermal over the warmer, exposed ground. Markis held her closer.

"We are really beyond hicksville," Larry remarked. It broke the mood as Markis realized they had an audience, polite and benevolent, but even so...they pulled apart.

Markis guessed Larry must be feeling invincible after coming back from those injuries. He knew better. No plague in the world would bring you back from a bullet to the brain, or one that tore through the heart. It wasn't magic.

Opening up the back of the Jeep, Markis reached into an ice chest he'd packed full of food and slapped together a sandwich, popping open a soda can. He left the chow out for other hungry people, making a gesture of invitation. Then he went over to see what Zeke was doing.

He watched as Zeke opened up a case and laid a topographical map on the hood of the Land Rover. Zeke took a lensatic compass out of his pocket and started doing a resection. Markis realized that he was trying to locate something specific, old-school, without the GPSs they had dumped for fear of being traced.

Zeke took sightings on known points, in this case mountaintops, plotted the azimuths back from those points on the map, and found their exact position at the intersection of the plots. Once he had done that, he used a thin clear plastic

military protractor to draw a line between their position and a point already marked on his map, measuring the angle. He then lifted the compass to his eye and sighted along it, turning until he was looking exactly along that bearing. He stared at something there for about fifteen seconds, fixing it in his mind. Then he turned back to the group, which by this time had formed a rough semicircle around him, watching. He rolled up the dummy cord attached to the compass, putting it in his pocket.

“Let me tell you a story,” Zeke began dramatically. “One day about ten years ago I got a funny call at my desk in the Pentagon. I was doing my hated staff tour and I really don’t know how the call got routed to me, but a lot of weird calls come to the Pentagon from concerned citizens about everything from UFOs to unexploded ordnance. This one was from a manager at a mining company who had run across some kind of old underground government installation in the course of their operations.” He pointed with an outstretched arm at where he had been looking just a moment ago. “Right there.”

“What is it?” Elise queried.

With the air of a showman, he responded, “I was hoping you would ask. I’ll show you. Follow along, kiddies, and don’t wander off.”

Zeke climbed back behind the wheel of the Land Rover, and the rest of them piled back into the other trucks. He led the way directly across the plateau, powering over head-high thistles and through brambles, the only things that would take root in the mine tailings and basalt, a thin layer of green. After about three hundred yards they approached the untouched mass of older-growth forest. Majestic evergreens, ash and oaks rose abruptly at the dividing line, with lots of snow patches on the ground where the sun touched only weakly.

Looking back under the trees, they could see a dilapidated cyclone fence, with rusted and unreadable signs hanging every ten yards or so on it. Some lay on the ground where they had fallen off. The Land Rover drove leftward along the tree line for a few seconds, then abruptly veered right, onto a barely visible remnant of a concrete road. Thirty yards in, they came upon a still-standing steel-poled gate. The sign on this barrier was newer, and contained official warning phrases: “Restricted Area” and “Use of Deadly Force Authorized.”

Zeke hopped out, unlocked the new, heavy padlock on the chain that held it shut, then drove through. He must have been here before. Maybe the lock was his. They paused to let Spooky lock it up again.

There was some chatter over the net, but Zeke kept his mouth shut, probably enjoying the sense of mystery he had created. Markis was curious, but

then, he liked a mystery when nobody was trying to kill him because of it. He just kept his eyes open and tried to figure it out on his own.

They drove up the road, two hundred more yards of still-serviceable but overgrown concrete, until they came to an enormous set of double doors in the mountainside, hidden by trees that had grown up. The opening would be big enough to drive a five-ton military truck straight in if the doors were thrown back. Markis figured Zeke wouldn't have led them up here if he didn't know how to get in.

The doors had a large wheel mechanism, like a ship's pressure hatch, holding them shut, and a big handle next to a hooded boxy metal fitting. It looked like it would take two men to move the wheel, if it would turn at all in its current state of disrepair. Apparently someone had slapped a coat of paint on the door and mechanism a few years back and there was another of the steel warning signs bolted to the front.

When everyone had dismounted from the trucks in front of the doors, in the twilight under the trees, Zeke called out in a loud announcer's voice, "Welcome to the Bunker: code name Sosthenes."

Chapter 16

Zeke sprayed some lubricant into the mechanism of the door, stuck a big odd key into a hole in the hooded box fitting, and then cranked the handle to the left like on a combination safe. It took two of them to turn the hatch wheel, and three of them to get it closed again from the inside. It was well made, but it was old. There were manufacturing plates fastened to the inside of the door that said “US Army Corps of Engineers” and “1943” on them.

They drove their little convoy into an unlit tunnel, bored into the mountain at a shallow downward angle. The headlights showed hastily cut living rock, the seams and veins visible as the tunnel descended through layers and lodes. There was crude and deteriorating bracing of riveted steel girders, and the whole thing was faced with rusting steel mesh. This kept most of the rocks out, but there was one part where they had to get out and manhandle some small boulders and rock fall where it had broken through into the open space of the tunnel. This place hadn't seen any maintenance in a while.

About a quarter mile down there was another huge double door, with a smaller, man-sized one inset into one side. They opened these too, with less difficulty since they hadn't been exposed to the elements at all. They drove through, into a vast open space the size of an indoor sports stadium, perhaps two hundred yards across and a hundred high. Huge girders braced the roof, and more steel mesh. There were only a few rock falls that had broken through, along with a trickle of water that was forming limestone riffles and tiny stalactites along the rising, sloping wall-ceiling.

Rows of vehicles stood covered in dull green canvas tarpaulins – five-ton and deuce-and-a-half trucks, vintage jeeps, and construction vehicles, things Markis didn't recognize that could be some kind of mining and cutting equipment. He saw a row of dusty glass windows along one side, and several doors. Two truck-sized tunnel openings led even deeper.

They got out and turned off the vehicles, but left the truck lights on. Nine people shuffled around the four modern vehicles in the eerie silence, punctuated by dripping water and the sound of engines cooling.

“Cold in here.” Elise rubbed her arms, then pulled someone's jacket out from behind a seat and put it on.

Markis suppressed a flash of jealousy as he saw it wasn't his. He should

have thought of that. She had nothing but the clothes she was wearing. He resolved to fix that situation. He resolved to give her whatever she needed.

“What is this place?” asked Roger, peering nearsightedly around through his thick glasses. It appeared the question was somewhat rhetorical, for he started to answer it himself. “Some kind of government bunker, built back in World War Two...but that backhoe is a 1950s model.”

“Right,” answered Zeke. “The Sosthenes bunker was commissioned in 1940 during the Battle of Britain, when they thought there would eventually be a chance of air raids on the East Coast by the Third Reich. The Germans had some super-bombers in development that never panned out. Then as that threat waned, the US kept building because of the possibility of the Nazis getting the A-bomb – and because they’d already paid for it. Never underestimate the inertia of a government contract and jobs in a Senator’s home state. It was to be a place for continuity of governance, where the President, Congress and the Supreme Court could maintain function. It was kept active into the cold war, through the changeover to the better-known Greenbrier bunker, code named ‘Greek Island,’ in 1961.”

Arthur crossed his arms. “There is no way this kind of construction could withstand a nuclear attack. The whole thing would probably collapse. Glass in the windows? Pathetic!”

Zeke responded, “They had no idea until the first test how powerful an atomic blast would be. It surprised even the scientists working on it. That’s why they built the Greenbrier bunker, after they knew what it would take. Remember, we were stretched to the limit in the Big One. Once it ended, we breathed a big sigh of relief – for about four years. The Soviet Union detonated its first atomic bomb in 1949, so the U.S. geared up for the possibility of nuclear war. The government initiated Project Greek Island in the 1950s and once they had that super-bunker, this place got mothballed. Fortunately for us, over the next half-century plus, it got forgotten about too.”

“How do you know they won’t dig up the information on its existence, pardon the pun?” Elise asked.

“Because I searched every database I could access and deleted all references to it. I buried the only hardcopy file I could find in the basement of the Pentagon, and I took the keys out. It’s in the wrong box on the wrong shelf in the wrong vault, in a section that has already been digitized. But the Sosthenes file never was digitized. It was *intended* to be secret. So barring incredible luck or a tipped-off search taking thousands of man-hours, no one knows about this.”

“Except that mining official.”

“Sure, but all he knows is he ran into some unknown government property bounded by a fence. He never got in. Once I took a look I knew I couldn’t let anyone in on this. I told him it was hazardous waste storage, and if their mining operations got too close they could release toxic materials. And...I kinda let slip something about nerve gas and national security.”

Several of them chuckled. Elise said, “So he thought you were giving him a cover story and it was really old chemical weapons.”

“Yup,” Zeke replied. “So unless all hell breaks loose and the government actually comes out into the open to find us, enlists the public, it’s very unlikely anyone will connect the dots. If they do...at least we have our Alamo.”

“They all died at the Alamo, boss,” muttered Larry.

“Okay, bad metaphor. It’s our Cheyenne Mountain.”

“That’s good. That’s an Air Force Base,” Markis chimed in.

“Smartass blue-suiter. How about I show you the best part.”

“I hope it involves food, because we only got enough for a couple days,” Larry said.

Zeke’s ever-present grin got wider. “Oh, baby, you have no idea. There’s enough in here for years. Come on, let’s run a jump.” He drove the Land Rover over to a diesel generator sitting by the wall, then hooked up his jumper cables. A moment later he had the machine started, and a faint orange glow started above their heads from dozens of sodium lamps. Not all of them worked, but there were enough. They turned off the car lights to conserve their batteries.

Elise wondered about the diesel emissions until she noticed its exhaust pipe ran up to a hole in the wall. The air in the cavern seemed fairly fresh, too. There must be some natural ventilation, like in those “breathing caves” found here and there.

Zeke walked over to the door at the end of the long row of windows. Vinny went with him. He turned on the lights inside, which were faint and flickering fluorescents. They looked like they wouldn’t last much longer. If they were going to refurbish and use this place, light bulbs were only the first of many things they would need.

“Oh man, this is a trip!” Vinny blurted, looking at the old equipment.

“Yep, and not a computer in sight. Just good old dials, knobs and switches.” Zeke flipped some of the switches and the lights came on in the two big tunnels, stretching deeper down into the mountain. The generator coughed and strained under the increased load. He flipped another two switches and two-

thirds of the sodium lamps above their heads went off. There was still plenty of light.

“What happens when we run out of diesel?” Markis asked him.

“That’s just for temporary use. Let’s go down and get this place running again. Larry, Roger, Vinny, you come with me. We’ll get the hydroelectric plant going. You guys look around up here. There shouldn’t be anything more dangerous than falling rocks. That reminds me – I suggest everyone wear a helmet. If you don’t have one, there are hard hats in there,” he said, pointing to a storage room door.

It took about four hours but eventually the tone of the generator changed, and a plethora of ancillary lights came on – exit lights over doors, secondary lights in the rooms behind the windows, and the sodium lamps got brighter. They also felt the sougning of a ventilation fan, apparently to supplement the natural air. That would help if they had to run any vehicles. Spooky took it upon himself to turn off the diesel generator, and nothing bad happened. It looked like the hydroelectric power was sufficient.

They’d been keeping busy exploring the cavern and the installations around it. There were locker rooms with showers and toilets, and after a lot of running, the water from the pipes cleared. The hot water faucets even ran fairly warm. There must be a hot spring or something like that.

There were offices with carefully mothballed manual typewriters, sealed canisters of replacement ribbons and bottles of ink. There were airtight boxes with paper and envelopes and manila folders, straight out of the 1950s. There were light bulbs and extension cords and fans and swivel chairs and a whole huge room full of shelves stocked with automotive parts in tinfoil and cellophane packing. There were cans of bearing grease and motor oil and differential oil and paint and ammonia and everything else imaginable. Markis wondered how much money they could get for some of this stuff online. He knew one source of income they had if nothing else.

Much of it was unusable after all this time, but some was pristine, like the day it was made. He looked at a perfect, shiny set of hubcaps for the 1948 Ford Super Deluxe sitting on its flattened tires in the big cavern. The car itself had 257 miles on the odometer. It would probably fetch a year’s pay at an auction. This place was a museum and a goldmine.

Later on, Zeke showed them stacks of mint gold and silver coins in a vault, placed there to ensure the occupants had money if paper currency collapsed. There were also bundles of uncirculated US bills from the 1940s, which would

fetch more than face value to collectors, at least twenty million dollars.

From this Markis realized why Zeke hid that file. He was as honest and patriotic as the next man, but who wouldn't be tempted by twenty million in ready cash and all these toys? And it was all unknown, a victimless crime, a treasure trove just waiting half a century for someone to put it to use. He felt slightly guilty, but there were far more important considerations.

Chapter 17

Markis and the rest spent the next day moving in and trying to get the basics working in the bunker. Months of effort stretched in front of them if they were to live here long term.

They found a residence level, with over a hundred individual rooms. There were open bays that could house many more people in less comfort. Elise and Markis took rooms well away from each other. Markis didn't trust the emotions born of those first intense moments, and he figured Elise didn't either, so he would give it time, but they did spend a lot of time together, talking around their feelings, spiraling closer.

Struggling with not letting their physical desires for each other take over, Markis realized more and more how much they were slaves to their own biology. There was an old saw about "if you don't control your passions, your passions control you." Markis resolved to remain his own master, no matter what the Eden Plague did to him. He wasn't about to jump in the sack with someone too soon. He'd done enough of that when he was younger. Besides, he couldn't be sure it wasn't just because of the Plague...and did he really want to risk her getting pregnant?

They – the two of them, and the rest – ate almost every meal together in a cafeteria with a kitchen attached. Right now food preparation consisted of dumping cans into saucepans and heating up the contents.

After a few days Zeke called a meeting for dinnertime, and they gathered there at one long table. He talked on his feet, pacing up and down, while everyone ate. "We have electricity, food, heat, air, and supplies. We need to discuss our next move."

"What 'we,' Kemo Sabe?" Larry deadpanned.

Laughter burst from the older people. Elise and Vinny looked confused.

"I'll explain later," Markis told her. *Probably barely even heard of the Lone Ranger and Tonto.*

"Seriously. What are we going to do?" Zeke said.

A long silence. A raised hand.

"Yes, Roger?"

"We need to set up a lab again. We need equipment. An electron microscope. DNA sequencers. Computers."

“Noted. You three scientists draw up a wish list.”

“We need to set up the satellite dish, get comms up. We need internet, preferably tap into a landline somewhere,” said Vinny.

“Ditto. Make a list. You’ll be on the shopping team.”

Markis crossed his arms. “Aren’t we getting ahead of ourselves? These are details. We need to discuss the bigger questions.”

“Such as?”

“Identity. Policy. Strategy. Structure. What are we? Are we just a bunch of outlaws? Are we an A-team? A township? Does everyone start bringing their families in here? Or do some of you who can, go back to a normal life and keep this knowledge to yourself? Because any one of us could blow the whole thing wide open, and get everyone buried deep in government black.”

Zeke blew air past his lips. “All right, good questions. Anyone?”

Elise said, “I think I speak for all of the former INS employees when I say we want to stay here for now and resume our research. This involves the fate of humanity. I don’t trust Jenkins or the government to handle it right. As long as this doesn’t turn into some kind of freaky cult, I don’t care much what the policy and strategy is. Not right now.”

Skull spoke. “We need to agree on some ROE, though. Rules of Engagement. Such as, no one they are looking for can leave the bunker unless it’s absolutely necessary.”

“He’s right,” Markis said. “That means me and the INS people stay. And, nobody tells anyone else about the situation without everyone’s agreement.”

“Everyone? That’s cumbersome,” Zeke said.

Markis responded, “Okay, then majority agreement? Right. I’ll start first. My dad lives a couple of hours from here. He has his own plane and some land. They will probably be watching him because of me, but we can agree in advance that he can be told and he will eventually come in, but only when we are sure it’s safe.”

Nods all around.

“And I know Zeke is waiting to say what he wants, so I’ll say it for him. His family. Wife and two kids. The longer we wait, the more likely they will connect him to me and the harder it will be to get them here. Zeke?”

“Yeah. What DJ said. I want them brought here. And my mom. She’s in a home with Alzheimer’s. She doesn’t even know me anymore. I don’t mean to sound cold-blooded but we might as well try the Eden Plague on her. She’s just in God’s waiting room right now anyway. It would be worth whatever side

effects if her mind was restored, even for a couple of years.”

“Everyone okay with that?” Markis asked.

Vinny said, “Why don’t we all agree that any immediate family that we trust can come in, but they can’t leave. Don’t tell anyone who’s going to stay outside *anything*.”

“See, there’s policy. Agreed?” Markis asked. Everyone did. “Is there anyone that plans to go back to their life and forget about all this?” Markis looked in Skull, Spooky and Vinny’s direction. They were the big question marks.

“No way,” says Vinny. “This is the coolest thing since forever. I always wanted to live outside the law and hack into anything I wanted. My family is Uncle Tran’s, so I’m just speaking for myself.”

There were nods and quiet mumbles of approbation. Everyone looked at Spooky, expectantly.

“I cannot bring my own family. Too many friends, brothers, uncles, cousins, my people. Unless they all come. So I go back. I am the man on the outside. Maybe there is a time I will bring my people in. Or send in some of them. Agree?” Spooky looked around anxiously, an unusual emotion for him to show. Everyone nodded.

Zeke said, “Done. Skull?”

Skull sat impassively, his arms crossed like Markis’s. “I have to think about it,” he said. Stares turned his direction, some hostile.

Markis didn’t want the man to be driven away. He had to keep peace. “Just as long as you don’t give up our secrets, I’m okay with that,” he said.

The rest of the group followed his lead, accepting. Skull’s expression might have thawed a trifle.

Larry spoke up. “Well, I’m infected, so I ain’t goin’ back to live. But I’d like to go back home for a while, see who might be good candidates. And I got my eye on a honey but it ain’t a done deal yet. I got a sister and she got kids, and then there’s my mom and dad. All right?”

Nods all around.

Zeke clasped his hands together, rubbed them briskly. “That’s settled, then. Because they’re at the most risk, the first expedition is to get my family. Then we can get anyone else’s. Who’s coming with me?”

The discussion sorted itself into two parts. The A-team composed of Skull, Larry, Spooky, and Zeke would go get his family. Once they were secured and en route to the bunker, Larry and Spooky and maybe Skull would go get Larry’s

relatives, and possibly some of Spooky's. The rest would stay at the bunker, with Vinny doing the shopping trips, and get the place in order.

Chapter 18

Right before the mini-A-team left, Elise sought out Zeke. She watched from the doorway for a minute as he suited up, before disturbing him. “Here. Protein bars. Stick ’em in your pockets.”

“Thanks, doc.” He took them, stuffing them into various places in his clothing.

“I’m not a doctor.”

“Closest thing we got, right?”

“No, that would be Daniel. I’m just a scientist. I never practiced on anybody.”

“Except for injecting people with the Plague.” Zeke grinned. “Like the Swiss Army knife of combat medicine.”

“Funny you should say that. Take this too.” Elise handed him a zippered pouch.

“What is it?”

“Open it.”

“Syringes? See, you’re a doc. What’s in it?”

“Like you said, Eden Plague. From my saliva.”

“But I can just bite anyone I need to.”

“I think this will work faster. Bigger dose. And it might have its uses.”

He opened the pouch, looked at the two preloaded syringes wrapped in padding. “Okay.”

Elise took his hand. “Good luck, Zeke. I’m looking forward to seeing your wife and Ricky and...”

“Millie.”

“Right.” She smiled crookedly. “Bring them back safe. I’m tired of being the only woman here.”

He hugged her like a father, like a brother. “Thanks, Elise. I will. Take care of DJ.”

Zeke and Larry took the Land Rover, Skull and Spooky the Cherokee, a natural division. On the way Zeke and Larry hardly stopped talking, reminiscing

about missions and comrades, friends and golf games, women and bars.

The other two drove in relative silence, listening to the radio and making a few comments about the road. They all had their secure radios but kept them in push-to-talk mode.

Eight hours later the pair of SUVs pulled into a truck stop at the outskirts of Fayetteville, North Carolina, just after dark. They sent Spooky in for food.

Zeke opened up a disposable cell phone, activated it, and called a special set of digits. He entered a code and his home number. This process masked the call, routing it through an offshore international service, nearly impossible to trace.

“Hi, Cass, it’s me. How’re the kids?”

“Everything’s green here, Mister J.”

Zeke’s blood chilled. “Okay, sweetheart. I’ll be gone for *two* more weeks.” He rambled on about family concerns couple of minutes before hanging up. Disposing of the phone, he switched his secure radio to voice-activated mode.

“They’re under surveillance. My wife gave me the code for ‘being watched.’ I told her to expect extraction at two a.m.”

“Damn, Sam, you got that girl well trained,” Larry chuckled.

“Actually, she got me trained. I never told you what she did before, did I?”

“Not really. State Department or something?”

“Well, I did meet her at the US Embassy in Moscow. I was there as a military attaché. She was deputy station chief.”

“She was *Agency*?”

“Yup. In the ultimate tradecraft training ground city. She’ll be fine. We just have to make a plan to get them out and break contact. That means we have to locate the surveillance and shut them down.”

Skull chuckled. “Does that mean I’m weapons free now that DJ Do-Right is out of the picture?”

Zeke sighed, exasperated. “Alan, if we kill their people it will raise the stakes tenfold. Right now daddy Jenkins is trying to keep everything hush-hush. Dead Feds, or even contractors, will force him to fess up to his superiors and they’ll come after us like a pack of hounds.”

“Joking, boss, joking.”

“I hope so. If you have to shoot, wound them. One of us will bite them if we have to.”

“Why don’t you do that anyway? Won’t that screw them up? Get them fighting the disease instead of us?”

A long, thoughtful pause. “Interesting idea. Maybe when we get back we should start trying to weaponize this thing. Create a delivery system. Darts or something. See if it can be put in a water supply. So we can make good on our threats.”

“Hmm.”

Spooky returned with the food.

“How do you think they connected you with Markis?” Skull asked Zeke.

“Good intel work. Assemble a database of all his associates. Cross match with things like, ‘Did he treat them in the field?’ ‘Are they at home or out of town?’ Stuff like that.”

“I hate intel pukes,” Skull growled.

“Only when they’re on the other side.”

“I hate them all.”

Zeke exchanged silent looks with Larry. He shrugged.

“Let’s focus on our five-meter targets, shall we? We make a sweep of my neighborhood. Locate the surveillance. Make a plan. Ready?”

Affirmative grunts and sounds.

They drove into Fayetteville. Zeke led them to an unused corner of a large, well-lit gas station. “This is our ORP. Make your sweep, maintain comms, meet here.”

The SUVs split up, approaching Zeke’s suburban middle-class home from two different directions. They quartered and searched the blocks, looking for vehicles with the telltale signs of a surveillance team: being parked on the street, not in a driveway; extra antennas; roomy models, like vans or big SUVs; too-black windows; sitting heavy and low on their suspensions; magnetic business logos, the kind that can be slapped on and peeled off easily. There were many clues if one knew what to look for.

It didn’t take long. Skull spotted them first, and called on the tactical net. “I got a cable service truck on your street. Old van, new paint, UHF and satellite antenna, barrier between the driving and cargo compartment. Parked between houses.”

“That’s probably it. No cable technicians working this time of night.”

“Do they ever work?”

“Ha ha. We going in light or heavy?”

“No way to sneak up on them. If you want them deactivated, we have to do it heavy.”

“Understood. Rally now at the ORP.”

They met back at the gas station. Zeke said, “We need a shock truck. Spooky?”

“If we can find it, I can steal it.”

“Okay, spread out, report when we got one.”

It took them twenty-five minutes to locate a suitable truck, a flatbed two-ton. Spooky had it gone in sixty seconds. Skull drove. They talked over their plan of attack on the way.

Zeke and Larry pulled up at the end of the alley that ran behind his house. “In position.”

“Roger. Commencing shock run.”

Skull put the truck into gear, coming around the corner nose-on the surveillance van. At the same time Spooky drove the Cherokee around the opposite corner, slowly, focusing the watchers’ attention on him as they looked out the back window.

The shock truck was going forty when its heavy steel bumper smashed into the nose of the van. Impact drove the vehicle several car-lengths down the street, coming to rest on its side.

Spooky pulled up in the Cherokee. He and Skull jumped out of their vehicles, charging the van. Through the shattered back window they could see broken electronics and camera equipment, and two men lying amid the wreckage, moving weakly. The shock had jumbled them like mice in a paint shaker, and the smell of leaking gasoline wafted through the mess.

Spooky stepped through the opening and pistol-whipped each in turn, ensuring unconsciousness. Then he pulled out the syringe Zeke had given him and pumped half of the contents into each. “Get them out, Skull.”

“We should let ’em burn,” he grumbled, reaching in to drag the men out with Spooky’s help, tossing them roughly onto the closest suburban lawn. He keyed his mike. “Van and team out of commission and infected. We’re extracting; people are already coming out of their houses.” Skull popped a smoke grenade and tossed it into the van. The flaming smoke mix soon ignited the dripping gasoline and the vehicle caught fire with a *whoosh*. By that time they were around the block and heading toward the ORP.

Zeke and Larry had already pulled through the alley up to his house’s back gate, blasting twice on the horn. Zeke exited, fastening the barrier out of the way, and then bolted inside. A moment later he ran out, carrying a skeletal boy wrapped in a blanket. Larry held the door open. Right behind him followed an athletic woman of about forty and a girl of eight.

“Hi, Cass. Hi, Millie,” Larry rumbled.

“Hi, Mister Larry!” piped the girl.

Cassandra nodded to Larry, handing him a suitcase.

Headlights appeared and the roaring of an engine sounded at the end of the alley, accelerated toward them. Cass shoved Millie into the Land Rover, while Larry reached for his shotgun under the seat.

Muzzle flashes sparkled from both sides of the oncoming vehicle, and Larry’s twelve-gauge roared over and over. Zeke hunched over Ricky, shielding him with his body, while Cassandra drew a pistol from the small of her back, taking cover behind the door to return a rapid hail of bullets.

The headlights wobbled, then skewed leftward as the oncoming vehicle bucked and rolled down the alley with a grinding crash of metal. Cassandra reloaded while Larry ran at the smoking wreck of a Suburban. He looked inside, seeing two men unconscious. He reached in, taking their guns and tossing them into a nearby garbage can, then knelt down among the wreckage.

“I can’t believe I’m doing this,” he said aloud to himself, then bit them each in turn. “Feel like a freakin’ vampire.” He returned to the Land Rover.

Larry was almost there when he heard an anguished sob, choked off, then a high keening. He leaped forward, shotgun searching for a target, but there wasn’t anything to shoot.

Cassandra knelt over Zeke, who lay stretched out on the ground. Millie stood there wailing, her small hands tangled in her hair, pulling. Larry pushed her gently aside, confident the Eden Plague would make it all right.

Not this time.

Zeke’s eyes stared sightless at the glowing suburban sky. Blood and brains leaked from the hole in his head. Cassandra stroked his face, crooning, “No, no, no...”

Larry cursed, a string of bitter vulgarities. “Come on, Cass, he’s gone. He’s gone. More might be on the way, we have to get going, we have to break contact.”

Cassandra growled with frustration, muttering under her breath, “Son of a bitch, son of a bitch, son of a bitch! Help me get him in. We’re not leaving him.”

Together they rolled Zeke in a blanket, then manhandled his body into the back of the SUV. Larry drove them away from the scene as rapidly as he could without attracting attention.

“What was that?” asked Spooky over the radio.

“They got Zeke. Lucky head shot. He’s gone,” Larry answered miserably.

Silence. Then, “Shit.”

“Meet at the ORP. We still have to get Zeke’s mom.”

“What?” asked Cassandra. “Why? She’s in a facility. What can we do?”
Her face was a frozen mask of iron control.

“Because we can cure her Alzheimer’s, we think. It’s a new thing. But if we cure her we have to take her with us because if they find out we did, they will turn her into a guinea pig in a lab somewhere.”

Cassandra digested this as they met at the ORP. “All right, I’ll tell you where to go. Do you think they’ll be watching her?”

“We have to hope not. They can’t be everywhere.”

Twenty minutes later they pulled into a complex labeled “Green Pastures Managed Care Home.” They took her out the back way in a wheelchair, dodging a sleepy staff, and got her into the vehicle.

The return trip to the bunker was a smooth surreal nightmare. Ten bags of truck stop ice packed Zeke’s body in the back of the Cherokee. Larry drove the Land Rover, silent, bleak. Zeke’s mother Beulah sat buckled into the front seat, humming softly to herself for a while before falling asleep. Cassandra sobbed from time to time, an arm around each of her children in the back seat. Millie slept most of the way, which was a relief; it wasn’t real to her.

About two hours out, Ricky spoke up. “I’m hungry, mom.” He reached up to grasp her arm.

“Ricky!” She took his hand in hers, feeling the strength of his grip.

“Mama, I’m hungry. I’m really hungry.”

“Cass,” Larry said. “Cass, he has to eat. It’s really important. Here.” He rummaged in a cooler between the seats. “Have him drink this protein shake.”

“That’s not for kids!”

Ricky started to cry, clutching his stomach. “Unnhh.”

“Please, Cass, trust me! It’s what he needs. Zeke must have given him the cure before he...before he got hit. It burns energy and food.”

Cassandra made her decision to trust Larry, grabbing the can and opening it with the flip-top. She put it to Ricky’s lips.

He grabbed the can with both hands and guzzled it down.

“His hands are strong! That’s amazing; just yesterday he would never have been able to pick up that can!”

“I know,” Larry said. “It’s a miracle, a God-blessed miracle. I’m so sorry about Zeke. But this stuff...it’s gonna fix Ricky and it’s gonna fix Beulah and a lot more people in the world. We’ve got this place in the hills, you’ll see it

soon...” He went on explaining, bringing her up to date on what had happened.

She listened with half an ear and half her mind, lost in the wonder of her son’s recovery.

Chapter 19

Elise and Daniel met them hand in hand at the cavern with all the vehicles, what they called the Motor Pool. Markis knew there was something seriously wrong when he saw the expressions on their faces as the two men in the Cherokee got out.

“Weren’t you guys supposed to take off?” Markis saw the Land Rover but didn’t see Zeke. By the time he had looked around, the others had opened the back of the SUV and hefted his body onto the cold cavern floor.

Markis stared at it in shock. At them. “How?” Elise clutched his hand, her eyes pouring tears.

“Unlucky shot. They had four guys on the house. We only spotted two. The other two must have been a reaction force. They opened fire on us and we took them out. But Zeke...” Skull waved vaguely, a helpless thing. More emotion showed on his face then, than Markis had ever seen before: grief, anger, bitterness.

Markis wanted to make some kind of gesture to Skull. If it had been Larry, he might have hugged him. He settled for putting a hand on the bald man’s shoulder. “Thanks for bringing him back.”

Skull shrugged Markis’s hand off, turning away. Markis could smell his barely buried rage. Maybe that was a good thing; maybe rage meant he wasn’t sociopathic, just...angry.

They took Zeke’s body and put it on ice in the bunker’s morgue. The scientists wanted to make sure they had the cadaver to study later. That was what Zeke would have wanted, they claimed. Markis got the family settled into quarters. Elise stayed with them, and even though they’d only just met, the two women clung to each other in sisterly comfort. The children seemed to accept her naturally as a second mother, or at least an older sister. Eventually they all slept.

Markis’s sleep was troubled with images of death and horror, of bodies lying asleep and he couldn’t wake them. He woke in the middle of the night, thinking, *it wasn’t supposed to happen this way!*

But he knew everyone died eventually.

The next morning brought some relief. When Markis got to breakfast he found Ricky shoveling canned ham and eggs into his mouth, with Cassie and

Millie and Elise at the table with him, eating more sedately. He got a plate of breakfast and sat down with them. He spoke to the boy. “How you doing, sport? You remember me?”

Ricky shook his head.

“That’s all right, it was five years back or so.” He looked at Cassandra. “Sorry to be such a stranger. And I’m sorry to have brought this on you and your family. If I’d have known...”

“None of us can know, DJ. We’re in God’s hands.”

That made Elise angry, though not as angry as she might have been before the Plague. “How can you believe that? With all this crap going on, how can you believe God cares?”

Cassandra turned to the other woman. “Maybe because I think things would be a lot worse if He didn’t.”

“Then why doesn’t he clean the world up? Why just keep things not too bad and not too good?”

“Maybe He expects us to do our part. Make our own mistakes. Take responsibility. Maybe He doesn’t want to be our nanny. And maybe He works through people – people who make things like the Eden Plague.”

Markis held up a placating hand. “Please, let’s not have my two favorite women in the world fighting.”

“We’re not fighting, we’re arguing.” Elise looked petulant, irritated.

“Either way. We’re all friends here, and we’re under a lot of stress.”

Cassandra reached across the table to put her hand on Elise’s arm with earnest, tear-filled eyes. “My heart aches for Zeke, but he died doing what he wanted to. Protecting people. Saving people. Saving us. He passed this Eden thing on to Ricky and saved his life. We treated Beulah and she recognized me this morning! We have to hold on to the good he did. And this Eden Plague is so amazing! This whole thing. It will change the world. He was willing to die for that.”

Markis said, “Yeah. But will it change the world for the better? It could be a wrecking ball.” He exchanged glances with Elise. Then Spooky caught his eye from across the room.

“Excuse me a minute.” Markis walked over to the Vietnamese man.

Spooky said, “We go now. Skull and me. Better that way. You want to reach me, you talk to Van Vinh.”

“What about...what about Skull?”

“I don’t know. He love Zeke. He very angry. Maybe he stir up the hornets.

What can we do? No man can live in another's heart."

Markis licked his lips. "You still have some Eden Plague in that other syringe?"

"Yes."

Markis stared at him, willing him to understand.

Spooky's eyes widened fractionally. He nodded, slowly. "Only if I must."

"It's better than killing him. At least then he has a chance to change.

Maybe the Eden Plague will help him heal some of his pain."

"But you say with the Psycho, they maybe turn very evil."

"That's just a guess. We have no evidence or proof of how any of this works. I just know we have to give him a chance. What you do is on your own conscience."

He looked at Markis's face for a few more seconds, searching. For what, Markis didn't know; certainty perhaps, but he wouldn't find it. Spooky swallowed, then bowed, formally. "Goodbye, Daniel Markis. I think you are the Colonel Zeke now."

Markis bowed to him in return, shaken. *Master sergeants don't become colonels overnight.* He guessed now he had no choice. He sure didn't feel ready. Pushing the thought aside he watched Spooky walk down toward the motor pool. *Good luck, Spooky.*

A week of being buried alive here in Sosthenes made Daniel realize the idea about quarantining himself wasn't going to work. Physically he was not limited; it was the oppression of the mountain above him, the damp cold air anywhere not heated by machinery, and the lack of open spaces that was getting to him.

He drove himself hard, to keep the oppression and the black thoughts of Zeke's fate away. He spent as much time with Elise as he could spare, and with Millie and Cassie and Ricky, trying to make up for the Zeke-shaped hole in their lives.

Cassie bore up well, and she quickly established herself as the master of their intel field work, what is called tradecraft by those in the business. She spent long hours with Vinh, who ate up the knowledge and reveled in his job as gopher, supply specialist and intelligence operative. She soon had him taking trucks to various towns and cities, never the same place twice, selling currency

and coins to private collectors and shops and jewelers, buying loads of electronics, spare parts, cabling, fresh food, everything that the bunker needed.

Vinny and Daniel set up satellite and microwave dishes and other antennas on the mountaintop under cover of the trees, and some extra radar-scattering netting strategically placed to mask any overhead surveillance. The bunker entrance nearby was one of a dozen or so that led to various points on the mountain, providing access or escape for people on foot. By midweek everyone was taking sunlight breaks at least once a day at the nearest hatchway.

They also got all the internal telephones working, at each entrance and in all of the main rooms and offices. The phones weren't connected to the outside world but were still useful for their work.

By the end of the week the lab equipment started arriving. Daniel risked going outside driving one of two trucks, following Vinh to pick up several large crates in Richmond. It was a great relief just to be up in the sunlight and out in the open, bouncing along the country roads down to the freeway feeders to the Virginia capital and back. He thought if he could do that once a week he might be all right.

Larry had taken off on his own the day after Zeke died, heading back to Atlanta. That gave Cassie enough time to set up a rudimentary anonymous webmail system with him, using free accounts for communication. As long as everyone stayed away from certain keywords like 'Eden' or 'Plague' or 'Markis,' everything should be fine. Computers might be able to look at every e-mail in America, but people couldn't: they could only see what the software flagged. That was how to stay below the radar of the creeping Big Brother that America's government had become since 9-11.

They decided to keep to a more or less similar week to the outside world, work five or six days but for sure take Sunday off. Everyone was pushing too hard. So it was on a Sunday afternoon right after the barbecue outside their best hatch that Daniel found Elise.

She had been sitting against the mountainside a couple of hundred yards up on a granite ledge. He remembered she liked it there. She gave a little wave when she saw him hiking up, but he didn't smile.

"Elise...I need to talk to you," he said awkwardly.

"I know. I mean, okay. Let's talk."

He took a deep breath, then sat down beside her, not touching. Staring out into space. "I need to know something first."

"Sure." She didn't sound sure, even to herself.

“Can the EP be fixed? Really? Can the conscience-enhancing portion be overcome?”

Elise did a kind of double take, as if he had asked her a completely unexpected question. She thought about the question for a minute. “Not easily. Not soon. It repairs cells. It repairs a lot of things. It balances processes. If you told it not to repair brain cells or processes – theoretically, I mean – then it wouldn’t repair nerve cells either. That would preclude a lot of other injuries getting fixed. But it’s more than just brain cells or neurons or axons or whatever. It’s the regulation of hormones and a thousand delicate neurological processes. The fact this thing works at all is a miracle, testimony to the creators’ work. They did amazing things with primitive technology.”

Daniel nodded. “If the Russians really did it. I’m still wondering about extraterrestrial influence.” He let a long breath out. “So the virtue effect is intrinsic. Impossible to separate from the advantages. That’s good, I think.”

Elise replied, “I’m not so sure it’s good, if we can’t defend ourselves. I think this imperfect Eden Plague will push some people into being puritans and pacifists and Pharisees. It’s falling off the horse the opposite way. You feel it yourself, don’t you? You risked lives back there on the island because you used nonlethal ammo, when one shot to the brain would have put Karl down for good. But you couldn’t do it. Is that good or bad? What’s the lesser of the evils?”

Daniel replied, “I don’t know. I’m glad I didn’t have to kill him, and I’m glad he didn’t kill anyone else. I don’t have any easy answers. We have to operate within the parameters we have right now. Maybe later you can tweak the virus to keep the reluctance-to-kill virtue without making it a vice.”

She shrugged. “Maybe.”

Daniel rubbed his eyes, thinking. “Okay, then what about the hunger? The food needs? The excessive fertility?”

Elise let out a breath, as if she had been holding it. “That can be improved a lot easier, I think. Just time and money and research.”

Daniel nodded, thinking. They sat back against the granite, watching the puffy clouds, feeling the breeze through their jackets, smelling the sweet pine. He opened up a bag of trail mix and M&Ms, what backpackers called “gorp,” and set it on the rock between their thighs. A handful went into his mouth with a practiced flick. He took a deep breath. “Elise…” his voice trailed off.

“Yes. Go on, it’s okay.” Her tone was gentle.

“Elise,” he started again, “I care for you. I could call it something else but maybe it’s too soon. I think you care for me. But I think I’m in charge of this

whole thing now and I need to think about bigger issues than just the two of us. That means I need to...to put aside at least that much turmoil. Oh, I'm not saying this very well, I'm making it sound like it's a coldblooded decision." He turned to her, to look in her eyes. "I just mean –"

She reached for him then, her lips for his. Relief flooded through Daniel's body, relief that she had not rejected him. The kiss was magical, electric. He felt connected to her in a physical way, like a joining of their nervous systems, as if in that moment he could reach out his hands to her body right there on that breezy chilly mountainside, and it would be wonderful. But something stopped him, the thing that had begun to get in the way between them. A desire to do things better. To not screw this up the way he had screwed up his other relationships. He hadn't given the two of them nearly as much thought as he had about the world-shaking implications of the Plague, and he felt embarrassed to have put her in second place. But dammit, wasn't all of mankind more important than any two people? He gently broke the embrace, still holding her head in his hands. "Elise, we need to –"

"Shut up, Dan, and take me here," she whispered huskily. "Right here and now. I can't think of a more glorious place."

He groaned, eyes squeezed together. "Elise, I want you too, so much. But I want to do it right."

"Oh, we're going to do it right all right." She stared at him wide-eyed when he only chuckled, pained. "Okay. Do what?"

"You know. I mean...if we're in love...if we love each other..."

"I do love you," she said.

"I know. I mean, I mean, we should...make a commitment. Make it official."

Elise sat back, obviously stunned. "You mean like, uh, married? Sure, I assumed we would, eventually. But a moment like this only comes along once in a while. Let's take it while we can." She reached for him again.

He held her gently away. "Elise, I...I...I made a promise. To be a better person. I keep my promises. And I mean, I'm not a real religious guy or anything but I just think...I want to be married to you before we...you know." His voice dropped to a miserable whisper. "So maybe I won't screw it up this time."

She reached up to take his hand in both of hers. "I can't argue with your enhanced conscience now, can I?"

"Don't put this on the Eden Plague! That would mean it's not really me. But after my divorce and all those AA meetings...I promised my Higher Power

I'd do everything right with the next woman in my life. I screwed up so many times." His face begged her to understand.

She shook his hand between hers. "Well, I have to admire and respect you for sticking to your beliefs and promises, even if they're not mine." Her eyes crossed slightly as she thought it through, thought of a way around Daniel's dilemma. "There won't be any official marriage certificates or anything like that, right? We're off the grid. So a marriage is just our commitment to each other."

"It's a commitment in front of witnesses."

She sat back in defeat. "Damn you, I was going to construct a nice little argument for saying our vows right here and now and then doing it like bunnies."

Daniel laughed, a great belly laugh of relief that lasted a long time, leaving his eyes and nose running. "I love you too, you know." He reached for her embrace and they basked in the shared warmth of their bodies.

"Okay, mister goody-two-shoes. Let's go get married. Today." She leapt to her feet, pulling him with her down the trail.

They tried. It turned out that the rest wouldn't let them. After the girlish shrieking from Cass and Millie, the backslapping from the men, and confused looks from Ricky, everyone made them wait until the next day. But Daniel and Elise insisted on having the wedding outdoors in the sunlight.

They enjoyed the short, moving ceremony.

After "You May Kiss The Bride" Elise whispered in Daniel's ear, "Now let's go up to our ledge and do it like bunnies."

Chapter 20

It was days later, after bouts of dreamy pleasure and sessions of hard work for the both of them, that they finally made time for the conversation they had been trying to have before. Daniel dragged Elise back up to their ledge with a picnic dinner and sleeping bags as twilight fell. She took his licentious look with good cheer and eagerness. But once they'd gotten there and set out the food, he said, "I need to talk to you about something."

She looked worried for a moment, then sat back, picking up an apple and taking a crunchy bite. Her freckles danced as her strong jaw worked. "Uh-oh. When the man says that it's always bad," she teased, knowing full well it was usually the other way around.

He pushed aside the distraction of her simple natural beauty and plowed on. "Remember what we were talking about here before? When we had the conversation?"

"About doing it like bunnies?" He laughed. "Okay, yes. About the Eden Plague and fixing it?" she asked.

"Yes. I've decided something. I'm sorry if it sounds like I left you out of the decision, I don't mean to," he put on his most determined expression, "but I really believe it's the right thing to do."

"Do what?"

He licked his lips. "To start the Plague going. As soon as we can."

She sat back, still chewing apple, crossing her eyes slightly as she always did when thinking deeply. She ate the whole fruit, including the core, except that little stem they always leave on to ensure everyone knows it's really from a tree. Daniel sat and let her think.

Eventually she responded. "You know, if we had a few months, we could probably make it airborne. Graft in some highly infectious influenza. One good thing is, it appears the virus is designed to survive in all sorts of media – blood, saliva, salt water, even chlorinated water doesn't faze it. And once it's ingested, it's very infectious. Kind of like Ebola."

"That's good news. You know, they're going to be watching for people pulling research off the web."

"I'll work with Vinny and Cass to make sure we don't get traced."

"So...you agree with my plan?"

“Sounds more like a goal than a plan, but yes...I always did.” She smiled reassuringly.

“Even if it causes chaos.” His tone of voice made it a statement, not a question.

She sighed. “Yes. Horrible as it might be, it will make a better world.”

He felt a twisting in his gut. *Where have I heard that phrase ‘A Better World’ before?* “I bet Oppenheimer said the same thing.”

“Wasn’t he right? After Japan, has there been another use of atomic weapons?” Her gaze was intense.

“No. But a couple weeks ago you were arguing that assassinating enemy scientists was wrong,” he said.

“I didn’t say I had it all figured out. I don’t think there are real parallels anyway. This isn’t a weapon. It’s just goodness that this evil world won’t be able to cope with.”

“But it won’t be just those who accept it that get cured. If you make it contagious, it will be indiscriminate.” Daniel looked at her for approval.

“Good. The faster the better.”

“I think so too. But let me play devil’s advocate for a minute. Aren’t we making that decision for all people? Shouldn’t they decide for themselves? And what if five years down the line we all turn into aliens or zombies or something? What if it does something completely unexpected and wipes out the human race?”

“Come on, Daniel,” she said with exasperation. “I thought you were the risk-taker and adventurer.”

“I’m also the one who took the Hippocratic Oath. *First, do no harm.* I’m not sure I’m not violating it.”

She shook her head. “If you do surgery, you have to cut. You have to harm to save. But...whatever you decide, I’m with you. I’m your life partner.”

“You’re my wife.”

“Okay mister old-fashioned, yes I’m your wife and you’re my husband. But if I disagree I’m going to let you know. So now you have my views. Let’s practice making the next generation of Markises. Less talk, more do.” She reached for him with abandon.

The next day Markis called a council of war. He termed it “war,” not

because they were going to make war on anyone, but because he thought it likely enough their actions would start one.

Against them.

He prepared to explain it all the best he could in the conference room, with computer-projected slides and diagrams. Military briefing habits die hard.

Larry was back, with a whole group of his family members. Markis wasn't sure what he had told them but there were about twenty of them, and they were not invited to the council. They were too new and he wasn't going to risk some kind of schism or budding political dispute in their little community.

He'd made sure that Spooky and Skull got invited back as well. Spooky came, but Skull didn't. Markis couldn't worry about that.

Spooky had brought several family members with him after all: the old, and the sick. They were immediately injected with the Eden virus, and started getting better right away.

Markis was glad they weren't among those southeast-Asians who didn't believe in medical intervention. He remembered a big lawsuit in California some years back, with the doctors trying to force a Hmong family to allow their son, crippled from birth, to be operated on. The family won, and the boy stayed crippled. There were eerie parallels with the present situation.

So it was a small group that sat down to decide the fate of mankind: the scientists Elise, Arthur and Roger; Larry, the Nguyens, Cassie and Markis.

Markis opened with, "Good something-time, everyone. What, it's afternoon? Hard to remember in here." That got a courteous laugh. "I called you here to tell you about some plans I have."

Everyone sat up a bit straighter, eyes fixed on him.

"I've sounded everyone here out so I think we're all in agreement, but I want to be sure. We've got a couple of dozen new people and we need to keep friction to a minimum. That means we need to have a formal structure, for now.

"Spooky said a while back that I should be the new Colonel Zeke. But I don't feel right about that. I propose this to start: we're now the Sosthenes Bunker Council. One year from now – and you can tell people this – we can have elections to choose new Councilmen and Councilwomen. I will be the Chairman until then, unless anyone objects or wants to be it?" He looked everyone in the eye one after another. It was obvious he wanted them all to be on board for this critical first period, because he had to be autocratic to get anything done.

"Okay then. If anyone asks, that's my title. Chairman. Like a town council,

not like Mao.” Markis laughed, then put on his most earnest expression. “But here’s a serious subject. Very serious. We’ve just been drifting from crisis to crisis, doing what has to be done, but ignoring the main issues. So here’s the first one, and the biggest.”

He swept the room with his eyes. “I think we need to spread the Plague. Come what may.”

A babble broke out, then calmed down after a minute. Markis held up his hand for quiet.

“Most of what I just heard was, ‘why now?’ I’ll tell you why. First, Jenkins isn’t going to forget I killed his son. He *will* hunt us down.”

“So why not just turn yourself in?” asked Roger.

Markis smiled at his brazen lack of couth, and waved back the glares directed toward the man. “It’s a fair question. The main answer is, that won’t stop them. Yes, he blames me personally, but he also can’t lose control of the power of the Eden Plague, so he will be do everything he can to find us before turning it over to his superiors and being cut out. So that’s the second thing. They will be researching. Jenkins will figure a way to pour resources into labs and scientists and within a year or two will probably be ahead of us. If he figures out how to inoculate against it, or how to get rid of the virtue effect, we lose all our leverage.”

Elise cried, “But then we won’t be a threat to him!”

Markis shook his head. “Honey, we’ll always be a threat. We’re an uncontrolled power bloc with the potential to destabilize the world. And that leads to the third thing. They will find this place eventually. Despite all we can do, unless we seal up completely and never leave, something will happen. They will locate us, and they will come and disappear us. We have to move soon. We have to blow it open so wide it can’t be suppressed.”

“So why not just put it out to the media?” Vinny asked. “I can make it go viral worldwide.”

“Without proof, that won’t mean a thing. It will just alert Jenkins to our plans. We *will* go to the media, but only after we have acted.”

“You are starting to sound like a terrorist, DJ,” Larry said with a smile, but Markis could tell he was uneasy.

“Terrorists bring death and destruction as a way to get what they want,” Markis disagreed. “I am proposing we bring life to millions – billions – of people. Call it insurgency, or a freedom fight. I don’t think there’s ever been anything quite like this before, but the closest I can think of is a war for

independence. Spreading freedom and liberty, even though it upsets the established order.”

“So now we’re revolutionaries?” Larry said.

Markis nodded, undeterred. “We have to be. I have thought long and hard about this and I am willing to accept that responsibility. I can’t let the fear I am making a horrible mistake deter me from doing what I think is right. ‘That Others May Live’ has been my code my whole adult life. I know there will be unintended consequences. Like any vaccination, the Eden Plague will save a lot more lives than it loses.”

Silence prevailed for a time as everyone thought about what he had said.

“So how are we going to do it?” Roger asked, always the scientist.

Markis held up a hand. “First, we have to agree to do it at all. To impose a solution on the world. To spread the Eden Plague against their will. Sure, a lot of sick people will welcome it. But a lot of people will get it without a choice – from us spreading it deliberately. From birth, even, as soon as pregnant carriers start having babies.” He looked over at Elise and smiled. “So I’m going to leave this room right now. I’ll be at the nearest hatch, enjoying the breeze. I’ll come back in at sundown or when someone calls for me. But you all have to talk it out and reach a consensus, without me to impose it. Because it might be the most important decision ever made.”

Markis turned on his heel and left the conference room, hearing the voices rising as soon as the door shut. He walked with a measured, fatalistic tread toward the nearest opening on the mountainside.

Markis knew he should have just pushed it through. That’s what a military leader would have done. But this wasn’t a military operation anymore. He was leading a bunch of civilians, and they had to make their own decisions. Besides, Markis thought there were enough in there that agreed with him to sway the rest. If not...he’d figure something out.

Jogging up flights of steps just to burn off energy, once he got to the hatch he opened it and sat down on a nearby log, within easy hearing distance of the telephone in the box just inside. He stared out over the low hazy West Virginia mountains, smelling the pine in the air, hearing the rustle of leaves in the breeze, wondering about the future.

It was less than a half hour before the phone rang. He took that as a good sign.

The conference room was silent as Markis reentered. He sat down in the empty chair at the head of the table, and deliberately did not look at Elise. He

didn't want people thinking he was politicking with his wife.

Spooky cleared his throat. "Mister Chairman," he said softly, "I believe we are of accord together. We are willing to bear responsibility with you. We will spread the Plague."

Markis released the breath he'd been holding and smiled. Spontaneous applause broke out, a relaxation of their nervous tension. He took the breath back in, deeply. Now for the first test of their resolve and unity. "All right, that's talking the talk. Can we all walk the walk?"

"Meaning what?" asked Vinny.

"Meaning...we have to infect everyone here to start." Markis reached over to a side table where a small bag rested, unnoticed until now. Pulling out a cloth, he unrolled it to reveal five small syringes.

He didn't think they expected him to throw it in their faces like that – to take concrete action after an abstract decision. But as it slowly sank in, he could see the acceptance form on every face, most especially those who were not yet infected: Spooky, Vinny, Cassandra, Roger and Arthur.

Cassandra spoke first. "I'm in. I'm fine with it. I've seen what it can do. Shoot me up, doc." She rolled up her sleeve.

Markis took the first needle and walked over to her. Looking in her eyes for a moment and seeing no uncertainty, he plunged it in. She smiled, a little strained, but determined.

The rest rolled up their sleeves as well, and he got it done as quickly as he could, before anyone got cold feet. "Everyone's seen the effects. Be prepared for the appetite. We have no shortage of food. Just eat what you feel like. And keep an eye on each other, in case of anything strange. But now that that's done, we have to give it to everyone else in the bunker."

"What, against their will?"

Markis stared at Vinny, who had spoken. "We're talking about doing it to the whole planet. If we can't do it to our own people, our own families, how can we justify doing it to everyone else in the world?"

There came another exchange of shocked glances. It was all becoming real to them, and fast. He'd had days and days to think it over and settle it in his mind, but they were getting steamrolled in real time. He had to do it this way, though, or the consensus might collapse.

"So what I propose doing, and you will need to ratify, is this. We start putting it in the drinks at our meals, and keep doing it until everyone is in. Nobody gets to opt out." Markis could tell some were very uncomfortable with

this idea. The values of individual liberty and self-determination ran deep in American culture. He stamped on his own misgivings and forced the issue. “So that’s my first formal motion. I move the Bunker Council approve infecting everyone here, without their express permission.”

There was a pause. Then, “Seconded,” from Spooky. He shot a look at Vinh.

“All right, motion is on the floor. All in favor say ‘aye.’”

Ayes rang out, some tentative, but clear.

“Opposed?” Markis waited for Vinny to object, but he didn’t. “All right, that’s settled. Now, here’s my first bureaucratic act as Chairman – watch this presentation.”

Turning on the computer screen, he laid it out for them then, in graphics and charts and pictures, how he proposed to plague the world. Coming to the conclusion, he looked around again, his hands clenched behind his back. “So now you’ve seen my plan, in outline. Everyone will get a chance to weigh in on the methods, on the how. But for the basic goals, I need to hear all inputs now, and I need everyone behind me one hundred percent on this.”

They talked and wrangled well into the evening, breaking for a meal and coming back, until they had worked through all the misgivings and everyone raised his or her hand and said, “Aye” again.

After that it was just details.

Chapter 21

The Council spent the next week keeping peace and soothing hurt feelings as the Eden Plague took hold. The virtue effect made it simpler, and Markis had counted on it. Better-balanced brains and more stable minds made it easier to accept the insult of their own destinies being hijacked for the greater good. Still, once everyone was confident they wouldn't turn into zombies or pod people, their little community settled down remarkably well.

One afternoon Markis looked in on the scientists, who had turned their efforts away from research, toward simply breeding as much virus as they could and making doses. They had enlisted the whole community, and there was a group of people in a big room next to the lab chattering away like a knitting circle. Except in this case instead of needles and yarn, they had hundreds of containers and were filling them with virus solution. Plastic water and soda bottles dominated. A few filled syringes – from small ones, to large and heavy with enormous needles, as if they were to inject horses. Part of the plan.

Elise came over when she spotted Daniel. “It’s a good thing the virus is hardy. Not like HIV, for example, which dies after a few hours in the air. This stuff is more like influenza. I sure wish we had time to make it airborne.” She looked accusingly at him.

“Sorry. We all agreed we couldn’t risk taking the time.”

“I know. We’re doing the best with what we have. At least it looks like simply ingesting a little bit is highly effective. Although injections use less.” She ran her hands through her hair.

“Yes, all but two people acquired it the first time around in the drinks, and those two got it the next time.”

“With a higher dose. We’re going to have to accept the fact that it’s not one hundred percent.”

“Anything over fifty and I’ll be happy.” Daniel kissed her, a little longer and harder than was usual, and then moved on to “manage by walking around.” He checked up on Larry, Spooky and Vinny’s work on the Bunker. They and some of the other men were laboring away with the heavy equipment, digging a new tunnel, covering everything with rock dust. This was also part of the plan. Then Markis tracked down Cassie. He found her working with her kids and a few of the Nguyen and Nightingale kids that had come in, an impromptu school.

The room smelled like old-fashioned paste and new magic markers.

“Hey, Cassie.”

“You know you’re the only one who calls me that.”

“I like to be different. What do other people call you?”

“Cassandra, or Cass.”

“You wouldn’t look good in a mumu.”

“I’m not going to admit to being old enough to get that reference. Call me whatever you want.” She raised her voice. “Class, take a ten-minute recess.”

The kids bolted out the door.

“Okay, what is it?”

“I need your tradecraft. I want to go get my dad.”

She cocked her head. “Okay...you know they’ll be watching him. He’s your only living relative.”

Markis sighed. “I know. Vinny did as much recon as he could via the web; it looks like they haven’t picked him up or anything.”

“He’s bait.”

“Yup.”

“Probably got everything wired and tapped.”

“Yup.”

“And you want me to figure out how to bring him in.”

“Yup.”

“Okay...well, I’m a bit out of practice but I think I can do it.” She smiled, a white shiny thing in her cherry-cheeked face. “By the way, I hate you.”

His eyes widened and he snorted. “Really? Why?”

“That damn Eden virus. Larry’s uncle Leroy is starting to look good to me.”

He laughed. “Well, he is a good-looking man for sixty.”

“He’s a good looking man for forty-five, which is about how old he seems now. And he’s been looking at me too. Do you think it’s too soon...” She put a finger in her mouth to bite the nail, a most un-Cassie-like thing.

He reached out to hug her. “Only you can decide that. Nobody here will hold it against you. This thing is making a whole new world, a whole new human biology.” He patted her, then let go to hold her at arms’ length. “What would Zeke have wanted?”

“Oh, I know. He was always so damn cheerful and understanding. Not my idea of a Green Beret when we met.”

“I’m sure you weren’t his idea of a CIA spymaster. So you have my

blessing, whatever you do. Just remember, nine months later..." He let go of her, miming a big belly.

"Oh, God, that's right. Well...I have pills, that may delay things."

"Or the Plague may just laugh and run roughshod over your pills."

"Okay, you've freaked me out enough. What about your father?"

"I don't know. You're the spy. Do some spy stuff. Make a plan of action for me to carry out." Markis pointed at little faces peeking in the door. "Your ten minutes is up. Come see me when you got something, hopefully in a day or two." On his way out he waved to the children, who chorused, "Bye, Mister Daniel!"

Kids can adapt to anything, he thought.

Spooky and Markis sat in the old beat-up pickup truck they had bought for cash that morning, no questions asked. They had put up reflective sun shades in the windshield and door windows, and they watched through the gaps around the edges. Parked in the lot of David Markis' Veterans of Foreign Wars hall, their vehicle blended right in. As the sun went down the old men and women started arriving. Some younger ones too, from the latest wars, but the VFW was a slowly dying institution, held together by camaraderie and cheap drinks under club rules. The marquee out front said "Bingo Tonight," and Markis knew his dad never missed it.

"There he is," he said as he watched his father get out of his Chrysler. David Markis looked pretty good for sixty-plus, still slim and spry, so different from Daniel's more muscular physique.

"And there they are," answered Spooky, as a dark late model heavy sedan drove slowly past his parking spot, then backed into another.

"No imagination. I can smell the Big Brother on them from here."

"You think they Feds or still contractors?"

"With that car? Contractors would have had more imagination. You know what that means, right?"

"It mean Mister Jenkins spread the word. Not just INS, Inc. anymore."

"Right you are, though I doubt he's spilled his guts completely. So. You got them?"

"Easy as pie, Chairman DJ. You think there is more than two?"

"Yeah, but these are the closest ones. Hopefully we will be gone before the farther ones notice. Do your stuff now. I'll go in the back and get Dad."

Spooky slipped out of the truck to work his way around the parking lot,

low to the ground. In the fading light he might as well have been invisible. Markis pulled his trucker's cap low over his eyes and headed for the back door to the hall.

Inside, the sounds of music, the beeps of game machines, and the murmur of conversation surrounded him. He smelled cigarettes and beer and wine and harder stuff, as the barmaids poured drinks for the members from their own marked bottles. That was how they avoided controls and taxation – brought in your own bottle then paid the organization to mix and serve your drinks. Club rules.

Markis stood at the inside end of the short hallway opening into the main room. It was Friday night, and the bingo was just setting up. There were a few card games going on the side, and a short line of eager players in front of the registration table. His dad stood in it.

Markis swallowed a lump. It was good to see him. It had been too long.

He intercepted the older man as soon as he had gotten his bingo cards, steering him toward the hallway leading back out the rear door. "Hey, what?" David said, jerking away before Daniel lifted his hat to show his face. He put a finger to his lips before his father could cry out.

Markis whispered in his ear, "Great to see you, Dad, but we got a situation. You're being watched, because they want to find me. You got to *didi-mao* with me now. Give me your cell phone."

The elder Markis stared at his son a moment, wheels turning behind his eyes, then reached into a pocket and handed him the phone. Daniel pulled him into the men's room, dropping the phone into the tank of one of the old toilets. He mimed getting undressed, opening up the paper bag he carried and taking out a set of cheap sweats and a pair of sneakers. His dad changed silently, eyes questioning. Daniel shrugged, held his fingers up to his lips, then his ear. His father nodded.

Markis picked up his father's wallet, ran a bug-finder over it with negative results, then put it in his pocket. Everything else of his dad's except his handgun and ammo went into a plastic bag. They slipped out the back, and tossed the bag into a pickup truck bed chosen at random. *Follow that, Jenkins.*

They got into their own pickup truck and pulled out the sun screens, pushing them behind the seats. "Damn, son, you're makin' me miss bingo, and I'm supposed to meet a nice young lady here. What –" He broke off as Spooky appeared at the passenger door, climbing in silently. His dad moved over on the bench seat to the middle. Markis drove casually out of the parking lot, just

another patron of the VFW leaving early.

“All clear, Spooky?”

“Two more infected, Chairman DJ. And out for a while.”

“Excellent. Dad...this is a long story, but we have a few hours on the road. Just listen for a while, okay? It’s freaky.”

They told him everything, start to finish, sparing no detail. It took some time.

David J. Markis was nothing if not a quick study, whip-smart in a way that Daniel wasn’t, he’d be the first to admit. The elder Markis ate it up. His first words were, “All right. Give it to me.”

“What? So soon? Don’t you need to think about it?”

“You must have brought some. Your Montagnard buddy here ‘infected’ the surveillance, he said. I presume that’s to complicate their logistics. With the virtue effect, they won’t be useful to the opposition for a while, unless they can brainwash them. But that means you got a needle around here somewhere, or one of you can just bite me. So do it. We might have a crash on the way. They might come after us before we get to this bunker of yours. I don’t wanna miss out on immortality because I was too timid.”

Markis shrugged, not really surprised. “No one would ever call you timid, Dad. Okay, Spooky, you heard the man. Shoot him up.”

Spooky silently took out the syringe.

A moment later his dad rolled down his sleeve, then sat back. “Now what?”

“Now we wait. There’s some protein shakes in that box on the floor – hey Spooky, pass me one, will you?” Markis guzzled a can. “You might as well drink one now. And I’ll tell you how we’re going to make a better world.”

Chapter 22

Infection Day Minus Seven

“Mister Nightingale? Mister Nguyen?” The gate agent was perky, professional. “You’re traveling together? How nice to see. Here’s your passports and your cabin assignment. One of our Premier Suites. This packet has everything you need to know, and if you have any questions, please don’t hesitate to ask one of the staff or crew. Welcome aboard Royal Princes Cruise Lines’ *Royal Neptune*, and have a wonderful cruise.”

Larry and Spooky took back their passports and put on their best smiles, but declined the standard picture-taking as they boarded. Port Canaveral, Florida was perpetually sunny, the air fresh and sweet rolling in off the Atlantic.

Larry adjusted his sunglasses. “I guess Vinny spoofed their computers all right. That was the hardest part of this whole gig, sweating in line, waiting to get matched against some kind of watch list.”

“Yes. My nephew is very competent, if undisciplined. He say it is easier to hack into cruise line computers and make software ignore us than hack into government computers and take us off the lists.”

They proceeded through ornate and luxurious spaces toward the rear of the ship, where their cabin sat facing aft. One of the first-class suites, it was second only to a few exclusive and unadvertised luxury living spaces above them, cleverly designed to be difficult to find unless you knew where to go, and hard to see into from the surrounding balconies and observation decks.

Opening the door with his keycard, Larry found their luggage already in place inside. “Compliments of Royal Princes! We livin’ large now,” he cried as he picked up a bottle of champagne cooling in a bucket on the table. He put it down to lift a suitcase onto one of the luggage caddies, unlocking it with a combination.

His eyes roved over several plastic bottles that had been carefully opened, filled with Eden Plague solution, and repacked just like new. To any inspection they would appear to be just bottles of popular soft drink. They had even added some food dye to complete the illusion. Many people brought their own particular favorite drinks or foods on a cruise; it would arouse no suspicion, and the bottles could be carried around openly.

Spooky reached over and pulled a clean new laptop out of the suitcase, packed next to the bottles; it was a powerful model with tremendous graphics capability. It booted up quickly and soon a flash drive on his key fob dumped stolen plans of their ship into the computer's memory.

No firearms this time; it was too risky, though he had a ceramic and carbon-fiber knife that was virtually invisible to the luggage scanners. Nguyen strapped it onto his forearm. He took out another laptop, booted it up and hard-linked it to the first machine so there was nothing to intercept over a wireless connection. He immediately started reviewing their intended actions, taking himself on yet another virtual rehearsal.

"I'm hungry," complained Larry.

"You always hungry, Larry. But you right, I'm hungry too. Nothing is open yet during boarding. Here is food." He opened one of his smaller cases, turning it around to show its load of high-calorie, high-protein snacks.

Larry looked at the selection with distaste. "I'm so sick of nuts and protein shakes I could puke. I'm gonna go through the buffet like a buzz saw through balsa wood." He unenthusiastically picked up a plastic bag full of trail mix and began eating, washing it down with champagne.

Spooky grabbed a big bag of wasabi chips and munched while staring at his computer screen. "I gonna do all the hard work this op, I think."

"It's not like I can blend in with the service staff below-decks, Spooky. How many three-hundred-pound – well, two-sixty now – black men do you think they got cleaning rooms or waiting tables? Ze-ro, that's how many. I'm just here to be a jailer, and enjoy the par-tay."

"Remember you got fiancée now, Larry."

"You see a ring on this finger?" He laughed. "All right, all right. We both know I ain't cheatin' on Shawna, even for the good cause of spreadin' the stuff around. You know back in the day, you would never have even brought that up."

"Back in the day we had no Eden Plague. No use complaining now. I have no such inhibition. I have no commitment to stop me from 'spreading the stuff around.'"

"Damn, Sam, you gonna rub my face all up in that, huh? Buddy's only half a word aroun' here."

"So solly, Larry-san," Spooky mocked. "Here, I got girlie disk for you. Asian hotties." Spooky tossed a DVD at his friend.

"Great. Just freakin' great."

In one of the enormous buffet cafeterias Larry sat methodically shoveling food into his maw while staring out over the moving ocean. The Bahamas receded in the distance; tomorrow morning they would arrive in Cancun, Mexico. Normally he would be ecstatic to go on a cruise like this – meet women, play some poker in the ship’s casino, eat and drink his fill. This time his mind was taken up with more important things.

That didn’t stop him from enjoying the food.

He wondered how DJ was getting on, then pushed it out of his mind, feeling a trifle guilty. Here they were, living it up, while Markis was driving across the country along the southern route, mostly I-10 and I-20, toward the opening salvo in their battle to make a better world. He laughed silently at himself; it sounded pretentious even in his own head.

He firmly quashed his doubts and went back for more. The fish was excellent.

Spooky came in with a full tray and sat down across from him. “Almost showtime.”

“Yep. You got your man picked out?”

“Yes. Piece of cake.”

“You ain’t got no cake on your tray.”

Spooky scowled, mock-serious. “You a funny spook, Larry.”

“And you a funny gook, Spooky. When do you want to nab him?”

“End of his shift, two hours. I told him to come by our cabin, we play Mahjong for money.”

“How’d you convince him to risk getting in trouble for doing that?”

Spooky stared at Larry, cocking his head in disbelief. “What, you kidding? I told him we play Mahjong *for money*. That like telling you a hottie waiting in your room in the bed.”

Larry choked back a laugh, covering his face with his napkin. “That was the old me.”

“Okay then, like telling you *Shawna* waiting in your room in the bed; how is that, smart guy?”

“I get it. You know your people best.”

“He is not my people, he is Chinese. I am *thuong* Degar, from Vietnam.”

“You little guys all look the same to me.”

“Yeah, you big guys too. If you not black I forget who you are.”

“You never used to talk so much before the Eden Plague.”

Spooky stared hard at Larry, then smiled faintly. “Before, I have too much confusion in my mind. To kill many, many men is...disturbing. Now the confusion is lifted. Everything is clear.”

Spooky, dressed in the clothing of the man they had sedated in their suite, walked brazenly into the ship’s lower-deck service area, a place the paying customers would never see. Spacious carpeted corridors and pleasant colors gave way to rubber and metal and harsh white lights, cramped passageways and the hustle and bustle of the enormous cruise ship’s below-decks. He turned sideways repeatedly to slide past as other similarly dressed people, many Asian and even smaller than he was, hurried about their tasks.

He turned down each corridor in turn, comparing the numbers and letters written on the walls against the route he had memorized, until he came to a hatch marked “Crew Only.”

Stepping through the hatch, he ducked behind an enormous painted pipe. Setting down the nondescript utility bag he carried, he pulled his staff server’s tunic over his head and stashed it, revealing a white naval style uniform with lieutenant’s banded epaulets very like the ones worn by the real crew. It wouldn’t pass close inspection but he hoped it would at least keep a casual observer from alerting to him right off.

Down three metal and steel-mesh ladders, then through several more twists and turns he burrowed into the bowels of the enormous cruise ship. Soon he found the location he had memorized, a condensation reclamation pipe with a thick rubberlike join where it made an odd curve among the machinery.

There was no one in sight, just the humming of the mechanisms of the engines and pumps and vents that controlled the fluids of the modern vessel – hydraulic fluids, fuel, oil, air, and water. Spooky set the bag down and removed one of the horse-needle syringes they had prepared. Without hesitation he shoved the sharp metal tube through the soft joint, into the feed from the central desalination system that supplied the thousands of people aboard with water.

Water to drink, water to prepare food in the kitchens, water to bathe in and fill the swimming pools and jacuzzis. Water to spray from their showers, atomizing the virus mixture into the air of the enclosed stalls, so it would carry the Eden Plague to resting places in their lungs, where it would take root,

invading their cells, bestowing its gifts and demanding its payments.

Leaving the syringe in after the initial injection, Spooky pulled out the plunger and attached a hose to the plastic tube. This ran to a two-liter soda bottle of the Plague solution, which Spooky taped inverted to the back of a nearby fitting. His carbon-fiber knife flashed, poking a tiny hole in the uppermost surface of the bottle, allowing air in, defeating the vacuum principle that would have impeded the flow down through the hose. Gravity would do the rest, dripping the virus-laden fluid into the vast clean-water tanks.

“Hey, you there. What are you doing?” The Afrikaans-accented voice was indignant, official.

Spooky turned around to placate whoever it was. He saw an officer of the crew with Commander’s stripes, sandy blonde hair, protruding teeth and a nametag that said “de Voort.”

“Just making a repair, sir,” Nguyen said in his best false British accent.

The man licked his lips. His eyes flicked over the tube running around behind the fitting, then focused on Spooky’s right hand. “What’s that you have there?”

“Just a tool, sir.” He held the thing up, showing the handle and concealing the blade behind his turned hand. But he had forgotten just how sharp the high-tech edge on this knife was, as the pressure of his own palm opened his flesh against it. Blood suddenly ran dribbling down his upraised arm.

Commander de Voort might be middle-aged and running to fat, a long ways from the South African Navy where he began and long unused to dangerous situations, but his instincts were still good. He turned and bolted for the nearest passageway, yelling for help.

Spooky leaped after him. If the commander sounded the alarm, the whole plan might come crashing down. Desperately he lunged, catching hold of the fleeing man’s uniform tunic.

De Voort yelled louder and spun, swinging Spooky painfully into the corner of a railing.

The little man hung on grimly with his one hand, bringing the knife up in the other, threatening. “Stop!” Spooky gasped, but de Voort ignored him. The bigger man pummeled the Vietnamese on the head and shoulders with his fists, bruising him.

Spooky dropped the knife to the deck with a clatter and struck the commander a foul blow with his free hand, perhaps four inches below his belt. The man folded up, gasping with shock. Picking up the knife, Nguyen put the

blade to de Voort's throat. "Be silent!" The ceramic-edged, razor-sharp blade was covered with Spooky's own blood, which gave him an idea. He slid the knife down to slice a ribbon of skin on the other man's forearm. The edge was so sharp that it was seconds before the commander even felt the sting. "Be silent or I will cut your throat! Turn over!"

De Voort rolled over to face downward on the deck.

Spooky wiped the blood off the blade then slid it back into his hidden sheath on his forearm; he carefully calibrated the force, as if breaking a board in the dojo, then drove a fist into the nerve plexus at the base of the man's skull. De Voort went limp.

Just in time. A cry from down the passageway drew his eyes to a young woman, a crewmember by her uniform, hurrying in their direction.

"He fell and hit his head," Spooky said loudly. "He is injured. Run to call for a doctor, please."

The woman nodded, breathless, dashing off for the nearest intercom handset.

Spooky made a quick inspection of the man's arm where the knife had mingled both of the men's blood. The slash was already healing, closing. The Plague had taken. De Voort's body fat would keep him alive and recovering until medical help arrived, so looking around one last time to make sure he was not observed, Nguyen smashed a fist once more into the base of the man's skull. He told himself that the result would be sufficient, that the man would be unconscious for long enough.

Leaping to his feet, he followed the trail of blood back to where the two men had met, then inspected his handiwork. The bottle was half empty. He debated with himself whether it would be better to leave the thing there and get every possible drop into the system, or take it down to remove all trace of it.

Finally he decided he had to take it down. They could not afford to risk a cautious captain or crew shutting down the main water system for fear of contamination, prohibiting showers and making everyone drink bottled water until the ship got into port.

He had to hope it would be enough.

The restaurants and buffets on the ship were humming that night, filled to capacity with cheerful, unusually energetic people. Every public space was busy

and buzzing with conversation. Senior citizens with spry steps took moonlight walks on deck or visited the ballroom to dance to big band swing. Weary staff members found their twelve-hour shifts were not so odious and tiring after all. Pinch-faced losers at the casino smiled as their chips flowed away from them across the tables, shrugging and philosophical. The young and not-so-young partied long into the night, drinking less, talking more, retiring to their rooms by twos.

By morning, there were miracles.

Moshe Capernaum, eighty-nine years of age, blind, diabetic and wheelchair-bound, woke up that morning and walked the four steps to the cramped bathroom of his tiny lower-deck cabin, half-asleep.

“Moshe! What are you doing? Will you kill yourself? Sit back down before you fall.”

Moshe blinked clear brown eyes at his wife Miryam as she fussed him back to sit on the narrow bed. “You are so beautiful, my dear. I love you more now than the day of our wedding.”

“There is no fool like an old, fool,” Miryam said affectionately, holding his hand in her lap. “If only you could see me, you will see how foolish you have become.”

“But I *can* see you my dear. I can see you clear as the daylight coming in that porthole.” He reached out to touch her cheek. “I was blind, but now I see.”

She marveled, holding his ancient face in wizened hands, suddenly grown strong.

One deck above, Sergeant Jill “Reaper” Repeth, US Marine Corps, started the day as she always did, with a protein shake and one hundred pull-ups on a tension bar she had brought aboard and set up in the doorway of her room’s balcony. Facing out to sea looking over the railing, her head and shoulders rose and fell, eyes on the horizon. Her lungs expanded, pumping the fresh sea air in and out. *It is great to be alive*, she told herself. She believed it more today than on some other days.

Every day above ground is a good day. Every day I am not being shot at is a good day.

Reaper was one of the One Percent. It was something most Marines didn’t know about, because most Marines weren’t female. Only a small fraction of the Corps was women, because unlike the other services, the Marines didn’t bend its physical standards much to admit them. Measure up or leave.

But the One Percent was a sort of secret club of female Marines that could,

would and did beat the men at their own game – that could outperform most of them. Marathoners, triathletes, gymnasts, distance swimmers, biathletes. Thus One Percent, because perhaps one in a hundred Marine women could do it – could perform at this Olympic level of physical fitness.

The cruise line had given her a private room on a middle-high deck, something she would have struggled to afford if she hadn't been selected through their "Wounded Warrior" promotion that provided free cruises to the nation's servicemembers. She was glad of it as she finished the hundred, hardly more winded at the end than at the start. She took that as a good sign, knocking out another fifty before stopping.

That was more than she'd ever done before at a stretch. It was true she had an advantage over the average Marine, male or female; she was at least twenty pounds lighter than normal. Missing everything below both knees put less strain on the cardiovascular system; absent lower legs didn't need blood and oxygen.

Stay positive, stay focused. Ever since the mortar shell that took her feet, that's what she told herself.

Dropping gently to the floor onto her buttocks, she maneuvered with wiry-muscled arms and leg stumps over to her prostheses. Sitting on the floor she strapped them on, fiddling and adjusting for a longer span than normal. Finally she got them to some semblance of stability, and wobbled to her artificial feet.

Reaper stared down at the legs and the metal-and-plastic structures. They didn't feel right. Her good mood evaporated. Some days the damn things just didn't sit well on her, and it looked like this would be one of these days. She wasn't even going to turn on the microprocessor control and servos that helped her walk and run with a semblance of normalcy. She still hoped she could work up to running a marathon again. *Maybe with those bladerunner things.*

Sitting down on the bed and taking the prostheses off, she rubbed at the end of the stumps. They always itched a bit, but today they positively screamed to be scratched. She did so, vigorously, and then looked more closely at them. If she didn't know better, she would swear that the stumps had lengthened slightly.

Maybe they were just swollen.

Repeth shrugged to herself. Rather than fight with the artificial legs, she phoned for a wheelchair pick-up. She'd come back after breakfast and fiddle with the things. She was *starving*.

Three decks above, in the crowded, well lit breakfast cafeteria, nine-year-old Gennie Washington scooped spoonful after spoonful of yogurt into her mouth, finishing the bowl in record time. "More, please," she requested.

Her father Rufous gently patted the colorful knit Rasta hat that covered her bald head. “Anything else?”

“Milk! And orange juice. And bacon.”

“Coming right up, punkin.” Ever since her mother died, he couldn’t refuse her anything, not that he wanted to. The chemo had been hard on her, and getting her to eat so well was a minor miracle. The cruise seemed to be good for her, to lift her spirits, and the oncologists all said that kids made good cancer patients, because they had the best attitudes. Attitude was everything, as his football coaches had all drummed into him so long ago.

He put a tray full of food down in front of his daughter and joyfully watched her eat. It was going to be a good day.

“Time to get off the boat,” Larry said to Spooky as they heard the disembarkation announcement for Cancun over the public address system. “Between this guy,” he hooked a thumb at the closet where the taped and frightened staffer had spent an uncomfortable night, “and the commander you knocked out, they’ll be onto us soon.”

“I’ll use his badge one more time to get off the ship,” Spooky said as he packed a shoulder bag. “We meet at El Gringo Loco.”

Larry raised his eyebrows at Spooky. Actually they weren’t going anywhere near that bar, but the man in the closet would certainly pass this tidbit on to the authorities. He raised his own bag to his shoulder and the two men made their escape from the ship, Spooky from the staff and crew exit, Nightingale with the usual crowd of tourists heading in to the bars in Cancun.

Chapter 23

Infection Day Minus Two

Binoculars brought the water treatment plant at Van Norman Lakes Reservoir into sharp focus. Markis could see the enormous tubes of the termination of the Los Angeles Aqueduct. Beyond it were hundreds of miles of pipes that gathered and funneled waters from the Sierras down to the Los Angeles Basin. It was a marvel of engineering, largely gravity operated, even generating hydroelectric power on the way. The devastation that the diversion of water caused Mono Lake and Owens Valley and many other, smaller natural Edens of California was deemed a cheap price to pay for keeping the economic powerhouse of the West Coast going.

Markis shifted his view to the trees planted between the Granada Hills Youth Recreation Center and the enormous structures that prepared millions of gallons of water a day for Los Angeles thirsty residents to use. The stiff breeze's direction was important; he had to choose a place upwind to maximize his chance of success.

Not that he actually expected to succeed.

Markis had spotted the car tailing him ten minutes ago; figured he had another ten minutes before Homeland Security pulled him over and checked him out. He opened and drank as many canned protein shakes as he could, choking down about seven.

Homeland Security. Such a wonderfully loaded phrase. Nobody could possibly object to some nice security for the homeland, right? But it gave birth to dysfunctional abominations like the Transportation Security Administration, stealing iPads, patting down toddlers and detaining old people with colostomy bags for fear of being politically incorrect while angry young underwear bombers were let through. It led to trading away constitutional rights and responsibilities to those in power, in return for the comforting illusion of protection that no amount of armed security forces or foreign interventions could provide.

He cut short his musings as he noted the wind direction was blowing just right for his ploy. Dialing a number on the disposable phone, he put in a code, and then tossed it out the window into a drainage ditch.

Shoving the surplus agricultural spray truck in gear, he drove down the slope of the hill and along Balboa Boulevard. It was the last mile of his journey across seven states, trusting to anonymity and the millions of vehicles on the road to get him to his goal. But it didn't really matter where or if he were intercepted; the design had been put in motion the moment he left the Sosthenes Bunker. It would be great if he could deploy the Plague into the water; but with or without him, the plan was going forward.

The tail car started accelerating behind him, and he knew he was blown. They'd probably gotten a look at his face, despite his best efforts at concealment, and matched it against a biometric database. Markis sped up, taking the turn into the recreational complex in a skidding screech. He was just five hundred yards from his target section of the fence.

Markis floored it, then reached over and threw a large lever under the dashboard. The mechanism in back of the truck, normally used for spraying a fine mist of agricultural chemicals in orchards or fields, coughed to life. In a moment a pale white fog trailed behind him, the stiff Santa Ana wind carrying it almost due west.

Four hundred yards, he thought.

The heavy government sedan behind him gained on his anemic truck despite the best he could do; it wasn't long before he heard the impact of bullets. But five thousand gallons of Eden-Plague-infused solution protected his person from harm.

Three hundred yards to go.

Unfortunately the wheels were not so well covered. He felt one of the dual tires in the right rear go flat, and he steered gently, carefully, to avoid getting the liquid sloshing and so overturn the truck.

Only two hundred yards now.

The car roared up, trying to get alongside on the right, upwind of the mist. Markis kept the speeding truck close to obstacles on that side – parked cars, fenceposts, curbs – preventing them from passing.

One hundred yards.

The truck shuddered and he felt the other right rear tire go. The vehicle settled on its suspension and he could barely control it, so he just kept his foot on the floor and aimed for the piece of fence that separated the sports complex from the water treatment plant's eastern perimeter road. Strips of shredded rubber banged into the fender well, louder than the gunshots, and he prayed for speed as the barrier came up.

He crashed through.

Still at thirty miles per hour, Markis roared along next to the enormous rectangular pools that held and distributed the water for treatment. He blessed the designers of the Eden Plague, as Elise had told him that the processing would not kill the virus. Even now the mist was settling into the pools, contaminating Los Angeles' main tap supply with the life-giving microbe.

He'd almost made it to the end of the complex when he felt the tearing of a bullet in his shoulder and his right arm went numb. His vision blurred and the unstable truck yawed to the left, then rolled once and ground to a halt, breaking open the tough plastic solution tank. He felt the liquid slosh onto him.

Moments later the legs of his pursuers walked into his line of vision. His head was stuck at an awkward angle, pressed against the ground and the remnants of the broken driver's window of the truck. Dust and grit swirled over him, getting in his eyes, and he was sure his body was broken in several important places. He wondered whether the virus would knit his bones in this awkward position.

Markis could hear the buzz of a helicopter getting closer. It didn't matter. He'd done the job.

"Should we get him out?" asked a voice attached to the legs.

"They said not to touch him. He's contaminated."

"This whole thing's probably contaminated. Stay upwind. Besides, he can lie there and bleed for all I care. Scumbag terrorist. "

"Did they say what the stuff is?"

"No, just some kind of chemical. Nothing too bad. I already called it in. They're shutting down the plant until they can make sure the water is safe."

"High five, partner."

"Yep. Might get a commendation out of this one."

"We should."

The sound of the helicopter drowned out their conversation, though it barely added to the gritty wind. The legs walked out of his line of sight. Markis waited. It seemed like forever, but was probably just a few minutes. He drifted off in a fog of pain. This was good, because the gnawing hunger of the Eden Plague was coming back. He let himself slide into unconsciousness.

Markis awoke to the smell of plastic and his own bodily fluids. The world looked blue, but that was just the colored sheet covering his face. It was loose enough for him to breathe, but he couldn't move. He was wrapped and taped. He could hear sounds of activity nearby, snippets of conversation and orders. It

sounded like they were cleaning up the crashed truck. He felt himself being lifted. The motion told him that unfortunately he was right; pieces of him had healed into an unnatural configuration. His mind drifted to wondering if someday Elise and the rest would be able to adjust the virus to straighten out bones too.

Markis heard a resonant, commanding voice rise from the babble. “Put him in the chopper.” He laughed to himself, his mind seizing on irrelevancies. Nobody who actually lived and worked around helicopters called them “choppers.” Aircrew called them “airplanes” or “birds” or sometimes “helos,” or by their military designation – “Black Hawks” or “Sixties” or “Hueys.” Never “choppers.”

Amateurs.

They put him inside the running bird, which sounded to him like some kind of Sikorsky, probably a UH-60 Black Hawk. He was in the hands of the enemy, now, and in God’s, Cassie would say. He sure hoped she was right. He could use some God right now. Closing his eyes, he said a prayer, and let the pounding of the rotors lull him to sleep.

It had taken five days for Nightingale and Nguyen to work their way back up through Mexico, eventually crossing using false documents at San Ysidro, the busiest border station in the US. Checked into a nondescript motel in Mission Hills, California, they ate free continental breakfast and watched the headline news.

“Search and rescue forces of three nations were mobilized today as the cruise ship *Royal Neptune* was reported overdue to arrive at Port Canaveral, Florida from Bermuda. While the US Coast Guard cautions against speculation, the internet is already buzzing with talk of the latest victim of the Bermuda Triangle.”

The two men turned to each other with ill-concealed horror.

Larry downed his coffee. “Damn. DJ was right. They hijacked it, quarantined it,” he whispered.

“Or sunk it to the bottom. The war, it is starting.”

“I guess it is. So let’s go fight it.”

They drove their rental car the mile or two to the north edge of the fence line surrounding the Van Norman water treatment plant. There was a

communications conduit thirty yards inside the fence, where it ran from the main structure to a point where it dove into the ground. Beneath the earth, it would join and run alongside the enormous pipes of the Los Angeles Aqueduct, providing a secure fiber-optic link all the way up the pipeline. The line connected the whole system together, computers at each critical node – control valves, hydroelectric generators, pressure sensors – and the water treatment plant in front of them. But right here, it was exposed.

Larry checked his watch. “Some time in the next hour, I’d say. You still think you can do it fast enough?”

“As long as nobody shooting at me, I do it in under one minute. If they are, I do it even faster.”

Larry shrugged, resigned. “Sure hope you’re right. This is gonna take some nice timing.” He stared at his phone.

Seventeen minutes later the phone beeped and the go-code displayed.

They immediately exited the car, walking up to the barrier. Larry worked heavy-duty wire shears along the cyclone fencing, making a hole within seconds big enough for Spooky.

The small man slipped through with a tool bag in his hand, his eyes roaming over the concrete and steel facility. They were far away from any of the plant workers’ usual locations, and the fence line only got checked twice a day. Dropping to his knees next to the conduit, he took a battery-powered saw and sliced carefully through the thin conduit pipe. Peeling it away with pliers, he exposed the fiber-optic lines within.

With a few deft movements of his fingers he attached a clip-on shunt, which interposed itself into the line. Now, unknown to the plant managers, Spooky had access to the computer that ran the whole system. He pressed a button and the LED on the shunt started flashing. Slipping back across the hot dry dirt, he ducked through the fence and into the car.

The tiny flash drive in the device dumped the cyber-worm Vinny had prepared into the line, where it burrowed its way in and immediately started taking over the system. Within two minutes the control computer, though otherwise unaffected, would ignore all commands to shut down water distribution. It would take tens of minutes or even hours to manually close valves and stop the contaminated liquid from flowing out into greater Los Angeles. By that time it would be too late.

Larry put the sedan into reverse, backing into a position away from the fence but facing down the long perimeter road. “I know he said to leave right

away, but I ain't gonna miss this.”

“It will not make us happy. We cannot interfere.”

“I know.”

So they had a front-row seat for the Daniel Markis road rally. They cheered as he started the sprayer and crashed through the fence; they pounded the dashboard as he cut off the pursuit and kept the mist going; they groaned when the truck rolled, and the helicopter landed. And they sweated as they watched the blue-wrapped bundle carried on a stretcher into the helicopter, both men wondering to themselves whether Markis was alive or dead.

Chapter 24

Infection Day Minus One

Elise Markis steered the bulk milk truck down the gravel track under the trees that line the little landing field outside of Athens, Georgia. She checked her watch. Ten minutes to go. She didn't want to be too early; the less time sitting around, the less time for people to question her presence.

She pulled the truck over before the rough road broke out of the tree line, at the downwind end of the runway. Hopping out of the cab, she made a final check of the hose, the pump, and the fittings.

Elise looked up from her check as a single-engine, low-winged airplane roared overhead and landed lightly on balloon tires. It turned around and taxied toward her. She jumped back in the truck and drove out to the end of the runway, meeting the aircraft as it turned around and lined up for takeoff. As she pulled up, she looked over the plastic tanks, tubing and brass nozzles of the crop duster.

A much-younger-looking David Markis waved at her as he climbed down from the cockpit. *My father-in-law. He looks so much like Daniel now he's rejuvenated*, Elise thought. She could see his expression was anything but happy, however, as he reached back in to drag a struggling figure out of the second seat. It looked like a woman, her mouth, hands and feet taped and her eyes wild with fear and anger.

"Sorry, I had to take her with me. She was too suspicious about me wanting to rent the plane."

"It's all right. I'll deal with her." At the bound woman's muffled shriek, Elise reassured her. "You won't be harmed, miss. And neither will anyone else. You probably think we're terrorists but this stuff won't hurt anyone. And I'm sure you'd love to argue about it but I don't want to hear it right now." She dragged the prisoner over to the truck cab and boosted her gently into it. From there she started the pump.

The senior Markis hooked up the hose fitting and quickly transferred the full capacity of five hundred gallons to the plane. As soon as he had it in, he unhooked and leaped back into the aircraft, taking off into the puffy clouds of the burning Georgia summer sky.

Once she had parked back in the trees, Elise looked over at the bound

woman. “Look, I know you’re scared, but really, there’s nothing to worry about. If I take that tape off your mouth will you behave?”

The young woman nodded, wide-eyed.

Elise’s phone beeped at her. She looked at the incoming text, nodded in satisfaction, and then worked the tape gently off of the younger woman’s face, revealing a strong chin and defiantly furrowed brow. They stared at each other for a long moment.

“What’s your name, hon?”

“Janet Bills. You don’t look like a terrorist.”

“What does a terrorist look like?”

She squirmed uncomfortably. “I don’t know. Crazy eyes? Crazy talk?”

“Well, you happen to be right. I’m not a terrorist, we’re just doing something illegal. But it won’t hurt anyone, so don’t worry about it. In a couple of hours I’ll let you go and everything will be fine.”

“Where’s he going? In the plane?”

Elise pondered this for a moment, then decided it didn’t matter if she told her. Besides, it was going to be a long vigil if they couldn’t talk about something. “Sanford Stadium. Athens. There’s a big Prosperity Gospel revival thing going on, all those suckers that think they can name it and claim it so God will give them a new Mercedes and a new bass boat. Lots of offering plates pouring money into the preachers’ coffers, just proving how much money God is giving the faithful. Talk about your self-fulfilling prophecy – for the preachers. About seventy-five thousand people. And they paid ninety bucks a head for the ‘seminar,’ not counting the concessions. You do the math.”

“My father’s a pastor, and he said those people aren’t following God.”

Elise nodded. “I have to agree with you there, honey. Sounds like your father’s a good man.”

“So what is that guy going to do? What’s in the tanks?”

“What do you think it is?”

Janet thought for a moment. “I dunno...skunk stink? Some kind of dye? Like throwing blood on people who wear furs? I can’t think of anything else that wouldn’t hurt people.”

“Smart girl. Would you like a drink?” Elise hoped Janet wouldn’t notice she hadn’t actually confirmed her guess.

“Sure.”

Elise opened the juice bottle, and Janet drank with her taped-together hands.

“So how did you get into flying?”

“I just always wanted to fly, so in high school...”

Elise kept her talking until David came back. Then she cut the tape binding Janet’s hands and hopped out of the milk truck. When she had climbed into the second seat of the plane, she threw the truck keys down to the waiting young woman.

“There’s an envelope under the drivers’ seat with some money for the plane. You might not get it back. Have a nice drive, and sorry to inconvenience you. Oh, and the truck kind of sticks in second.”

Janet nodded and waved, half a smile on her face.

They took off, winging their way northeastward. “I think you got a Stockholm buddy,” David said.

“What? Oh, you mean like Stockholm Syndrome? I held her hostage and now she likes me?”

“Yep.”

A pause. “So how did the spraying go?”

“Seventy-five thousand new converts. Just not quite the religion they expected.” David Markis laughed.

“Yes, and tonight and tomorrow they’ll pass through the Atlanta airport and go back home to a thousand different places and then there’s no way they’ll be able to quarantine it.”

“Lord willing and the crick don’t rise. But they’ll try.”

Elise did not respond, lapsing into silence. She stared out the scratched and dirty cockpit as her thoughts closed in. Now that their task was over her husband was all she could think about. No matter how much he had protested and placated, she knew he did not expect to get away after his own piece of the plan in Los Angeles. If he did not show up at the rendezvous...well, she was no soldier, but the rest were. She told herself the men were frighteningly competent, and they would be able to rescue him.

If not now, then later. After the chaos. After tomorrow.

After Infection Day.

Chapter 25

Markis woke to the smell of disinfectant and lanolin. His cell was dim and clean, the narrow bed's covers of ragged rough green wool with "US" printed here and there on them. He'd seen the same blankets in a few old barracks back when he'd been in the Army, though these days they had mostly migrated to the surplus stores. A naked steel toilet with no seat beckoned, and a sink with only one tap: no hot water. A roll of paper, in an incongruously cheerful green wrapper

Markis struggled to a sitting position, finding himself unable to straighten. His right arm and shoulder were pain-free but twisted like a lightning-struck tree trunk. He stared at the strange crook in his forearm, shoving aside the surreal feeling. The limb was useless; the muscles were so misaligned he could barely close his hand. It reminded him of someone with cerebral palsy; he was half of Stephen Hawking. He tried to remember if Hawking was still alive, and he said a little prayer that the Eden Plague would find him and free that amazing mind from the prison of his crippled body.

Markis's left side, hand, and arm were more or less useable, though his ribs were a bit compressed. His spine must have been broken as well, and healed in this hunched-over position. Fortunately his legs seemed to function reasonably well, so he struggled to move over onto the toilet. He was clothed in orange pajamas, with a convenient elastic waistband.

The necessities finished, he drank from the faucet and lay back down on his bunk, on his side in a semi-fetal position, and tried to ignore the cat-claws in his gut. The Plague wanted to be fed.

Booted feet tramped outside his door. The little window opened, then shut, and the locking mechanism opened with a heavy clunking sound. The door slid back, then sideways on rails, and three men in blue hazardous material suits, filter masks and face shields came in.

Two of them had those huge-barreled revolver-blunderbuss things. The enormous tubes pointed his direction, naked threats. The other man carried a stainless steel chair.

The two guards took positions in the corners to the left and right of the door, and the man in charge sat down on the chair across from Markis's bunk, in front of the door.

“It’s not airborne, you know,” Markis said without moving. “And I’m hardly in a position to jump you.” He held up a twisted arm.

“It’s just precautionary,” a familiar rich voice said, and his fears – his expectations rather – were fulfilled. It was Jenkins, the Third.

“I’ll say it again, Mister Jenkins. I am sorry about your son. I take full responsibility, and I’ll say so in front of any court or tribunal you care to convene.”

Jenkins chuckled, a deep, cruel sound. “You’re never going to see the inside of a courtroom. You’ve just become a lab rat. A guinea pig. You’re going to bless the days when it’s just my scientists experimenting on you, because on the other days, I’m going to test the limits of your suffering.”

“It’s our suffering that defines us, Mr. Jenkins.”

“What?”

“C. S. Lewis. Loosely quoted.”

“Then you are about to be defined quite vigorously.” He laughed again, a naked, evil thing.

“It sounds to me like you’re afraid. What is it that scares you?” Markis tried to hold the man’s eyes.

“If I fear anything, it’s the wanton disruption of the American way of life that you are trying to bring about. Have you thought about the chaos you might have caused had we not caught you in your little scheme?”

“What part of today’s ‘American way of life’ do you love so much? What part did the Founding Fathers sacrifice so much for? Is it our citizens dying of cancer? Heart disease? Or just traffic accidents? Is it the rampant violent crime, or alcoholism, or the PTSD of veterans like me? The drug use and mental illness that caused me to lose control and kill your son? We can get rid of all that if you just stop fighting it.”

Jenkins snorted. “Listen to yourself! You want to surrender the destiny of the human race to an untested virus that might mutate and wipe us all out. Or this thing could be a Trojan Horse designed by aliens or the godless communists to destroy the Free World. What if everyone welcomes it, and after a certain amount of time, or the deployment of some trigger mechanism, kablooi! Everyone infected with it dies or goes crazy, and the old Soviets win the Cold War from their graves while the Russians and Chinese and Al Qaeda laugh and cheer.”

“Plausible. Plausible, Mr. Jenkins, but I don’t think so. If you cared so much about your country you would have informed our elected leaders when

you discovered it. There would be a multibillion-dollar program to deconstruct the virus already in place, to defend against misuse of it, and to genetically engineer it so it could be used for the good of everyone, under controlled circumstances, as a cure. Instead, you kept it hidden on an island, owned by a shell company, run by your own personal mad doctor and secured by amoral thugs who kept their own researchers prisoner. So even if I didn't get half of Los Angeles infected, now it's too big for just INS, Incorporated. You had to call in Homeland Security. People will talk. There's nothing more of an oxymoron than a 'government secret' in the age of the internet."

"You know Markis, I let you blather on because it amuses and gratifies me to see you lying there like a twisted freak."

"So you must trust these men implicitly? You're not afraid of them hearing anything you say?"

"They are utterly loyal to me."

Markis glanced at them, seeing nothing to contradict what Jenkins had to say. Still, the longer he kept Jenkins talking, the more time the other parts of the plan had to succeed. Maybe he might even get through to one of the minions.

"Did you tell them it will cure *anything*? And give them functional immortality? Live a thousand years like a man of twenty? Never have to watch what you eat, or worry about all the pains of growing old? Do they think a couple of grunts like them will get a piece of that? That it won't be reserved exclusively for the rich and powerful?"

"They will get it, just as soon as I do. As soon as the bugs have been worked out. They don't want to end up in a pathetic situation like you are now."

Markis chuckled. "Just a little longer, and everyone will have a better world, right? It's always just a *little bit* longer, until they find a cure for cancer, or nuclear fusion gives everyone clean energy, or we balance the budget. But those things never come, Jenkins, because the rich and powerful don't *want* them to come. If they did, the little people wouldn't have to be afraid anymore, and people like you would have no leverage. Nothing to hold over their heads. But the Eden Plague can free them now, and we can still work on making the virus better as we go along."

Markis wasn't sure how convincing he was, or how much of this he even believed himself, but he had committed himself to the course and he wasn't going to back out now. And maybe this was penance for his crime, even if it accomplished nothing else.

"You think I'm evil, Markis? You're a pie-in-the-sky raving lunatic. You

want to just roll the dice on a slice of Soviet-designed biological warfare and hope it all turns out all right.”

Markis shrugged, as well as he could. “At least I put my money where my mouth is. What have you risked, Jenkins?”

“As little as possible. That’s how great things are achieved.”

“Really? I think truly great people would say just the opposite.”

Jenkins stood up. “We’ll just have to see who achieves greatness, then,” he sneered. “Good luck from that position.” He picked up the chair, backing out of the room. The other two followed.

“I could use some food, if you want more than a corpse to torture later.”

He laughed. “I think I’d rather see you suffer some more the way you are. *Bon appétit.*”

The door shut with a heavy slam. Bon appétit’s cat-claws ripped at his guts.

Eventually he slept.

Chapter 26

Infection Day

Jervis A. Jenkins III sat in the command vehicle half a mile from the terrorist's underground lair. Outside, C Squadron, Special Forces Detachment, Delta – commonly known as Delta Force – deployed across the mountain. Measurement and signals intelligence, MASINT, had identified the hidden entrances using infrared and radar imagery comparisons, and each was being covered by a squad of elite special operators.

Jenkins looked down at the piece of paper in his hand, almost orgasmic every time he read it. The President's signature at the bottom, handwritten, not autopenned, authorized him to take control of the counterterrorism operation under the "clear and present danger" clause of the Patriot Act. It was probably extralegal, perhaps illegal, as it severely bent if not broke the Posse Comitatus Act of 1878 prohibiting the use of Federal troops for law enforcement within the United States.

The power to break the law with impunity was intoxicating. Jenkins reveled in it.

Even now, select committees of the US Congress were being briefed and martial law would soon be declared, assuming they agreed. Even if they didn't, that damn infected cruise ship was now under the guns of the Atlantic Fleet, and would stay quarantined offshore for as long as necessary. He wished he had been able to persuade the President to sink it immediately, but like all politicians, the man had wanted to keep his options open, and a massacre was always bad for poll numbers.

It was a stroke of luck, the anonymous tip that turned the Markis group in, that pinpointed this bunker.

When he'd been briefed on the facility later, by an ancient civil engineer they had dug up – who had worked on it shortly before it was sealed up in the fifties – he'd been appalled at how the Pentagon had lost track of it. He wondered how many other installations like this were scattered around. It could have been a nightmare.

"I wish we'd been able to bring Markis to see us capture his people and their hidey-hole," he mused as he pushed buttons, checking feeds from the

various personal cams attached to the helmets of selected operators. “Better to have him locked in the secure facility, though.”

His driver and the communications techs, contractors rather than regular military, chuckled approvingly at their boss’s comment. *As well as they’re being paid, they’d better approve*, he thought.

A buzz, then terse voices reported their positions and readiness. Most of the teams were just to cover the exits, to keep the rats from escaping. They had orders to shoot first, then capture wounded if it was absolutely safe.

These men were among the best elite hostage rescue and direct action specialists in the world. They had been briefed about the plot to spread a genetically engineered virus that would make Ebola look like the sniffles, and every one of them was cocked and locked, burning with eagerness to take down the enemies of their country, their families, and their way of life.

Jenkins loved this kind of control, and laughed inside. *Fine upstanding stupid square-jawed suckers, so easily fooled by real leaders like me, using their own pure innocent patriotism against them*. He looked at his watch, checked with his comm tech one more time, then said, “All right. Execute.”

In two different locations simultaneously, precisely calculated shaped charges blew hatches open, leaving smoking holes but not collapsing the tunnels behind. Then tactical stacks of operators, heavily armored for this short-range op, piled into the tunnels in lockstep, rushing down the corridors toward their selected targets.

Alpha Team got to the big cavern first, and designated men spread out to find vehicles that could be started. Within fifteen seconds, six men roared out the vehicle tunnel toward the inside of the bunker’s main entrance, to open it to more forces outside.

The rest fanned out, quartering, searching and clearing each room, finding no one until they met Bravo team coming from the other direction, in what looked like a cafeteria. It was obvious the terrorists had prepared food here in the kitchen and eaten in the dining room. One of the soldiers reached down to pick up a crayon drawing of a truck in a tunnel under a mountain, a yellow sun shining incongruously above, its rays like petals of a flower.

“Patricks, if it ain’t intel, put it down. We got the whole place to clear.”

“But sir...” He held it up. “They didn’t say there were kids here.”

“Shit.” The lieutenant changed frequencies to the general net, and transmitted, “Common push, this is Delta Alpha One, we have evidence of children here, over.”

A series of double-clicks and pops came in acknowledgment, but nothing else. Chatter was discouraged, communications discipline strict. Alpha Team spread out, with one more thing to think about. Nobody wanted to kill kids.

Markis’s next awakening was brief. He heard the door open, saw the barrel of some kind of gun pointed his way, heard a hiss and felt the sting of a dart. It was a blessed relief from the twisting in his belly and the pain that ran through his starving body.

He came around in a different environment completely, an IV in his arm and a feeling of well-being coursing through his veins. He lifted his left hand. It looked thin, but not skeletal anymore. *They must have fed me through the IV, or maybe stuck a feeding tube down my throat while I was sedated.*

This place looked more like a hospital room, though he noticed locked restraints on his legs. He also felt heavy, tired and a bit euphoric. Probably Valium or some other kind of drug to keep him under control. It didn’t matter. It was out of his hands now. He had to just hope and pray that others could execute his plan. It was hard to be optimistic right now. He wondered how Elise and the rest were doing.

Thirty-five minutes later, the major in charge of the Delta squadron reported the bunker was clear. “No one at all secured, though, sir,” he said to Jenkins, who slammed his console in frustration.

“Drive us in there, now. I want to see this place. And tell the intel people to get in there immediately and start figuring out where they went!”

The command truck lurched into motion, joining the convoy of military and government vehicles rolling into the complex. The cavern soon filled up with two dozen Humvees, trucks, vans, and Suburbans, parked haphazardly among the old five-ton trucks and ancient jeeps. Men in combat fatigues mingled with groups in biohazard suits. There were reports of a laboratory, and they were taking no chances.

As the last of the vehicles passed through the inner tunnel archway, they felt a shock go through the mountainside. A rolling wave of dust flowed out of the big tube, chasing the trucks, and the people inside moved *en masse* toward the personnel doors away from the cloud.

“Don’t worry, the virus won’t let them kill us,” Jenkins said with a confidence he didn’t really feel.

“Not on purpose,” muttered one of the techs.

The executive stepped onto the back bumper of the command vehicle, looking around at the confusion. It quickly sorted itself out without his intervention. These people were professionals, and as soon as it was clear that the roof wasn’t coming down, they kept on with their business.

Two minutes later, smoking a cigarette inside the nearest bunker office, Jenkins heard a series of smaller blasts. Immediately, the overhead sprinkler system burst forth with a fine rain of water.

“Oh, come *on*.” He looked at his soaked cigarette, then threw it down. “Somebody get that turned off! We can’t work in this!” He ran back to the command vehicle, taking off his suit coat and grabbing some paper towels, drying off. “At least it will settle the dust.”

He ran the sopping towels over his face, and then froze, staring at the soggy mess in his hand like it was a snake getting ready to bite. “No...” he whispered, as he smelled the slightly sweet cloying odor that he recognized from the laboratory of INS, Inc. The odor of the virus breeder gel, generated by the decomposing unicellular organisms the Eden Plague used to reproduce.

Jenkins slumped in the contoured seat. It was too late. There was no way he could get out – no way he could avoid the infection. There was only one thing he could do, and he had to do it right now, while his mind was still his own.

Before his resolve failed.

“Major, I need to see you in the command vehicle.”

The Delta commander trotted up, wiping liquid off his face. “Sorry, sir. I was looking at this.” He held up a box full of papers.

“Come in, Major. Shut the door. You guys, take a break. Go to the john or something.” The other three men left, giving them privacy. “What is that?”

The major reached into the box, showing him a thick stack of waxy pieces of paper, the name of the world’s foremost private package company on the backs. “I think these are those things that are left after you put address and customs stickers on packages.”

Jenkins stared at the scores of sheets in the man’s hand, the hundreds in the

box, and he knew in that moment that the game was already lost. They had failed, and Jenkins didn't want to live in a world where he'd wrecked the train so badly, nor one where in a few hours his infected brain would be begging to admit what a mistake he made, and ask forgiveness of someone, nor one where he would cheerfully give up all his enormous wealth and privilege so he could slave for the good of mankind.

A world where he didn't get to torture Daniel Markis, or even hate him for winning the game.

"Major, I have some terrible news." Jenkins stared at the man for a moment, until he had his full, weighty attention. "I have made a horrible mistake. This liquid dispensed out of the sprinklers is filled with the biological weapon. Everyone inside is now in the first stages of infection. If any one of us gets out of here, he could spread the disease, and millions will die. Our families will die. The United States might not survive it. We have only one choice." He spoke the lie with complete conviction.

The major licked his lips, wiping his mouth convulsively, eyes bulging. He took a deep breath, straightened up, and finally said, "Yes, sir. I understand."

"Not everyone will have the fortitude you do. Even if your men maintain discipline, some of the others won't. So before we become incapacitated, your men must seal off all exits, permanently. Use explosives and collapse the tunnels."

"That will be easy. The terrorists already did most of it for us. That was the explosions you heard."

Jenkins sat back in relief. "Good. They did us a favor. They wanted us to think ourselves trapped and try to escape, not realizing that the sense of duty of good men like ourselves would keep us here anyway. We will maintain discipline and work as long as we can, and we will see if some miracle cure will come to us, but for now, just make sure no one leaves."

"Yes, sir."

Jenkins dismissed the major and then got out of the vehicle. The sprinkler system had run out of liquid. The air smelled like dirt and sweet cloying humidity, the ground covered with a thin layer of mud. His shoes made squelching sounds as he walked across to the armored sedan.

A back door opened, and he slid inside next to the National Security Advisor. The man had an old-fashioned car-telephone handset pressed to his ear.

"Yes, Mister President. One moment please sir. What is it?"

"You have him on the line?"

“Yes, the ultra-wideband repeaters we planted were able to find their way through the rock fall.”

“Good,” Jenkins said. “Put us on speaker, please. Mister President, we have a situation.”

Nineteen minutes later the first B-2 Spirit stealth heavy bomber orbiting above them released its special payload. One minute after, a second one did so in California.

A new sun briefly blossomed in the West Virginia mountains. Then another, larger one in Los Angeles. The President came on nationwide television almost immediately, preempting all broadcast channels. He pronounced the falsehood easily in his smooth orator’s voice.

“My fellow Americans: a few minutes ago, terrorists detonated an improvised nuclear device in Los Angeles, California, and another in rural West Virginia. They have attacked a cruise ship in the Atlantic ocean, and all aboard were lost. Hundreds of thousands of our countrymen are dead. There may be more attacks to come. Ladies and gentlemen, we must act now. Therefore, in consultation with, and with the full support and ratification of both houses of Congress, the United States is declared, as of this moment, under martial law.”

Vinny Nguyen drove the old jeep through the West Virginia nighttime, northwestward toward Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and eventually Canada, he hoped. He should meet up there with the rest of the community, who had filtered out of the bunker over the last week.

Vinny had dug his way through the last few feet of soft dirt after he had triggered the explosions that sealed Jenkins and his people in, and then wirelessly activated the modern electronic valves that flooded the complex with contaminated fluid. He smiled as he thought about the trap he had laid, and the flawless way his systems functioned.

At least he died happy as blackest night turned to atomic day.

Chapter 27

The video went viral less than an hour after the nuclear explosions. Despite the best efforts of the National Security Agency, US Cyber Command and every other arm of the government, it was posted and reposted to servers all over the world, to social networking pages, to websites and just simply e-mailed to people everywhere.

In the video, Daniel Markis' face looked at the camera, calm and composed. He smiled briefly, glanced down at his script, and then spoke in a strong, confident voice.

Hello, my fellow homo sapiens. I'm Daniel J. Markis, and I'm here to tell you about a better world.

But before that world arrives, there will be some problems. Your own governments and leaders will try to suppress this video and the knowledge in it. But it won't work. Information wants to be free.

Then they will try to suppress the miracles. But that won't work either. The miracles have already been sent to too many places.

You will have heard scattered reports by now of miraculous cures of terminal illnesses, in Central America and Mexico, in Los Angeles, in the US State of Georgia, in Bermuda and many other places. But the miracles are right next door to you now.

Over one thousand packages have been sent by private service to hospitals in a thousand cities around the world. The greatest number were sent to places where poverty and disease is rampant – to places like Calcutta and Mexico City and Rio de Janeiro and Cairo and Cape Town, as well as the great centers of civilization like New York and London and Paris and Moscow and Beijing.

Each package contains a simple bottle of a miracle solution. Less than one milliliter of this liquid will cure anyone injected with it of almost any known disease. You don't have to take my word for it. Just give that tiny amount to any patient, any person, with a terminal illness, anyone who volunteers. As far as I have been able to tell, it has almost a one hundred percent success rate.

If you run out of the cure, then there is an easy solution. Anyone who has been cured already can pass the cure on through blood or saliva or any other bodily fluid. Once you are confident of its power, all you have to do is pass it on.

If anyone tries to hoard the cure, don't worry. Don't do violence. Just seek

someone out that has been cured, they can pass it on to you. Share a drink, or a mint. Kiss them if you feel like it. If you are a medical professional, use a syringe or a swab or an inoculation gun. It doesn't matter. And if it doesn't work, try it again. Because miracles really do happen.

Good night, good luck, and welcome to a better world.

Chapter 28

Markis woke up from the nightmare again, the nightmare where he could see the food behind the glass but couldn't reach it. He stumbled over to the bathroom faucet, drinking cup after cup of water. His dinner was long gone and he couldn't convince them that he needed more calories. Or maybe they wanted to study him in this state of starvation. He looked in the mirror, seeing a concentration camp victim already.

They came in from time to time in their hazmat suits and took blood or saliva swabs. They did biopsies of his liver and other organs with painful needles; they cut him and watched him heal. Each time he spoke to them, calling them by name if he could, trying to make them see him as human. Eventually they put a leather gag in his mouth.

The promised tortures hadn't yet materialized; he suspected Jenkins had bigger fish to fry. Markis just had to make it through day to day.

They had been kind enough, if that was the word, to re-break his bones and straighten him out. They used no anesthetic and they recorded the whole procedure, hooking him up to electrodes and machines. At least they fed him then.

Markis lay back down, but had a hard time sleeping. Because he was awake, through the thick walls he heard the rattle of bullets ricocheting like marbles in a bathtub, the muffled thuds, the thump of something hitting his locked door, the yelling and screaming faint through the soundproofing. He sat up in bed, waiting for whatever came.

The door swung open abruptly, revealing a tall, thin figure, backlit so Markis couldn't see his face, but he knew the posture and the man's way of moving.

"Have you come to kill me, Skull?"

The cadaverous avenger stepped into the room but left the light off. An MP5 submachine-gun with a long suppressor rested in his hand.

"I ought to. It's your fault Zeke is dead."

"How do you figure?"

"If you'd just have gone with them, if you'd never run and asked for Zeke's help, none of this would have happened."

"It's because of me he was alive at all. I put him back together on a

Kandahar mountainside, and I killed fourteen Taliban at close range doing it. Maybe ten other guys in the world could have done that, and I paid for it later. I didn't kill him, Skull. But if it eases your pain, then shoot me now. I'm ready."

"I'm not going to shoot you. I'd have done that back in the cave if I was going to. Do you have a death wish? Why are you even here? You could have just sent the stuff around the world and escaped. Why did you get yourself captured?"

"Because it seemed like the right thing to do."

Skull snorted in disbelief.

"Okay, how's this. Maybe I didn't want to put all my eggs in one basket. Maybe I wanted to distract them from the real plan, let them think they'd won. Maybe I wanted to provoke them to rash action, which I did. Maybe I deserve to be punished. I did murder Jenkins, and I brought on the death of a couple hundred thousand Angelinos. Maybe the people that have been experimenting on me need to see the truth, despite the lies. Or maybe the world needs a martyr, a symbol to rally around."

"You really are full of yourself, aren't you? God damn you and your martyrdom and your symbolism and your sainthood," Skull snarled. "What's with people like you? You don't live in the real world."

"I live in the world of ideas, because that's what changes the world."

"Oh, you make me sick. Get up and come with me. I'm not going to let them win even if you want them to."

Markis smiled gently. "The old me would tell you to go to hell, take that weapon from you and do what I promised the last time you had me at gunpoint. The new me...just says no. I'm not coming with you. The new me isn't afraid anymore. It doesn't mean I'm a saint. It just means I consider myself already dead, so you can't scare me. Nobody can. And that scares you."

Skull cursed him then, words to wound and hurt, but Markis was beyond the sticks and stones. He wished he could help Skull. He wished Skull would accept the gift, and surrender all that pain and hate and anger. But for some people, that pain and hate and anger is who they are, is all they are, and they can't give that up.

Skull turned and went away muttering, defeated by Markis's refusal to be intimidated. He didn't kill him, so on some level he must have known Markis was right.

Markis understood. He forgave. He was glad, because it meant Skull had a conscience after all.

He was also glad Skull left the door open. Perhaps if he'd been stronger he could have stayed, but Markis found that given the way out, and the cost of staying, he wasn't strong enough to remain to be tortured and dissected. Maybe that's what was supposed to happen. Maybe staying would be the coward's way out after all. Maybe he had more work to do.

He followed Skull out at a distance, past a sad trail of bodies. It grieved him to see Skull's killing rage, but as Spooky had once told him, no man can live in another man's heart.

Chapter 29

Elise looked at her watch, dimly visible in the glow of the hangar's Exit sign. She glanced for the dozenth time at David Markis. His rejuvenated body had settled in at its optimum physical age, and now he looked for all the world as if he were Daniel's brother instead of his father. He shook his head at her, shrugged as if he knew what she was thinking.

Pacing up and down, she exchanged quiet greetings with Larry and the dozen others that were still with them. She knew many of the Bunker group had simply flown to Buenos Aires on their own passports. Before he died, Vinny had confirmed that those were not on any watch lists, had not been connected with the fugitives. The rest, who might be taken into custody, were here waiting in a small airfield near Tucson, ready for David to fly them south to safety and freedom.

A half hour later the elder Markis finally spoke up. "We can't stay much longer. It's almost dawn, and someone is going to notice us stealing this plane and call the authorities. And we don't want to have to sneak across the border in daylight. I doubt the Air Force is going to respect Mexican sovereignty if they decide to shoot us down. We have to go."

Everyone was looking at her. *As if I can decide this, she thought. But I am his wife. They want my blessing. They want me to let him go, to absolve them of responsibility. Well, all right. They may still make it. Two highly trained men by themselves might be able to slip across the borders. These people here – civilians, women and children – I can't risk their freedom for one man.*

Even if he is my husband, my heart, my life.

She nodded to David. "You're right. Come on, let's go."

Immediately David Markis clapped his hands. "All right, you heard the lady, load up." The stairs were already down on the twin-engine turboprop and the people took their places quietly. Elise sat down in the frontmost passenger cabin seat. She ran her hand over the fabric of the cushion next to her, wishing things were different. Wishing he was there.

Larry hit the button that opened the hangar, then ran to shut the fuselage door and take the copilot position. Engines whined to life and David taxied out onto the ramp, turning eastward toward the downwind end of the runway.

As the plane swung through one hundred eighty degrees she heard an

exhalation and an exclamation from the cockpit.

“What is it?” she heard David say. “Are we blown?” He pushed the throttles forward and the engines picked up speed.

“I don’t know,” replied Larry. “It’s just one vehicle. No lights. Slow down, man. The Feds wouldn’t come in like this. They’d be all guns blazing and shit. It has to be them!”

David throttled back, but did not brake the plane. The aircraft and the SUV approached each other on opposite courses, the truck speeding down the runway much faster than the turboprop, heading directly toward it.

At the last second it slewed sideways and two men bailed out, waving frantically. David Markis slammed the throttles back to idle, feathered the props and hit the brakes as wild cheering broke out among the passengers.

Elise couldn’t hold back the tears as Spooky and Daniel climbed aboard. Her husband threw himself into her arms and held on as if he’d never let her go. *And he won’t, not if I have anything to say about it*, she resolved.

As the plane ran down the runway she saw the SUV flash its lights twice in goodbye, then turn and race away across the dusty desert landscape just turning pink in the light of dawn. *Goodbye, Skull*, she thought. *I don’t like you, but right now I love you. I hope I get to thank you sometime.*

The End of *The Eden Plague*.

Reaper's Run

by

David VanDyke

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***Speculations on the Eden Plague*, by B. B. Larson – Online Excerpt**

Greatness tries to change the world for the better. Small-mindedness resists, reacts – and ordinary people get caught in the gears. Usually they are ground up and spit out, but sometimes, once in a while, they win through to produce a fundamental alteration of everything we know.

The long-awaited apocalypse arrived not with a bang but with a slow-motion, grinding crash. It began with irrational fear in the minds of men, a self-fulfilling prophecy of overreaction that brought the world to the stuttering brink of annihilation.

It started with a man named Aaronovsky, a secret Jew that kept his Talmud and his Torah behind a false panel in his miserable little apartment on a bleak biological warfare research base in the middle of Siberia. This one man had the courage to respond to anonymous messages that showed up on his computer and keep the conversation hidden from his Soviet masters.

Whoever was on the other end provided information on how to build a prototype virus that might save humanity: from illness, from death – perhaps even from itself. It was an amazing feat of genetic engineering, decades ahead of its time. Unbeknownst to him, this information, this communication, was of extraterrestrial origin – but that is another story.

For long years he used the knowledge, and the laboratory, to create what eventually came to be known as the Eden Plague. That he did it right under his supervisors' noses was a testimony to his courage and determination. Unfortunately, he did not have time to complete his work. The virus he had made, though amazing, was imperfect.

No one living knows exactly what happened, but in 1989, politics intervened: the Soviet Union fell apart, and its technologies were stolen, its scientists and research trafficked to brutal regimes with oil money, and the

almost-miracle disappeared into a black hole.

That is, until it surfaced in the form of some samples of tissue, a whole human head, and a canister of a virus, in an abandoned biological facility buried in the Iraqi desert. There it had waited until someone, probably local salvagers, found it.

From there its path wended murky, but eventually it fell into the hands of an ambitious CIA man, a spymaster in the classic mold – an old-moneyed New England dabbler named Jervis A. Jenkins III. He believed in putting wealth and power to use, and in this experimental biotechnology he saw a source of both.

Keeping the secret even from his own superiors, he created a small, closed corporation to investigate the germ that showed the potential to heal and to extend life. If harnessed, it would be of immeasurable value. Who wouldn't give everything they owned to conquer cancer, AIDS, even old age itself?

But the so-called Eden Plague had a flaw – at least, from Jenkins' point of view. Not only did it heal the body, but the brain, and perhaps the mind, as well. Test subjects changed for the better; their morality tended to improve as a so-called "virtue effect" took hold. Were the virus to be distributed, crime, drug addiction, selfishness and misuse of power would drop precipitously. For those like Jenkins, this was a drawback they could not stomach. If corruption were stamped out, so would be his unchecked exercise of power over his fellow man.

Additionally, because the agent of change was a communicable disease, it could not be controlled. Easily transferred from person to person, in its present form it was useless for Jenkins' selfish purposes. The virus had to be modified – "perfected" – to get rid of this virtue effect, and also its easy transmissibility. Only when it could be controlled, withheld for the elite who could pay, and held out like a carrot to the masses, would it be publicized.

Then the world would beat a path to his doorstep, cash in hand.

The elder Jenkins' major mistake? Bringing in his son and namesake to manage the corporation. When Jervis A. Jenkins IV botched his attempt to recruit Air Force combat lifesaver Daniel Markis into the program, he set off a chain of events culminating in the Eden Plague spreading throughout the world.

But just like Jenkins, the national power structures, especially the people at the top, were not ready to allow such a revolution in their societies.

The U.S. tried to burn the virus out with nuclear weapons on its own soil, as did the Russians and the Chinese. Especially within these three superpowers, Eden Plague carriers, or "Sickos" as they were labeled, were hunted down, rounded up, locked away – or worse.

Chapter One

Aboard Royal Princes Cruise Line's *Royal Neptune*

Sergeant Jill “Reaper” Repeth, U.S. Marine Corps, started the day as she always did: with a protein shake and one hundred pull-ups on a tension bar she had brought aboard and set up in the doorway of her room’s balcony. Facing out to sea looking over the railing, her head and shoulders rose and fell, eyes on the horizon. Her lungs expanded, pumping the fresh sea air in and out.

It is great to be alive, she told herself, one of a series of mantras of encouragement. *Twenty-five and still alive. Every day above ground is a good day. Every day I am not being shot at is a good day.* She believed these things more today than on some other days.

Jill Repeth was a One Percenter. Most Marines didn’t know about them, because most Marines weren’t female. Only a small fraction of the Corps was composed of women, because unlike the other services, the Marines didn’t bend its physical standards very much to admit them. Measure up or leave, they said.

But the One Percent was an unofficial secret club of female Marines that strove to outperform the men – that could, would and did beat them at their own game. Marathoners, triathletes, gymnasts, distance swimmers, biathletes. Thus One Percent, because perhaps one in a hundred already fit Marine women could do it – could perform at this Olympic level of physical prowess.

The cruise line had given her a private room on a middle-high deck, something she would have struggled to afford if she hadn’t been selected through their “Wounded Warriors” promotion that provided free cruises to the nation’s war-damaged service members. Jill was glad of that privacy as she finished the hundred, hardly more winded at the end than at the start. Taking that as a good sign, she knocked out another fifty before stopping.

That was more than she’d ever done before at a stretch. Perhaps it was because she had an advantage over the average Marine, male or female: she weighed at least twenty pounds lighter than normal.

Missing everything below both knees put less strain on the cardiovascular system. Absent lower legs didn’t need blood and oxygen.

Stay positive, stay focused.

Ever since the mortar shell that took her feet and shins, that’s what she told

herself.

Dropping gently to the deck onto her buttocks, she maneuvered with wiry muscled arms and leg stumps over to her prostheses. Sitting on the floor, she strapped them on, fiddling and adjusting for a longer span than usual. She finally got them to some semblance of stability, and wobbled to her artificial feet.

Jill stared down at the legs and the metal-and-plastic structures. They didn't feel right. Her good mood evaporated. Some days the damn things just didn't sit well on her, and it looked like this would be one. She wasn't even going to turn on the microprocessor control and servos that helped her walk and run with a semblance of normalcy. She still hoped she could work up to a marathon again. *Maybe with those bladerunner things.*

Jill sat down on the bed and took the prostheses off, rubbing at the end of the stumps. They always itched a bit, but today they positively screamed to be scratched. She did so, vigorously, and then looked more closely at them. If she didn't know better, she would swear that the stumps had lengthened slightly.

Maybe they were just swollen.

She shrugged to herself. Rather than fight with the artificial legs, she phoned for a wheelchair pick-up. She'd come back after breakfast and fiddle with the things. She was *starving*.

An hour later, after bolting down everything she could shove into her face at the buffet, she returned to her room, bewildered. The ship had gone crazy, in a good way. People claiming to be cured of cancer. A blind man seeing. A paraplegic standing up and walking. People talking about the Second Coming of Christ, seeing the Virgin Mary on their walls and their pizzas, gossiping about miracles and the aliens landing.

Well, nobody had disappeared off the ship, so at least that ruled out the Rapture. Other people spoke of a viral video some had seen before the ship's internet went down, where a man named Daniel Markis claimed to have released a curative disease that everyone could have.

Jill stared down at her stumps again and wondered.

Two days later, Jill peered out over the balcony rail. The object of her gaze was the U.S. Navy frigate *Ingraham*, keeping station to windward at about two nautical miles distance. Beyond, hull up on the horizon perhaps twelve miles off floated a Landing Platform/Dock amphibious assault ship, probably the USS *Somerset*. It was this ship that held her frustrated attention.

She lowered herself down from her hold on the railing; she had been perched there with her hands taking all her weight. Settling into the comfortable deck chair, she picked up her small five-power optical binoculars. Jill cursed herself for not bringing her eighteen-power electronic monsters, but she hated to carry a month's pay around on a Caribbean cruise.

The LPD leaped into view, the angled, radar-deflecting planes of its superstructure identifying it as one of the most modern ships of the U.S. Navy. She was familiar with the type, having served a Fleet Marine Force tour on her sister ship, the *USS Arlington*.

Twelve miles away. Just sitting there for the last forty-eight hours.

Food aboard the cruise ship had dwindled, and was now rationed; Jill had recognized the impending problem as soon as the vessel had been detained. She had taken pains to smuggle everything that would keep back to her cabin and stash it in anticipation of making a break, but her stock would run out shortly, and there was no sign of them being allowed to land or disembark.

The announcements aboard ship had said they were quarantined because of a "dangerous disease." That dangerous disease had apparently cured cancer, blindness, even old age among those aboard, and had started to regrow her legs. Between the official word and the Daniel Markis video, she decided she believed the latter.

Hunger became her constant companion. She didn't know why for sure. Her caloric intake had exploded; for a triathlete like her, that was a sign something was seriously out of whack. The appetite must have something to do with the miracle disease.

She looked down at the strange pink skin down there, contrasting with the tan that ended just below her knees. The nubs couldn't bear her weight without excruciating pain, and they wouldn't fit her prosthetics anymore, so she had used the wheelchair service a lot. Reaching down to scratch the itchy growth, she pushed aside thoughts of why it had happened, or even how, and concentrated on what she had to do.

Night began to fall over the Atlantic. Making her final preparations, she wrote a letter to her parents in Los Angeles, leaving it addressed on the table for the steward to find. She ate as much as she could hold, and put the rest into the waterproof bag, along with her combat utility uniform, her wallet and identification, and the jury-rigged prostheses. She had ripped the expensive electronic guts out of them and she now had something that she could use, if barely. Padded with pillow stuffing and cut-up blankets, they strapped onto her

stumps and allowed her to stand, even walk gingerly, as long as she could take the pain, and look somewhat normal in her uniform.

A bottle of ibuprofen went in as well, and a few other odds and ends. Then she sealed it up and put it in her rucksack. Wet suit on next, a stylish blue and green never intended for clandestine work, but it was all she had. Then the scuba gear she had brought to use – she thought – for recreation; her combat knife; and a rucksack strapped in reverse to sit over her belly. Lastly the swim fins, reconfigured to fit her regenerating stumps.

Levering herself up to the rail, she looked out between the slats at the two ships, now visible mainly by their navigation lights. Earlier she had seen hovercraft embarking and disembarking out of the combat well at the back of the LPD. Now she could see a strobe and running lights from a helo landing on the flight deck at the rear, one of a continuous droning above and around the ships. She had seen Hornet and Lightning naval fighters high overhead earlier in the day, so there was a supercarrier out there somewhere too, running combat air patrol.

She took several deep breaths, wondering if she was making the biggest mistake of her life. *Hell, there's an old Corps saying, she thought. "The worst plan executed quickly and violently is better than the best plan no executed at all."*

Far better to do something than to do nothing.

Facemask and regulator on, she hoisted herself up to the railing, looked at the water thirty feet below, and launched over the rail like a gymnast. Balling up, she wrapped herself around the rucksack, holding her hands to her face to shield the delicate apparatus from the impact. The sea struck her like a cold wet fist, and she fought to stay out of sight below the surface, fought to get the mouthpiece settled and clear it of water. For a moment she just floated beneath the waves, recovering her breath.

Then she began the long swim.

She navigated by lights from the ships. At first she steered by the brilliant glare of the bright cruise ship behind her, easy enough to see through the water above her head. All she had to do was keep going directly away. A half hour later, when she couldn't see it any more, she cautiously broke the surface to get her bearings and adjust.

Her stomach already complained; she rolled over on her back and pulled a plastic coffee can out of a rucksack pocket, gulping down the cold spaghetti and meatballs packed inside, shoving it into her mouth with her fingers. It was the

best she could come up with for eating on the trip; she hoped she had enough food to last. A half-liter of water followed.

The surface swim seemed interminable; even with the fins, she estimated it would take four to six hours to reach the LPD. The critical variable was the hunger, the thing she'd had to learn to live with and manage for the last two days. How often would she have to stop, how much would she have to eat – would her food and water run out? She laughed to herself at the idea of being thirsty in the ocean.

Eating every thirty minutes, she burned calories at a prodigious rate.

The answer came after three hours. *Ingraham* was far to her rear; she had bypassed it by a good mile, having no desire to be spotted and caught. It appeared that no one had even considered the possibility that someone would *swim* away from their floating prison, particularly not in the direction of their captors. But now she'd eaten the last of the food outside the waterproof bag. It looked like about an hour to the LPD. She wished she could ditch the scuba tank, but she might need it when she reached the ship.

A half hour later her gut demanded food again, and she didn't have anything accessible to give it. If she opened the waterproof bag, she would flood everything inside with seawater – the food and her uniform in particular. She clamped down on the discomfort, bringing the discipline of a lifetime of triathlon training into play.

Pain is just weakness leaving the body. No pain, no gain – no pain, no brain. Pain is a feeling, and Marines don't get issued feelings.

Two hundred yards from the stern of the LPD, the starving wolverine in her belly cramped her up completely, curling her into a fetal ball. She ground her teeth, pushing through the pain. She put her head under water and screamed. She pounded her thigh, trying to distract her nervous system.

Looming above her, the ship showed nothing except for its navigation lights. Uncramping just enough to propel herself to the stern, she hoped that someone didn't pick that moment to look out into the dark water and see her in the moonlight. She forced her legs to push her closer, finally rounding the corner.

The well ramp had closed.

She groaned, fighting the cramps and starvation. Pulling out a water bottle, she drank, hoping the fluid would ease the sensations. She cursed herself for not thinking of putting something with nutrition in the containers – protein shake, orange juice, anything.

Milk would have been ideal. I'm such an idiot.

Lesson learned, if she lived to remember it.

The cramping eased for a moment. Looking around she found a steel rung inset into the stern. More rungs led up the side, and she measured the climb with her eyes. Fifty feet, maybe. No way would she make it, especially not with the gear. She closed her eyes for a moment, hanging on grimly. Ketosis soured her breath as her body scoured her bloodstream for something to metabolize.

Only one choice. She had to get to the food inside the waterproof bag.

Levering herself painfully up on the first rung, she sat on it and wrapped her left arm into the one above. Clinging on crudely, she forced her right hand's cold knotted muscles to open the rucksack strapped to her belly, then the bag inside. She grabbed the first food packet she encountered. Greedily she stuffed crackers into her face. A feeling of relief and well-being spread like a drug; she could almost follow the sugars through her veins as they reached outward from her insides, quieting her screaming tissues.

A rumble went through the ship, a vibration felt rather than heard. Grinding and clanking sounds startled her, originating from somewhere very near. She hastily sealed up the waterproof bag and slipped back into the water, just in time.

Light blazed above where she had just rested, and she slipped the scuba regulator back in her mouth, breathing tank air. The great dark slab of the well ramp laid itself rapidly down onto the surface of the water nearby, forming a smooth transition for hovercraft inside to leave the ship.

A moment later an enormous dark shape swept by just feet from her, an LCAC hovercraft shoving her downward with tremendous force, spinning her like the undertow at a riptide beach. As quickly as it had come, it was gone, off into the Atlantic night, and the ramp began to rise again.

This was her only chance. Her legs pumped, driving the fins against the sea with all of her strength, aiming for the joint at the base of the ramp, from the side. There was no time to worry about being spotted; she had to get out of the water and on board.

She rolled over the enormous hinge and into the wet well. There was only three feet of water inside, and as soon as the ramp closed it would drain. She swam sidestroke in the shallow water, pushing herself up against the side rail, and then wormed her way forward. She was still hidden by the seawater, the dimness and the looming machines, but soon she might have nowhere to hide.

It's good to be good, but sometimes it's better to be lucky. She got lucky.

The only person in sight was a sailor sneaking a smoke, facing into the

corner opposite her across the vast open space. Parked vehicles hid her exit from the water, and the noise of the starting pumps covered any sound she made as she dragged herself up the access ramp. She climbed onto a ladder – nautical terminology for any stairway aboard ship – and upward into one of the compartments tucked up along the walls. Once out of sight, she just breathed for a few minutes, resting after her ordeal.

Dry and safe enough, she ate her fill, stripped off the wet suit, and changed into her uniform. On a ship this size, one more Marine would be almost anonymous. The trick would be when to make herself known, and to whom.

This was as far as her planning had carried her.

Her MOS, Military Operational Specialty – until she lost the legs – was 5816-3RT, Military Police Special Reaction Team member, similar to civilian SWAT. The problem with such a small specialty was that her circle of contacts was limited. 3RT people tended to keep to themselves. She hoped to either find someone on this ship's 3RT she knew, or just depend on the tight-knit community to shelter her in the face of her unlawful actions. Still, there were some violations that could be ignored by the loyalties and traditions of the service; she hoped that unofficially rejoining a deployed unit would qualify.

She slipped the prostheses on last, grimacing as she strapped them tight. Another four pain pills and a gulp of water, and she was on her feet. She stowed her gear behind a stack of firefighting equipment and hoped it wouldn't be noticed.

Down into the enormous ship she tottered, holding onto railings and moving slowly. Sweat broke out on her brow, and she fended off two concerned inquiries with explanations of recovering from food poisoning. She didn't like the way the people looked at her; she had chosen that illness as an explanation precisely because it was neither unusual nor contagious.

These people seemed on edge. She realized the crew must have been told the same lies about a deadly disease aboard the cruise ship, and they were jittery. Maybe going to the 3RT wasn't the best choice. She suddenly realized whom she might be able to trust – by law, custom and regulation.

Five minutes later she was leaning against the chaplain's door. She hoped he would be a calm, sensible sort that could keep his mouth shut. If she were lucky, she would get a Catholic priest. Priests had reputations for keeping confidences, and closing ranks. For this, she needed someone unshakeable.

The door opened to show a pleasant, pink, thirtyish face attached to a short, chubby body with dirty blonde, collar-length hair. She stared at the Navy

Lieutenant's bars on the right lapel of the woman's combat cammies, and the cross on the left, disoriented by preconceptions. Her name tag read "Forman."

"May I help you?" Lieutenant Forman's accent exuded culture: New England – Boston perhaps, or Maine. It reminded Jill strongly of Katherine Hepburn, before the quaver, or maybe a Kennedy.

"Yes, ma'am. Permission to enter?"

"Of course, Sergeant." The chaplain stepped back, then closed the hatch behind Repeth as she gingerly tottered in. "Please, sit. Are you ill?"

Jill sat. "No, my prostheses are giving me a bit of trouble." She reached down to thump on her boots, bringing forth a decidedly artificial sound.

"Ah. Well, here we are. Coffee? Tea? Soda, or some juice?" She gestured at a compact coffee maker that sat upon an equally tiny refrigerator. "Privileges of the ministry."

"Juice would be great, and if you happen to have anything to eat...I missed chow."

Forman slid a tin of shortbread cookies off a shelf near her feet, opening it and setting it on the desk within reach, then pulled out a cold can of orange juice for Jill, a coffee cup for herself.

"You have the look of someone with a lot on her mind."

Jill stuffed two cookies into her mouth, drank the juice in one pull. She gazed at Forman from under lowered eyebrows. "You don't know the tenth of it. But before I go on...how confidential is this conversation?"

"As confidential as you want it to be."

"And what if I told you I had done something unlawful? Would you stick to that?"

Forman sat back, blowing on her hot coffee, contemplating. "Are we talking capital crimes here?" She smiled, obviously only half joking.

Jill stared, intent. "I don't think so. Mostly just Article 92."

"Failure to obey a lawful order. I can tell you then with ironclad certainty that my lips are sealed." She took a drink of her coffee, made a face. "It's this ship's water. I ran out of bottled a while back."

Repeth took a deep breath. "All right. I choose to trust you." A pause. "I am not assigned to this ship."

Forman's eyebrows flew up in surprise, and she sat forward, putting her chin on her fist. "Really? That's a new one, not that my military career is particularly long or distinguished. Do tell." Her eyes sparkled with the cheeky joy of shared secrets.

Jill shook her head angrily. “Ma’am...six hours ago I was looking at this LPD from the railing of that cruise ship you have under quarantine. I just swam twelve miles, I’m hungry, and I’m not in the mood for girl talk. And there is no disease aboard that ship. At least, nothing...nothing bad.”

Forman opened her hand to drum her fingers on her own cheek, staring into Jill’s eyes, as if seeking truth. “Dear me. Dear me. Sergeant, I never thought to say this, but I am at a loss. What do you want me to do?”

“Ma’am...I haven’t a clue. But I’m exhausted. I need food and rest, and I’m holding my head up by sheer willpower. Is there somewhere...”

“On a ship? We both know that every space is spoken for. You might be able to join the crew as a transfer in and get away with it for a few days...”

“Just let me eat and sleep, then I’ll be able to think straight. Please?”

Forman pondered for a moment. “Take my cabin.” She gestured to a door in the back of the tiny office. “No one will disturb you. I can sleep in my chair if need be. I’ll go get some food to go from the mess.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” Jill stumbled to the cabin’s bunk, falling asleep as her head hit the pillow.

The wolverine in her guts woke her up. Faint light from the open office door illuminated food cartons next to the bunk. She wolfed down their contents – sandwiches, fruit, potato chips, milk – then rolled over and went back to sleep.

A long black time later, a giant club struck the ship like a gong, throwing Jill out of her bunk and onto the deck. She yelped as the impact twisted her wrist, then again as she put her weight on the prostheses. She gave up and went back to one hand and two knees, crawling along the heaving deck to the doorway.

Chaplain Forman sat on the deck as well, holding her head. She would have a nasty shiner soon, above her right eye. The two women stared at each other, and then Forman clawed her way to her seat behind the desk as the PA came to life.

“Now hear this, now hear this. General Quarters, General Quarters, all hands General Quarters. Condition Zebra.” They felt the ship get under weigh, the sound of the screws churning at flank speed, maximum revolutions.

“I have to go to my station in the infirmary. You stay here!” Forman pointed severely at Repeth with an emphasizing finger.

An hour of sweat later the chaplain returned, teeth clenched. “The scuttlebutt is your cruise ship just exploded. Lost with all souls. One of the corpsmen said they saw streaks of light from the sky, then it just vanished in a

fireball. Someone should be court-martialed. The *Ingraham* was a lot closer than we were, and has been gravely damaged. Their wounded are being medevacked to us. I have to get right back.”

“You know what this means, don’t you, ma’am?”

“It means the U.S. government just murdered three thousand innocent people because they thought they were sick. They must have been extremely frightened to do something like that. Though perhaps they have a right to be. Terrorists just detonated two nuclear weapons on U.S. soil: one in Los Angeles, another in West Virginia.”

Sergeant Repeth gaped in shock. “Nukes? Los Angeles? What the hell is going on? Just what...” She trailed off, stunned.

“Something rotten in the state of Denmark, methinks. I have to go.”

Jill just raised a shaky palm as Forman left, not looking. She ground the heels of her hands into her eyes, damning her leaking tear ducts. *Los Angeles*. Her whole family was in Los Angeles, her parents and her little brother and uncles and cousins...

She waited as long as she could, until the ship secured from General Quarters and the watertight doors and hatches were allowed open and the ship slowed; they must have gotten word they were not under attack after all. She wondered why the two naval ships had not been told to move away before they sank the cruise ship.

Her first concern was more information. She also needed more food, and to move the illicit gear she’d stashed back in the compartment. Angrily she shook her head, throwing the tears off, wiping her eyes with her sleeves. She stood up, gritting her teeth against the pain, and strode out into the passageway.

The ship blurred busy around her, sailors and Marines scurrying about with extreme sense of purpose. The amphibious well filled with people checking landing craft and gear, loading armored vehicles aboard the huge hovercraft, chaining them down to hardpoints on the decks. She saw live ammunition being hoisted into the tanks and personnel carriers.

The commotion hid her, just one uniform among hundreds, hurrying about a task. She climbed the ladder to the compartment where she’d hid her gear, using mostly her upper body strength, and then struggled back down with the rucksack, everything stuffed inside it.

“Hey, let me give you a hand.” He was smiling, handsome, cheerful and dark. She saw Staff Sergeant’s stripes, and “Gaona” printed on his name tag.

“No, I got it.” She grimly struggled on.

“Come on, Sergeant. You know, chivalry isn’t really dead.”

“With all due respect, Staff Sergeant, you can stow that shit where the sun don’t shine. I pull my weight.” At that moment, the jury-rigged prosthesis on her left leg failed her, twisting sideways under the pressure of walking down the ladder steps. She would have fallen had he not caught her, setting her gently on the deck, along with her rucksack.

He looked at her lower leg, then her face, then back again. “You should be screaming about now, so I’m going to guess that’s not your real leg. I mean, that’s...” Confusion showed on his visage.

She bit back her embarrassment to growl, “It’s a prosthesis. I need to re-secure it. Just help me get out of everyone’s way.”

Accepting his support, she hobbled a few yards on one leg to a spot against the bulkhead. Once there she pulled up her trouser cuffs and began redoing the bindings. “Thanks, Staff Sergeant. But you don’t have to do any more. I’m good.”

Pursing his lips he nodded, then shrugged as he pointedly read her name tag. “Okay, Sergeant Repeth. I’ll see you around.” His tone was playful.

She watched him walk away. *Just as good-looking from this angle, and he knows it. Oh, Jill, give it a rest; not the time for the libido to act up.* Funny, she’d been feeling friskier the last few days. Maybe it was from the...the whatever-it-was that was fixing her legs.

Boot and straps again secure, she stood back up and hefted the rucksack down the passageway toward the chaplain’s berth. After dropping that off, she made her way to the nearest mess. The galley crew was in full swing, and she loaded up on everything she could, demolished the whole tray, then did it again. She didn’t think she could get away with a third; one of the mess ratings had looked at her strangely the second time through. Fortified, she stumped down the passageways to the other enlisted mess and went through the line there too.

This time she could eat slowly enough to listen to the scuttlebutt. She chose a spot close to a group of sailors in uniforms somewhat crisper than average. She thought they were part of the CIC, the Combat Information Center, nerve center for operations aboard. Maybe they would know what was going on.

“The Old Man said it was a kinetic strike.”

“Kinetic strike of what?”

“Inert reentry vehicles. Like nukes but just made of metal.”

“No way that could have blasted that cruise ship like it did.”

“Dude, those things come in at fifteen *thousand* miles an hour. Mach 20. I

ran the energy on my computer – it’s way enough. Like manmade meteors. I’m surprised it didn’t take *Ingy* with it.”

“It almost did, from what I hear. Two dozen dead and fifty wounded.”

“Somebody screwed up bad. They should have had her move away.”

“If they wanted it gone, why didn’t they just have us do it? With a missile or the guns or something?”

“Dunno, man, dunno. Maybe all them civilians on board. Glad I didn’t have to push that button.”

“Oh, yeah. That would suck. So where we going now?”

The sailors all stared at the questioner, a young junior enlisted rating, but no one spoke. Security prohibited talking about operational details, such as their destination, outside of secure spaces.

“Sorry.”

“That’s what I always tell them you are.”

“What?”

“You’re sorry.” The sailors laughed.

Jill finished her third tray and sidled away before they noticed her eavesdropping. Replete at last, she went back and got a to-go carton for later.

When she slipped into Chaplain Forman’s office she found the older woman staring at her shipnet computer screen. “Come here,” the lieutenant said. She pointed at an open email.

“All hands, pass this message. Sergeant Repeth report immediately to the Personnel Support Detachment.”

“Someone must have noticed you weren’t on the manifest.”

Jill growled. “Gaona.”

Forman looked a question.

“Just a nice guy that tried to help. Probably tried to look me up at Personnel and found out I wasn’t in the system. Now they’re trying to find me. There goes my anonymity. F– umm, freaking do-gooders. Sorry, ma’am.”

“I’ve heard salty language before, Sergeant. I’m sure Jesus did too.”

“Yeah, lots of people talking about Jesus on that cruise ship. Didn’t do them any good...ma’am, I need to get off this ship. I need to get to somewhere that I can plausibly rejoin from – I can say I missed reboarding – that I got drunk and got left behind in the Bahamas or something. Do you know where we’re headed?”

“Yes, and I think I know how to get you off the ship. We’re going to Norfolk to transfer the injured ashore on to Bethesda. That’s how you’ll go – as

combat wounded.”

Jill looked at her doubtfully. “That seems pretty iffy. I don’t have any fresh wounds.”

“You’ll have a concussion. Disorientation, you can’t think straight. It will be the perfect cover. And I’ll attend the wounded. Nothing more natural. I’ll make sure you get left alone. Then, at Bethesda, you’ll disappear in the shuffle.”

“Ma’am...that sounds like it will work. Can I say, you’re the most...*unusual* chaplain I’ve ever run across?”

“Why, are most of them you have met cowards?”

“No, just more sticklers for the rules, I guess.”

“I never much liked rules. I didn’t like my father’s rules,” – she pronounced it ‘fahtha,’ the New England Brahmin coming out strongly through clenched teeth – “so I married a Navy man. After a while I found I didn’t like my husband’s rules much either – or his skirt-chasing – though I did keep his name after the divorce. Better than ‘Jenkins,’ and a bit less conspicuous. But then I found God, or perhaps God found me, and I decided to go to seminary, to be a chaplain. I still didn’t much like rules, so I made sure the only ones I respected were really His, not the ones that mankind had tacked on to the religion.”

“That...that makes a whole lot of sense, ma’am.”

“I’m glad you approve,” she said drily. “If we’re going to be co-conspirators, you might as well call me Christine.”

Sergeant Repeth squirmed. “Ah...I’m not really comfortable with that, ma’am.”

Forman’s tone turned ironic. “God forbid I trespass on the sanctity of Marine Corps sensibilities. Suit yourself. Just remember, I’m not a line officer, I’m a Navy chaplain. You’re permitted.”

“All right...Christine. Thank you.”

“You can thank me when you’re ashore and gone.”

“Ma’am...Christine, can you see if you can check on my family? They are in L.A...I’d like to know if they’re...how they are.”

The chaplain looked at Sergeant Repeth and swallowed a lump. “Sure, Jill. Just as soon as I can.”

Repeth sat back, some of the knot of worry finally unraveling. Like any good Marine, she hated being without a plan. Now she had one, or at least, half a one. After she got back to where she belonged...her mind shied away from the future. Some part of it knew she wouldn’t like it when it arrived.

The next morning Forman dropped a sack on Jill's bunk, waking her up. "Sit up. We need to give you a good wrap and disguise." She opened the bag, pulling out gauze, bandages and a soft neck brace. Soon, Repeth was swaddled in enough of the material to hide her identity, save the last part across her eyes.

"Did you find anything out about my family?"

"Jill, I'm sorry. Communications are swamped. There are half a million people dead in LA, and the authorities there are way behind the power curve. Here, eat this. It might be a while before I can feed you again." The chaplain handed her a carton full of scrambled eggs, sausages and biscuits. While Jill was eating, Forman dumped the Marine's rucksack and started making two piles. "You can't get caught with anything incriminating. That means the scuba gear and anything with your name on it except your neck wallet. Shove that down your panties and tell anyone that asks you lost it in the attack, until you get clear. Where were you stationed, anyway?"

"Quantico."

"Good, that's just down the road from Bethesda. I assume that if you make it home you have uniforms and other gear?"

"Of course."

"Very well. Let's go, get those prostheses on." The chaplain started to help, then stopped as she looked at the exposed stumps. "If I didn't know better, I'd say that was new skin. Right there at the tan line. That's very strange."

Repeth licked her lips. "Uh...I didn't tell you everything, because... because I'm not sure I even believe it myself." She cleared her throat. "I think it *is* new skin. New skin and more, new everything. I think my legs are, uh, regrowing themselves."

Christine sat down suddenly, reaching out a hand to gently touch the baby-pink nub. "That's...that's amazing. Miraculous."

"Yes. I think it's why they killed all those people. There were things like this happening all over the cruise ship. Blind people that could see. People with terminal cancer cured overnight. A paraplegic got up out of his wheelchair. And this. I guess regrowing – regeneration – takes a bit longer, but I think in a few months I'll have new feet." The younger woman's eyes were pleading, begging the chaplain to let her have a chance at being a whole Marine and a whole person again.

"And that's what they are trying to cover up. But why? You aren't some kind of monster."

"I don't know. Maybe it's a secret worth killing for. It's going to take

smarter people than me to figure that out. I just know that I don't want to be locked up in some lab."

"You won't be if I can help it. We stick to the plan. This doesn't change anything. In fact I'm more sure now than I was before. Something big and rotten is going on, and I'm going to find out what. And fight it. My family is wealthy, and has contacts. Maybe it's time to use them." The chaplain looked very determined.

They heard an announcement over the PA, calling for the patients to be prepped for medical air transportation to Bethesda National Military Medical Center. Hurriedly strapping Repeth's prosthetics on, they walked carefully through the passageways to the auxiliary infirmary that had been set up in one of the cleared cargo holds. Ratings stepped out of the way as they saw the chaplain and the walking wounded Marine. The two slipped in among the hustle and bustle of the doctors, nurses and corpsmen, and got Jill horizontal on a cot as quickly as possible.

Forman fended off several helpful medical professionals, insisting this one was fine, just combat stress and a lingering concussion. When asked for her name, she said, "Jane Doe. No ID, no dog tags, no memory. Bethesda can take her fingerprints and DNA and look her up in the system."

Everyone was too busy prepping the patients to pursue it further.

Several six-man teams of Marines carried patients to the cargo lifts, then up to the flight deck to be loaded onto MV-22 Osprey tilt-rotors. Lieutenant Forman sweated and watched as they worked their way toward her and Sergeant Repeth, finally surrounding the cot and reaching for the lift points.

One man stopped short. "Hey, this is Sergeant Repeth, the one they were looking for."

Forman saw the man's name tag read "Gaona." *Thanks, Murphy.* Mind racing, she whipped him with her raised voice. "That's right, Staff Sergeant. She's concussed, she's suffering from combat stress, and she's in no condition to be bothered with you like last time. Now take charge of your detail and put your hands on that cot and *lift*, damn you, one, two, three, *lift*, and march your asses up to that aircraft or by *God* I will have your stripes – and you too, Corporal, don't think I won't, you men ought to be ashamed of yourselves, I should file charges for sexual harassment, for abuse under cover of authority. I thought Marines had more discipline than to be sniffing around a wounded female like horny butt-monkeys looking to hump everything in sight – h'ut, two, t'ree, fower, keep your eyes front you stinking pus-poxed son of a guttersnipe

streetwalker or I swear I will have you locked up at attention in front of the Sergeant Major and he won't be *anywhere* near as nice as I am..."

She hardly took a breath as she vented her bile in a running monologue, channeling her drill instructors and her abusive ex-husband and her lacrosse coach and that DI in *Full Metal Jacket*, calculated to stun and overwhelm the men until they loaded Repeth aboard the humming Osprey VTOL transport. Forman followed Jill onto the aircraft, where her blazing eyes dared anyone to interfere with her patient.

The transport team was sweating and only too happy to get away from the most cross-grained and viper-tongued minister of the Lord they had ever encountered.

"What the hell was that all about?" muttered one Marine once they were out of earshot.

"Must be a lesbian thing," said another nervously.

Staff Sergeant Gaona coughed, then spoke in a stentorian voice. "Belay that, Edwards. This is the new Corps. Embrace the rainbow."

After a distinct pause, all six of them burst into gasping, raucous, relieved laughter. When they could breathe again, they headed down to pick up another patient. The corporal said, "Remember, Staff Sergeant, that Chaplain'll be coming back eventually."

"Oh, shit. And she knows my name."

On the Osprey, Forman strapped Jill in – Navy chaplains afloat were trained in as many medical-assistance tasks as possible – and shook with relief when the aircraft finally lifted. She bowed her head and said a heartfelt prayer of thanks, certain now that Jill would get away. She resolved to have a little talk with one Staff Sergeant Gaona when she returned to the ship.

Bending down, she spoke directly into Jill's ear. "Take this," she said, handing her a folded piece of paper. "Memorize it if you can, then get rid of it. It's an anonymous email drop I set up when I was going through my divorce, so I could communicate with my lawyer without my husband snooping. If you avoid any distinctive keywords, you should be able to contact me through it

without the NSA picking it up. Only use it if you have to.”

Jill nodded, opening it up to commit it to memory. When they landed, she handed it back to Christine with a confident nod.

Chapter Two

National Military Medical Center, Bethesda, Maryland.

Inside the female head – what the Army would call a latrine – Jill pulled her eight-point cap from her cargo pocket and her neck wallet from her panties. Looping the packet of ID, money and cards back over her head, she then shrugged on the utility tunic she'd swiped from a wounded fellow Marine's ruck. "Raznowski" read the name tag, with a corporal's insignia. A little big, but it would have to do.

That was probably the worst thing about this whole exercise – to steal, even if she thought it necessary. She consoled herself with the belief that it should be reported lost or damaged in transit and replaced by the Corps.

After strapping her prostheses up tight again, she stepped out of the stall and washed her face and hands, checking her appearance. Good enough for a cursory glance, and one more Marine in a military hospital was likely to go unnoticed. Sliding out into the hallway, she turned and walked quickly for the stairs.

Eight floors later she wobbled to the bottom on her false legs. She'd done the last four flights parallel-bars style, with her hands on the rails, pausing as others walked by, nodding and smiling and hoping they did not inquire too closely.

After tightening the bindings up again, Jill opened the door to the lobby. It bustled with people, with the smells of the coffee kiosk in the corner and fresh bread from the sub sandwich franchise along the wall. It was all she could do to ignore her increasing hunger and not get in the line for a foot-long, but there was no telling how soon they might start looking for her. After an internal struggle, she simply walked out.

The first and most important order of business was to get lost, so she stumped carefully over to a waiting base shuttle bus and got on, not caring where it went. There had to be something to eat somewhere.

The bus made several stops on the base, then drove out the gate. She could see Humvees with M2 .50 calibers mounted, guarding the entrances, and long lines of vehicles waiting to get in. Fortunately, they did not seem to be checking the outgoing vehicles – yet. Though martial law and a state of national

emergency had been declared just days ago, the national capital region was still sorting itself out.

Traffic felt light outside the installation, even in the middle of a weekday, and there seemed to be a cop or an MP vehicle parked at every intersection. Jill wondered what they thought they were securing against – more “terrorism,” presumably.

Given that she had witnessed the deliberate murder of three thousand people on the cruise ship, she wondered about the nukes in West Virginia and Los Angeles, and the lengths people in her own government would go to control secrets.

Thinking of LA brought another wave of grief and fear for her family. She'd grown up on some tough streets, been part of a gang until she'd joined the Corps. With her mixed-Latina looks, she'd never quite fit anywhere – until the Marines taught her what it meant to be a warrior, and serve something greater than herself.

Though there were at least fifteen million people in the greater Los Angeles area, and perhaps only – *only!* – half a million casualties from the nuclear detonation, she couldn't shake the terror that almost everyone she loved in this world might be dead.

Maybe they're all right. She kept telling herself that.

Jill resolved to try to call them as soon as possible, then discarded the notion. From what she'd heard, on the television in the ward and the radio on the bus, anyone showing “unusual medical symptoms” was being detained and quarantined. A call to her family might lead back to her or, more importantly, throw suspicion onto them. As a military police member, she knew the security mentality well; anyone associated with a suspect was automatically under suspicion.

No, she'd not make that call. Better to have them believe she'd died on the cruise ship. Maybe Gaona's inquiry and the records associated with it would get buried under an avalanche of more important things for the overstretched military to do.

The bus she rode pulled up with a squeal of air brakes and she looked up from her musings to see a Metro station. Getting off, she settled her cap on her head and looked around, searching for any sign of something to eat.

A burger place beckoned at the end of the block, but her stumps were already screaming inside her badly fitted prostheses. She looked longingly toward the fast food, then thought about the long ride home to Quantico. Her

healing body wanted food every hour, needed it really – with this *thing* that was going on inside her.

“Can I help you, Corporal?” a voice at her elbow asked. Jill turned to see a tall, staggeringly handsome Army captain, in neat utility uniform with a holstered sidearm. He glanced at her chest, but she was used to that in uniform – that’s where her military name tag resided. His read “Muzik.”

It certainly isn’t my huge rack, she chuckled to herself, not with a triathlete’s low body fat. She saluted sharply, and he returned it automatically, raising his eyebrows expectantly. *God, he’s gorgeous.*

“Thank you, sir,” she said. *Have to take a chance here.* She reached down to thump on her artificial right leg, then the left. “Just got released and haven’t totally got the hang of them yet.”

His brow furrowed with sympathy. “That sucks. IED?”

“Mortar round. Iraq.”

“I thought we were pretty much out of there?”

“I’m an MP, and we’re still helping with their police. ‘Troop withdrawal’ doesn’t include trainers. Those poor local schmucks get it from all sides. Glad to be home.” The truth came much more easily than any lies, and Jill found herself glad to talk with someone.

“So...again, can I help you?” The sun returned to his face.

“Sir, I hate to be coddled, but what I really need right now is food, and the end of the block looks a long damn ways away.” She pointed at the burger place.

Captain Muzik laughed. “Well, Corporal Raznowski, I can’t leave my post, but we got MREs in the Humvee.” He gestured at a nearby armored utility vehicle with double whip antennas and a 40mm grenade launcher in a cupola, manned by a nervous-looking private.

Jill smiled with relief. “Deal. Mind if I sit down in it while I eat?”

“Of course. You make it?”

“I made it fifty yards to cover crawling with my feet blown off. I reckon I can make it ten on these pins.” She stepped over to the Humvee and pulled one back door open, resting her butt on the seat without swinging her legs in. Soon she chowed down on twelve hundred calories of Uncle Sam’s finest field food – Meals, Ready to Eat, also known as Meals Rejected by Ethiopians. She found they really weren’t that bad when the body believed it was starving.

“So Captain,” Jill asked between bites, “tell me the latest.” That seemed a safe enough question.

“Hmm well, nobody really knows anything. The two nukes got everyone

spooked and there's a lot of people getting detained. It's a good time to be in uniform; at least we're more or less above suspicion." Muzik peered at her from under his cap with a mock-severe expression. "You're not a Sicko, are you?"

"A what?"

"You know. Infected. Someone with the Plague."

"Oh, is that what they're calling the bastards now?" Jill tried to convey the right sense of black humor. "Do I look sick? You wanna see my stumps?"

"No, that's okay. To tell you the truth, I don't know I could even tell if someone was. Hear a lotta rumors about what it is, like...like folks turning into hippie peaceniks or pod people. Doesn't sound like any Marine I ever knew."

"Right." Jill casually plucked another MRE out of the box on the Humvee floor and slid it into her cargo pocket, the door hiding her motion from Muzik. *It won't be long before this hunger will be a symptom they're looking for*, she thought. *Best not to be too obvious.* "Well sir, thanks very much but I gotta be going." Standing up, she saluted once more.

Captain Muzik returned the courtesy, saying, "Good luck, Corporal."

"Cap'n," the 40mm gunner abruptly broke in from above, "something's up."

Muzik and Repeth turned to look in the direction the private pointed. Around a corner two blocks away came a procession of hundreds of people, perhaps thousands, yelling something and waving signs with anti-government, anti-martial-law slogans. Some pumped fists, and some carried sticks with no signs attached. More kept coming toward them, and some outliers, mostly young men, jumped on cars or kicked over garbage cans.

All the uniforms nearby, whether military or cops, nervously checked their weapons, and moved instinctively out of the mob's path. "Everyone keep calm," Captain Muzik called to his troops in a ringing voice. "As long as they are peaceful, do not fire."

"They don't look peaceful, sir," Repeth said as several youths smashed a parked car's windshield.

"I'm not going to shoot people for a little property damage, Corporal," Muzik said in a cold voice. "You'd better get inside the Humvee. Lock the doors."

It stuck in her craw to have to be protected, but she knew he was right. With her legs the way they were, and no weapon, there wasn't much she could do. She wasn't sure she could shoot civilians anyway, unless they were trying to kill someone.

They're just scared, she told herself. Like me.

"Get on the radio," Muzik said to her when she had climbed in. "The CEOI is right there with callsigns and frequencies. Tell Battalion what's happening and we need riot control squads."

"Roger," Repeth responded flatly, reaching for the radio handset.

"What?" Captain Muzik shot her an annoyed glance.

"Yes, sir, I got it." *But what's got him?* she wondered.

Repeth saw Muzik shut the armored door and move to the other side of the vehicle, putting it between himself and the mob that had overturned a pick-up truck and now chanted rhythmically, "*Kill-the-cops. Kill-the-cops.*"

Uh-oh. She tried to reach the next higher headquarters on the frequency listed, but all she could hear was chaos on the nets. She got a brief response, she thought, before someone else stepped on her transmission.

She popped the door on the safer side open enough to yell, "I can't reach anyone, and it sounds like there are riots breaking out all over. Battalion is swamped."

"Crap," Muzik responded, then said louder, "Dammit!" The mob had turned toward them. He drew his sidearm. "Lock the vehicle!"

Repeth immediately did so, checking all the doors and looking up at the private standing in the 40mm cupola. "Better unbuckle, kid. You don't want to be lashed into position if they roll this vehicle."

"Hell with that," he muttered, sweat streaming down his bone-white face. "Hell with that!" he repeated, and without orders, opened fire with his grenade launcher.

"Shit!" Repeth yelled as the weapon's loud stuttering filled the compartment. "Cease fire, cease fire," she ordered, hammering with her fist on the man's leg. He paid no attention, but continued to rake the mob with 40mm grenades.

The first shells did not detonate. Launcher grenades require approximately thirty meters of flight before arming, and the soldier was firing at people closer than that. The heavy cylinders slammed into people, breaking bones and knocking them down, but none exploded.

At first.

Then one lucky shot missed hitting anything or anyone, striking the street sixty meters away, right in the center of the crowd. To Repeth's surprise, it burst into a cloud of white mist, and the rioters nearby coughed and covered their mouths and noses, eyes and sinuses streaming.

Tear gas. Thank God. I thought he was firing explosive rounds. Other grenades popped, and soon the entire area filled with acrid fumes. Her eyes stung, and she grabbed a protective mask on the seat next to her, putting it on in well under the requisite nine seconds.

It did not matter that the shots were not lethal. Like a living being with one angry mind, the mob gave an inarticulate scream and turned from rioting to killing rage.

Men surrounded the Humvee, and climbed up to beat the struggling, screaming soldier on his perch behind the grenade launcher. Blood spattered into the interior. Repeth could see sticks, rocks and even a machete chopping, chopping.

Grabbing the gunner's assault rifle racked below, she aimed and fired upward, shooting for arms and legs, trying to drive the mob off the soldier before they killed him. Only when his severed head fell into the interior did she stop. They couldn't get past his harnessed body to reach her, and the three or four she shot deterred the others for a moment.

Instead she felt the Humvee rocking as the mob sought to overturn it, but the squat, heavy vehicle resisted their efforts at first. If they got coordinated and all on one side, though, they would succeed.

Shots rang out from the direction of the metro station where Muzik and his troops had fallen back, but she heard none of the full automatic that would indicate anyone had blown it like the gunner. From what she could see, the cops and soldiers had taken cover, only firing if the mob threatened them directly. She felt a brief flash of pride at their discipline, amazed that only one young troop had lost his head.

That had been enough, though. The Humvee now bounced like a low-rider on hydraulics, and she knew that if it went over, they would drag her out and butcher her. She would be forced to shoot to kill to try to save her own life, and the thought nauseated her.

That's odd: killing those trying to kill me never bothered me before.

Then Repeth had no more time to think as she scrambled into the driver's seat and punched the starter. Given options among death, shooting to kill, or driving, she chose the last. Putting the truck into four-wheel-drive, she goosed the diesel engine, lurching a foot or two forward. Then she did it again, trying to give the mob a chance to back off.

Instead, this seemed to increase their rage. A miasma of blood and death and cordite rode the air, and faces and fists plastered themselves against the

bulletproof windshield. Hate-filled screaming washed over her, causing terror to shoot through her different from any fear she had felt in war.

There seemed to be no choice. She floored it.

Bodies crunched and cries turned from rage to fright as she powered across a carpet of human flesh. It lasted only a moment, then she was clear of the press, trying to avoid running down any more civilians.

She saw a uniformed cop being dragged from her shattered vehicle and changed her mind, deliberately slamming the two rioters aside by opening the driver's side door as she drove into them. "Get in!" she screamed hoarsely at the policewoman through the mask, then cursed as she forgot she had locked the other doors tight against the mob. "Crawl across me!"

The cop did just that, throwing herself in and clawing across Repeth's lap with reckless abandon. As soon as she could, the Marine clamped the door shut and floored it again, racing between burning vehicles and groups of rioters.

"Holy shit, is that someone's head?" the woman squeaked, looking down at the floorboards where the thing had fallen.

"Yes, and that's what these people will do to us if we don't get out of here," Repeth replied.

"Turn right at this next intersection. There's a fire station...there."

Repeth turned, powering across the corner lawn to pull up next to the front door of the firehouse. Off the main drag there seemed fewer people, though smoke and a sense of impending doom filled the air. The door opened and two burly firemen with axes and helmets stepped warily out.

Repeth pulled off the mask. "Go on, I have to get back to my unit," she lied, and the cop nodded.

"Thanks, Miss. You saved my life," she replied.

"Just one cop to another, officer."

The woman hopped out and was quickly whisked into the safety of the station. Repeth roared away, then pulled over on a side street. Taking a deep breath, she ran her hands through her hair and rubbed her eyes, feeling the residual sting of the tear gas. *What the hell am I going to do? The world is going mad, and this is just going to cause them to clamp down more. If they know I'm a "Sicko"...what will they do?*

Trying to think, she glanced around and noticed the head again, and realized she had to get rid of the body. She wasn't ready to give up her transportation yet, even if she would probably have to abandon it eventually. A Marine with a false nametag alone driving an Army Humvee was uncertain

enough without adding a corpse.

Struggling with the harness, she eventually pulled the headless body down from the cupola and inside, placing it and the head into the seat directly behind her. Looking around, she saw a boy of about ten in dirty jeans and not much else watching her from his perch on a tree limb. Solemnly, he waved.

Repeth waved back as she drove off, wondering what he thought of what she was doing. She tried to think where she could dump a body.

The urge was strong in her to go back and find Captain Muzik, to return his man's corpse and his vehicle. It tore at her sense of honor to be running off, leaving the officer in the lurch, but to do so would be to rejoin a system that had become her enemy. At best, she would be cast loose on her own again with legs that hardly worked and no transportation. At worst...no, she did not want to be locked up.

Checking the fuel gauge, she saw that it showed full, so she decided to just drive, for now. Using the GPS mounted on the dash, she programmed it for Los Angeles and hit *GO*.

It'll be a miracle if I get that far, she thought with a dark laugh, then began giggling almost uncontrollably as she started to come down from the stress high. At that moment, driving a stolen Humvee with a decapitated body in the back seat toward a nuked city three thousand miles away seemed hysterically funny.

Noticing a sign, she detoured toward the Potomac and found an access road leading down between high earthen walls. In a wooded declivity, she quickly rolled the body out, consoling herself with the fact that she did not murder the kid – it was his own panic and the mob's reaction that did it.

Her rationalization didn't help much.

The GPS took her west on I-66. Checkpoints stopped civilians but waved her Humvee on through without a second glance. Eventually she reached I-81 south, running through the heart of the Shenandoah Valley. Its beauty wavered surreal in her eyes, with light traffic except for military convoys of five to fifty vehicles. Stopping only for take-out food, she drove steadily for several hours. Somewhere around Wytheville, where I-77 crossed, she ran low on fuel and pulled over at a truck stop.

After using the restroom and buying two much-needed burger meals to go, she climbed back into the driver's seat and ate while she thought about her options.

Use her credit card for a fill-up – if it was not blocked – and she could make it another 300 miles or so. Otherwise, ditch the vehicle and start

hitchhiking, perhaps on semi trucks. Truckers were usually a patriotic lot, and would probably have no problem with giving a servicewoman a lift.

Unless they thought she was running.

They wouldn't even have to think she was a Sicko. One of them might report her as a potential AWOL, running from her duty. Life had turned crazy enough right now that such things must be happening.

A few always ran when the shit hit the fan.

She decided to try to fill up.

Repeth's heart pounded as she swiped the card in the reader. "Come on, come on," she chanted as it processed, and then the words came: *Dispense Fuel*. She gasped with relief, grabbing the hose and jamming it into the tank, then realized how stupid she'd been as she looked toward the rear of the vehicle. A row of six five-gallon cans sat strapped to the back, resting on the bumper.

Nothing for it now, she thought, then checked the canisters. Each can was full, so she went back to filling the tank, looking around nervously. No one seemed to be paying her any attention, so she took another risk and walked over to the ATM on the wall and took out as much cash as it would let her, four hundred dollars. She wondered what paper money would be worth in the coming months.

Back on the road, she drove with one hand and ate with the other. Night threatened to fall, and quickly, as the Appalachians loomed to the west. Fumbling, she eventually found the lights, but just after crossing the Tennessee border, the Humvee began to make ugly noises underneath.

It didn't sound like the engine, but Repeth was no mechanic, so she slowed down and pulled in to the next truck stop.

Like most such places, it had a repair shop, and after taking a look, the good ol' boy there with the nametag that said "Willet" shook his head and his attached NASCAR cap. "Ma'am, you done messed up the transmission. It 'pears you been drivin' locked in four wheel drive for I dunno how long on a paved road. Ain't made for that."

"Crap. Can you fix it?" she asked.

"Two, mebbe three days to get the parts, with things as they are now. I could call Bristol to the National Guard there. They could come tow ya. Mebbe you could beg another Hummer off them in trade." The man spat a stream of tobacco juice off to the side, managing to look sympathetic doing it.

"Yeah, give me the number and I'll do that. Will it go a little farther?"

"Five or ten mile, prob'ly. After that..." He shrugged.

“Thanks, ah, Willet. That a first name or last name?”

Willet laughed. “You ain’t fum aroun’ heah, is you? That’s mah first name. Last name of Hunt. Pleased ta meetcha.”

“Get me that number, Willet?”

“Yes ma’am.” He rustled around in the office for a moment, found an actual paper phone book under a pile of actual newspapers, and scribbled down a number. “Here ya go.”

“Thanks, Willet. You’re a true gentleman.”

He spat again. “Aw, shucks, ma’am,” he said, and winked. “You in Tennessee now. We’s all gentlemen till we get riled.”

Repeth tipped her hat to him, leaving the mechanic rubbing his greasy hands with an equally greasy rag and chuckling. She hopped into the Humvee and tossed the phone number onto the seat next to her, and then drove around the back side of the massive truck plaza and parked as far from the garage as she could. By the time the vehicle was found, she hoped to be long gone.

Slinging the dead soldier’s assault rifle, she emptied his rucksack and stuffed it full of ammo and MREs. She wished she had a pistol, but the only one she had seen had been on Captain Muzik’s hip. Looking at the blood-splashed interior of the Humvee, another wave of guilt washed over her. Desertion, theft, desecration, mishandling of firearms and ammo, misappropriation of government property...the list went on and on in her mind. Now she was about to abandon a deadly weapon – the grenade launcher – and several hundred rounds of ammo.

Picking up the slip with the phone number, she sighed. *Can’t let some civilian get ahold of this stuff*, she thought, and trudged back to the well-lit central building to buy a new prepaid phone. A quick call to the National Guard number to report the abandoned Humvee eased her mind. Then she went looking for a ride.

With no idea how to do this, Jill looked around and spotted a scantily clad woman looking an old thirty and smoking in the half-darkness near a line of idling semis. “Hey,” she said to the working girl.

“Looking for a date, honey?” the woman asked, cocking her hip.

“No, I’m not...I mean, I like men. No, I just would like to talk to you a minute.”

“Time is money, honey.” She raised a skeptical eyebrow.

Jill pulled an ATM-fresh twenty out of her wallet and passed it to the woman. “Look, I need a ride on a truck going south, but I’ve never hitchhiked

before. Just tell me the system.”

The woman ground out her cigarette on the pavement and made the money disappear. “Okay, honey, it’s simple.” She pointed. “Over there is mostly northbound, over there is mostly southbound. If they’re idling with the curtains shut or the lights in the cab are off, don’t bug them. If the curtains are open or they’re sittin’ in the driver’s seat, they’re fair game. Just knock on the door and talk to ’em.”

Jill nodded. “How do I make sure they don’t think...I mean, that I’m not going to...”

“Pay your way in trade?” She laughed tiredly. “Don’t worry about that, honey. Dressed like that, with a gun, nobody will think you’re working. Why don’t you just wait until a convoy comes through? Or over there,” she pointed, “there’s some Army guys in a truck.”

“Um, no.” Jill stepped deeper into the shadows.

“Ah...” The woman held out a pack of cigarettes, then lit one when Jill declined. “AWOL, huh?”

“I’m not deserting, if that’s what you think,” Jill retorted angrily. “My family was in LA and they won’t tell me anything. I just want to find out what happened.”

“Yeah. You and a million other people. So I guess you don’t know anything either.”

“Not really. I was on a ship until a couple of days ago.” Suddenly Jill realized she was talking too much, out of loneliness or fear perhaps. “Hey, thanks, I gotta go. Take care.”

“Yeah, honey. You too.”

The third trucker Jill talked to agreed to give her a lift, eyeing her uniform and weapon. She offered him a twenty. He sniffed and took it, saying, “Get in.” Big, bearded, burly, about forty-five, and he smelled of cigarettes and, strangely, lemons.

Inside the roomy cab she settled into the big passenger seat with her feet stretched out. She massaged her upper legs, then as the rig got moving she lifted her trousers at the bottom to scratch where the stumps met the prostheses.

“Woah,” the trucker said in surprise. “How come you didn’t get out when you lost your legs?”

“The Corps is my home,” she answered. “And what’s the point of getting out, trying to find another job? We take care of our own.”

“You don’t look like you’re bein’ taken care of, darlin’.”

“Sometimes you gotta take care of yourself.” Jill turned away from him and rummaged in her ruck for an MRE to eat. Afterward she stared out the window at the night rushing by. Eventually her eyes closed and she slept.

If she hadn't been so exhausted, and lulled to sleep by the rhythm of the rolling wheels, she'd never have been caught unawares. It was only the feel of cold metal against her cheek that finally woke her.

Looking up, she saw the business end of her own assault rifle wavering in front of her face. Jerking, she backed up against the door, staring wide-eyed at the truck driver, whose name she did not even know, holding it one-handed with his finger on the trigger and the safety off. His other hand loosened his belt.

Glancing around, she realized he'd pulled the truck over on a side road in the middle of nowhere. No lights but the moon and stars were visible, and the trees closed in as if conspiring to hide the commission of sins.

“Now darlin', let's just do this nice and easy. I'll have me my fun and then you kin go, and nobody gets hurt.”

Jill was about to threaten to report him when she realized that was about the stupidest thing she could do. The whole country was falling apart and a man who would rape might also murder.

“Hey, you could have just asked nicely,” she said with a show of equanimity.

“Naw, you don't understand. I like it rough. I'm gonna like it when you squeal. Just shrug them pants off, then turn around. Don't even look at me. Better for both of us.” He smiled, showing oddly even teeth through his beard.

Her mind racing, Jill reached down and rapped her prostheses. “Hard to get my pants over these things. You'll have to help.” She unbuckled her belt, then pulled the utility trousers down to her knees, extending her booted false feet toward him, past the assault rifle that still pointed at her.

“Oh, hell,” said the man disgustedly. “Forgot all about those.” He looked confused for a moment, then mumbled, “I guess no cripple ain't gonna give me too much trouble.” Leaning the rifle against the driver-side door, well away from her, he reached for her legs.

Instead of cooperating, she popped the door lock on her side and tumbled out of the truck cab, landing in a wet ditch. Her athleticism saved her this time, and she rolled on her hands and arms, and then scrambled crawling into the woods.

The trucker hollered with rage, and then jumped out of the cab with the

rifle in his hand, but she snaked on her elbows and bare knees down a draw, then rolled upright behind a tree. While he blundered around looking for her, she yanked the trousers back up, buckled the belt, and then worked her way away from him as quietly as she could.

Cursing inside, Jill realized she had now lost her weapon – a Marine’s cardinal sin. She should have looped the sling around her wrist and leaned on it as she slept. What’s more, the bastard had her ruck full of supplies. She racked her brains trying to remember if she left anything that could identify her, but did not believe so. At least she still had her neck wallet, an MRE in her cargo pocket, and her prepaid phone.

After a couple of minutes blundering in the woods, the man gave up. *Probably smart enough to realize he can’t leave his truck unattended, in case I circle back around and turn the tables.* That was very tempting, but she swallowed her anger and desire for vengeance and stayed put, watching from a distance until he drove away. Then she found a dry spot in the cool Tennessee night, and dozed until morning.

Chapter Three

Sounds of an engine nearby woke her up. Warily she looked around, spotting an old pickup truck pulled into a turnout nearby. Two big men with shotguns got out as the engine shut off, and a large muttish hound jumped out of the bed and made a beeline for her.

Crap. She hid behind the tree and hissed at the dog to go away. Instead, it bounded and capered around her.

“Hey, you, come on outta there.” At least, that’s what she thought it sounded like, as thick as the man’s mountain accent was.

Hands visible, Jill eased from behind the tree and looked at the two men. Both held their shotguns negligently, not pointing them at her. One looked to be about twenty, and the other, the one who had spoken she thought, about forty. The elder stood tall and wide, perhaps six four and two fifty. The younger looked only slightly smaller.

“Howdy, Miss. Kin we he’p you somehow?”

“Ah, yeah,” she replied. “I was...” Jill ground to a halt, suddenly aware of acute hunger. Even without hard physical activity, the thing within her demanded to be fed as it slowly rebuilt her legs.

She started again, after sitting down and pulling out her MRE, the only thing she had. “My name’s Jill, and I was riding in a truck. With a trucker, I mean, hitchhiking. I fell asleep and when I woke up, he had pulled off here and had a gun on me. He was going to rape me, but I got away.”

The dog nosed her interestedly as she tore open the thick food-packet plastic. “Sorry, gentlemen, I’m really hungry. And thirsty, too. Any chance you have some water?”

“Got beer,” said the younger one, and went to fish in a battered cooler in the truck bed. Walking over, he handed it to her as he pushed the dog away. “Go on, Klutz. Go on now.”

“Thanks.” She popped the top and guzzled. Despite the liquid’s warm temperature, she said, “Best beer I ever tasted.”

“First one o’ the day allas is,” he replied. “I’m Jimmy, by the way. This here’s my pa, Big Jim.” He squatted and held out his hand.

“Nice to meet you, gentlemen. Looks like you’re not much smaller than your dad, though.” Jill shook his hand backward, then shoveled beef stew into

her mouth with the long-handled spoon provided.

“Yes ma’am.” Despite his outrageous accent, rough clothing and appearance, the young man had a nice smile, and his teeth looked healthy. “What?” he asked.

“Guess I expected you to have a dip in,” she mumbled as she dug for gravy.

“Naw. That stuff’ll kill ya.” Jimmy grinned at his father, then stood up. “Well, we was gonna go do a bit of duckin’, and we’re already late. Wanna come along?”

“Jimmy,” the older man said in a warning tone.

“Oh, come on, pa. We cain’t just leave her here.”

“Oughter take her to the sheriff. She gotta report that rat bastard.”

The younger Jim stared for a moment at the older in disbelief.

“I didn’t say we would let him see us. Just drop her at the corner and she can walk to the station.”

“Now wait a minute, gentlemen,” Jill said. “The way things are in this country right now, I’m sure your sheriff has a lot more important things to do than talk to me. I can’t even give him a license number off the truck. No harm, no foul.”

Now both men stared at her, then glanced at each other. “Uh-huh,” said Big Jim slowly. “Well, I guess you kin come along with us if’n you like. You ever been duckin’?”

Jill shook her head.

“Well, we’ll show you how it’s done.”

Jill sat in the shotgun seat of the pickup truck on the way back from the duck hunt. Seven birds, along with Jimmy and Klutz the mutt, rode in the bed. The dog flapped his long tongue alongside her head right by her open window, enjoying the breeze through the trees.

Up into the hills they wended their way, down old paved roads that turned to gravel and then dirt. For some odd reason, these two – well, three with Klutz – had taken to her like the proverbial ducks to water. Sure, she was used to dealing with men like brothers in the Corps, suppressing her femininity in favor of the warrior culture, but this was something more. In just a day of sitting in a blind and shooting at birds, it appeared she’d been adopted.

They didn’t ask too many questions, and they’d given her a few knowing looks, which she studiously ignored. They’d fed her from their cooler, simple

fare but wonderful. “Ma’s a great cook,” Jimmy had said, and his bragging justified itself. She ate fried chicken wrapped up in brown paper, cold potatoes and butter, cole slaw and corn bread and pecan pie, and sipped from a bottle of what they called “corn squeezins.”

White lightning. Moonshine. Maybe that explained their reticence to talk to the sheriff.

Normally not much of a drinker, she imbibed because alcohol also yielded calories. She noticed she had lost another pound or two in the last couple of days. Looking at her hands was like staring at sticks with skin on them. Perhaps that explained these hill folks’ sympathy – they probably thought she was starving and on the run.

Ironically, they were not wrong. Her reasons were just not what they must think.

Eventually they pulled up in front of what Jill would have termed a cabin, given its setting. On closer inspection she had to call it a house, because there was nothing recreational about it. A dull yellow clapboard thing with a corrugated metal roof, it seemed almost a part of the landscape.

Tucked into the hollow between two hills, a functioning farm surrounded it. Garden plots alternated with fruit and nut trees, a henhouse, rabbit hutches, and a barn. A bit farther back looked like several acres of corn. To her amateur eye it seemed prosperous, at least in food, though probably not in cash. Another old pickup truck was parked off to the side.

Once they had stopped, Jill could see a boy of perhaps twelve sitting in a chair on the oversized front porch. He waved with a strange motion of his hand, as if something impeded him. Klutz jumped from the back to charge up the steps and press his head into the kid’s lap, and he petted the dog clumsily.

From the front door stepped a tired-looking woman similar in age to Big Jim, and a pretty young one of perhaps sixteen in a homemade flowered dress. The former held a pitcher full of lemonade; the latter, a stack of beat-up multicolored plastic cups. Both set their burdens on a rough wooden table that occupied one side of the wide frontage and pulled chairs back to sit around it.

“Got seven!” Jimmy called enthusiastically as he picked up the birds in both hands. “We kin have a couple tonight. Got a guest, Ma,” he continued, waving in Jill’s direction. “She eats like Cousin Bee-Bob and looks like to blow away in a stiff breeze, so maybe we should make three or four. Ain’t gonna keep that long in this hot weather anyway.”

Jill didn’t find it all that warm, perhaps eighty-five. On the other hand, she

didn't see any electric or phone wires leading to the house. Perhaps they had no refrigeration beyond the water from the creek she could see running down the hillside behind the farm.

"You come on up here, honey," the older woman called. "I'm Sarah McConley, this here's my daughter Jane. The boy over there's Owen, but he's one o' God's simple children." She took Jill's hands in both of hers, her eyes kind. "Oh my, you do look like you could use some fattenin' up. We're common folk, but the good Lord has blessed us with food and kindness. You set y'self down now."

Jill had little choice in the matter, as Sarah kept hold of her hands until she sat. "I'm Jill," she replied as she was gently maneuvered into position. "Jill Repeth."

Sarah blinked quizzically. "What's that name there on your shirt?"

Color drained from Jill's face as she realized how she'd tipped her hand, but she really did not want to lie to these people. "Something bad happened...I had to get away, so I borrowed this. I'm not..." She ground to a halt. *I'm not what? A criminal? A deserter? Face it, Jill, that's exactly what you are.*

She started again. "I haven't hurt anyone, but I did run away." She unbuttoned the tunic, balling it up and stuffing it into a cargo pocket, for some reason not wanting to wear that lie anymore.

Sarah pressed her lips together in thoughtful disapproval, but didn't pursue the matter further. "Jane, you keep Miss Jill here company while I start a-working on dinner." She went inside.

Jane smiled broadly and poured lemonade out in five tall, well-worn plastic cups, setting two aside and handing one to Jill. "I just love having company. Hardly anybody comes up here."

Jill tasted the lemonade, then drank half of it down. Cool but not cold, it confirmed her conjecture about the lack of refrigeration. Nevertheless, it tasted wonderful. "Thank you. I'm happy to be here. Everyone's been so nice."

"It's the Lord's kindness, that's all. Do unto others as you'd have them do unto you, the Good Book says." Klutz's tail thumped on the porch as if in agreement.

"That sounds like a good idea," Jill responded, unsure how to take these folks. The banjo line from *Deliverance* played in the back of her head, and something in her wondered if anyone could really live this simply. Had she encountered the same family in her own LA neighborhood, she would have thought they must be cultists of some sort, but here, in these hills...it all seemed

to fit.

“Do you go to school?” Jill asked.

“O’ course I do. We ain’t billies, you know. Ma and Pa both graduated from high school, and they say maybe I can go to the junior college down in Morristown, if’n I can get a scholarship and state aid. They got a program for vocational nursing. I already take care of Owen, mostly, so it can’t be all that hard. O’ course, with everything like it is...”

Jill turned in her seat to look more closely at Owen, and realized that his chair had wheels on it. Not exactly a traditional wheelchair, rather, it looked like something home-made from bicycle parts, but sturdy nonetheless.

Owen made a sound something like a grunt or moan, and looked at her with a smile on his face. She got the distinct feeling there was more inside him than he could express. “Hello, Owen,” she said, and was rewarded with a clumsy wave and another inarticulate but cheerful sound.

“He wants to come on over. Will it bother you?” Jane asked.

“Of course not,” Jill replied. “But could I trouble you for a little something to eat? I seem to get hungry a lot lately,” she said, watching closely for Jane’s reaction.

“Here you go, Miss Jill,” Sarah called as she backed out the door holding a large bowl in each hand. “Figgered you’d want something before the ducks got done, which will be a couple of hours.”

Cheese and butter and bread filled one bowl, and freshly washed peaches the other. After she wheeled Owen over to the table, Jane plucked one of the yellow-orange orbs and sliced it all the way around the middle with a little paring knife, handing half to Jill. Cutting hers small, she fed Owen and herself alternately, a piece at a time. He chewed open-mouthed and laughed, clapping his hands together.

When Jill bit into her peach half she thought she’d found heaven on Earth, and devoured it and another whole one right away. Then she started on the bread and butter and cheese.

“My, you are a hungry thing.” Jane’s voice held no criticism, only the kind of innocent wonder Jill hadn’t experienced since her childhood. She smiled, embarrassed, but that didn’t slow her feasting down. Her body screamed for calories, protein, and fats, and hummed with pleasure as her stomach filled.

The men had disappeared into the barn, where Jill caught glimpses of them tending to animals. She thought she could see cows, barn cats, and it looked like a pig and some piglets occupied an enclosure to the side, well downwind.

“Jane, get us some t’maters and squash, will you?”

“Yes, Ma,” Jane replied. Turning to Jill, she asked, “Watch Owen, will you? Just make sure he don’t get ahold of nothing sharp, and only give him a small bit at a time. He can choke if’n it’s too big.” Without waiting for a reply, Jane hurried off to one of the garden plots to pick tomatoes and yellow squash, putting them in her flipped-up skirt.

Jill looked at Owen, and Owen looked back at Jill. His eyes danced, and he grinned. *Someone’s trapped in there*, she said to herself. She wondered what it was exactly that afflicted him. Was it a cognitive disability, or only physical, like Stephen Hawking?

“So Owen, can you understand what I’m saying?”

The boy squealed, pawing in the direction of the food.

Jill took a piece of cheese, but Owen shook his head. “Peach?”

Squeal.

She cut one of them up, keeping the little paring knife well out of reach, and began to feed him. She knew so little about people like this...how much was delayed development due to lack of a special-needs program? And how much was intrinsic, brain or body betrayal?

Her musing was cut short by Jane’s return. The girl sat down with bowls of washed vegetables to begin cutting them up for cooking, producing another small knife. Soon they were chatting like sisters. For a time, Jill forgot that she was on the run, forgot that her family might all be dead, forgot that her second family, the Corps, would consider her every action since contracting the disease aboard the cruise ship to be unlawful, even treasonous.

By the time dinner was ready the sun was going down behind the hills, though not behind the true horizon. It made for a long sunset, pleasant breezes, and enough light to sit outside on the porch and talk. The table overflowed with food, but everyone seemed determined to eat all they could.

“So you two are farmers?” Jill asked the men at one point. “Or do you have some other jobs?”

“Oh, we do a little of this and a little of that,” Big Jim replied, his face studiously neutral.

“I do some construction now and again for cash,” Jimmy volunteered, “but with a place like this, well...something always needs doing.”

Jill grunted, picking up the jar of “corn squeezins” from which the men had fortified their lemonade, and looked at Jimmy across its open top. He smiled back at her as if sharing a secret, but it seemed a very open secret to her. Then

she caught Sarah's glare and realized that perhaps not everyone was in agreement about the stuff. She put the jar back down and shrugged apologetically.

"You know what's funny?" Jill asked without meeting anyone's eyes. "I'm a cop. I'm a military police sergeant. I should be chasing down people like me... people like me. Whatever that means. I never thought anyone had an excuse to run from their own government, but..."

The men chuckled, and even Sarah and Jane looked amused. Big Jim spoke. "Girl, you in Tennessee. Ain't nobody knows more about resistin' the gubmint than us. In the War of Succession we saw county against county and town against town – families divided, brother against brother. We had *two* gubmints to resist, and we made the most of it. Virginia had the biggest battles, but Tennessee had the bitterest. So don't you worry none; we ain't much on bowin' to no gubmint, not when it comes to right an' wrong."

The adults – lumping Jane in that category – nodded, and Jill suddenly realized they were trying to reassure her, to tell her something: that they wouldn't turn her in, and perhaps, that they understood.

"Jane girl, go get the radio, would you please?" Big Jim said. He turned to Jill, "We been listenin' to the goin's-on from the Knoxville station. Terrible, terrible things, some of it. Riots all across the country. Martial law. Feds confiscatin' people's guns just when they need 'em most. Troops ever'where. We always knew it would happen, didn't we, dear?"

Sarah nodded, fingers plucking at her needlework. "Just got to hold out 'til the Lord returns and sets things to right."

"Now Ma," Jimmy protested, "this ain't no Armageddon. Lots of places went through worse than this."

"Either way," Big Jim intervened, "we'll do the same. Keep an eye on our own and our neighbors." He cocked his head at Jill and furrowed his brow. "You reckon to stay here a spell, or move on soon, Miss Jill?"

Jill opened her mouth, but nothing came out. Staying hadn't even entered her thoughts. How could these people afford to take care of her, and how would she repay them in turn? "I'll stay for now, if you please," she found herself responding with relief. "As long as you'll have me, until I have to move on. I'll try to earn my keep."

"That you will, girl," Big Jim said contentedly, sucking on his briar pipe.

Jane returned with a radio, setting it on the table and then cranking a handle on it a dozen times. "Survival set. Charges its own batteries." She

switched it on. "Only gets the one station though."

...And that was Brenda Lee with "I'm Sorry" on your country oldies station. Now we bring you a public service reminder that if you see something, say something! Tell a police officer, tell your local, state or federal officials. What should you tell them about? Anyone who has had a miracle recovery, or who seems to be hungry all the time, might be infected. Anyone who seems furtive, or has a sudden change in behavior, or who pulls their children out of school. Anyone who speaks against the government, or protests against it, should be reported. Anyone who your neighbors are calling a "Sicko," must be reported. If you don't know who else to contact, call the Centers for Disease Control at 1-800-336-132.

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Then the station returned to playing old country songs. Big Jim reached over to turn it down, staring at Jill contemplatively as he puffed on his pipe.

A chill went through her. He knows, or at least suspects. Just stay calm, Jill. These people took you in. They're not going to suddenly turn around and give you up. Besides, they don't even have a phone. And there is no fear in this family, only love. If they were twisted, they couldn't hide it.

She hoped. Everyone seemed to be watching her as the daylight and the conversation faded.

Eventually Sarah went inside and artificial light soon shone from inside the house, harsh white glare from a gas lantern. Jane stood up to clear the table and Jill started to get up to assist when Jimmy put a hand on her arm. "Mebbe you

can just watch Owen while we do this, Miss Jill.” He picked up dishes and followed the others inside, leaving Big Jim staring at her.

“Don’t worry, girl,” Big Jim rumbled as his eyes gleamed in the night. “We ain’t gonna turn you in. You ain’t mean no harm to us, and we ain’t mean no harm to you.” He took his pipe out of his mouth, fragrant smoke swirling from it toward her nose. Owen sneezed and moaned, waving his hand. “Oh, pardon,” he said, and changed seats to send the smoke away from them. “I imagine you kin use a firearm, ma’am? Other than a shotgun, I mean?” He’d let her take a few shots at ducks, but she’d missed every one.

“I grew up in East L.A., sir. I joined a gang when I was thirteen, and enlisted in the Corps when I turned seventeen. Spent two years deployed to the desert, fighting off insurgents and training foreign police. What do you think?” She smiled to take the sting out of her words.

“Nuff said. I hope it don’t come to that, but with things goin’ the way they is, nuc’lar weapons and all, people bein’ rounded up an’ quarantined...”

“Sir...Big Jim, aren’t you worried about the disease?”

He puffed on his pipe a moment. “They got the internet in Jane’s school, you know. She saw that Daniel Markis fella on the tee-vee, tellin’ about the miracle germ. For a couple days, afore the gubmint took over the news stations, she heard all kinda stories, about people gettin’ cured. The cancer, the black lung that got all my cousins over in Cold Creek, heart attacks goin’ away, even my uncle Clyde that allas was a little teched in the head, they said he was talkin’ like a normal person. Clyde got taken away, and my cousins took to the hills. If the disease is so bad...I think roundin’ folks up is worse.”

Jill’s tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth, and she couldn’t swallow. Impulsively she took a gulp of the white lightning straight from the jar, coughing a little. Once the spasms passed, she straightened, looking Big Jim in the eye. “I want to show you something.”

Big Jim held up his hand. “Mebbe you want to show everyone.”

“You’re in charge here...”

“Yeah I am, but we’re a family. Smart man don’t leave his family out, less’n he has to.” He grinned. “Not if he wants a peaceful home.”

Jill cocked her head and picked up her lemonade, looking at Big Jim over the rim of the cup. “Well, I may not be family, but I know how to follow orders.” She put on his accent for a moment. “A smart sergeant don’t buck the system less’n she has to.”

“Amen. Why don’t we go inside?” Big Jim stood up. “Here we go, Owen,

goin' inside for family time." He wheeled the chair and the boy into the doorway, clattering over the threshold. Klutz dodged ahead, bumping into the doorframe on the way.

Jill followed, entering the home for the first time. As expected, the room was rustic and unpretentious, but in the light of the lantern hanging from an overhead beam, it blazed richly with homey decorations. Needlework Bible verses competed with pastoral scenes done in oils, exquisitely carved animals, some painted and some not, and lots of other artistic crafts. Photographs, many old, in black and white and sepia, hung on the walls.

"This is amazing," she said, looking closely at the nearest wall. "Who did these?"

"The womenfolk did the sewin'. Pa paints, I carve," Jimmy explained. "Got to have somethin' to do, don't you think?"

"What *do* you do for fun, anyway?" Jill asked. "No television, no computer, no internet, no phone...I see you have some books, and some boardgames."

Jimmy shrugged. "We get by. None o' those things was around a hunnerd years ago, even fifty years ago some places in these parts. People got by."

Big Jim wheeled Owen into a place obviously his, next to the unlit hearth. Klutz padded over to sit at his feet. The boy craned his head around, looking at everything as if checking to see it was all in place. "Unnh!" he said emphatically, making a motion toward one part of the wall.

"That's right, Owen. I moved the pictures." Sarah walked over, and then switched two small photographs into each other's location. "He knows, you see. He remembers everything, and can tell when something's out of place. If I really want to change something, it's some time before he takes to it."

"Autism, sounds like," Jill remarked.

"Yes, that's what the doctor said, but it don't matter what you call it. It's just Owen." The older woman walked to a bookshelf and took down a large leather-bound Bible, handing it reverently to Big Jim.

"Thank you, darlin'," he said, then leafed through it as if looking for some particular passage. "We allas read a bit of the Good Book after dinner. I hope you don't mind."

Even if I did, I sure wouldn't be complaining to these good people, Jill thought.

"Janie, could you please read for me? My eyes are a bit tired today." Big Jim handed the Bible over to his daughter. "Right there, where the bookmark is."

Jane smiled, and in a clear sweet voice, read, “The Good Samaritan.” Then she proceeded to relate the parable of a man set upon by bandits.

Left to die, a priest, and then a high-status Levite, passed him by and did not help. Finally a Samaritan, of despicable ethnicity and heretical faith to the Hebrews of the time, was the only one to render assistance. In fact, he paid for the man’s care and promised to return to check on him.

“You know,” Big Jim said in a casual tone, “we’s the Samaritans here. Ap’lachian folk. Get laughed at on the tee-vee, less’n they like our bluegrass pickin’.”

The rest of the family nodded, and Sarah said, “Amen.”

Jill couldn’t fail to get the message. Unless their whole lifestyle was a lie, they had truly accepted her into their family, in a way that usually happens only when the very foundations of society get shaken. She found tears of relief in her eyes.

“Thank you,” she replied. “I have something to show you, though. You’ve been so good to me...I want to be honest with you. It might...well, if they ever come for me, I want you to know the truth about these people. These ‘Sickos,’ as they are calling them.”

Reaching down, she rolled up her utility trousers, exposing first her boots, then the prosthetics that filled them. Eventually she worked them all the way up to her knees, exposing the skin of her stumps, showing pink at the extremities. Then she began unstrapping the left one.

The McConley family murmured sympathetically as they saw, and Jimmy let out a hoot of surprise. “If that don’t beat all. I never woulda knowed if you didn’t show us. You walk around all right.”

“As long as I don’t have to go far, I can stand it. But the fact that I lost my feet isn’t really the interesting part.” Jill finished unstrapping the left artificial foot, and set it aside. Lifting her leg with her hands, she flexed her knee, the stump waving up and down. “Perhaps I should have done this in the daytime, with better light. You’d be able to see that the bottom inch here is pinker than the rest, like new baby skin. I lost my legs over a year ago, and nothing like that happened, until now.”

She took a deep breath and went on, finding them staring at her in fascination. “I was on a cruise ship a few days ago. One morning we woke up and there were miracle cures all over the ship. I heard rumors of some video that said it was a germ that did it. Then the Navy showed up and quarantined us. Food began to run low, and people were eating more. That’s what the disease

did, I guess. I know I got hungry a lot. I decided I didn't want to wait, so I swam to a Navy ship nearby and sneaked aboard. I blended in to the crew, contacted a chaplain, and she got me off with the wounded."

"What wounded?" Jimmy asked.

"After I left the cruise ship, they blew it up. Killed everyone aboard. Damaged another warship doing it."

The family gasped. "This is worse than I'd thought," Big Jim rumbled.

"It's Armageddon coming for sure," Sarah declared.

"Now honey, we don't know that," Big Jim cautioned. "But it sure 'nuff looks like bad times. Miss Jill, we can see you're not some crazy person. Whatever it is, it ain't a bad thing, far as we kin tell. Mebbe the gubmint will figger it out, and things'll calm down. Best we just be careful, keep you out of sight, and wait. Stay out of the way."

"Thank you," Jill said yet again.

"Don't thank me yet, girl," Big Jim replied with a smile. "Like I said, you'll earn your keep. As much as you eat, you'll have to."

"You'll never meet anyone that works as hard as I do," Jill declared. "I'm no invalid, and maybe..." She gave voice to her greatest hope: "Maybe I'll actually grow my feet back."

"Wouldn't that be a marvel," Jane exclaimed, throwing her arms around the other woman.

Jill replied, "Yes, it would. And now, folks, I've had a really long day. Does anyone mind if I get some sleep?"

Murmurs of assent came from all, and Jane showed Jill to a room with two beds. "We'll have to double up, though. That there bed's Owen's, and we can't disturb his routine, so you can sleep with me, head to foot, like we did when we was little. You mind?"

"Oh, Jane, you can put me in the barn and I won't mind."

"Maybe tomorrow," Jane replied seriously, rearranging the bedclothes and retrieving a pillow from the closet. "Here you go. Sleep well. We'll try not to disturb you when we come in later."

Jill climbed into the bed and slept, not waking until the morning sun peeked over the hills.

Chapter Four

Days passed into weeks in a pleasant haze for Jill. She watched Owen a lot, freeing the rest to work the farm. They moved her into the barn loft, after she proved to them that she could handle the ladder just fine. Their excuse was to give her privacy and not crowd their two-bedroom house too much, but it also occurred to her that if someone showed up unexpectedly, she might at least have a chance to keep out of sight.

She explored the hills behind the land as best she could, taking short painful trips upward with Klutz romping along, eventually to find a hollow with a cave-like overhang that might hide her if she needed to run. There was also a small obvious basement beneath the barn, and a genuine working root cellar beneath the house.

Sometimes the two men would spend the day away in one of the pickup trucks, with no explanation. Usually the bed would be full of corn, heavy five-gallon buckets, and other things when they left, empty when they returned. Jill guessed they were servicing their still, and were smart enough to keep it well away from the farm.

In three weeks her stumps had lengthened to the location of her former ankles. She wondered if they would just keep growing longer: if the disease that they now called the “Eden Plague” would know when to quit, or start making ankle joints.

Jane had brought the disease’s name back from the church the McConleys attended, whispered in the usual gossip that nothing could stamp out. She also told Jill about some people whose old folks had suddenly passed on, and of new “cousins” that showed up unexpectedly. A deputy that attended, a relative of the number of interknit families in the region, had quietly warned people to keep quiet and not rock the boat.

The radio lied but the gossip told of things getting worse instead of better, especially in the cities; of neighbors turning each other in, of quarantines with no cure and no one returning, of men who came in the middle of the night and took people away. Some said more nuclear weapons had been used, by terrorists or the Russians or Chinese, or even by the U.S. against its own citizens.

Jill had no trouble believing it.

One day a pickup truck full of young men in uniform shirts drove up,

wearing black armbands with some kind of spiky red symbol on them – perhaps a trident. Jill climbed the ladder to her loft, hand over hand, to watch through the board cracks. They talked to Jimmy for a moment, then Big Jim came out onto the porch and they talked some more. Finally the group drove off, looking unhappy.

Once they were gone, Jill hurried over, her heavily modified prosthetics hurting more than ever. “What was that?” she asked.

Jimmy replied, “Unionist party. Wanted us to come to some meetin’ they’re havin’. I told them I’d think about it.” He glanced at his father, who nodded in approval.

“You’re kidding, right?” Jill almost exploded. “These are the people that are the most anti-Eden-Plague. They’re fascists. They’ll take away all your rights, and you’re thinking about joining them?”

“Simmer down there, girl,” Big Jim said, an edge to his voice. “That’s exactly why Jimmy’s gonna go see what they have to say. Keep an eye on what’s goin’ on. If’n we spit in their faces right off, who do you think they’ll come after next?”

Jill took a deep breath. “I understand what you’re saying, but...” she trailed off. “We can’t let them win.”

“We’ll do what we can, girl, but I ain’t gonna get my family killed by bein’ no martyrs.” He pointed a finger at Jill, and she realized he’d never been stern with her, never been anything but kind...until now. “You become part o’ this family, and you told me you knew when to take orders. So as the head o’ this family and as your boss both, you need to fall in line. You don’t know nothin’ about nothin’ aroun’ here that we didn’t done teach you, so you gotta trust us on how to handle this. Amen?”

Jill lowered her eyes. “Amen, boss.”

“Good.” He stared at her for a moment more, then glanced at Jimmy, and then his wife and daughter. Sarah gave a slow nod, so he went on, “Come on out to the barn, girl. We got somethin’ to show you.”

Jill looked at the women’s faces, seeing no fear, only determination. Wondering what this was about, she walked gingerly after the two men as they led her to the barn. “I already know about the cellar,” she said with a hint of defiance in her voice.

“Do you now?” grunted Big Jim. Ignoring her and the visible cellar door of heavy planks set in the floor, the two men stepped over to get behind an old broken-down tractor that sat in a corner. From the side, they lifted and it tipped

with surprising ease, holding it precariously balanced on two of its rusted wheels.

Jimmy reached down to pull up a trap door while Big Jim held the tractor in place. Jill walked over and examined the setup in wonderment, realizing that the antique was gutted of its heavy parts, and was thus much lighter than it looked, needing not more than a couple of hundred pounds of dead lift to get it up on its side. One healthy person could probably do it, in fact.

Looking below, she saw a dark opening and a ladder. “Come on down,” Jimmy said with a grin, and went in before her. “Don’t worry, this here lever will lift the tractor up if it gets closed. Got gears and ever’thing.”

Jill followed, and soon found herself on a dirt floor in another, separate stone-walled basement. Jimmy reached for a flashlight and turned it on. The space was small, but boasted a triple bunk bed, and what looked like food and water for a few days. Other supplies – a lantern, fuel, books, linens – rested on shelves along one wall. A tiny plastic portable toilet sat in a corner.

“This place has been here since the days of the War,” Jimmy said.

“War?”

“Civil War, you’d say.”

Jill gaped. “That’s...”

“More’n a century and a half, I know.” Jimmy turned to look Jill in the face, shining the flashlight against the floor. It gave him a devilish look, even more so when he grinned. “We McConleys is Abolitionists from way back. This here’s a gen-u-wine piece of the Underground Railroad. ’Course, the supplies and furniture’s newer.”

“My God...”

“When all that stuff happened, and you showed up, well, we figgered we might have to revive some of the old ways. We ain’t had nobody to stow yet, but if’n things keep gettin’ worse, mebbe we’ll be hidin’ Eden people. So now you know about this place, and you kin hop in here if’n you have to.”

Impulsively she threw her arms around Jimmy, who reciprocated after a moment. “Thank you, Jimmy. You’re...you and your family...”

“Mm. I’ll have to take you here more often, I think,” he chuckled in her ear.

Jill pulled her head back to look at him. *What the hell.* She kissed him gently. “Yeah, maybe,” she breathed.

“All right you two, break it up,” Big Jim called from up above, laughter in his voice. “Any courtin’s gonna be done up here in the light o’ day.”

They broke their clinch with embarrassment, then climbed back up the ladder and watched as Big Jim closed up the hide. Jimmy and Jill swept dust and hay back to remove their traces while the older man walked out of the barn ahead of them, leaving them alone.

“Listen, Jimmy,” Jill began. “I like you, but that was just something I did on impulse. I don’t know how you do things around here, so I just want to speak plainly: I’m not sure what it was, all right?”

Jimmy smiled gently. “It’s all right, Miss Jill. I’m twenty-two. I kissed a few girls in my time. Even done a couple other things with ’em I don’t never tell my ma about. You ain’t gotta worry about no shotgun weddin’.” He stepped toward her, stopping within easy arm’s length. “On the other hand, I do like you. If’n you stay, well...reckon I ain’t against it.”

“Okay, Jimmy. That’s fair.” Jill nervously pushed her lengthening hair behind her ears. “You’re a real gentleman, you know that?”

“Yes ma’am. I’m from Tennessee. We’re –”

“– all gentlemen till we get riled, right?” They laughed together, and walked out of the barn toward the lunch waiting on the porch.

A week later Jill’s nervous idyll took another unexpected turn.

As Jimmy finished a plate of pork with cracklins, courtesy of one of the young hogs, he remarked, “I shore do have an appetite lately.”

Jill and Big Jim glanced sharply at the younger man, then at each other. Jill’s face whitened.

Big Jim leaned over to lift up the sleeve on his son’s t-shirt. “Scar’s fadin’,” he said.

Jimmy pulled the sleeve back and craned his head to look at the outside of his shoulder. “Well I’ll be doggoned. Why...” Then the color drained from his face as well. “I got it, don’t I?”

“Imagine so.” Big Jim pushed his own plate away and began to pack his pipe.

“Oh, I am so sorry,” Jill exclaimed, heartfelt.

“What did you do?” Sarah asked sharply.

“Simmer down, Sarah love,” Big Jim interjected. “They just been courtin’ a bit, the way young folk do.”

“That’s what the radio said – the disease is passed by close contact,” sister Jane remarked. “So Jimmy,” her eyes lit with a sibling’s joy in another’s discomfiture, “you been smoochin’?”

“Just that once, and it was all my fault,” Jill broke in, glaring at Jane. “My fault,” she repeated. “We haven’t done anything like that since.”

Sarah took a breath and seemed about to explode when Big Jim spoke. “What’s done is done. We knew a day like this had to come sometime, though I’d hoped to delay it a fair bit.”

“What do you mean it had to come?” Sarah asked, unable to contain herself. “She should have been more careful!”

“I mean,” Big Jim said heavily, “that eventually we’d have to give it to Owen, don’t you think?”

That stopped Sarah in her tracks. She turned to look at her youngest son as his eyes roamed here and there, and she breathed, “Oh dear Jesus I pray, you’re right, James. It could fix him. He could be normal!”

Big Jim lit his pipe and puffed. “Cain’t do it now. Not with things the way they are. It’s one thing for Jimmy’s scar to go away, but if Owen got cured and someone saw him...they’d round us all up.”

“Then we go on as before. We just be careful,” Jimmy declared. “I’ll taper off going to the meetings. I’ll tell ’em I gotta work the farm. We just got to buy enough time...” He abruptly stopped, as if he’d said too much.

Jill looked from Jimmy to Big Jim and back. The elder was imperturbable as usual, but Jimmy seemed embarrassed. “What?” she asked.

“Well, I figgered once your feet got better, you’d be moving along, goin’ to Los Angeles to find your family.” Jimmy eyed his empty plate, and reached for another slice of bread and butter, not meeting Jill’s eyes.

“I...I hadn’t thought that far. I suppose you’re right, that’s what I should do. I’ll go, just as soon as I can.” *Stupid, Jill, she scolded herself. Every day you’re here, you put these people in danger. Now you’ve infected one of them, and that can’t be undone. At least with you gone they can blend back in to their own society, or run for the deep-woods mountains like their cousins.*

UNIONISTS TAKE POWER IN STUNNING MASS PARTY
DEFLECTIONS read the headline on the newspaper Big Jim dropped on the porch table. “Found that in a trash can when I went into town,” he rumbled.

Jane snatched it up, skimming the headlines and then summarizing, “It says elected officials are changing parties all over in the middle of their terms.” Jill noticed the girl’s accent and dialect faded as she read. Perhaps this was her school persona coming out.

She went on, “It says the new party has gained a bare majority in the

House and Senate, and if the President doesn't switch too, he'll still be voted out next election. Says the whole country is turning against the infected people." Jane glanced at her brother and Jill. "It also says that the same thing is starting to happen in Canada and Mexico. There's a column here where the writer believes there might even be some kind of co-governmental arrangement."

"Mexico and Canada'd be damn fools to join the U.S. in anything like that," Jimmy declared. "They have their own ways of doing things."

"Might be good for Mexico," Big Jim said. "Might clean up some o' that corruption."

"Yes, like the Nazis made the trains run on time," Jill muttered darkly.

"Oh, don't get me wrong, girl. I'm jus' sayin', there's a little good in most bad, and the other way 'round too. This country is too big and there's too many ornery people for the crazies to take over for long."

"Long enough, James," Sarah said. "You always see the bright side of things; that's why I married you. This time...things are really getting worse. Them Hastings boys have taken to wearin' that Unionist uniform all the time, runnin' around and scarin' people, makin' them give 'political contributions.' I heard they burnt out some poor black folks on the other side of Shandy that wouldn't pay."

"Like to see 'em try that here," Jimmy growled.

"Rather they didn't, son," Big Jim disagreed. "Rather if trouble jes' passed us by."

"But Pa, we need to do something!"

Big Jim nodded. "And we will, son, but not with violence, unless we got no choice. No, the best thing we can do is stay out the way, help who we can, keep our eyes open and our mouths shut. That goes for everyone. When Jill gets her feet back, when she's able to get up and run for the hills, then mebbe we can take a few risks. Y'hear?" He stabbed his pipe stem at Jimmy. "You want this fine young lady to get taken away?"

"No, Pa," Jimmy said miserably, suddenly looking twelve instead of twenty-two under his father's stare.

"How are your legs now, Jill?" Jane asked, changing the subject.

Jill had showed her just last night, but she answered, thankful for the diversion. "It looks almost like I have baby feet, and I can't put my weight on them at all. It's a good thing that I have this," she went on, slapping her palms on the wheels of the chair they had built for her. "I figure another two weeks and I may be able to walk, three or four and I may be almost normal." *And then I'll go,*

she heard the unspoken subtext.

Klutz stood up and pointed with his nose, his ears cocked, then barked once.

“Pa?” Jimmy stood up, looking out toward the valley below. “Someone comin’ up the road.” Now that he pointed it out, they could all see a plume of dust as a vehicle made its way up the gravel-dirt track that led up to their farm.

“Jill, get in the special hide. Jimmy, run her over there and toss her things in after her. Everybody keep your guns handy. Jane, run and get a coupl’a jars o’ corn squeezins out of the larder, put ’em on the table there, and then go get a whole case from the cellar and put it in the kitchen. Sarah, see what kinda grub you can rustle up quick. Hop to now.” Big Jim stood up, reaching for his shotgun he kept leaning in the corner on the porch.

“Don’t see why I’m getting’ food for some fool flatlanders comin’ up uninvited,” Sarah muttered as she went inside.

“Come on, Jill,” Jimmy said as he wheeled her down the ramp and off the porch, racing for the barn. She held on tight, and assisted as much as she could when he lifted the tractor and helped her down the ladder. A moment later her duffel bag and bedding tumbled down into the hole as Jimmy made sure nothing incriminating remained in the loft. Then the tractor came down, sealing her in, and Jill sat down quietly in the dark.

For the first time since the trucker tried to rape her she felt afraid. She imagined some runaway slave of so long ago doing the same, longing for freedom, relying on the kindness of strangers, fearing a return to hell on Earth. Why couldn’t people let each other have the gift of the Eden Plague, its healing and its promise, if they chose to?

Jill knew the answer already. She’d seen it in the Corps, and in the gangs before that. Power itself, to those who had it, was more important than anything else, or anyone. It didn’t matter whether the wielder was a slave owner, a pigheaded officer or a politician. As soon as they got power, and felt afraid of losing it, then they would abuse it, and to hell with the people that got hurt.

She saw now that the Eden Plague would take away their power by taking away an enormous source of dependency. If no one needed medical care, and everyone had their head screwed on straight, how could they be made to fear? How could they be manipulated? Of course the ones on top right now would resist, by whipping up that fear before it was too late, to drive out the infection, even kill those who had it.

But what could she do here? Obviously she would have to leave. Somehow

she had to help fight this thing, this situation. Like she wished people had fought the Nazis when they took over, or the Bolsheviks, or McCarthy, or...she ran out of examples. But where could she go? She'd only read a few obviously censored newspapers, and listened to one radio station, for the last several months. No internet, nobody to talk to except the McConleys. Once she got out, she'd have to find somewhere in the world that Eden Plague people were accepted as normal. Then...then she'd find a new gang, or a new Corps, to join.

Thinking about that drove a dagger through her heart. The Marine Corps was her family...except for the Repeths back in Los Angeles, if they even lived. Except for the McConleys, too. It seemed she was doomed to keep losing her families, and the tears began again.

Some warrior you are, Jill, sitting here sobbing like a little girl. She felt so helpless, with useless feet. It would have almost been better to live with the prosthetics for the rest of her life; to have never gotten the Eden Plague. Then, as during all tough times, she reminded herself that this would be over with soon, and she would come back stronger, faster, better, like she always did.

Someday soon.

Jimmy took one last look around the loft and barn before sprinting back to the house to rejoin his family. He saw that Jane had her Ruger .22 across her lap, hidden a bit by the porch rail. Two quart jars of white lightning sat on the dinner table, along with a plate of yesterday's persimmon cookies and a big bowl of apples.

Pa had his Remington under his arm, standing on the porch steps, and he could see Ma had her Smith and Wesson .38 long barrel visibly tucked into her waistband. For a God-fearing woman she was a dead shot with that thing, he knew. Jimmy retrieved his pride and joy, a .308 Browning lever-action rifle, from inside the front door. With a magazine that held ten of the heavy rounds, he knew he could knock down an equal number of targets in quick succession.

Around the last bend came a truck, and not a mere pickup; he saw a flatbed two-ton fitted with slatted sides, a dozen men packed into it. All of them wore the deep-blue Unionist shirts with black armbands, those points-down red tridents emblazoned upon them. As soon as the truck stopped in a cloud of dust, the men jumped out, one of them with chevrons yelling orders as if they were all in the Army. He took three men with him and headed for the barn without asking

permission. Klutz ran over to them, capering and barking with delight to have visitors.

Jimmy could see they carried a variety of weapons comparable to his family's – shotguns, rifles, handguns. He recognized several from the meetings he had attended, especially their leader, who hopped out of the passenger seat. That one wore the double bars of a captain, though the last time he saw the man he had been a sergeant recently discharged from the National Guard. *Guess he gave himself a promotion*, he chuckled to himself.

"Harry Whitcomb," Jimmy said as the man walked forward hitching up his pants. "How you doin', ol' son?" He tucked his rifle in under his arm, but knew he could have it up and aimed in a flash.

Harry's belly fell down over his waist despite being no more than thirty, and two .45 automatics depended from his gun belt, one on each side. He hooked his thumbs just inside the holsters with his palms resting on the closed flaps in implied threat.

"Don't *how-you-doin'* me, Jimmy. This here ain't a social call."

"I kin see that, Mister Whitcomb," called Big Jim from the porch step. "What cause you got bringin' all these armed fellers onto my land? Might wonder whether you'd done forgotten 'bout the arrangement me an' yer pa have."

"Now settle down, Big Jim. This here's just precautionary, you might say."

"P'cautionary about what?" Big Jim reached over a casual left hand to pick up a quart jar. Popping the top, he took a sip and smiled. "Drink?"

Harry licked his lips and shook his head. "We got orders to search the place."

Big Jim shrugged and put the jar back down on the table. "Your loss."

"Whose orders?" Jimmy demanded, his temperature rising at the highhanded treatment of his father. Pa had called Harry "Mister" and the man had come back with "Big Jim," as if Pa weren't twelve years older and a respected man in these parts.

"Unionist party orders. We gotta check every place for Sickos and traitors hidin' out."

"Well, son," Big Jim said with a frown – no more "Mister" – "your men kin *check* the farm all they want, long as they don't mess with nothin'. Then you kin come inside and *check* the house. Then, since there ain't nobody here that don't belong, once you do that you can all have a nice drink and some cookies and be on your way."

“I’ll *check* in my own way and in my own time, thank you,” Harry blustered.

A moment later he found himself frozen, staring at the wrong end of Big Jim’s 12-gauge from a range of about six inches. Jimmy had never seen his pa move that fast. He raised his own rifle, jacking a round into the chamber with an audible *clack*, and aimed at the nearest of the bully-boys. Beside him, he sensed Jane and Sarah doing the same.

“You best tell your friends to keep them hands away from them firearms if’n you don’t want your brains spattered all over that truck o’ yours, *Captain Whitcomb*.” The way Pa said it made the word a sneer. “And ever’ one’a us kin pick the eye out of a fly at fifty yards. I’ll bet you dollars to damnation ever’ one’a y’all is down with a bullet in him before any o’ *my family* is even winged.” Stone-cold menace dripped from Pa’s every word, and a shiver ran down Jimmy’s spine.

“Stand down, boys, stand down,” Harry said, his voice squeaking. Those who held long guns made sure to point them at the ground; those with handguns holstered them, some with dropped jaws and nervous hands. Whitcomb himself showed a stain on his crotch that spread slowly down his trouser leg.

Big Jim continued, “Now each one’a you boys is gonna walk over and put them weapons down in the truck bed, then go over there by the pear tree where I kin see y’all. And you,” he called loudly, “with the three men in the barn. The first shot and your boss is dead, y’hear? Come on outta there and nobody’s gonna get hurt.”

“Do it!” screamed Harry over his shoulder. His face ran with sweat.

Reluctantly the sergeant and the three men walked from the barn toward the house, to drop off their guns at the truck and stand over with the disarmed mob. Klutz, apparently sensing the tension, ran over to stand at Big Jim’s side.

“Jimmy, get Harry’s pistols,” Big Jim ordered, so the younger man plucked them from the holsters, carefully staying out of his father’s line of fire or background. “Toss ’em in the truck bed there.”

Once Jimmy had done that, Big Jim tucked the shotgun back under his arm, barrel pointed half-down. Then he put his left arm around the shaking Harry Whitcomb and walked him gently over to sit down at the porch table. He then slid the jar of hundred-proof over to the man and ordered, “Drink. You look like you could use a jolt.”

Harry reached for the jar with both hands and took a gulp, then another, his eyes never leaving Big Jim’s. “Thanks,” he rasped, moving as little as possible,

like a mouse under the gaze of a snake.

“Now you see? No need for trouble here. We’re all friends, all local folks. We know how to work things out without comin’ onto one another’s land and scarin’ each other’s family. Why, I reckon *your* ma’d be plumb frightened out of her wits if a dozen boys come up on her little place with guns, don’t you think?” Big Jim’s eyes bored into Harry’s until shame joined fear on his face. “I don’t care what kinda p’litical party y’all are with now, that don’t do away with common courtesy, now does it?”

Harry shook his head miserably, looking more like a bashful little boy all the time.

“Take another drink there, Harry. Now, I ain’t gonna hold this against ya. I ain’t even gonna tell your pa or, heaven forefend, your ma, ‘zackly how you jes’ acted. We’re jes’ gonna all have a nice drink and some cookies and forget this ever happened, ain’t we?” Big Jim patted Harry’s shoulder like he was his own son. Jimmy kept his eyes and rifle on the mob, but he couldn’t help a grin stealing onto his face.

“All right, Mister McConley. I ’pologize for comin’ up here like I did.” He took a deep breath and seemed to regain some composure. “But I still would like to take a quick look inside – just so’s I can rightly say I did it, you understand.”

“O’ course, Harry, o’ course you can. Tell your boys to come on over and have a swig and a cookie while you and I take a look inside.” Big Jim guided Harry up out of his chair, his large calloused hand never leaving the man’s shoulder, and on into the little farmhouse. “Look here; there’s Owen. You seen Owen before, ain’t ya? See, if’n them Sickos was around, if’n we’d got that disease, Owen’d be all different now, don’t ya think?”

“Sure, Mister McConley, you got the right of it.” Harry stared at Owen, who grunted and waved a twisted hand.

“Go ahead, Harry. Take a look in all the rooms, even the closets. You want a gander in the root cellar?”

“No sir, no, won’t be no need for that, Mister McConley,” Harry hastened to assure Big Jim. “Just had to truthfully say we checked, you understand.”

“O’ course, Harry. Oh, look at that.” Big Jim prodded a wooden box packed with straw. “There’s a case full’ a corn squeezins. I bet if you spread that around a bit, your boys’d forget all about this little...” Big Jim seemed to search for a word, “this little *misstep* on your part, as your mama’s cousin the sheriff might say.”

“Oh, yes sir,” Harry said eagerly, picking up the heavy box. It clinked as he

hefted it, and the man couldn't help but lick his lips.

"Jes' don't forget to bring one jar home for your folks," Big Jim added as he followed Harry back out onto the front porch again.

By now the first two jars had almost been emptied, and every man had a couple of cookies or an apple, or both, in his hands, bashfully munching away under the stern gaze of the McConley matriarch. One of the men was actually trying to start a conversation with Jane, who seemed to be struggling not to smile. When Harry showed them the box full of moonshine, they gave a cheer, and the mood changed in a moment from uncertain to festive.

"All right you boys, git on up in that flatbed there and head back on down the mountain," Big Jim said with an expansive smile, but never letting go of his shotgun. "Our poor ol' hearts had jes' about enough excitement for one day."

The group turned as one for their vehicle, some mumbling thanks and goodbyes. Jane winked at the one she'd talked to, and he blushed. Everyone else waved as they drove out of sight, forcing good cheer onto their faces all the way.

Then they all collapsed into chairs. Sarah laid her pistol down on the table and clutched her knees. Jimmy whooped, and then put the rifle safety on, leaning the weapon against the rail. Big Jim set his shotgun back in the corner where it usually stood. Jane unloaded her .22 with practiced fingers, hardly bothering to look at the mechanism, a cold expression on her face that belied her flirting a moment before.

Owen gave an inarticulate cry from inside, and Klutz wuffed. Jane hastened to roll the boy out onto the porch, which seemed to content him.

"Sarah darlin', I believe I'd like a drink. We got another jar somewheres?"

"Yes, James, we do." Not even a hint of her usual disapproval colored her voice this time, and when she brought back the jar, she poured a healthy slug into a water glass and drank it down herself. "For medicinal purposes," she explained, deadpan.

Big Jim wisely said nothing as he took a gulp, then passed the container to Jimmy.

"Oh, Lord. Jill!" Jimmy cried suddenly, jumping to his feet.

"Settle down now, son. Another few minutes in the hide won't matter. Let's make sure they don't talk themselves into tearin' back up here to have another go at us. I don't think they will, but shame kin do funny things to a man, once he's not under the gun anymore."

Jimmy sat back down, but fidgeted ceaselessly for long minutes. Finally Big Jim said, "Son, you go take the old pickup down to the end of the drive," –

that was more than three miles, ten minutes at normal speed – “and take a look, make sure they really left. If’n ya see hide nor hair of ’em, you hightail it back. Bail out if’n ya have to, leave the truck. Ain’t nobody gonna catch you on our own land. I’ll see to Jill.”

“Yes, Pa,” he responded eagerly. *Probably just giving me something to do*, he thought, but he didn’t care, and he grabbed his rifle and the ignition key off the hook inside the door and ran for the pickup truck.

By the time he got back, Jill and Big Jim and Jane and Owen were sitting on the porch. “No sign of ’em,” Jimmy called as he hopped out.

“Let’s hope they learnt their lesson,” Big Jim rumbled.

“For now,” Sarah said, bringing out another pitcher of lemonade. “Evil’s got them boys, and no amount of shamin’s gonna make it stick.”

“Aw, Ma, they ain’t so bad,” Jimmy protested.

“Not by theirselves they ain’t, but they’s like a pack of big stupid dogs. They will tear apart whatever their master Satan tells them to, and don’t you forget it, James Aaron McConley Junior.” Sarah shook a wooden spoon at her son for emphasis. “It don’t take much for the Devil to lead the weak-minded and unbelieving into the ways of Hades, and I ain’t talkin’ about a bit o’ fornicatin’. I’m talkin’ about beatin’ and rapin’ and killin’ and burnin’ folks out, you mark my words.”

“Ma!” Jimmy was appalled at his mother’s diatribe, which made it all the more powerful in his mind.

Big Jim spoke. “All right now, Sarah dear. That scare they had oughta hold ’em for a while, and I’ll go over tomorrow and talk to Tom Whitcomb. Give him a kindlier version o’ what happened, make sure it don’t happen again. Remind him if’n he wants his corn juice, me and mine got to be left alone.” He nodded to himself as he took out his pipe and pouch.

“I’m so sorry this happened, Mister McConley,” Jill said.

“Don’t you ‘Mister McConley’ me, girl. You’re family, just like my own.” He smiled at her and tears came into her eyes. “Wouldn’t anythin’ been different had you been here or not.”

“But I do have to go as soon as my feet are healed up. Being here puts you all in danger.”

Sarah put a hand on Jill’s arm. “You stay as long as you need to, and go when you must, Miss Jill.” Klutz’s tail agreed with her.

Chapter Five

Late summer turned to peaceful autumn on the McConley farm. The air breezed crisp as leaves reddened and yellowed, and the family lit a fire in the hearth for the first time that year. The ever-present knot inside Jill's stomach finally loosened itself as she began to feel whole again.

Literally.

She stared at her feet every morning, watching them turn from buds to baby appendages to strange gnarled troll limbs, eventually to something that really belonged to her. Every day she gingerly tested them out, putting a bit of weight on them until the pain told her to stop.

One day she let go of all support and stood.

Victory! she crowed inside, but remained stoic on the surface. Standing wasn't running, and no matter how many pull-up and sit-ups and careful push-ups with her shins braced on a padded railroad tie she did, she wouldn't be whole until she could *run*.

Once her routine had consisted of thirty to fifty kilometers, three days a week, and ten just to keep limber on the off days, interspersed with lots of swimming and bicycling. She'd swum in the creek's deep pool in the back, and it felt good to eel under the water with all four limbs moving freely, but it was still nothing like *training*, nothing like being really fit and at the top of her ability.

The first time she'd walked from the barn to the house the family had stared, then burst into raucous cheers. They'd hugged her and congratulated her, though Jane had started to cry, and Jimmy had looked a bit distressed.

They know this means I'll leave soon.

Jill had gently kept the young man at arm's length, for reasons both practical and intangible. She had no birth control pills anymore, and even if she had, who knew whether they would be effective with the Eden Plague dominating her body's metabolism? Other methods might have worked, but it was just safer to simply put the whole thing on hold. She liked Jimmy and before the world went mad she probably would have been happy for a roll in the hay, but now, things had changed.

Before, she probably wouldn't have thought much about the emotional consequences to such a short-term fling. Now, she thought of the heartache getting in deep and then running off would cause them all, and she just couldn't

do it. If everything worked out, and she came back, perhaps...

It wasn't long before Jill could take short hikes, with boots laced tight to give the new feet support. Her muscles strengthened rapidly, far more quickly than she expected. *It has to be the Eden Plague*, she thought. Building muscle was a process of tearing and healing, and no matter how hard she trained, she healed overnight...as long as she got food.

One morning Jimmy invited himself along. He carried his rifle and a wanderer's bag slung over his shoulder. "Got some things ta show you," he said with a secretive grin. Jill found herself returning the expression, filled with the sheer joy of healthy physical movement. "Klutz, stay!" Jimmy ordered as they set out, leaving the dog standing forlornly on the porch.

Up the hill behind the house they went, then wended their way into what the locals called mountains. Having grown up near the southern tip of the Sierras and having seen the Afghan heights, Jill thought this branch of the Appalachians barely qualified, but they were rugged, thickly forested, and confusing to anyone who didn't know them well.

After four or five miles he led her up a steep hillside to a forested ledge that concealed a deep dell with a stream and a pond. Pulling aside brambles, he showed her an opening in the hillside, then entered it. He pulled out a flashlight and handed her another, both modern long-lasting LED models.

Switching them on, they proceeded into the side of the mountain, up a twisting cave that after a hundred yards debouched into a cavern with a still, shallow pool. Inside, Jill saw a dozen large waterproof plastic bins and twice as many small closed barrels. "Supplies," Jimmy said. "Enough to keep us goin' for a while."

'How long have you had this here?' Jill asked curiously, lifting the lid on one of the bins. It was packed tight with cans of lantern fuel.

"Oh, the cave is an old McConley secret. Pa and I brung this stuff up here after the first nukes went off. Took us a couple a' dozen trips, too. Only time I'd a wished we kept horses, or maybe mules. But you ain't seen nothin' yet."

Jill almost asked him why they'd never said anything about this place before, but stopped herself, because the answer was obvious to the practical-minded: there was nothing to be gained by her knowing, and what she didn't know, she couldn't tell if she was questioned.

"Come on." Jimmy led her into one of several tunnels, all of which showed signs of having been worked – the floors smoothed, corners rounded, protrusions broken off to make for easier transit. The one into which they walked led

upward, twisting and turning. At one place they had to wiggle through on their bellies.

“There’s more tunnels than I ever explored, and five or six exits that I know about,” he explained. “D’pendin’ on how hard we was pressed, we could live here for a while an’ come out later, or keep on goin’ up into the higher country. But you’ll like this.” After fifty yards of relatively flat easy tunnel, they emerged into another cavern, larger than the one below.

A stream ran through this one, into and out of a pool, exiting in a rush down a dark hole at the lower edge, but that wasn’t the most interesting aspect of the cave. Along one side sat what was obviously a moonshine still, though Jill had never actually seen one. Big kettles and copper tubing, propane tanks, tubs and buckets and jars. Boxes rested on shelves, along with all sorts of other implements and items whose function she could only vaguely guess at. A metal pipe ran up into the ceiling, for a chimney, she thought.

“I don’t imagine you carried all this up from below,” Jill remarked.

“Nope.” Jimmy walked across the floor, crunching gravel beneath his boots, and pulled back a heavy canvas curtain that covered an opening. On the other side she could see a short tunnel and sunlight through a screen of bushes. “There’s an old mining road that runs nearby, that we can get up with a truck if’n you know the way. If’n we just need to come up to work it, we walk. Don’t make but thirty or forty gallons a month. We’s careful, and we ain’t greedy, but it brings in some extra cash, and lubricates some dealins.”

“I reckon so,” Jill replied, looking around at the arrangement. “I never knew people could...” she ran out of words. “This seems like we just traveled back a century – bootleggers and revenuers, Prohibition. Now it’s just...quaint.”

“Guess so. On the other hand...” Jimmy pulled back another curtain along the rock wall, revealing another room. He waved Jill forward to look.

Inside she saw a small office, with bookshelves – and a computer. It was outdated, certainly, perhaps fifteen years old, but a cable and its power cord ran around the base of the wall and out the door, from there hidden by duct tape and dirt. Jill turned to Jimmy and punched him in the arm. “You’ve been holding out on me! You aren’t such a simple hick after all!”

“Never said I was. Pa says it’s always better to have people underestimate you. One way to do that is to adopt the dialect of the simpler folk around you.” While his accent had not diminished, his diction had abruptly improved.

Jill’s jaw dropped. “Wow. What else don’t I know about you?”

“A fair bit, but that’s as may be. The next question you’ll ask is ‘why.’ Pa

wanted to keep our upbringing and lifestyle simple, oriented around our family and hard work. He wanted us to use machines, not have them use us. So he kept the high-tech stuff up here. We got an antenna that gives us access to the internet through cell networks, we got a water-powered wheel and generator, also a gas generator and a battery bank, and some solar cells in a hard-to-see spot up top. We got television too. Makes workin' the still less of a chore."

"I'm flabbergasted." Jill waved her arms helplessly. "You just upended my world, Jimmy."

He stepped closer, looking into her brown eyes. "Enough to give me a chance? Now that you know I'm not just a dumb hillbilly?"

"What? Oh...no. I never thought that." *Did I?* She reached out to place her hands on his shoulders, but more to keep him there than to draw him closer. "Look, Jimmy, it's just terrible timing. I'm going to go soon, to try to see if my family is...is still even alive. That means leaving. If I make it back here...then I promise I'll give you a chance. Give *us* a chance. Okay?"

Jimmy nodded slowly, pain and frustration in his blue eyes. "Okay...but you said you ain't even seen them since you joined the Corps. All you did is email. How come you suddenly can't stand not to travel across the whole country? And if you get caught, you'll end up in some cell somewhere and... what's the point? Why not just stay here? *We're* your family now!"

Even though she wanted to take Jimmy in her arms, Jill shoved herself away from him with a flick of her wrists. "I can't explain it any better than I already have. It's just something I have to do. Now I told you I'd come back when I could, and you'll just have to be patient. If this Eden Plague thing is really like the rumors say, we'll live hundreds of years and not get old, so we both have time. Time for things to change. Time for people to come to their senses, and get used to us Sickos. Time to figure out that we're still the same people, just a little bit kinder, a little bit smarter, and a lot more durable. Now let's please quit talking about it, all right?"

He sighed and turned away. "All right."

Crestfallen was a weak word for how Jimmy looked, but Jill told herself that it had to be said, and it had to be done. Giving in now to the way she felt, or might have felt, would just complicate things, and she would never be sure that it wasn't just fear and stress and the supercharging Eden Plague underpinning everything, rather than love.

"Come on, Jimmy. I'm not saying 'no,' just 'wait'."

"Ha. That's how Ma says God answers prayers when you ain't ready for

what you want.”

Jill laughed gently. “Your mother is a wise woman, I think.” She turned toward the computer. “Can you turn this on? I’d love to see what was going on in the outside world.”

“No, sorry. It’s too dangerous. It piggybacks on a cell phone tower signal, or somesuch. We have to only use it from time to time, and not too much, or the phone company might think it’s worth their time to track us down. Next time we fire it up, though, you can.”

“All right.” Jill looked wistfully one more time at the old machine, then said, “Come on, let’s get back...unless you have more amazing revelations.”

“No, no Revelations, unless it’s the Apocalypse already.”

“Was that a joke?” Jill slapped Jimmy on the shoulder.

“A lame one. Here, let’s go outside and eat.” He led her through the curtain, down the short tunnel past more screening bushes and onto a wooded mountainside. Finding a spot in the sun on some rocks, he took off the satchel he carried and handed her a chicken salad sandwich.

Homemade mayonnaise and chopped pickles on fresh-baked bread made it the best meal she’d ever had, except for every other meal since arriving at the McConleys. Real hunger, not the pale imitation the average office worker experienced, was truly the most amazing flavor enhancer. She washed it down with spring water from her canteen.

Jimmy pointed to the left and downward after he’d finished his first sandwich. “See? There’s the mining road. The trick is to make the cutover hard to see. You have to actually go above and past it a hunnerd yards, turn around at a wide spot, and come back. Then you can see it easier, but we allas brush out the tracks and spread some fallen branches. Nobody found it yet. But on foot, we go that way.” Jimmy then gestured to the right along the grade, at a faint trail.

Jill nodded, peering archly at the satchel. “What else you got in there?”

“Got ’nother sandwich, some apples, a half-dozen oatmeal cookies. That oughta hold us until we get back for lunch.”

“Oughta.” Jill chuckled again, reaching for more food. Once they had finished everything, they set off down the mountainside.

Eventually the trail rejoined the one they had originally come up. Jill turned to orient herself and thought she could see where the hidden ledge and dell must be, but even so, she couldn’t pinpoint it.

“Right there,” Jimmy said, pointing it out as he came back to stand beside her.

His arm brushed hers and she shivered with suppressed pleasure in the cool autumn breeze. *Not yet*, she scolded herself yet again, and patted his shoulder absently. “Come on, let’s go,” Jill said. “There’s work to be done, and then I want to take a swim.”

“Sounds good. Race ya down!” Abruptly Jimmy took off down the slope, satchel flapping, rifle in one big hand. Jill followed, whooping, and trying to figure out how she could beat him. The only thing she could think of to do was stay close so as not to lose the track, and then try to sprint past him to the finish.

Several miles of heart-pounding trail running later they crested the final hill and the farm came in sight. Jimmy slowed in front of Jill and put an arm out to prevent her from running past, and then he pulled her aside under the trees. “Wait. Something’s not right.” He jacked a round into the chamber of his lever-action .308 and glided forward to a position overlooking the homestead.

From almost four hundred yards, their perfected Eden vision allowed them to easily see a truck and an SUV parked next to the family’s two pickup trucks. At least a dozen figures in black uniforms were spread out, looking around. They appeared different from the Unionists, with helmets, standardized weapons, and no armbands.

Searching, perhaps.

Jimmy surged forward, jogging down the path, rifle at the ready. “Wait,” Jill said urgently. “We have to make a plan.”

“We gotta get close enough to see what’s going on,” he replied, slowing to a fast walk. “If they’re just looking for moonshine or doing a routine search, we’ll wait it out.”

“And if not?”

Jimmy stopped to turn and look at Jill. “We do what we gotta do. You okay with that?”

Jill nodded. “Yes. We can’t let your family be taken away. But Jimmy... I’ve been thinking about this for a while. First, the Eden Plague will heal us if we don’t get hit too bad. I’m tactically trained. You’re not. You’re a fine shot but you don’t have the honed instincts for close combat, so you are going to take up the best position you can a hundred yards out. You know this area, so you pick a good spot. Then I go in.”

“And then?”

“I’ll sneak into the barn and get my weapons, or I’ll take one of them down and use his. You watch me the whole way in. If they spot me and I make this hand signal,” she pointed her finger and thumb like a child pretending to have a

gun, “then you shoot, center mass low, and you keep shooting as long as you have targets. Don’t get fancy and try to go for head or weapon shots.”

Jimmy angrily replied, “At a hundred yards I can put one through an eye!”

Jill grabbed his arm and shook it. “Shooting human beings isn’t like plinking bottles, or even killing a deer. The first time your gut really knows that you just ended a human life, you’ll find it a whole hell of a lot harder to pull the trigger. So you try to think of them as targets, not people, and shoot center mass, low. They might have chest plates, and under stress you’ll tend to pull high, so it’s always better to put one into the dirt than to go over; at least it will scare the shit out of them. Got me?”

“I got you.” He jerked his arm resentfully away.

“Don’t go all testosterone on me, Jimmy. This is my job, and I’m damn good at it. Now you have to do yours like a pro. Be patient. Be cool, don’t panic, and when you shoot, shoot straight.”

“Okay!”

“Okay. Good luck.” Without further words, she turned to scurry forward, low through the light woods and brush that surrounded the farm. Up ahead she heard Klutz barking, an angry sound.

As she approached, she could see one man looking over the pigpen fence. He jerked back at something inside. If Jill knew the old sow, she’d lunged at him. She didn’t like strangers getting near her half-grown offspring.

Using the distraction, she crept forward with all her skill. She could now see the man’s uniform was jet black, with the American flag on both shoulders. His appearance seemed neat and military, unlike the local party thugs who had visited them before. Their trucks looked uniform as well, painted with unit numbers, a government crest of some sort, and the words “Security Service.”

She’d heard about this new paramilitary, formed by an expansion and reorganization of the Department of Homeland Security. How they could not see the irony of calling something that would inevitably be nicknamed SS was beyond her. Perhaps that just spoke to their fanaticism and ideological blindness. From what she could tell, the far left and the far right had both gone around the bend to the other side and met in the middle, and this was the result.

Four SS men stood near the trucks, between the barn and the house. Owen, Big Jim and Sarah sat on the front porch, two guards behind them. Another, apparently an officer by his dress and demeanor, seemed to be questioning them. Jane should be coming home from school soon, walking up the three miles from the main road where the bus picked her up. Jill hoped she spotted the men and

would stay out of sight.

For now, she decided to watch and wait. Maybe, if they were lucky, the detachment would go away after asking their questions.

Or not. It didn't take long for their methods to reveal themselves.

She watched the officer ostentatiously slip on a pair of black gloves, and then he struck. Not Big Jim, not Sarah even.

Owen.

He backhanded the boy across the face, flinging a spray of blood. Owen howled and held up ineffectual arms to cover his head. Big Jim surged out of his chair, only to be clubbed down by rifle butts. Sarah threw herself on her husband, and she was clubbed in turn, until the officer yelled for them to halt. Klutz sank his teeth into the officer's leg, and one of the others reversed his assault rifle and shot the dog, who dropped onto the porch as if poleaxed.

So that's the way it is, she thought, and clamped down on her sudden rage. I hope to hell Jimmy doesn't start shooting. Unless they kill someone, they can always get the Plague and be healed. But I can't just stand here. I have to acquire the tools I need, if we're going to go up against ten to one odds.

Drawing her combat knife, the one she'd kept in her boot through all of her adventures, she did something she'd thought about, even tested. She ran the blade down her forearm, creating a shallow slash, and wiped the profuse bleeding all over the blade like spackle on a trowel.

She knew the arm would heal within moments, and now the weapon she might have to use on someone was coated with her fluids – filled with the Eden Plague. Everyone she stabbed would eventually heal, easing her conscience about the danger of killing – and would also produce more Plague carriers. In essence, it would force them to defect, or be interned as well, draining the resources of the fascists.

It was far better than killing them, really, no matter what her outrage told her.

With knife in hand, Jill eased forward in a combat crouch, freezing when the man turned toward her, moving when he turned away. It appeared as if he had been placed to watch this sector, but had made the cardinal error of getting out of sight of his fellows. There couldn't be more than twenty SS here, not enough to really cover the whole perimeter.

When she got as close as she could, behind the last screen of bushes, she took a deep breath, waited until the man turned away, then rushed him silently.

As a cop, she'd never stabbed anyone before. All of her blade work had

been theoretical, or defensive, aimed solely at disarming a knife-wielding attacker. She'd heard that a straight blade to the kidney was ideal to incapacitate. The pain and shock involved usually paralyzed the diaphragm for long enough to finish the man off, lethally or not.

At the last moment she realized that the man had a vest on beneath his shirt – a thin one, undoubtedly just enough to stop pistol rounds, but it would likely turn her blade. In a split second she changed tactics, bringing her hands together to grip the knife's hilt with both. She lifted it and brought the pommel down on the back of the man's neck, just to the right of the spine, beneath his helmet.

He staggered and fell, letting out a low grunt, and she leaped on him with both knees. Adrenaline surged through her and she swung double-handed at his neck and face, trying to knock him out. She couldn't think of anything else to do.

It took her four blows, and he was bloody and breathing shallowly when she finished. *Ugly and poorly done*, she thought, and suppressed a wave of nausea. She'd killed before, with an assault rifle, fending off insurgent attacks on U.S. training and assistance forces, but it was never this close up and personal.

She found she really did not want him to die. He was a fellow American, misguided perhaps, but probably not evil. Just a grunt. So she did what she had intended before, and sliced him shallowly, on his forearm, twin to her own wounds. Hopefully that would transmit the Eden Plague.

Quickly she dragged the man inside the barn out of sight before running back out to retrieve his assault rifle. The odds just got a lot more even in Jill's book. She made a big *come in* gesture toward where Jimmy should be, then went back to the fallen trooper and began to strip off his clothes.

By the time she had his black pants and tunic off, Jimmy slipped inside the barn. "I'm too big for those," he whispered.

"Not for you. For me." She pulled the trousers on over her own, bloused them in the boots with their strings, then donned the man's armor vest and tunic. Everything was large, but by cinching up the belt she made it fit. Fortunately she had pinned her hair up for the hike so once she put the helmet and equipment harness on, she made a fair imitation of an SS trooper.

She hoped.

"Did you see what they did to Owen and Ma and Pa?" Jimmy asked, his voice anguished.

"Yes. So we take them down. That means keeping cool. We can give them all the Plague and they will heal up. Just keep that in mind." Jill reached down to smear some dirt from the barn floor on her chin and face.

“Right.” He squeezed his Browning and looked around furtively, unsure.

Jill ordered, “Go up to the loft and toss me down the .45. Keep the shotgun up there with you. Take a sniper’s position back as far from the window as you can while still able to see your targets. Keep moving from position to position. That way they won’t be able to pinpoint you.”

“What are you going to do?” he asked in a hoarse whisper from the top of the ladder.

“Don’t whisper,” she said in a low tone. “It carries farther than a quiet voice. I’m going to walk out into the open and take down as many of them as I can, by surprise. As soon as I start shooting, you pick off any target you see, especially those behind me. Center mass low, remember? Right in the gut is the best thing, okay?”

“Okay.” He turned away and retrieved her weapons hidden in the loft, tossing the .45 and two full magazines down. She thrust the pistol into the back of her waistband and dropped the ammo into her left front pants pocket. Then she cleaned off her knife, slipped it back into its sheath and eased over to look out across the farm.

Jill would never even have considered what she was planning if she hadn’t known the Eden Plague would give her an edge. Even if they ended up in a draw, with everyone shot and wounded, she and Jimmy would recover rapidly, while the SS men wouldn’t. She performed a slow scan, fixing everyone’s position in her mind, and then called softly up, “Here I go.”

Stepping out the back of the barn, she popped open the ammo pouches on her captured harness, tucking the covers out of the way and making sure the magazines were loose and handy. A standard load of six thirty-rounders, plus the one in the weapon, gave her two hundred ten rounds. More than enough.

She held her captured assault rifle casually pointed down, but with her hands in position on the grips, and strolled around the corner of the barn. Helmet tipped down, she looked out from beneath its rim, opening her mind and eyes to the positions of her targets, just like on the tactical range.

Targets. That’s all they are.

“Hey, Smitty, you look shitty,” someone called in her direction. That was the signal; in a moment they would recognize that Jill was not Smitty. She brought her weapon up, flipping the selector lever to *Fire* with her thumb, and shot the speaker just below his visible chest plate.

Before he hit the ground, she took down two more standing near him, pop – pop. Working outward and moving rightward in a tactical crouch, she circled

the trucks and shot the fourth man in the leg as he tried to take cover, then drilled him in the back as he fell.

With the four at the vehicles out of the way she turned toward the house, scurrying forward, rifle locked to her shoulder, eyes open looking over her sights. A bullet flicked at her heel. Jill barely noted heavy .308 shots sound from the barn; she had to trust Jimmy to keep them off her back.

In front of her on the porch, three standing targets and three prone friendlies occupied her arc of fire. The leftmost target aimed a rifle her direction and fired just as she did. Her shot took the man in the stomach, the high-velocity rifle bullet punching through his vest without difficulty.

His shot struck her in the center of her forehead.

Unlike the vests, the helmet she wore was made to stop assault rifle bullets up to 7.62mm, and so it saved Jill's life. Her head snapped up with the impact and she fell onto her back, instinctively flattening and rolling, trying to regain some kind of firing position. Rounds from target two kicked dirt around her as she scrambled under one of the McConley pickup trucks, then recovered her feet on the other side. Bullets slammed into the sheet metal and smashed through the vehicle's windows.

Using one of the vehicle's side mirrors, she saw target two fall, his head exploding as one of Jimmy's precision shots rang out. Whether he was showing off, or merely had forgotten her instructions, she had no time to wonder. She turned to scan behind her toward the woods, just in time to see Jane, in a flowered frock and tennis shoes, club an SS trooper down with a tree branch. He'd been aiming at Jill.

Jill waved her emphatically back. "Keep to cover, Jane!" she yelled, the need for secrecy long over. Jane nodded and slipped back into the bushes with her improvised weapon.

Checking the mirror again, she saw the SS officer drag Sarah to her feet and, using her as a shield, back into the house. Big Jim stirred on the floor as Owen sobbed in his wheelchair.

About half of the possible twenty troopers had been taken down, Jill believed. Now she had a hostage situation, but could not wait it out. The officer might have a radio or satphone and she couldn't allow him to regroup his men.

Only one thing for it. She charged the house.

He couldn't control Sarah and engage Jill effectively with a pistol. Her vest and helmet and the Eden Plague gave her an edge. As long as she didn't get shot in the face, she should be able to take the man down.

Two handgun rounds struck her as she rushed through the death funnel of the doorway. One hit her vest like a punch to the chest, hardly noticed due to adrenaline and concentration. The other burned hot fire along her thigh, a nasty flesh wound.

Inside, the officer had his left arm encircling Sarah's neck, while his right pointed his pistol at Jill. Most attackers would have ducked behind something and looked for a shot, hoping to get the hostage-taker to run himself out of ammo. With her advantages, though, she'd already decided on a different course.

Spiraling to her left and forward, she advanced quickly with her rifle sights fixed on the man's exposed right shoulder. He fired one more time, and the shot took a piece of Jill's right ear off.

Then she had him.

From two feet away, impossible to miss, Jill's bullet shattered his exposed right shoulder joint. Shock and pain caused him to drop his pistol and Sarah both, and as soon as he was clear, she put another round into his stomach. Then she kicked him in the head, ensuring he was out.

Checking Sarah, she saw that the older woman was incoherent and concussed, with one pupil dilated huge, so Jill did what she had planned, if it ever came to this.

With her left hand, she smeared her fingertips into her thigh wound, coating them with ichor. Then she stuck one of them in Sarah's mouth. Disgusting, perhaps, but if the rumors were true, her blood contained even more of the virus than her saliva, and one good kiss had passed it to Jimmy. This should infect the older woman, and perhaps save her life.

She did the same with the unconscious officer, then scuttled over to the front door. Big Jim looked at her from floor level, still stunned, but he had begun grimly crawling toward the entrance. Jill grabbed his collar and dragged him inside, then fed him a taste of her blood as well.

Next, she grabbed Klutz and dragged him inside. He still breathed, and she shoved a bloody hand between his teeth to coat his tongue. She had no idea if the Eden Plague worked on animals, but it seemed worth a try. Then she stood up and went back to work.

Scanning quickly outside, she spotted two troopers moving toward the barn, left and right, closing in on a flurry of gunfire inside it. Odds were that the remaining SS men would focus on the sniper that was picking them off one by one, and so now it appeared Jill was on the outside of the action, looking in.

Aiming carefully, she popped the one on the left, seeing him fall. Swinging

right, she fired but missed her right-side target as he dove forward. A moment later he was out of sight behind the barn.

Using the reprieve, she grabbed Owen's wheelchair and rolled the crying boy into the house. She saw that Big Jim seemed aware, if badly injured. She kicked the half-conscious SS officer in the side of the head again to make sure he wouldn't cause any more trouble, and then relieved him of his belt that carried several leather cases, like a police officer would wear.

One case held handcuffs, with which she expertly cuffed the officer's hands behind his back. Another held a walkie radio, which she slipped into a pocket. Then she extracted two magazines and retrieved the fallen man's pistol from the floor, pressing the weapon and ammo into Big Jim's hands.

"I have to go finish them off," Jill said to her surrogate father.

Big Jim nodded, taking the weapon. "Go," he grunted hoarsely. "Kill the bastards."

Jill nodded, though she wasn't going to follow his wishes; at least, not intentionally. The rumored virtue effect must be damping down her sense of outrage and desire for revenge. It didn't matter: leaving them alive and infected would be vengeance enough. That would consign them to being abused by the very system to which they had sold themselves.

Swapping in a full magazine, she set her assault rifle for three-round bursts. Now that her enemies were fully warned and waiting, firepower mattered more than surprise. Nearly as effective as fully automatic, this setting was far more controllable and gave her an easy way to track her ammo expenditure. She only had to count to ten as she fired off each thirty-rounder by threes, then drop the empty and insert the full one.

A look out the door showed movement in the trees to the right and left of the barn, but no clear targets. Intermittent firing continued, sounding like half a dozen weapons, maximum. Because Jane was somewhere to her left, she went out the back door and rightward, counterclockwise along the edge of the farm, hoping to flank and roll up the enemy.

Hang in there, Jimmy. I'm coming. Jill sprinted up the rows of vegetables, quickly entering the tree line, then turned left, resuming her gun-up tactical advance. Her thigh burned like fire, but it appeared only slightly impaired and already the bleeding had stopped. She'd also avoided the worst of the shock she should be feeling: *Eden Plague again.*

She mentally thanked her instructors for making her one of the best; these men, though competent enough, fought hardly better than the half-trained

insurgents in the sandbox.

As Jill approached the barn she spotted two targets. One fired his rifle into the wall of the barn near one of the small loft windows. It appeared he had no target, but was just providing harassing fire. The other faced her direction, a very young man, eyes searching, and he spotted her movement just an instant later than she saw him.

She revised her estimate upward slightly – at least they were keeping rear security – even as she lined up on his lower torso and fired a burst. Her bullets dropped him and his weapon stuttered skyward on full auto. Twigs and leaves dropped around her as a dozen rounds sliced through the foliage above Jill's head.

The other SS man was a veteran, she guessed; at least he did what it took to survive, dropping forward to the ground, out of sight in the bushes. Jill fired several bursts into the scrub to the left and right of his position as she cautiously advanced. *He would have been smarter to keep watch himself*, she thought, *and let the kid fire into the barn.*

Jill swung wider to her right, away from the barn, instinctively believing her opponent would not scramble toward that building with his other enemy inside. With her weapon at the left oblique she tried to anticipate his position, circling, circling...

There. A flash of dark movement. She expended the rest of her magazine and dropped down on one knee to reload, then resumed her advance. In a moment a leg came into view, moving slowly, painfully. Jill quickly swept her weapon through three hundred sixty degrees, checking around her before rushing forward to see the wounded veteran, a man of perhaps thirty, pull a pistol from his thigh rig and try to point it in her direction.

Her cop instincts took over and she hissed, "Freeze!" When he failed to comply, she put a shot through his forearm, and the handgun jerked and fell into the dirt. He moaned and his head dropped back. It appeared he had been hit three or four times even before her last shot, and she mentally saluted him.

Tough bastard.

Rubbing the sticky blood around her healing thigh wound, she shoved some of it in the man's mouth. In other circumstances she'd have bandaged him, tried to save him, but gunfire still stuttered from the barn and she had to come to Jimmy's aid. This instinct was confirmed when the boom of a shotgun replaced the hard crack of the .308.

They must be getting close to him.

Reloading again, she hurried for the back of the barn, skirting the hog pen. A hole had been knocked in the heavy boards, and it appeared empty; mama pig must have gone berserk with the firing and smell of blood, and broken out with her yearlings.

One man stood in the back door of the barn, looking inward, and she shot him in the kidney. He dropped like a stone. Charging inside, she was just in time to witness a flurry of automatic fire from two men on the ground floor as another climbed the ladder.

Jill picked the man off the top of the rungs, then turned to blast the other two. She took down one before the other shot her in the chest, knocking her off her feet. Her assault rifle went flying. She felt like a mule had kicked her, her vision grayed, and she became unable to breathe. *Lung shot*, she thought as she lay on her side, and, *this is shock for sure*. Apparently there were limits to what the Eden Plague could do, and she'd just found them.

She lay still, watching the remaining trooper approach her with rifle aimed at her head. Her only chance at this point was to seem nonthreatening, too wounded to fight back. "Hello," she croaked, trying to put some femininity into her voice. "How's the security business?"

Maybe he won't shoot a woman, or at least he'll underestimate me. Come on, Jimmy, now would be a good time to use that shotgun.

The hoped-for blast didn't come. The SS trooper kicked her in the belly, then in the head, breaking the helmet strap and sending it flying. Her hair came loose of its bobby pins, but it didn't seem as if the man cared about her gender. He kicked her again, and this time, she blacked out.

So close, she thought as she came to. *One, maybe two guys left*. Opening her eyes, she saw she was still in the barn, with her wrists fastened painfully to one of the supporting posts. The baling wire that confined her also cut off her circulation, and both hands seemed completely numb. It felt like the .45 in the back of her belt had been taken away, but at least she could breathe now. The Plague had done its work.

Whoever had tied her up must have thought she was not going anywhere, lung-shot and concussed. He would be coming back for her and the rest for sure, with reinforcements.

She also felt as if she was starving. Fortunately she had put on some fat during her enforced inactivity, but she felt it draining away as her body scoured itself for available materials and calories.

That was a secondary issue, though, compared to survival.

Jill began working at the wire, moving her arms and body in an attempt to bend the metal. Unlike rope, steel would fatigue if she could work it back and forth, twist it enough times. It would be a long tough job, but she knew she could eventually do it.

If she had enough time. She wondered where the last man had gone.

Someone appeared in the doorway. Jill tried to focus on whoever it was, and then realized she must be concussed, because her vision blurred and it appeared she was looking at an angel.

Then the figure stepped closer and out of the sunlight. “Jane,” Jill said with relief. “Get this wire off me. What happened to the rest of the security men?”

“A healthy one drug a couple wounded men into the smaller truck and drove hell-for-leather on down the road.” Jane dropped to her knees and began to unwrap the steel wire. “Even if they have a radio, we should still have at least fifteen minutes before anyone can get here, thirty if they don’t.”

“Unless they have helicopters. We have to get everyone away, up to the caves.”

Jane looked at her in surprise. “You know about them?”

“Jimmy showed me today. Good thing, too. Come on, hurry up.” As soon as she was free, she laboriously climbed the ladder with her feet and elbows, already knowing what she would find. If Jimmy had been able, he would have been the one setting her free.

Jill’s faint hope she would find him alive but incapacitated was dashed when she saw the young man’s head shattered on the loft floor like a dropped melon. One of the hundreds of bullets that had been fired blindly into the upper room had taken him down. It was just bad luck, and she let loose with a stream of profanity worthy of a drunken sailor, to cover the anguish she felt at his loss.

“Jill!” Jane cried. “What...is it Jimmy?” She began to climb the ladder, but Jill pushed her back down.

“Yes, and you don’t want to see. He’s dead for sure.” Jill stepped off the ladder and hugged the girl. “Leave him there as a testament, to show these people the price they’re going to pay for what they’re doing. Besides,” she said, picking up her fallen assault rifle, “there’s no time to mourn. We have to go *now*.”

The two ran across the yard, past the lone truck. Dead and wounded men littered the area, and Jill felt sick with reaction and the killing, more so than she had after similar firefights with insurgents. “Go see to your family, Jane. I tried

to infect them with the Eden Plague.”

As Jane ran to the house, Jill took out her knife and gashed her left index finger’s tip, then methodically dripped blood into every man’s mouth she thought had a prayer of living. Though several were conscious, none resisted, watching her like mice in fear of a snake. “If you’re lucky, the Plague will take hold and you will live,” she announced loudly, “but I wouldn’t go self-reporting as Sickos if I were you.” She could think of no better punishment.

Jill turned toward the house, to see the McConleys emerging from it. Big Jim and Sarah stood and walked without difficulty it seemed, and Owen...did too. His eyes and his expression seemed clearer, and full of wonder. His parents each tightly held a hand, and the smiles on their faces contrasted strangely with their current plight.

“He’s getting better already, praise the Lord,” Sarah called when she saw the realization come over Jill.

“That’s great, Sarah,” she replied, “but we have to go to the caves, now. Get some walking shoes on and we have to get going.”

“She’s right,” Big Jim rumbled. “Jane, watch Owen. We’ll go in two minutes, out the back door.”

He led them inside, where he grabbed an old canvas bag and began throwing items into it – fresh food, a blanket, clothing, shoes and sundries. Sarah did the same with a pillowcase, handing one to Jill. Soon they all were laden with as much as they could carry.

“Let’s go,” Big Jim said, seeming stronger by the minute.

“What about Jimmy?” Sarah asked sharply. “Where is he?”

Jill and Big Jim exchanged saddened glances. She knew the big man had already figured it out. “Jimmy’s gone, Sarah darlin’,” Big Jim said gently, wrapping his wife up in his arms. “Him and Miss Jill done the best they could, but now we got to go.”

Silent tears leaked from Sarah’s eyes, but she nodded and picked up her load. “All right. I’m ready.”

“Then let’s get goin’. We’ll eat as soon as we’re out of sight.”

This reminded Jill of the sharp pain in her belly as her need for food made itself felt. She picked up the pitcher of lemonade that stood by the sink and drank as much as she could hold, easing the problem somewhat. She passed it around.

Owen spoke, suddenly. “Klutz,” he said, pointing at the faithful canine lying on the rough wooden floor, then sinking to his knees to cradle the dog’s head. His four-footed friend ran his tongue over the boy’s hand one final time,

then he went slack with a sigh.

“I’m sorry,” Jill said, her voice cracking. “I guess the Plague doesn’t work on animals.” Owen began to cry softly. “We have to go,” she said. “We don’t have time. Whoever comes here will take care of Klutz.”

Jane pulled Owen away, speaking softly in his ear, and then they left out the back.

“Can’t we take a pickup?” Sarah asked.

“No,” Jill answered before Big Jim could. “They’ll follow fresh tire tracks, and if they get a helicopter up here they may find it. Much better to go on foot.”

Into the tree line they hiked, retracing Jill’s route as she flanked the barn. She detoured to take a look at the two men she’d shot there, finding the younger one staring sightlessly at the tree branches above. The older one, the veteran, was not where she’d left him, and she lifted her assault rifle, looking around. Hopefully he’d run off, or been one of the ones that got away.

“Stop,” she heard a man’s voice from behind her say.

Damn. Slowly she crouched and laid the assault rifle and the stuffed pillowcase on the ground, and then held her hands out to her sides before she turned.

The man sat propped against a tree, with brush on either side of him. She’d walked right past him, for he’d chosen his spot well. He held a rifle trained on her, braced on his knee.

The man looked to be in bad shape, Plague or no Plague, but his grip on the weapon was steady. “What did you do to me?” he asked. “I should be dead.”

“Would you rather be?” she retorted. “I gave you the Plague to save your life. You’re a Sicko now. An Eden. We’re the same, you and me. I am...I was a Marine. You’re a combat veteran; I can tell. Do you like what your country has become?”

“I’m not a traitor,” he ground out.

“Then shoot me. What’s stopping you? And then when your buddies return, they’ll lock you away, because they won’t see *you* anymore. All they’ll see is a Sicko. Just like every time this ever happens – Japs, Jews, blacks, Bosnians, ragheads – dehumanize the enemy, then round him up and murder him. Well I’m still human, and so are you.”

His mouth worked, then he turned the weapon away from her. “You got a point. So what now?”

“Right now you can let us go and take your chances, or you can come with us.”

“Jill!” Sarah said from behind her, where she and the rest of the McConleys had been watching the tableau. “We can’t trust him. And he killed my boy.” She burst into tears, falling to her knees with her pillowcase sack.

“Miss Jill is right,” Big Jim said to her as he squatted down. “Everyone with the Plague is now on our side. We’re all runaways together. We lost Jimmy. Maybe this man can help fill his shoes.” The older man stood up and stepped forward, dropping his sack and shifting his shotgun to his left hand. “What’s your name, sir?”

“Clayton, sir. John Clayton.” He rolled painfully to his feet, supporting himself on the tree he had been resting against, and stuck out his hand. “And I’m powerful sorry for my part in this. I know it’s no excuse, but...well, when the shooting starts, you shoot back at the guy shooting at you.”

Big Jim wiped his hand on his trousers for a moment, then set his jaw. “I understand, John. I forgive you.” He glanced at Sarah. “Jimmy’s mother’s gonna have a mite harder time, though.”

“I want him with us. Someone go get him,” Sarah wailed.

“We’ll do what we can,” Jill broke in. “We really have to go. Clayton, can you walk?”

“Not very well yet.” Clayton looked around. “Are there any more of us alive and infected?”

“Yes, back by the truck there are two or three.”

“I have to help them.”

“Dammit, we don’t have time,” Jill said.

“Just tell me where to go. We’ll follow after you.”

Jill cursed again, but fully understood the man’s loyalty to his brothers in arms. Turning to Big Jim, she said, “Go ahead. Jimmy showed me the cave. I’ll stay here with these men and lead them in. And we’ll take care of Jimmy.”

Big Jim nodded to her. “Give me that sack. You gather all the guns and ammo you can and bring everything with you, hear?”

“Got it, boss.” Jill agreed, grimly satisfied now that everyone’s goals aligned. She watched for a moment as the McConleys started the hike up to the caves, then turned to Clayton. “Come on, John. You got any rations in that truck? You’re gonna get damn hungry soon.”

She helped him limp back toward the mess in the center of the farm, leaving him to talk to his men when she realized the one Jane had clobbered hadn’t been dosed with the Plague. Fortunately he was still out, so a quick cut and a few drops of blood solved that problem. She dragged him back over to

dump him with the rest.

Five SS troopers had survived to become Edens, including Clayton. One she recognized as the man who had shot Klutz. “You,” she said, pointing with her assault rifle. “You see this dog you killed?”

“Yeah,” he replied, clutching his healing stomach. “Sorry.”

“You want to stay to be interned, or you want to come with us?”

His mouth worked, and finally he said, “I’ll come with you.”

“Then here’s your penance. You’re gonna pick up that dead dog and carry it all the way up to our hideout, and when we get there, you’re gonna bury him in a nice grave so that a twelve-year-old boy can grieve properly. You got me, soldier?” At that moment Jill felt as close to troop abuse as she’d ever gotten, and he must have seen it in her eyes, for he lowered his own and nodded, clearly ashamed. He got up and began wrestling the ninety-pound corpse up onto his shoulders.

“All right, men,” Clayton spoke up. “Like the lady said, you can stay and get locked up, or you can come with us, because I’m going with her.”

The other three looked around at each other, then as one stood up from their resting positions. “We’ll go,” one said. The others nodded.

“Good. Then grab all the weapons and ammo you can carry and bring them to the barn. There’s one more thing I have to do.” Jill left them to their salvaging, walking resolutely over to the barn.

Inside lay two dead cows, and the barn cats were already sniffing around at the smell of fresh meat. Jill opened the henhouse and let out all the chickens, then did the same with the rabbit hutches, taking no more than a minute. Then she began breaking open hay bales and scattering the straw.

Next Jill steeled herself, and then climbed the ladder. She forced herself to look at him one more time, with the flies gathering already around the sticky, blood-soaked boards. Blinking back tears, she picked up his beloved Browning, and the shotgun he died clutching, and then backed down the ladder.

On the ground, she grabbed a fuel can and opened it, waiting for her little squad. Once they arrived laden with weapons and ammo, she upended the gasoline onto the straw, tossing it into the pile, then took another and began to lay a line of flammable liquid out the back of the barn. “Get on ahead of me,” she instructed, and when they were all a hundred feet away, she asked for a lighter.

A moment later, fire streaked toward the barn, sending the barn cats running. A muffled *whump* and a puff of smoke signaled the structure’s ignition.

“Viking funeral,” she whispered. “Best I could do. Goodbye, Jimmy. Hope you find that Heaven your ma talked about.”

Less than a minute later, flames had engulfed the old wooden structure. “Come on, men. Even discounting your former buddies, the smoke will draw people from miles around.” Jill turned toward the hills. “Follow me,” she said.

Chapter Six

Four weeks later

Jill hugged Owen first, looking into his bright inquisitive eyes. “Be good, little brother,” she said.

“You too, Miss Jill,” he responded shyly. “Thanks again for letting me out.” She knew what he meant; out of the prison of his body, and his brain’s broken biology.

Jill said her goodbyes to each in turn: dour Sarah, smiling more now as the age lines fled from her face; gentle giant Big Jim, looking more like his dead son Jimmy every day; Jane, seemingly the least affected by the Plague, though at seventeen she had little to rejuvenate.

“Clayton.” Jill shook hands with the man who, with four of his fellows, formed the nucleus of a resistance cell in this area. They struck from the high hills and hidden valleys, stealing supplies, damaging military equipment, and infecting everyone they could.

“Reaper.” He smiled, his eyes less haunted now that he had come to terms with what he’d done, and Sarah had explicitly forgiven him. In fact, he seemed to be doing his best to be the son she had lost. “We’re going to miss you.”

“Me too, but I can’t stay. I know it makes no sense up here,” she tapped her head, “but it makes sense in here.” She patted her heart. “I have to find out what happened to my family.”

“I know.” He squeezed her hand one final time and let it drop. “Good luck, and good hunting.”

“Not me,” she replied grimly. “I’ve killed enough for one lifetime. Anyway, I’m a cop at heart. I’m not cut out to be an insurgent. All I want to do is go back to being a cop, in an America that isn’t murdering its own people.”

“Too late, I think. We’ll have to fight the Unionists to bring the real USA back. When you’ve found out what you need to know...remember us, all right?”

“Yeah,” Jill replied. “I’ll do what I can, from wherever I’m at. And remember to get in touch with the contact I gave you. The person on the other end of that email is completely trustworthy. Helped me escape. Just remember what I said about avoiding keywords that the NSA might pick up on. They can’t read everyone’s email, so the trick is never to get flagged.”

Clayton nodded. “I got it. We got it. Now you have to get going, before these folks start bawling.” He looked a little teary himself.

Jill smiled one last time, hoisted her rucksack, and walked out of the cave into the Tennessee Appalachians. She consciously resisted the urge to look back, but sensed their loving eyes upon her until she was down the trail and out of sight.

Night fell as she walked, the sun lingering below the mountainous horizon, shedding a long twilight. After dark, the moon allowed her to see well enough, perfected Eden eyes picking out every root and rock. Eden ears heard every night cry, the hoot of owls, the piping of bats that normally only children could. Fully fuelled, her body felt like a smooth-running machine.

The trail she had planned took her through a series of lightly populated areas, many of them state parks – Cove Lake, Frozen Head, Obed, Cumberland Mountain – eventually debouching near Huntsville, Alabama, nearly two hundred miles on foot. As long as she had food, though, she should be able to make twenty to forty miles a day, assuming she didn’t run into any trouble.

A stolen GPS would keep her on track, and a faked Security Service ID card should get her through anything but a high-level database check. She had food, fluids, and camping gear, and the burner phone she had bought so long ago.

The one thing she didn’t have was a gun. With her cover as an SS trooper on vacation, she might have been able to get away with it, but she had decided it was more risk than it was worth. Her combat knife would have to do.

She’d learned one lesson at least during the long swim from the cruise ship. Now her ruck and her pockets were packed with high-nutrition items – protein powders, nutrient bars, MRE packets, home-jerked deer meat, smoked fish and duck. She sincerely hoped that she would never feel that gut-ripping hunger ever again.

As she hiked, Jill wondered about the rest of the world. Apparently whole nations had embraced the Eden Plague, or at least, didn’t have the security apparatus to keep it under control. The poorer they were, the more likely that it spread like wildfire, becoming accomplished fact. Now formerly corrupt and terrifying places like the Congo and Zimbabwe, Sudan and Colombia and Rwanda, nearly overnight had become functioning nations. Without the load of medical costs, and with the Eden Plague’s virtue effect dramatically reducing corruption and crime, the only problem many countries now faced was food supply.

However, the world had always produced enough food. In most cases it was transportation, distribution and economics that caused shortages, and those issues remained. The world was still a long way from perfect, but it seemed like it was getting better, despite the tremendous disruptions, and resistance from the fearful elites.

They're afraid of change, Jill realized. Afraid that disruptions in the markets and healthy, long-lived populations would erode their traditional power bases. Like the Unionists, reactionaries throughout the world are exploiting fear to maintain power.

She camped that day in an out-of-the-way nook in the mountains, with no fire and no tent, just some brush to hide her. Insects seldom bothered her, and she wondered if that was a Plague effect as well. Even if she did get bitten, the bites healed so fast they were no trouble.

Traveling by night and sleeping by day gave her a lot of time for similar thoughts. An earbud and a radio no bigger than her thumb let her pick up a lot of information, though most of it was obviously censored. Even so, some things leaked through.

The USA, even under the Unionists, still claimed to be a republic. The Constitution might be getting trampled, but it was not yet completely gone. Courageous judges, statesmen, clergy and legal organizations fought rearguard actions, trying to limit the tide of lies and fear sweeping aside citizens' rights.

They seemed to be losing.

In the past months, tensions with the Chinese had run high, and the paranoid North Koreans launched a missile at Japan. Though shot down by interceptor missiles, Tokyo immediately revealed that it was even now assembling one hundred atomic warheads from secretly prepared components, and would defend itself with nuclear weapons if necessary.

Shortly after, seven more nuclear detonations occurred on American soil. Though blamed on terrorists, speculation ran rampant that some enemy state had supplied the bombs – China, Russia, or North Korea being the usual suspects.

The Unionists pushed for more Federal police powers, and the rump Democratic-Republican coalition, now joined out of sheer political necessity, was happy to oblige. More surveillance, more arrests without charges, more curtailment of rights naturally followed.

By the time Jill got to Huntsville, the USA had become a police state. Less than one year from Infection Day, the world had convulsed and remade itself, and most Americans didn't care. They were too busy trying to keep food on the

table, money in the bank and themselves above suspicion to be courageous.

Most people were sheep.

Jill remembered a resistance training exercise she had participated in. She and the rest of her MP platoon had been run through a prisoner-of-war scenario for three days.

Despite briefings, despite education, and despite knowing full well it was only a training exercise, many if not most of the troops had found themselves complying with their “captors” instructions in all things, with little question or resistance. Videos shown afterward had been eye-opening and embarrassing, as Marines seemed to make statements denigrating the United States, their officers, and everything they had sworn to uphold, with just a bit of trickery, persuasion, and selective video editing.

Why? Afterward, she had deduced the answer, the same answer: most people followed authority figures, especially if backed up by force and even the veneer of legitimacy. Add fear and misplaced patriotism and the recipe was complete, and no one was more susceptible to this seductive stew than young military troops, trained to follow orders.

In fact, in the exercise, she’d seen junior personnel ignore the lawful orders of their own officers and NCOs in favor of the “captors’” instructions, completely ignoring the Code of Conduct that they should have internalized. How much more likely was it they would follow despicable orders that proceeded from those same officers, whose careers, whose lives, or even whose families were threatened?

Jill understood. If the Corps was your family, what do you do when your family betrays the very things it is supposed to uphold and defend? Without another family, some kind of support system, what could one poor Marine, or soldier or sailor or airman, do?

Now she realized that, although she loved the Corps, the Corps did not love her. God might love her, if He existed the way Chaplain Forman believed. Her family might love her, and her new family, the McConleys, certainly did. Beyond that...she just didn’t know.

She made it two hundred miles in five days without trouble, traveling from sundown to sunup and a bit more. Park rangers generally did not walk trails at night. At most they might drive around and check campgrounds and scare the bears away. They were easy to avoid.

But near Huntsville, her luck ran out.

Jill had planned to make her way west by hitchhiking, by bus, or even

perhaps by “borrowing” a government vehicle if she thought she could get away with it. The corridor between I-20 and I-40 seemed ideal; smaller state highways that would be watched less, perhaps, but still with a heavy presence of truckers.

This time she resolved not to let anyone get the drop on her. This time she was ready.

As so often happens, it was just bad luck that tripped Jill up. She’d made it to Monte Sano State Park overlooking the Rocket City of Huntsville – home of both the Marshall Space Flight Center and the Army’s Redstone Arsenal. As the sun came up over the Von Braun Astronomical Society’s observatory, a pickup truck with Alabama State markings came into view on the forested road.

Perhaps if she hadn’t been tired, been more alert, or if the park ranger had had her lights on, Jill would have had time to dash into the woods and hide, as she usually did. Then again, what was one more hiker in a state park?

Jill kept cool, nodding as the truck passed her going the other way. Her heart dropped and her adrenaline surged as it swung around to pull up next to her.

“Mornin’, ma’am,” called the middle-aged female ranger out her passenger window. “Can I ask what you’re doin’ here?”

Jill put on her best clueless smile. “Hiking?”

“The park is closed right now, ma’am. Been closed to the public for almost a month.” The woman stared at Jill with a strange mixture of suspicion and concern.

“All right. I’ll go back.” Jill made as if to turn around.

“Wait a minute, please,” the ranger called with a hint of authority in her voice. “Can I see some ID?”

“Sure,” Jill said with false cheerfulness, and dug out her fake SS card, handing it in the window across the passenger seat.

The park ranger looked it over front and back. Her face twisted sourly. “Would have thought you’d have heard the advisories, Ms. Clayton. Or did you think just because you people control the processing center, you have the run of the park? Closed means closed.”

Jill hid her confusion. Obviously something was going on of which she was unaware, and she found herself in the middle of it. In any case it appeared the woman did not like the SS, which was a plus in Jill’s book.

“I’m really sorry, ma’am,” Jill replied. “I promise I’ll head right back out the way I came in.” She held out her hand for the ID.

“And what way was that?” The ranger’s face sharpened suspiciously,

holding onto the card.

Jill realized she'd made an error, and tried to cover it with as much truth as possible, which she knew was always the best way to lie. "I've been hiking and traveling on leave, and my GPS led me to your lovely park. I'm sorry I intruded." She changed her tone from apologetic to matter-of-fact. "Now I'm going to go. I don't like to throw my weight around, but I *am* a federal agent and I don't have to put up with harassment from fellow officers. Feel free to file a report. Now please return my ID card." She gave the ranger her best no-nonsense stare, the one she reserved for stupid suspects who couldn't follow simple instructions, holding out her hand insistently.

Instead of returning it, the woman's face soured even further and she barked a vulgar expletive. Then she put the truck in gear and roared off, leaving Jill standing by the side of the road without the fake ID.

Shit. She's going to take the ID card straight to her office, maybe her superiors, and report me, and it won't be long before they figure out it's a fake, but my picture is real. Then they'll match biometrics and might come up with who I am...

It had been a calculated risk putting her own picture on the fake ID but she had seen no way around it. The photo they had used was as low-resolution as they could make it without arousing suspicion, and maybe that would slow them down, but she had to assume they would come up with her identity eventually, and her status in the federal military databases would change to "Deserter."

With little idea of the park's layout – the GPS did not provide much detail on such installations – Jill just had to make a judgment call. She wanted to go west down the mountain, to lose herself in the city of Huntsville, and she saw no reason to change that goal, except that she would have to somehow get past the closed park to do it. Skirting it north or south would lengthen her travel time. Unfortunately she had only a hazy idea of where she was and what the terrain looked like between here and there, so she decided to head straight on through in minimum time. With her triathlete's fitness and Eden strength and speed, she could cover a lot of ground in under an hour; probably a lot more than the park ranger would expect.

Tightening the backpack's padded hip belt and shoulder straps, she began to run as fast as she could down the road the truck had taken. She kept her eyes open for signs or buildings, and at the first fork in the road she kept right, away from where the signs indicated the park was. Presumably the park ranger had taken that road and even now had begun the process of petty revenge upon the

uppity SS agent she'd accosted.

If she only knew.

Two minutes and half a mile later, Jill passed a road and a sign marking an exclusive mountainside housing tract. A late-model high-end SUV turned out from the drive and accelerated away in front of her. Already sloping slightly downward, the grade steepened, and soon she ran as fast as she ever had in her entire life, on the smooth asphalt surface. Only the pack thudding on her back hindered her, and that not very much.

Two more cars passed her, and the second driver slowed to take a look in its rear-view mirror. Jill realized that she must seem rather odd, running flat out with a backpack full of gear. She had to get off the main road.

At the next curve she spotted an access road to the right and a water tower thirty yards back in the trees, so she slowed down and took it at a jog, making sure no cars were in sight when she did so. The driveway led to a chain-link fence, but also continued around the enclosure as a partly overgrown graveled track. Following it, she was happy to see it twisted and turned down the mountainside, perfect for her purposes.

A half mile later she came in sight of another stand of homes, and looking out from the hillside she could see Huntsville spread out before her. She was running out of rough country to hide in. Soon suburbia would be her jungle.

Finding a place among the bushes with cover in all directions, she dropped her pack and stripped out of her hiking boots, shorts and shirt. She put away the dusty ball cap that held her pony tail, and then donned tightish jeans, walking shoes and a clean t-shirt. A windbreaker and a large leather handbag completed the ensemble, and she shook her dark brown hair out, letting it cascade around her shoulders.

After putting a selection of essentials into her pockets and bag, and sliding her sheathed knife into the small of her back, she drank as much water and ate as much food as she could wolf down, then buried the backpack in a shallow hole.

Then Jill simply walked out of the woods and onto the sidewalk, past people beginning their days – driving away to work, starting sprinklers, sending their children to school. She looked like one of them now, perhaps a college student on her way to the bus stop, or an employee of someplace local enough to walk to.

Eventually she came in sight of a divided highway, and what she really needed: a bus stop. Once on the vehicle, she was able to pay the driver for a transfer ticket to the main station downtown, which shared space with a long-

haul passenger line.

Looking around the local terminal, she could see a couple of SS guards, but they just seemed there to show their presence. On the other side of the busy yard, though, she watched as uniformed officers checked IDs and tickets as passengers boarded each long-haul bus.

They sure aren't making it easy, she mused, and sat down on a bench to survey their routine. As a cop herself, she was naturally familiar with the theory and practice of securing a transportation hub, and so she figured she might be able to spot a hole to exploit.

She found it.

As usual, it resulted from the simplest of things: human boredom, complacency. The long-haul company's uniforms were all similar, porters and maintenance workers and drivers, with only some minor differences. Everyone had photo badges clipped to their chests or on lanyards around their necks, but the busy maintainers generally had them tucked inside their shirts or into pockets so as not to get caught on things as they scurried around performing their duties.

These men and women fuelled and serviced the vehicles, cleaned them and dumped the sewage from their tiny restrooms, invisible and ubiquitous. The SS guards ignored them even as they slipped on and off the buses, doing their jobs.

Bingo.

Jill marked the "Authorized Personnel Only" door that many used. It probably accessed the break and locker area. While most of the workers going in and out wore the uniform, a few did not, and no one paid them any mind either. With at least a hundred employees on duty at the terminal, not counting the drivers, any thought of checking each busy person's badge every time had long ago broken down.

Getting up, she went into the local terminal gift and sundries shop, buying a navy-blue lanyard. She put it around her neck and slipped its badgeless end clip inside her windbreaker.

Resolutely she strode across the wet October tarmac, skirting the line of buses, walking as if she belonged there. An SS guard glanced at her briefly, but his eyes lingered more on her tight jeans than her face. Straight toward the door she marched, timing her entrance to follow a uniformed employee in. The woman didn't even glance behind her.

Still walking as if she knew where she was going, Jill quickly found the women's locker room. Happily, it contained full facilities including showers, and there were a few empty lockers.

Slowly she began undressing, watching for her opportunity. It took almost fifteen tense minutes, hoping no one would notice her dawdling, before a woman roughly her size came in to change out of uniform. Luckily she did not shower, but threw on a sweat suit and left quickly.

Using an abandoned towel she found to hide what she was doing, Jill took out her knife and slipped it through the cheap padlock on the woman's locker. A careful steady twisting popped it open, and in moments Jill pulled the stolen uniform coverall over her clothing. Her lanyard end, stuck into a zipped upper pocket, simulated possession of a badge, and her handbag she wrapped in the towel, and then jammed it under her arm. Hopefully no one would question the bundle.

It was the work of a moment to select a bus going west, with "Memphis" on its electronic display, and slip aboard, ignored by the ticket-checker and the SS guard nearby. Only a few passengers had boarded so far, so Jill stepped into the tiny restroom near the back and stripped off her coverall, rolling it up in the towel, leaving herself back in her street clothes.

Taking a seat far to the right rear, she stuffed the bundle far underneath and then ate a protein bar and drank some water from her big handbag. She slouched down against the window and closed her eyes. Most people didn't bother the sleeping.

It was only when there came a commotion at the front of the bus that she began to worry. A middle-aged woman was holding a heated conversation with the bus driver. Looking down the long aisle, Jill could see the bus was now packed full, and in a flash she realized what must have happened.

While passengers were not assigned seats, the total number of tickets sold would not exceed the number of places. The woman was complaining that she had no place to sit.

Jill knew the next thing that would happen was a person-by-person check of tickets, possibly with the SS watching closely.

Trapped! Every nerve screamed to get off the bus and run, but she kept outwardly calm and casually stood up, slipping into the restroom again. If only no one noticed...

Though she hoped her ploy would work, inside the restroom she prepared to be taken, the way she had rehearsed many times. She'd already pre-concealed many useful items about her person, such as hobby knife blades sewn into her collar and other seams, and notched fine piano wire that would slice through wood or flesh inside her shoelaces. Now she took out a handful of tied-off

condoms containing other things, and swallowed them. If they did not perform an X-ray, she should be able to recover them later. She also dumped her knife in the trash slot. Then she started eating and drinking everything she had left.

A knock on the door dropped her heart into her stomach, and as she finished the last of her food, she put on her best smile and waited, on the off chance they would go away. The knock came more insistently, then a curse and a rattling. Eventually the door opened to show a maintenance worker and an SS guard, with two more visible behind.

“Come with me, please,” the hard-faced man said, and Jill sighed and shrugged.

“Okay,” she said brightly in her ditziest voice.

He snapped handcuffs on her wrists in front, then used them to pull her along off the bus.

“Come on,” she whined, “I’m broke and trying to get to Memphis. It’s not a federal offense.”

The three SS officers took her into a holding area, one small bleak room of two, and fastened the cuffs to a lock in the middle of a bolted-down steel table. Then a woman wearing latex gloves searched her and took all the obvious things from off of her, but none of her well-concealed items. No body cavity search yet, but she was ready for it.

Then they left her there for an hour.

When they came back in, Jill knew she was done. The cat-cream smile on the hard face of the female SS captain, the smirks displayed by her muscular sergeants, and the nervous look the technician gave her as he took a blood sample gave it away. “Positive,” the man said after three awkward minutes.

“Take this Sicko to the processing center,” the captain snapped. “Standard protocol.”

One sergeant lifted a dart gun and shot Jill in the neck. She jerked with the pain, but did not resist. Her vision tunneled and she felt dizzy, and then someone threw a hood over her head. She blacked out.

Chapter Seven

Jill came to in stifling heat, which seemed strange for early November. The reason became instantly evident, as she felt people pressing up against her. She lifted her now-free hands to take off the hood, stuffing it into her jacket pocket. As a prisoner, almost anything they let her keep might prove useful.

Around her she saw at least sixty people crammed into the interior of what must be the back of a semi trailer. The dimensions fit, and she found herself next to the doors, in a corner. Everyone sat or lay against each other, and as far as she could tell there were no facilities, or even lamps. Cracks around the doors and what looked to be air holes punched in the ceiling provided the only light. The structure vibrated with the idling of a diesel engine.

Sweat poured down Jill's face, the same as others around her. She was about to try to talk to the woman closest to her when their prison lurched into motion. Immediately some relief from the heat came as moving air filtered into the interior, and she breathed deeply. The trailer tipped as it descended a slope, the truck's engine whining as the driver braked with its resistance. The prisoners flopped left and right as the vehicle rounded switchbacks. They appeared to be descending a mountainside.

Jill thought back to the words of the park ranger – something about the SS and a processing center in the park – and the irony struck her. She must have ended up back in Monte Sano State Park to start her journey – to where?

Carefully she reached down into her trousers and extracted the stretched condom containing the GPS from the only place she could have hidden it. *Needs must when the Devil drives.*

Sliding it into her windbreaker, she turned it on, but it could not lock onto its satellite signals, probably because of the metal roof. She turned it off and slipped it into an inside pocket.

Raising her head, she met the eyes of a lean, scarred-faced man of about forty-five, with a day's growth of stubble. Jill smiled, but the one he returned had nothing of reassurance in it. She told herself not to worry; they were all Eden Plague carriers in here, and the virtue effect should limit or eliminate any serious problems among the prisoners.

At least she hoped so. Humans could overcome almost any taboo or conscience if pushed too far. She idly wondered whether she could ever resort to

cannibalism if she was starving badly enough. It was a question no one was likely to be able to answer until they actually faced it.

And what made her so sure everyone here had the Plague? Perhaps they had tossed a few common felons or political prisoners in with them. After all, while Jews were the most well-known target of the Nazi holocaust, they also interned and killed or sterilized other “undesirables,” – communists, homosexuals, activist clergy like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “gypsy” Roma, even single mothers who weren’t “Aryan.”

Jill suspected any number of grudges had been recently settled by turning in friends and neighbors for any available offense. Also, infecting and interning some of the hardcore prison population in the camps might seem like a viable solution to hard-pressed bureaucrats.

Or perhaps not bothering to infect them. She resisted glancing at the scar-faced man again. If he had the Plague, those marks would have been healed, and he’d look younger, unless he just recently got infected. Mentally she marked him as a wild card; someone that could help or hinder her plans...plans to escape.

Four hours later they were let out at a rest stop under the close eye of a busload of SS. The troops had blocked off the entrances so only the detainees could access the restrooms and drinking fountains. Long lines formed immediately, exacerbated by the unwillingness of a couple of frightened people to leave their toilet stalls. Nonsensical, perhaps, but Jill could feel the fear coming from her fellow prisoners like waves of heat.

Once she’d had her turn, she sidled over to the scarred man. Now she could see blue monotone tattoos up and down his arms and peeking from under his collar. Prison ink, using the oily color from ballpoint pens, laboriously hand-drawn with sewing needles.

He didn’t look at her, but he was certainly aware. “What?” he asked, lighting a cigarette.

Interesting, that they let him keep those. “You don’t have the Plague,” she stated.

“Nope. Why would I want it?”

“Make you stronger, younger, heal faster.”

“Make me a pussy.” He took a deep drag.

“I’m infected,” Jill said casually, and then turned to him. Without telegraphing, she shot a straight right to his jaw. It hurt like hell; she thought she might have broken her hand. She’d certainly broken the first rule of street

fighting: never hit your target's head with your naked fist. It tended to do more damage to the hand than to the opponent.

In this case it put the thin man down, but not out. From his hands and knees he shook his head like a dog, then roared as he came to his feet, but Jill was already fifty feet away. She had turned and speed-walked as soon as she'd struck him, and the SS guards were already converging on the troublesome man with truncheons. As expected, they'd marked him as a felon and been ready.

Instead of fighting back, he covered up and curled into a ball, just protecting his head, belly and groin. After a short beating, they left him alone, as Jill thought they might. They had no mandate to respect their prisoners' rights, so they just punished anyone who got out of line and then backed off.

Jill walked warily over to the bruised and battered man, now lying on his back with his knees up. She squatted down near his head, just out of easy reach. "I bet that hurt," she said conversationally.

"What do you want?" he coughed.

Not, 'Why did you do that?' Definitely an experienced inmate.

"Do I seem like a pussy?" Jill asked, glancing around. A couple of the guards watched from a distance, and one licked his lips.

"Guess not," he replied.

"You're a hard case, probably a lifer," Jill stated. "Somebody got sick of you causing trouble and transferred you to the Plague detainee system, right?"

"Guess so. So?"

"So I'm a cop. How's that for funny?" She smiled without humor. "That means I know guys like you, inside and out. I also know law enforcement inside and out. You obviously know prisons inside and out. Together, we could get the hell out of this trap we're in."

He turned on his side and coughed again. Blood spat onto the concrete. "How's that gonna work? I'm all messed up. Think they broke some ribs. Might have nicked a lung."

Jill grinned. "Oh, I think we can fix that. What do they call you?"

He held up a forearm with a picture of a coiled snake. "They call me Python, 'cause I'm long and skinny, but once I get ahold of you, you're dead."

"Excellent. You can call me Reaper, because I've sent so many sons of bitches like you to hell." Melodramatic for sure, but she knew bravado backed up by violence was the only thing that impressed men like him.

"You don't sound like any lady cop I ever knew." Python rolled to his knees, and Jill stood up, offering him the hand she'd hit him with. It had stopped

throbbing, and if she had to hit him again, she wanted to use a fresh one.

“Let me show you *my ink*,” she said as she helped him to his feet. She unzipped her windbreaker and bared her left shoulder, where the fouled anchor of the Marine Corps blazed in red and gold. “I’ve probably killed more people than you have.”

“Kill for your country and you’re a hero. Kill for yourself and you’re a criminal.” Python spat more blood and coughed, putting his palms on his knees.

“Just the way it is. Come on, thin man, let’s load up.” The guards blew whistles and herded the people back into the truck. She let him lean on her, but remained alert to treachery. By the informal felon’s code, as far as she understood it, he should have accepted her as someone to respect...or at least, he’d fake it for as long as it took to recover and stab her in the back.

Inside, she muscled them into her same corner, suppressing her feelings of guilt at shoving these sheep around. But she was a sheepdog, and always had been. Sometimes the herd needed some nips on their asses to keep them in line. She also felt it important to keep looking tough in her new partner’s eyes.

Once they sat down shoulder to shoulder, Jill turned to Python. “Now I’m going to do something you’re gonna like, but don’t let it go to your head. Either of them.”

“What?”

Jill put both hands behind the man’s grizzled neck and pressed his mouth to hers for the deepest kiss she could manage. After a moment of surprise, he responded, bringing his palms up to her breasts, but she broke the lip-lock and then grabbed his thumbs, pulling his hands away. “Like I said, chill out, big boy. Plenty of time for that later.”

I don’t like playing with a man’s urges, she thought, but right now, I’d stretch my principles quite a lot to get out of here.

“You’ll be feeling a lot better soon, because I just gave you the Plague,” Jill continued. “Unfortunately you’re also going to get hungry, but I can’t do much about that.” Talking about it reminded her of the gnawing pangs in her own belly. She wondered whether the SS would feed them or just let them waste away. From what she understood, the internment facilities were not death camps, but then again, that kind of thing could be covered up for quite a while.

“Guess I got no choice now.”

“Nope. Deal with it.” Jill sighed, blowing air out of her cheeks. “Let me tell you a story.” She noticed heads turning her way, watching, listening, so she raised her voice. “Let me tell everyone here a story, since we don’t have much to

keep us entertained. I hope you remember it, and keep telling it, because in it, our government murdered three thousand innocent people, and maybe a lot more. It's about a Marine in the military police, who was helping to train Iraqi security forces..."

Late the next day, threescore hungry, tired people found themselves herded through the gates of Internment Camp 240. Black-clad SS lined up with truncheons, and used them on several people who didn't move fast enough.

Give people a little power, and they will use it, and not usually for good.

Jill stayed close to Python, but not too close, trying to give the guards nothing out of place to focus on. Right now they were alert and primed for trouble. The time to do something different, anything against the rules or to create an advantage was later, when they were lulled by the routine.

On the other hand, standard POW doctrine said the best time to escape was early on, before things got too organized, and when there might still be holes in their procedures. Somewhere, sometime she should be able to find a sweet spot, between the disruption of newness and the dullness of routine.

Surreptitiously checking her GPS confirmed what she already suspected from the harvested fields of cornstalks all around: the camp was in Iowa. More precisely, to the northwest of the town of Osceola, which was forty or fifty miles south of Des Moines. She could see several farmhouses, but no activity. Perhaps they had been evacuated.

It was a prime spot for a prison camp, with nothing but rough fields in all directions. A few wooded gullies offered the illusion of cover, but she had no doubt there was very little in the area the SS had not thoroughly reconnoitered. Once outside the double barbed-wire fence, where would the average escapee go?

They were herded into lines to be processed. First they passed through large communal restrooms with no walls between toilets. Under the watchful eyes of hard-faced female guards, they did their business. Jill considered putting the GPS back in its hiding place, but she did not know whether a body cavity search still awaited, and decided to abandon it. She set the little box down beside her toilet, one of the few places not easily visible, and left it there. Better that she not be caught and marked as knowing anything special.

She also made sure she retained what was in her bowels, hopefully until she had some privacy to retrieve the things inside.

In the next building they were checked once more, but still with no body

cavity search. There seemed to be a lot of prisoners in the camp, and relatively few guards. Perhaps they didn't have enough manpower – or at least, enough people willing to do this kind of work. Perhaps they relied on the Eden Plague virtue effect to minimize any trouble. Perhaps they thought the people were all sheep.

Jill tried to recall what she knew about the internment of Japanese civilians in World War Two. It was probably a closer analogy than Nazi concentration camps. Hopefully the point of this facility was not extermination...at least, not now. Things might change as the "Eden Problem" spread, and if the Unionist party ever took full power.

After processing, the men and women mingled again. *They're going to have a population explosion in about nine months if they aren't careful.* That thought led her down dark paths as she considered just how the SS was likely to prevent it. Forced sterilization, at least vasectomies for the men, seemed like the easiest method. She wondered if the Plague could reverse such a surgery.

At the last station, she received a shrink-wrapped package the size of a large pillow. It looked like it held bedding and a few sundries. She also received an electronic card with a number on it. "Don't lose that, or you won't eat," the clerk said. "Next!"

Jill exited the building into the interior of the camp. "What now, boss?" Python asked as he walked up to her, hands thrust into jeans pockets in the cold breeze.

"Recon the camp. You go left, I'll go right, along the fence line. Come back through the middle and meet right there." Jill pointed with her chin at what looked like a chapel building, easy to spot for its plain spire.

Jill's man nodded and turned to stroll the fence counterclockwise, and she did the same on the other side. She counted at least forty two-story barracks on this side of the camp, along with dining halls, muddy ball fields with bleachers, a laundry, a separate shower building, and a large supply store that sold basic necessities like soap and towels. All the buildings looked to be prefabs, hastily thrown up with no foundations, no drainage, and rudimentary sidewalks made of discarded wooden pallets. It would be hell when it rained.

Inside one near-empty barracks building she added up the bunks. More than one hundred double racks meant at least two hundred people per, eight thousand on this side of the camp. Room for sixteen thousand in this place alone, then, and a lot more could be crammed in if necessary.

Rounding a corner, she came upon two rough-looking young men. Their

eyes widened on seeing her, and they moved to obstruct her way. Each had a two-by-two board about the length of a baseball bat, and prison ink on their arms.

Great. Convicts preying on Edens.

Quickly, Jill put her back to the wall beside her and glanced back the way she had come. Another man, older than the first two, blocked her retreat with a shiv in his hand.

“Don’t start no trouble now, missy,” one of the younger ones in front of her said. “We just want the packet. Give it to us and you can go.”

Letting them have it might have been the smart play, but everything Jill had ever heard about prisons said that backing down was a sure-fire way to look weak and be preyed upon. Even if this place hadn’t turned into a hellhole yet, she wasn’t about to let these bastards help it along the way.

Instead of talking, she dropped the package into the dirt and took three quick strides toward the older man. While most people are more afraid of a knife than a club, Jill knew that two men with sticks were far more dangerous than one with a short blade.

The man slashed at her with the knife and backed up instinctively, clearly not ready for her aggressive move. She avoided his swing easily and kicked at his knee, connecting solidly. He fell with a grunt of pain.

One down.

Jill immediately turned and ran toward the opposite building’s wall, knowing the two bat-men would be rushing her from behind. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw one helping the man with the knife, and the other following her with stick raised.

The older one must be the leader of their little bandit gang, and the younger one had given in to his instinct to please his boss. *Bad move.* Turning around, she put the wall on her right, her attacker between herself and the other two, so she could see them all. When he swung, right-handed baseball style as she expected, she jumped back, and his stick slammed into the building.

Instantly she reversed and kicked upward, aiming at his groin, but happy to come in a little high and drive the ball of her foot into his belly. He bent over with a whoosh of breath so she grabbed his medium-length hair, driving her knee into his face. Something broke, and he dropped senseless onto the ground.

Jill picked up the stick, hefting it as she walked toward the other two. “Who’s next?” she asked cheerfully.

The younger man started for her with his stick, but the older one grabbed

his elbow. “No,” he said. “Let’s go.” The two men slunk off around the corner, leaving their compatriot to his fate.

Jill stood over the fallen man and thought for a moment, and then she worked a tiny hobby blade out of a seam in her jacket collar, the kind that fitted into a handle the size of a pencil. Using it, she stabbed her wrist over a vein and squatted to splash the resultant gush of blood into his half-open mouth. Then she picked up her package and left, her thumb sealing the cut for the minute or two it took to heal.

Jill waited for Python for fifteen minutes at the side of the chapel. When he arrived, she told him about her encounter. Then they compared notes on the camp. The only major difference in his side seemed to be that instead of a supply store it had an indoor auditorium seating at least a thousand.

“Looks like we find our own place,” Python rumbled. “Lots of people have staked their own spaces with hanging blankets and scrounged materials. I checked out eight or nine buildings. Some are full of families, and the men are not letting anyone that doesn’t live there inside. One had only women, with the same setup. One with a bunch of hard cases had no security at all, but I had to kick the shit out of two guys to get out.”

“It’s a new camp,” she said. “Not full yet. Wild West still. There is probably no prisoners’ administration, no central authority. Many of the people are Edens but until all the troublemakers are infected, it’s going to be a dangerous place.”

“Yeah. I saw three roving patrols of a dozen SS each, with riot armor, truncheons, beanbag air guns and radios. All the firearms are outside the fence. There’s also a command post inside the auditorium.”

Jill nodded. “Yeah. I saw ten or twelve troops around the supply store. I wonder what passes for currency here?”

“Camp scrip.” Python handed her a small piece of printed plastic. “Everyone gets a weekly allotment in cash. There’s some inside your packet. Also I saw normal money, and barter – cigarettes, candy. Like any jail. Inside is inside.”

“Yeah. So, any ideas on where is safe to crash?”

He shrugged. “Maybe someplace with couples?”

“Good idea. Let’s go look.”

They’d lost count of barracks buildings when they found what they were looking for: a half-full building with young people, mostly paired off. A few had babies, and there were a few groups of teenagers trying to look tough and

uncaring. Mostly they seemed forlorn and lost. Jill and Python claimed an area for themselves.

One of the items Jill retrieved on her first toilet visit was a tiny multi-tool. Using its pliers, they partly dismantled four bunked beds and built a corner enclosure they could pull inward, creating some security when they slept. It also yielded some short, heavy lengths of steel pipe that could be concealed in waistbands and used as weapons.

“All right. I’m starving,” Python said. To Jill he looked sallow and unhealthy, and she realized he must be running on empty as his body healed the damage she’d inflicted on him.

“Yeah, me too.” They found the nearest cafeteria and used their cards to gain entrance.

Once inside they were allowed once through the serving line, the food dished out by sullen trusties under the watchful eyes of more SS guards. They exited with their trays from the service area into a communal dining room with more guards.

Jill and Python ate ravenously as they observed their fellow detainees. Almost everyone else consumed all they had immediately. Jill wondered how long before they would be allowed to eat again – a certain number of hours? Three times per day? A few people slipped fruit or other portable food into pockets, and the guards did not seem to care.

It interested Jill to classify those who saved food. One category included parents whose children did not eat everything. Uninfected hard cases seemed to do it often as well. She guessed their caloric needs were less than an Eden, and they would barter or hoard what they could. A third type of people simply looked thin, even malnourished. She wondered about those.

Once they had finished eating, they went back to their bunks in the barracks block. No one had disturbed their bedding, and they’d brought everything portable, such as soap and scrip, with them in their pockets.

A half hour of conversation with their new barracks mates gave them a lot of information about the routine of the camp. Meals could be had three times a day, once during each eight-hour period. Some ate late and then early, to feel full. Some spaced their meals out equally. Almost everyone seemed hungry all the time, and food was the most valuable commodity in the camp.

That explained the parents saving food for kids, or just for later, and the hard cases, for barter. Jill wondered again about those she dubbed “skinnies.” What was their story? Nobody in their barracks knew, or had even noticed.

A week later Jill and Python found out, by the simple expedient of following one of them. He skulked into a nondescript barracks building no different from any other, except for two things. It was one of the closest to the edge of the camp, less than fifty yards from the fence. It was also controlled by men and women with a certain look about them.

A military look. Jill could spot them a mile away, and they had it.

“I think we just found our escape committee,” she said, nudging her sidekick as they watched from well back.

“How can you tell?” Python seemed to be genuinely curious.

“How can you spot a con?”

He shrugged. “Just a look they got.”

“Right. I can spot military. It’s also close to the wire. And you see that guy carrying in a board? I bet we see another couple of boards, or maybe metal from bunks, brought inside in the next few minutes.”

They watched, and it was just as Jill had said. “I think they got a tunnel in there.”

Python snorted. “What do they need a tunnel for? There’s only two hundred guards on site at any one time, and ten thousand people. We could just grab pipes and beat down the wire if we could get people organized.”

“These people aren’t cons. Only one in fifty, one in a hundred is going to stick his neck out. A tunnel is low risk, high payoff.”

“So why the skinnies?”

Jill replied, “They’re giving up some of their food for the workers. Hard work means extra calories. Doubly so for those with the Plague.”

“They could have enough if they got more people to contribute.”

“But then more people would know about it. There have to be informers among us, probably some of the hard cases, paid off in cigarettes, extra food, scrip. Maybe drugs.”

“Yeah,” Python mused. “I’ve seen some meth around. Also a few phones.”

“Those won’t do us any good. Besides, they’ll all be bugged. It’s easy when there’s only one tower in line of sight.” Jill pointed off in the distance at a tall structure, perhaps five miles away, on a low hill. “So forget about that. We just need to get out.”

“So...we join this escape committee?”

Jill motioned Python back, and started walking around, not wanting anyone to notice their scrutiny. “What do you think we should do?”

His forehead wrinkled in thought. “If we muscle in, we’ll have to do something. Dig, or give up food, or something. Also, if they get caught, we do too. Some of the troublemakers already been put in solitary.” The confinement blockhouse stood outside the wire, an ugly windowless rectangle with steel doors. Those who spent time there came back cowed and starved.

“Yeah. I don’t think they’re following the Geneva Conventions inside there, either. So, I’m with you. Let’s not get caught. But we can still help.”

“How?” They turned a corner and walked over to the inside track along the wire, where many of the detainees strolled. It was the closest they could get to feeling unconfined.

Jill replied, “We can gather food, and supply it to them. We just have to figure out a simple way to keep our distance. And I have another idea, but it’s going to be a lot trickier. I’ll tell you about it later, when I’ve thought about it some more.”

“Well I got an idea about the food. We can charge for security.”

Jill glanced crossways at Python. “What?”

He shrugged. “We’re already running the muscle for our barracks building. Might as well charge the straights something for it.”

“Python, I need you to think like a cop on this one, not a con. Be a sheepdog, not a wolf.”

He laughed. “Me? A cop? You’re kidding.”

Jill stopped and faced the thin man, now a lot less grizzled and scarred. “I got news for you, Keith. Yeah, I know that’s your name. Don’t ask me how. You’re a different person already. You’re still a hard case, but I bet the thought of murdering someone in cold blood twists your guts up.”

He looked uncomfortable, shrugged. “Yeah, so?”

“Look,” she said, putting a hand on his arm, the first time she’d touched him with anything like affection since she’d passed him the Plague. “Violence has its place in the world. I know, because I spent my youth in a street gang and then I joined the Marine Corps. I’m not asking you to be weak. I’m telling you that you can be strong and good at the same time.”

Then she kissed him, for real. “Let’s go back to the barracks.”

He swallowed. “What about getting pregnant?”

And that proves you’ve changed, Keith my Python. The old you wouldn’t have even cared.

“I think we can have some fun even without that risk.”

“I can’t believe this is working.” Python shook his head. “Getting everyone in our block to chip in food...don’t make no sense.”

“Fear isn’t the only human motivator,” Jill replied. “Altruism, kindness, or just enlightened self interest work too, otherwise who would give to charity?”

“Tax breaks,” Python ventured.

“That helps,” she admitted, “and getting your name on a plaque, things like that. But some people just give because they want to help people. Or they believe in karma, or God, or something like that. What goes around, comes around.”

“And payback’s a bitch. Okay.” He looked at the pillowcases of food they’d collected from the nearly two hundred people in their building. It had become a popular block even before they organized better security, after Jill and Python had dealt with a couple of attempts to extort their fellow prisoners.

The place even had a waiting list, because Jill had organized a score of the men and a couple of the women into a neighborhood watch. Half the collected food went to them, adding roughly twenty percent to her unofficial security officers’ diets. It was only fair, since they did work the hardest.

The other half of the food filled the two pillowcases they carried. Now that one part of her plan had worked out, Jill was ready for the next. “Let’s go.”

Python didn’t ask where.

They approached the escape barracks as night fell, but before the lights came on. It was the best time to move around unseen. A challenge came from the side door they’d chosen: “Whatta yous want?”

“Boston or Philly?” Jill asked.

“Neithuh. Woostuh. I’m still askin’, whatta yous want?”

“Got something for you.” They set the pillowcases down on the steps of the entranceway and turned to walk away.

“Hey, what’s this about?”

“Ask your boss,” Jill replied over her shoulder. They rounded the nearest building just as the lights began to glow along the fence line, throwing harsh shadows inward.

The next night they returned to the same building, different door, a few minutes earlier. This time they dumped the pillowcases, leaving the lookout to scramble as loose fruit, rolls and cookies spilled over the steps.

The third night they stopped by the side door of the nearest barracks and

waved the lookout over. He ignored their gestures, but after a few minutes, a dark-skinned woman walked out past the watcher and over to them.

She looked young, as all Plague carriers did, except for her eyes, which seemed ancient. And she didn't smile. "What's this about?" she asked.

Jill gestured at the food. "We need our pillowcases back. We can't give away two every time we bring you supplies."

"And why the hell are you giving us supplies?"

"For your tunnel rats."

The woman's jaw worked, and she looked as if she would explode. Then she mastered herself with an effort, putting on a bland smile, and sat down on the steps next to them. Blazing lights came on just then, aimed inward on poles around the outside of the fence, and from dim twilight the three were plunged into deep shadow, shielded by the buildings.

"So who are you?" the woman asked.

"I'm Reaper. This is Python," Jill replied.

"Convicts." Disdain tinged her voice.

Jill only laughed. "Convicts might be your salvation."

"Convicts might be informers. We can't trust anyone that isn't an Eden."

Jill snorted. "Oh, it's a noun now? Edens, Sickos, Unies...labels. Doesn't mean you can trust all Edens either. You think Edens are immune to fear or bribery, or threats to their kids? I bet the goons already know about your tunnel. We figured it out our first week here."

"So why are you helping?"

Jill rolled up her sleeve, showing her the tattoo that perfected Eden eyes could see in the dimness. "Because I'm not a convict. I'm a Marine. It's my duty to defend my country against all enemies, foreign or domestic. These enemies seem pretty domestic to me. And it's my duty to escape."

"What about him?" The woman glanced at Python.

"He's with me. That's all you need to know."

The woman nodded slowly. "Okay. You can call me Cee. We'll take your food, and thank you for it. What do you want in return?"

Jill smiled. "Two assault rifles and ammo would be nice."

Cee snorted. "Fat chance."

"Okay, then, how about information? We haven't heard much news in a while. If anyone gets out, where is there to go?"

"Mexico and Canada...one of the Caribbean islands. Any other country, really, except China and Russia. Most places have no policy against Edens, so at

least we wouldn't be rounded up." A light breeze began, bringing them the smell of earth and farm.

Jill nodded, musing. "And after you get some people out and running?"

"We have a few plans."

"I don't want details, Cee. I just want to know you have some kind of objective other than merely crossing the wire. We're in the middle of a whole lot of nothing, and the little towns nearby won't be hard to search, unless the entire population is noncompliant."

Cee licked her lips. "I shouldn't even be discussing this with you. I only just met you."

"Whatever. But from being on the other side of this situation, I'll tell you that the best time to stage your escape is when something changes – the bigger the better. Anything that disrupts the routine will provide an opportunity."

"Understood."

Jill turned to look the woman in the face. "And one other thing, since you asked. The thing I really want is a tipoff when you go. Twelve hours, even six."

"You don't want to go with us?" Cee seemed surprised.

"Oh, hell no."

Cee waited for Jill to go on but she did not continue, so the dark woman shrugged and stood up. "All right. I'll send a runner by your building on the day before."

"Fair enough." Jill held out her hand to shake, then Python did the same, surprising the other woman.

"Good luck," he said, and Cee gave him a quizzical look before she walked back to her barracks and her tunnel. "Didn't know quite what to make of me," Python said when she had gone.

"That's how I want it. Keep 'em guessing." Jill slapped him on his shoulder, grown rock-hard with surplus food and the exercise regimen she demanded. "Let's go."

As they walked back to their block, Python asked, "I thought you said before you wanted to go to L.A. Now you're asking about Mexico and stuff."

"I did a lot of thinking about that. I'm not just listed as AWOL anymore. I'm in their records as infected. My biometrics, my fingerprints, probably my DNA...it's too dangerous. Whatever happened to my family, I can't help the dead, and I'd be just causing trouble for any survivors. You too, for that matter. The best thing I – we – can do now is just get away to somewhere that doesn't lock up people like us. Then maybe we can think about fighting back."

“I’m all right with that,” Python replied.

“How come you never talk about your family?” she asked him as they walked.

“I treated them like shit. They don’t want to see me. I don’t blame them.” He sounded regretful.

“Well, it’s never too late. My old man wasn’t happy with me running with a gang. If I hadn’t joined up, he’d probably have thrown me out of the house anyway.”

“He must have been happy when you enlisted.”

Jill nodded. “Yeah, he was proud of me, but I was so angry at him that I didn’t talk to him for years. And now...now maybe it’s too late.”

“You just told me it’s never too late.”

She laughed. “Yeah, I did, didn’t I?”

The security men at their block door nodded to the pair as they entered their well-run barracks. People immediately started to approach; Jill had become a de facto judge and jury when anything was in dispute. She sighed, and said, “Give me five minutes, folks.”

Chapter Eight

Six weeks later

Despite all best-laid plans, something went wrong. *It always does*, Jill thought as sirens wailed in the middle of the night, waking her and Python from a sound sleep. They rolled out of bed and dressed hurriedly. Most of the detainees streamed out of the barracks, but he and she climbed up the improvised ladder they kept ready, and out the ceiling hatch onto the sloping roof. From there, they could see a lot of the camp.

SS guards poured out of their own living quarters on the other side of the main gate, toting weapons and jumping into every available vehicle. “It looks like they woke all three shifts up,” Jill remarked, craning her neck as she held onto a ventilation duct at the apex of the roof. “Something big.”

It wasn’t long before they could see that the troops had spread out around the outside of the camp, driving Humvees and trucks through the empty cornfields with lights blazing. Eventually about half of the available manpower concentrated itself off to the northwest.

Python got it first. “That’s near the tunnel block.”

“Shit. You’re right. Do you think they went early? Nobody told us. Damn.” Jill spat a few more choice epithets. “And no way we can break out now, not with a Humvee every fifty yards and the lights on. Why didn’t they tell us?”

“Maybe they thought we were informants.” He shrugged.

We could have taken the lights down, we could have organized diversions, we have improvised wire cutters to cut through and slip away in the confusion... damn you, Cee, we could have made you successful, or at least, not the fiasco this will be. Jill kicked the ventilation duct in frustration. “Let’s go talk to our block. Nothing to see here.”

Back inside, Jill coordinated with her building’s guardians, as she thought of them, telling them to keep the entrances secure and try to persuade people to come back and go to bed. Now was not the time to step out of line, not with the SS cocked and locked and jumpy as hell. Then she and Python settled back to wait, and eventually to sleep.

When the sun came up, winter-late, she sent her people out with instructions to gather information about what had happened. Soon she had

pieced together the story. “You called it,” she said to Python. “For whatever stupid reason, they went last night, and they all got caught. They should have told us, and they didn’t. They should have gone at nightfall to maximize their hours of darkness, but instead they went at two in the morning.”

“Were the guards waiting for them?”

“No, but they got alerted quick, so Cee was right about that. Someone ratted them out, just not us.”

Python smacked a fist into his palm. “So much for your grand diversion.”

“Yes, but now we have to worry about the crackdown.” Jill looked him in the eyes. “You know it’s coming.”

“Always does. They let the camp run easy for a while, but now whoever’s in charge has to make a show of strength, and punishment.” He picked up an apple, stared at it, then bit. “Gonna get interesting,” he said around a mouthful.

It didn’t get interesting until the next day, after an uneasy night. That morning the word spread after the usual pickup of food supplies for the dining halls: rations were being cut by one third; that is, one full meal a day. Additionally, the guards announced a curfew. Everyone would be confined to their barracks blocks between sundown and sunup.

And one more thing she had more or less predicted. All infected internees would soon be implanted with birth control devices, among a range of choices, or they could opt for sterilization. She wondered how long before the choices would evaporate and the SS would choose the cheapest and most permanent final option.

Jill expected – hoped even, that this would cause a surge of unrest, but if most people were sheep, then most Edens were lambs. Without a direct threat, their sense of outrage did not translate into action, and the virtue effect’s suppression of violent impulses rendered the critical mass needed to form a mob extremely unlikely.

Insight flashed through Jill, then, about why the camp had been so easygoing until now. To a certain extent the SS must have believed their own propaganda – which was always a danger of having too much control. They had thought that Edens wouldn’t even try to escape or resist in any way, but making people less selfish and violent didn’t mean they were always passive.

She herself didn’t feel any inhibitions on her own use of force, except if it was intended to kill: then, she experienced a physical revulsion. But compartmentalization was part of any warrior’s mentality, and so as long as she kept her goals, reasons – rationales, anyway – firmly in mind, she had no

problem inflicting corrective action on those that deserved it.

Her conscience remained clear, and that was all the Plague seemed to care about.

Jill wondered about people who simply had no consciences – sociopaths, psychopaths. Would the Plague repair their brains? What if the abnormality was psychological and not physiological? What would people like that look like? Could they even be identified?

She filed those thoughts for later.

Immediately Jill did away with the contribution of food for the guardians. On two thirds of the former diet, every Eden would soon begin to waste away; in effect, starving. Normals – those few left in the camp, as infection naturally only went one direction – could get by on a lot less.

But most of those normals were hard cases, and were not likely to give up anything.

That would have been another benefit of organizing a mass tunnel escape. Leaving the ration cards behind in the hands of designated leaders could have provided a food surplus, at least for as long as it took the guards to sort it all out. That could have been stored against another contingency.

Now everyone would just grow weaker and weaker.

Jill turned to Python. “We have to act soon, on our own. Every day from now on, we’ll be less capable. And we can’t train hard anymore, because we won’t have the calories.”

“Yeah. We can stretch that out with the camp scrip we got stashed,” – they had built up a savings account from contributions – “but food prices are gonna go up. A lot.”

“Do you have any ideas on what we can do that won’t prey off people here?”

“Yeah.” He looked at her speculatively. “If by ‘people’ you mean the sheep. That leaves the hard cases. Get control of them and their ration cards, and there’s more food for everyone. Might get ugly, though.” He finished his apple, core and all, discarding only the stem.

“Too ugly,” Jill said, shaking her head. “We’re not equipped to keep them locked up, even if I could stomach starving them for our own benefit.”

“Who says we let them live?” Python grinned an evil grin. “Just kidding, boss.”

“No, but what you say has some merit. It’s given me an idea.”

“What?”

Jill grinned an evil grin of her own.

Python and Jill approached the hard cases' block in the early afternoon. Though their number had dwindled, there were still forty or fifty of the convicts that preferred to live together, instinctively afraid of the Edens – of contamination, perhaps, or of being turned into sheep.

Or of being cured of their sick desires.

Behind Jill and Python, ten of their guardians waited, close enough to intervene if things got out of hand. At the bottom of the front steps the two stopped, looking up at the tattooed man that sat keeping watch. From inside the block Jill could hear the sounds of grunting and group encouragement – weightlifting, or a physical contest, she hoped.

“What?” the man asked disdainfully.

Python said, “We need to talk to Drake.”

“Drake don't need to talk to you,” the bull-necked bruiser replied.

“Why don't you let him decide?” Jill cocked her hip suggestively.

“Don't need no Sicko whores, either.”

“Tell him we got something he wants.”

“What?” The man stood up, towering over them from the top of the steps.

Python shook his head, slowly. “For Drake.”

Finally the hard case grunted and signaled for another to watch the door while he went inside. A few moments later a fit man in a sleeveless undershirt stepped out. He looked about forty, with thick hair and intelligent eyes. Muscular, but not massive. Jill knew that somehow this man managed to keep these men in line and working for him, so he had brains as well as brawn.

“I'm Drake,” he said, wiping his sweaty hands on a towel. Unlike his underlings, he seemed devoid of bravado. “You are?”

“Python. This here's Reaper. We have some information for you, and a proposition.”

Drake nodded, looking closely at them both. “Come in.”

Python smiled. “No thanks. How about we sit down at that table over there, where your boys and ours can all see us.”

Drake stared coldly at them for a moment, then turned to speak back through the doorway. “Get Fish.” A moment later a broad man with scarred knuckles stepped out, and the two convicts walked over to the nearby table.

Jill and Python went to the other side, and they sat down together. Drake stared at Python expectantly, until he made a motion with his eyes at Jill. “Ah, so

you're the boss," the felons' leader said to her. "His type I know. He's been inside. But you...you puzzle me."

"The same to you, Drake. I'll enlighten you. I'm a military cop. The only thing I did wrong was get my legs blown off in the desert and then get infected with the Plague. You know what?" She lifted a trouser leg to show the two-tone skin of her calf. "I'm damn glad I did, because now I got new feet. Your turn."

Drake's eyes narrowed, and he took out a pack of cigarettes, lit one. He didn't offer them to anyone else, not even his lieutenant. "I ran a little smuggling operation down south. I still have some connections, even here. I can get things no one else can."

"And to the hard cases, you're the devil they know." Jill reached over to pluck the cigarette from his fingers with two of hers. Although she didn't really smoke anymore, she had in her youth, and so managed not to cough as she drew a lungful before starting to hand it back.

"Keep it," he said. "I'll put off getting the Plague a while longer." He took out another and then lit it. The whole time his eyes never left hers. "You got balls, I'll give you that, lady. What you want?"

Jill handed the smoke over to Python, who took it eagerly. "I want what everyone else wants. Out of this hellhole."

"Hellhole?" Drake laughed. "This place ain't so bad. Frickin' country club compared to a supermax."

"It's not bad yet, but with two meals a day, food's going to get tight. Can you keep all of your guys happy?"

"Probably. For quite a while."

"With your *connections*, right," Jill deliberately mocked. "But then there's the attrition problem."

Drake's eyes narrowed, but he said nothing.

Jill continued, "Attrition means –"

"I know what it means, Miss Reaper. I'm a well-read man. You mean that every now and again, one of my guys gets the Plague, and I lose him. But eventually they'll ship some more hard cases in, and I'll have reinforcements. And I prefer this arrangement over a supermax pen, even with the crackdown. So again," Drake pounded his index finger on the table in time to his words, "what – do – you – want?"

"I have a plan to get out. You need to get out. Nobody but you is likely to want out. Me and Python, we're different, but most of these people are sheep. By the time they get their courage up, it will be too late. They'll be weak from lack

of food. Eden metabolism is too fast. We can't store fat the way the uninfected can. On the other hand, we can regrow limbs, so..." Jill shrugged.

"Get out how?"

Jill shook her head. "Not yet. Need to build some trust first. Bring four or five guys who can keep their mouths shut to the back corner of chow hall nineteen, tomorrow at two p.m. We'll show you from there."

"So you can jump us?"

Jill snorted. "In broad daylight? And where am I gonna get ten guys willing to attack you? My boys here do all right as long as they're defending someone, but a *well-read man* such as you should know that Edens aren't very good at making unprovoked assaults. Unlike yourselves."

Drake took a drag. "Two it is, then." Then he handed her the half-full pack of cigarettes.

She accepted it with a nod of thanks, knowing the gesture represented a step forward. Drake and Fish got up and strolled back into their block, and Jill and Python rejoined their own men, returning to their barracks.

They spent the evening preparing.

At two they met as planned, Jill, Python, Drake and five of his men. The convict leader's bodyguards were just a formality to make him feel safe; she wasn't planning to test them.

Nor did she believe they would do anything to her or Python. The risks to them – Plague contamination, being spotted by watching guards – were too high, especially in broad daylight.

"Follow us," Jill said, and led the men casually into one of the communal male showers, one with an "Out Of Order" sign on it, guarded by four of her people to make sure everyone stayed away.

Inside, the hard cases looked around warily as Jill walked over to the small central drain grate, and lifted it.

"What, you gonna fit through there?" one of the cons scoffed, and the rest laughed. Except Drake. His eyes narrowed, and he watched.

Jill took out her multi-tool and used it to pry up an adjacent floor panel, about a foot across. Beneath it they could see two feet of space, and then a subfloor. "If we need to, we can pry some more of these up, cut our way through, and then have a reclosable hatch to access the ground under this building."

"Another tunnel? They'll be looking for that. Besides, we're damn near in the center of the camp." Drake had stated his doubts, but was still listening.

“Ah, but let me ask you. Where does the waste water go?” Jill tapped the shower drain.

“Sewers? There’s some kind of treatment plant off to the east about a mile.”

Jill nodded. “Yes. That’s one reason they constructed this place here, I believe. To take advantage of the new waste plant that serves Osceola. And like any lowest bidders, the building contractors cut as many corners as they could. I’m sure they were under tremendous time pressure, and digging costs money.”

“So?”

“So they didn’t dig.”

Drake growled, “Get to the point, Reaper.”

Jill held up a forestalling hand. “Okay, short version. Old three-foot concrete irrigation pipes run right under this camp. One of them goes almost straight to the plant. Instead of digging a mile-long trench, I’m pretty sure the contractors cracked the pipe and started shoving ten-inch PVC through it, then did the same at the other end to connect to the facility. Or, perhaps, just ran the raw sewage into the irrigation system, but if that were so, I think we’d smell it more than we do.”

Drake smiled. “So if we can get into the pipe, we can scuttle almost all the way to the plant, and dig out there.” He laughed. “Ready-made tunnels. How did you know?”

Jill made an over-there gesture. “I saw the standpipes out in the fields. Those ten-foot-high things sitting in the middle of nowhere? But if you look close, you can see they line up, following the irrigation pipes. They relieve pressure on the system, otherwise it would burst from time to time. All I had to do was figure out where they crossed.”

“Beneath us.”

“Within ten feet of here. We just have to dig, then break through, and after that, bust out the other end. For that I needed muscle; people like you guys who can work hard on short rations.”

Drake nodded slowly. “It could work. Okay, I’ll go along with you for now. We dig, we bust into this irrigation pipe, then we see what’s what. After that, we’ll decide.”

“Fair enough. My guys will secure this place and set lookouts, since it’s near our block. We’ll smuggle in improvised tools for you. We’ll figure out where to get rid of the soil. You just have to rotate your guys in to dig. They’ll undress and work in their underwear, then shower and put their clothes back on

to make it all look normal. You can come by any time to check. We'll put everything back together at night. Deal?"

"Deal." Drake stuck out his hand. "Kinda wish you weren't infected." He held onto hers a moment when she clasped it. "You'd make a hell of a business partner."

Jill squeezed his in return. "You never know," she answered, "but let's stick to the *business* at hand."

The breakthrough came quickly, on the third day. Lack of hard heavy steel slowed them down, but eventually the four inches of high-grade concrete yielded to the chipping by dismantled bunk poles, free weights, and a smuggled ball-peen hammer. Once they'd made the first hole, widening it took only another shift.

Jill and Python took their turns working hard. Both lost more than five pounds a day, and began to seem severely underfed, if not yet malnourished. Drake didn't comment on it, but it was clear he'd noticed, and even took a turn himself, probably to show his men he wasn't to be outdone.

Murphy never sleeps. Occasionally, though, he focuses his attention on the enemy.

Just before noon, one of the lookouts told Jill he'd heard something was happening at the SS complex out front, so she told the crew to keep digging while she and Python meandered over to have a look, along with half of the internees. For once the guards did not yell and threaten the people back, so they lined the cyclone-and-barbed-wire inner barrier, watching. Any break in the routine made for a relief from boredom.

Instead of pushing to the front, Python boosted Jill up on top of the chapel roof. She then gave him a hand up. They fended off a couple of like-minded joiners, afraid of attracting too much attention.

From their perch they could see military buses arriving, eight of them, along with a similar number of five-ton trucks. Troops of some sort disembarked and began to unload the cargo carriers, stacking duffel bags and plastic equipment cases neatly on the side of the parking lot.

Jill shaded her eyes with her hand. "They're not Marines, or Navy...I don't think they're Army. Air Force?"

"What would the Air Force be doing here?"

“They have Security Police. Some good ones, too, matter of fact. I’m guessing these aren’t regulars, though. Air National Guard? And notice, no weapons, no tactical vehicles.”

“Huh.” Python seemed just as puzzled as Jill.

After more than an hour of sluggish activity, Jill told Python to stay and watch, while she went back to the breakout team. She found Drake there, looking for her.

“Something’s up, they tell me,” he said as she arrived.

“Yes. Looks like about three hundred Air National Guardsmen arriving. No idea why. But it could be the perfect time to bust out, when something is happening and the SS is distracted.”

Drake looked skeptical. “More guards mean they can cover more ground.”

Jill explained, “More newbie personnel mean more confusion. I say we try to create an exit in the pipe today or tomorrow, and leave tomorrow night at sundown. And Drake,” she grabbed him by the arm, “don’t tell anyone we’re actually going until the very last minute, and then leave your ration cards with the ones you’re leaving behind.”

Drake’s face blanked as he shook off her hand. “I’ll take it under advisement.”

Jill stepped in close to hiss in his ear, “If you don’t, they’ll go running straight to the guards. Don’t do it because you’re such a sweet guy. It’s payoff to keep their mouths shut, and it will buy us all time, as the system sees your cards still being scanned.” She paused. “You were going to kill them, weren’t you? But there’s no need.”

Drake put his palm on her chest and shoved her away. “I said, I’ll think about it. Now back off.”

Jill shrugged and nodded. “I’ll keep an eye on what’s going on. Maybe I can find out something useful.” She headed back to the chapel and Python’s observation point.

When she rejoined him, Python said, “SS is loading up.” He pointed at lines of black-clad guards carrying gear to the trucks, and then boarding the buses.

“You got a good count?” Jill asked.

“Almost three hundred incoming, about the same outgoing.”

“Half the SS, then. For some reason they need them elsewhere.”

“Yeah,” Python said. “Setting up another camp?”

“That would make sense. Keep some experience here, backfill in with

called-up Guard. This is good news, Python. Very good news. And they wouldn't be boarding the buses if they weren't leaving today. The guard force is going to be all screwed up, or at least thin, for the next while." She turned to speak softly in his ear. "We're going tonight, no matter what the convicts do."

Python smiled.

Just before night fell, Jill and Python made their way to the tunnel building, each with a bagful of equipment. "We'll sneak back later," her sidekick told the crew of lookouts. She found it hard to lie to her faithful sheep, so she let him do it.

It was time to abandon this flock. Perhaps not forever, but for now.

As they opened up the floor, Python asked, "Do you think Drake will let them live?"

"The ones he's keeping inside his block? I planted a bug in his ear. I hope he sees it my way." From glimpses through the doorway, she'd realized the convicts kept haggard women, and possibly a few men, prisoner inside. Probably as sex slaves. Also, each one had a ration card they could exploit.

Jill and Python had gone around and around on the subject. They both wanted to rescue the captives, but had finally concluded the best way to do that was to have the convicts take themselves out of the way by escaping. Hopefully this would give the SS fits at the same time, and possibly divert resources from chasing him and her as well.

"I'm still not happy with leaving them behind," Python grumbled.

"You want to wait one more night and try to go when they do?" It was the first time she'd really given him a chance to second-guess her, and it clearly made him uncomfortable.

"No, I guess not." He resumed dismantling the floor.

"Think you're skinny enough now?" Jill asked. Hard work and deliberate lack of food had reduced her five-foot-eight frame to under a hundred pounds. Python was two inches taller and perhaps only ten pounds heavier.

"I guess we'll find out," he replied.

Three minutes later they dropped through to the space beneath the building, and began to replace the concealing floor from below when they saw a flashlight shine from above.

"Well, well," came Drake's voice. "Glad I thought to check on things. You wouldn't be thinking of selling me out, would you?"

Jill looked up at him but kept back out of the way. "No, Drake. We're just

leaving a bit early, and by a different route. Good luck, and goodbye.”

“Wait...just because I’m interested.” He squatted down at the hole, turning the light away so it wasn’t shining in their faces. “Tell me how. You can’t possibly break out of the pipe from the inside, not just you two skeletons.”

“Sorry, Drake. If you’re going to rat us out to the SS, we’re not going to make it easy on you.”

Drake stared. “I won’t, but I understand why you’d think that way.” For some odd reason he sounded disappointed. He seemed to care what Jill thought of him.

Perhaps that will be enough for him to spare his captives.

Drake covered up the hole with the modular tiles, and they heard him leave.

Once they had dropped down into the big irrigation conduit, they saw the PVC sewer pipe within, just as Jill had predicted. It led off to the east, toward the treatment plant, leaving the irrigation pipe relatively clean and dry. Because they had broken in near an intersection, they had a choice of three other cardinal directions as well.

First they donned improvised knee pads, gloves, and taped tiny battery-LED lamps to their foreheads. Then they turned south, directly toward the SS compound.

Jill had made careful estimates, and now they counted their steps – if that was what a unit of crawling on hands and knees could be termed. They passed a standpipe above at one hundred yards, and an intersection at two, then another standpipe at three, and finally they came upon more PVC descending at nearly four hundred.

When they’d seen three more vertical pipes drilled through the concrete from above they knew they were under the SS compound. A score of yards farther they reached another intersection, where they rested. PVC sewer pipe ran off to the east from here as well.

“What do you think?” Python asked, apparently more to fill the time as anything.

“I think you’d have made a good tunnel rat,” Jill said cheerfully. She took out a water bottle and a sandwich from her satchel and ate ravenously. “Eat,” she ordered. “With this kind of caloric expenditure we’ll need it.”

“Right.” He gladly followed her orders. “Glad we saved up during our diet plan.”

“It better pay off, or we’re going to be two very unhappy moles.” Jill

slapped the concrete pipe wall. "Like Drake said, no way we're breaking through this."

"Don't worry, boss. Your plan will work."

"Damn well hope so."

After a few minutes they pushed on south. One hundred yards later they found their objective: a standpipe above their heads.

"I can see stars," Python said, peering upward.

"Soon we'll see them in the open." Jill unwrapped the grappling hook she'd formed out of bunk parts, and tied it to the length of parachute cord she'd smuggled in so long ago.

The line was thin, but had a test strength of five hundred fifty pounds, plenty for her purposes. Whittled dowels tied every foot provided something to grip with hands and feet. The only question was: were their bodies thin enough?

The standpipes were eighteen inches inside diameter. They could certainly fit, but could they climb?

Without fanfare Jill made her first, experimental throw. The hook fell far short. Because the standpipes stood ten feet above ground level, she had to launch the thing more than twelve feet straight up and have it catch, with the ability to swing it only three feet to gain momentum.

"We should have brought that collapsible pole you thought of," Jill said after several tries. "But it would have been awkward as hell."

"Let me give it a shot." Python did no better.

"All right. Plan B. I climb up the standpipe. You can push me part of the way. Then I have to power up the last part, and I'll hook the line on when I get there for you. Get on your hands and knees." When he set himself beneath the hole, she pushed herself in, arms up and holding the hook, line dangling down. She stepped up on his back, then widened her elbows, and braced her feet and knees up inside, supporting her own weight.

"Okay, get up and grab my feet, my ankles or something, and start pushing."

Python did, awkwardly lifting. Jill used his strength to move upward as far as she could, then braced with her hands and forearms. Then she lifted her feet again, and set them against the sides, aided by his hands. Soon she stood on his palms as he extended his arms straight up.

"You all right?" she asked.

"No problem. I can do this forever." His voice held no strain, so she believed him.

“All right. I’m going to try to throw this thing up. It’s only about three more feet, but I got almost no way to swing it.”

The fifth time she managed to get it caught on the rim, and with the line, climbed to the top. Once there, she boosted herself onto the rim and settled the hook solidly. She looked around at the cold, overcast Iowa December and wondered when the first snow would arrive. It was a week to Christmas.

“Send up the gear,” she said quietly. Soon she had brought everything up on the line, and dropped it gently to the dirt below, then jumped down. Just a football field to the north she could see the SS compound and the internment camp beyond, lit up like an outdoor stadium. Fortunately all the light pointed away from them. They should be invisible.

Python climbed the line easily, hand over hand, and came down the same way. He flipped the hook off the rim and caught it. “Lamp,” he said, removing his and turning the tiny thing off. She did the same. “We’d feel pretty stupid if they caught us because we were wearing ‘catch me’ lights on our foreheads.”

“Yeah,” she replied. “You ready to run?”

“Gonna really suck if we don’t come across a vehicle to steal.”

Jill grimaced. “We could try for an SS vehicle. They don’t even have a fence around their parking lot.”

Python stroked his chin. “That’s not a bad idea…”

“I was kidding.”

“No, really. Who’s going to notice a vehicle gone, with all the new people and the comings and goings?” Python’s eyes shone with reflected floodlight as he looked northward. “They’ll just assume someone else has it, running errands or whatever. They might not miss it for days.”

Jill thought for a moment. “All right. We’ll take a look. Let’s go.”

They crept across the field, crawling the last forty yards until they were in among the fifty or sixty various trucks, SUVs and Humvees there. The parking lot was poorly lit, and the vehicles haphazardly arranged.

“Damn,” Python muttered at the first SUV. “This model has kill chips. Can’t hotwire it without a bypass module.”

“How about a Humvee? All we need to find is one without its steering wheel chained…” She opened the first one she came to. “Like this. What schmucks. I’d have their asses if they were my troops, leaving their vehicles unsecure.”

“Down!” Python hissed, and they flattened and rolled under the Humvee. A truck with a half dozen troops in the back pulled into a parking spot twenty

yards away, and they dismounted. With the driver and passenger in tow, they gaggled back toward the main SS building, rifles slung over their shoulders.

“Don’t even think it,” Jill said in a low voice as Python stared at them. “We don’t need weapons bad enough to risk getting caught. Stealing this Humvee is already dangerous.” She watched the eight men’s feet as they dwindled in the distance, then said, “Come on.”

They slipped into the vehicle, Jill in the driver’s seat. Once she was sure the patrol had entered their building, she hit the starter and a moment later the diesel rumbled to life. She didn’t wait, but immediately pulled out and turned on her lights. Leaving them off might have helped avoid being spotted, but if they were seen, someone would wonder what she was doing driving dark. Most people saw what they expected to see, and wouldn’t think a Humvee leaving was unusual.

She hoped.

Only when they were headed south on state route 169 did Jill finally relax. She let out a whoop, and grabbed Python by the back of the neck with elation. “Free at last, free at last, thank God I’m free at last!”

“I didn’t know you were religious,” Python remarked.

“It’s from a speech by Martin Luther King,” she replied. “Although right now I’d join the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster if it helped us get away.”

“Amen, sister. Preach it.”

They both began to laugh, and didn’t stop for a while.

Chapter Nine

“What are we going to do for money?” Python asked as they neared St. Joseph, Missouri.

Jill handed him a roll of bills the size of a packet of candy mints. “Three hundred. Should get us a tank of gas and some food.”

“Where the hell did you hide this?” he asked.

“You don’t want to know.” Jill chuckled.

“We’re pretty ratty looking, too,” Python went on. “We need some new clothes.” It was true; even discounting the dirt from crawling all over and under Iowa, they’d been wearing more or less the same few outfits for months.

“Truck stops see all kinds. We need to pick up the interstate while it’s still dark.”

“Right. I-29 South it is.”

“There’s irony for you,” Jill said. “We’ll pass within ten miles of Fort Leavenworth.”

Python didn’t respond, just slumped down in his seat. Then after a while he said, “I’m not going back.”

“Of course not.” She spotted a sign and turned the Humvee onto the on-ramp for the interstate.

“No, I mean it,” he said, turning haunted eyes toward Jill. “I’m done with prisons, even wimp-ass prisons like Camp 240.”

“I’m with you, Keith.”

“No, look, Reap, you’re not getting me. Dammit, what’s your real name, anyway?”

She took a breath. “It’s Jill.”

“Thanks, Jill. But listen to me good. I am *not* going back in. Whatever it takes. I can’t do it anymore.”

“You can’t think that way. No matter what happens, we have to survive. Now that we can live to a thousand, so they say, we can wait the normals out.”

Python snorted. “Or they can just torture us for a longer time.”

Jill glanced at him, saw the resolve and determination in his eyes, and for the next half hour she worried silently.

“Truck stop.” Python pointed.

“Right.” Jill took the exit. “You go in and pay for the diesel, and pick up

two sets of clothes, sweats or something. I should fit anything you do, except shoes. I wear a women's nine, man's eight. Don't forget socks, and a couple of ball caps. And get a couple of shower tokens." Soon she pulled up at a pump in the truck section, away from the cars where the Humvee and their mismatched appearance would draw more stares.

Once she had pumped the vehicle full, she parked behind some semis, gathered her belongings, and met Python inside.

The hot shower felt incredible; water in the camp had never been more than warm, and was often barely above freezing. Ten minutes later she rejoined her partner in matching outfits of cheap sweats and hoodies. Their next stop was the burger joint inside, where they ordered eight meals in go boxes. They wolfed down two each while bagging the other ones for later, another decided contrast to the bad, bland camp food.

Thus fortified, they headed out to the Humvee.

Jill grabbed Python's elbow and steered him off at an angle when she saw what waited where she parked. Two SS vehicles sat next to their stolen truck, and several uniformed troops milled about.

"We're blown," she said as they walked across the tarmac toward the on-ramp where the semis made their long runs up to cruising speed. "We have to get out of here right away, before they lock the place down."

"Gonna hop a truck?" he asked.

"Exactly. Flatbed with something on it would be perfect." They walked quickly into the bushes that lined the on-ramp, out of sight of any onlookers, or the drivers. Jill was sure the truckers were wise to unwanted riders, but she also knew they would not expect hers and Python's physical capabilities. Probably as soon as they had achieved fifteen or twenty miles an hour they would be watching the road, not their mirrors.

She let five or ten trucks pass in the next couple of minutes, getting a feel for the right place to get on, and crept through the bushes to set up.

"Lowboy," Jill said as a heavy hauler revved through its first few gears. It carried a large earth mover, chained down but not covered. Fortunately it was a standard load size, without an attendant safety vehicle. "This is it."

As it came past them, they dashed out of the undergrowth and ran up on the trailer from directly behind, to minimize their exposure to the driver's vision. Then it was a simple thing to sprint up and climb aboard, even carrying a sack each. Soon they had settled in the lee of the airstream behind the behemoth's steel treads.

“You sleep,” Jill told Python, hooking a leg over him to make sure he did not roll with the sway of the trailer. “I’ll wake you up later.”

He didn’t argue, but pillowed his head on his sack and went out like a broken bulb.

“Where are we?” Python asked as he started to sit up. Dawn’s early light was upon them.

Jill’s restraining hand kept him down. “We’re on I-35 coming up on Wichita. Stay down and still. I don’t want anyone spotting us from behind and alerting the driver he has ride-alongs.”

“Okay. I’ll stay awake, you get some sleep.” He pulled his sack from under his head and began to awkwardly rummage in it, pulling out a crushed food carton to eat flattened burger and cold fries.

Jill nodded and closed her eyes, exhausted.

She awoke as she felt the truck decelerating. Looking through gaps in the caterpillar tread, she saw the semi had turned off for a truck stop. Beyond the plaza she could see the edge of a municipality, presumably Oklahoma City.

“Get ready to jump off,” she warned. When the truck decelerated enough, they dropped off the back. A trucker behind them eyed the couple with disinterest as he drove past.

Glancing around, Jill couldn’t see any SS or police presence. Even so, she steered Python toward a picnic area away from the service building. “I’ve been wondering how they picked up on us before, and I have a guess,” she said.

“Besides two scruffy people getting out of an SS Humvee?”

“Yeah, well that’s the other possibility, bad luck. No, I was thinking biometrics. Our faces are in databases now. Maybe they tap in to the security cameras around the building, via the web. With martial law powers, I’m sure the Security Service is sucking up every bit of data it can.”

“So how do we beat that?”

Jill’s eyes narrowed as she rummaged in her dirty satchel, coming up with a burger and couple of stray fries. “Stay away from cameras. Stay hungry. Stay off the grid.”

“Okay. I’m getting used to starving.” He opened up his own bag and found a burger of his own, and half a cookie. “We’ll need water eventually, though.”

“Radiator refill hose,” Jill said, pointing with her chin. She finished off a

plastic bottle and put its cap back on the empty.

“So what now? Steal a car, hop a truck?”

“Neither. Let’s see if I can find us a ride.”

“Why you?” he asked.

“Duh.” She unzipped her hoodie, tied up her t-shirt to show her rock-hard abs, and stood up. “Because most truckers are straight. But hey, if you want to look for one that isn’t...”

“Okay,” he said, putting up his hands. “I’ll refill the water bottles.”

“Keep your head down and your hood on. There are cameras above the pumps.” With that, she walked off to talk to truckers. Five minutes later she had secured a ride, but not with her bare midriff; it was her Corps tattoo that did it.

The driver looked about fifty, corpulent but still muscular, with ink on his arms that matched hers and a lot more. “Name’s Greg Hadley, Gunnery Sergeant, USMC, retired,” he said, shaking hands with them both. He turned Python’s arm over, holding onto it to look at his tattoos. “You been in,” he stated.

“Yeah, but I’m reformed now, boss,” Python responded humbly, and Jill almost snickered. Any con worth his salt knew when to suck up.

“As long as my sister in arms says you’re okay, you’re okay by me,” the man declared. “I was in the Gulf, you know,” he began, and for the next three hours he regaled them nonstop with war stories.

Now I know why we got the ride: he wanted an audience. Cheap at twice the price, Jill thought.

As they approached the Fort Worth area, the traffic began to slow down until it was creeping along. Up ahead they could see flashing lights from at least a dozen vehicles.

“Bad accident?” Greg asked, peering ahead.

Jill’s Eden eyesight reached farther. “No, looks like a checkpoint of some sort. Gunny, it’s been great, but we have to go.” She nudged Python to open the passenger door.

“Yeah, I don’t blame y’all,” Greg said wistfully. “Good luck, and stay away from Laredo.”

“Okay. Thanks,” Jill said. “Take care of yourself.”

“Ain’t nobody else will,” he replied with a wave.

They hopped off the running boards onto the shoulder next to the long line of traffic and then walked a few steps off into the verge. “Now what?” Python asked in exasperation.

“We go back, split up. You cross the traffic and walk along the other

shoulder. They may be looking for a couple like us, or it may be a routine roadblock. Once you get parallel to the back of the line, where the cars are moving a bit, come on back.” Jill turned to walk northward as Python worked his way across the stopped traffic.

Once he had rejoined her, she pointed toward some nearby woods. “Let’s go there. I have an idea.”

As they descended the embankment they could see some sort of grand stadium-like structure off in the southwestern distance. “I think that’s a racing track. NASCAR or something,” Python remarked.

“Good,” she responded. “Railroad should be nearby.”

They picked their way across a cattle fence and crossed a pasture, eventually approaching a small herd of beef loitering near the tree line. The animals stared as they walked past and into the forested draw. On the other side, they found more field and pastureland, and they hurried along dirt roads, giving farmers on tractors friendly waves.

Some squinted suspiciously, but most of the folks seemed pleasant, or at least Texas-polite. Jill remembered she’d done some training at Corpus Christi and the culture shock had been severe. At first she’d wondered whether they were all faking it, but eventually came to understand that the cool Angeleno disdain she thought of as normal was as alien to the Lone Star State as their genuine respectfulness was to her.

Two women on gorgeous Palominos overtook them, tipping their Stetsons with sheepskin-gloved hands. It was a great day to ride, chill but sunny. “Mornin’. Where y’all headed?” the leather-faced older one asked with innocent curiosity.

“Los Angeles,” Jill replied with a casual smile. *Always stick as close to the truth as possible*, she thought.

“Los Angeles, West Virginia, Anchorage, Vladivostok...bad business. Pandora’s box.”

Jill connected the dots. “I’m sorry...Anchorage? Vladivostok? Do you mean they got nuked?”

“Yep, and a few more places I can’t pronounce, in China and Russia and some o’ those Stans. Kablinkistan or something. People goin’ crazy.” Her gelding tossed his head, as if agreeing. “How you folks travelin’?”

“Hitchhiking, but the guy who gave us a lift made us get out before the interstate checkpoint. Guess we made him nervous.”

“Everyone’s nervous nowadays,” the pretty younger one echoed

sympathetically. “Getting so you can’t go anywhere in your own country without some jackbooted thug from back east asking for your ID.”

“They’re not using Texans for local security?”

The older rider snorted, a sound that expressed disbelief and disgust.

“*Security*. Don’t need no goddamned Federal security. The Rangers and sheriffs do just fine. Now they’re talkin’ about violating *posse comitatus*, callin’ up Texas Guard for duty up in Iowa and Nebraska, them camps, usin’ ’em against American citizens.” She patted a six-gun in a holster tied to her leg. “Reckon they might end up with a leetle uprisin’ here soon.”

Jill licked her lips and narrowed her eyes, not sure how far she could trust this outburst of local spirit. While she was dithering, Python made the decision for her.

“Is that a railroad line I see up there?” he asked, shading his face with his hand.

“You got good eyes there, sir,” declared the elder. “Union Pacific comes through here, transits Fort Worth, and there’s a spur that heads to El Paso and parts west. You thinkin’ about hoppin’ freight?”

Python shrugged. “Maybe.”

“Well,” she looked down at him speculatively, “you’re gonna want an express. Bypasses the rail yard. You’ll know it from three locomotives, y’hear? Two or one, it’s gonna stop in town. Three or more, generally speaking, gonna go through on the bypass.”

“Thanks,” he responded.

“Yes, thank you,” Jill seconded. “What should we call you?” she asked.

The rider shook her head. “Best don’t call me nothin’, ma’am. Best we just say so long and happy trails.”

The younger woman burst out laughing, and Jill did too. “You didn’t really just say that, did you, mama?” she guffawed.

Her mother’s eyes twinkled. “Just a bit of fun. You folks take care now.” She clucked her horse into a trot, and her daughter did the same, waving over her shoulder.

“You know, people like that give me hope we’ll come through this all right,” Jill said.

“Yeah,” Python agreed. “Would be nice to have a place to call our own... you know, ride horses and stuff.”

Jill turned to Python in surprise. “I didn’t know you rode.”

“I don’t, but I can learn.”

Impulsively Jill hugged him. “Yes, sir, you can.” A kiss from her lit up his face. “Come on. Let’s see if we can find an express train to hop.”

Chapter Ten

It had taken a long day of searching for a good spot, where the train had to slow before a descending corner, and then more waiting for the early nightfall to hide them jumping aboard. They drank water from a running stream, but did without food, hungry all the time.

They climbed aboard a flatcar without incident. Snuggling up next to construction machinery against the cold airflow was starting to seem routine, and the smells of West Texas mingled with the odors of diesel and grease.

“Home stretch,” Python said, his mouth close to her ear. “We should have asked more about the border.”

Jill turned to him so they could converse, practically rubbing noses. “Not if we’re supposedly heading for Los Angeles. We got two choices. One, try to slip through at a busy border crossing. They didn’t used to check outgoing Americans. Or two, try to cross at some lonely spot at night. You heard anything that would help make that decision?”

“No. I’ve been inside for twelve years, remember?”

“What do you think, then?”

Python chewed on his lip. “I’d rather take my chances at night in the open. They could have face cameras, blood tests, fingerprinting. We got no ID anyway.”

“We could try to get some in El Paso. I’m sure you can find someone who makes them.”

He laughed. “All the good fake IDs are made south of the border. The only things you can get here barely fool bartenders.”

“All right, night crossing it is.”

They looked up at the skies for a time, clear now that the glow of sunset had faded and they had left the lights of Fort Worth a hundred miles behind. “I ain’t seen stars like this in a long time,” Python said. “Prisons don’t like cons outside in the dark.”

“And your eyes are like a kid’s again,” she responded.

“Something else is like a kid’s again,” he half-joked.

Jill smiled and kissed him. When he stayed silent, she asked, “Run out of words?”

“I got enough words. A few of them just for you.”

Jill put a hand up to his mouth. “Not until we’re safe.”

Are you even intending to keep that implied promise? she asked herself. *You crossed that line already but...why? To keep him loyal? To reward him? You don't love him...do you?*

She didn't know how to answer herself, so she put such thoughts out of her mind and rolled into his embrace. The rhythmic jouncing of the flatcar made her body wish for a full joining, but in her rebellious mind, she remained glad that was *verboden*. It gave her conscience some salve to believe it wasn't really real until that last act took place.

Besides, she hadn't the energy, and probably neither did he. She felt dreadfully weak, her body's fuel reserves as low as they had ever been.

From time to time they saw traffic off in the distance, lines of headlights and truck running lights that seemed to crawl, though she knew they must have been doing seventy. For hours they paralleled what she believed to be I-20, and passing through towns they shrank back deep into the shadows of the caterpillar treads for fear that some stray gleam might betray them. Jill was grateful for the tip about the express train; it dodged a lot of potential trouble that local stops would have brought. Now and again they passed an eastbound, and clung to one another as the cold winds buffeted them.

Eventually the long train diverged from the freeway again, rails running out into the badlands west of Pecos. Moonlight illuminated scrub-covered hills as the engineered grade cut straight through them. By this time her tongue felt swollen from thirst. They needed water, and food, soon.

After more than an hour of suffering, they passed through a final notch to see the interstate off in the distance – I-20 or I-10, she thought, depending on where they rejoined the big roads. *Should have had Python buy an old-fashioned paper map at the truck stop so long ago,* she thought, *rather than relying on memory.*

As they approached the line of vehicle lights perhaps half a mile away, the train slowed through a curve. It appeared that instead of crossing the interstate, the railroad would pick up parallel to it again.

“Get ready to jump off,” Jill yelled. “This might be the last slowdown before El Paso.” He nodded, and they stuffed their meager belongings back into their pillowcase sacks. “Protect your head and roll,” she instructed.

At the sharpest part of the curve, they leaped off, despite the ground rushing by beneath them. Jill estimated they were still traveling at thirty miles per hour, and the impact knocked the breath out of her. Rolling through brush

and over rocky soil tore skin off her arms, back and knees. She clamped down on the pain and told herself to be thankful for no worse injury.

Python was not so lucky. His right wrist was sprained at least, possibly broken, swelling up quickly. She knew that without food and water, the Eden Plague would mindlessly try to heal him. Like a stupid construction crew that tore down good buildings to repair bad, the disease could not be shut off.

Jill supported him as he walked, grimly stomping over the broken ground toward the freeway. It seemed the only source of what they needed. Perhaps someone would stop and help them. She started concocting a plausible story about their car breaking down in the hills and having to walk out to the interstate.

She also resigned herself to the possibility she might have to steal the car of whoever stopped, or even kidnap them for a short time. One of those might be the only option. She couldn't let someone call the police or an ambulance.

The irony of possibly mugging a Good Samaritan did not escape her, nor did it make her feel any better.

They stumbled along across country, closer and closer to the divided four-lane. Off to the right Jill could see an overpass, and she inferred on and off ramps from the truck she could see exiting. It cloverleafed around and headed away from them on a road only visible because of the vehicle itself, toward a cluster of lights about a mile south.

“You see that?” Jill said huskily, barely able to talk. “Whatever it is, it's better than trying to flag down a car on the freeway. Any facility should at least have water faucets.”

Python just mumbled something unintelligible and kept plodding, holding his arm. Shortly they came up to the freeway, and they waited unsteadily for a break in the westbound traffic. When it came, they shambled across the lanes and into the divider.

The cold took its toll, as well as thirst and hunger. In the arid southwest, winter days were pleasant but the nights could easily dip to just above freezing. Jill's body screamed for calories, reminiscent of the swim that had begun her odyssey. For agonizing minutes they waited for a break in the steady eastbound traffic, then ran across when they could.

“Come on, Keith, only a mile to water, and maybe some food. Gotta be something.” They stumbled down the grade into a field of sage and weeds. Jill felt as if she was floating, her feet operating on automatic as her eyes glued themselves to the harsh lights on widely spaced poles ahead.

“I hope that’s not a camp,” Python muttered.

“No way. Not enough light, and they wouldn’t put it so close to Mexico.”

“How far?” he croaked.

“Dunno. Just a few miles, I think. That was I-10; I saw a sign. It parallels the border. Worst case, we can drink from the Rio Grande.”

“Not sure I’m gonna make it.”

“Don’t give up on me yet, Python. You are far too badass to quit now. Just put one foot in front of the other.”

It seemed like forever but was only minutes before they approached the mysterious group of buildings. These resolved themselves into eight to ten huge yards, each with a long low central open structure and a couple hundred black-and-white cattle. In the center of it all stood a larger, closed building. A dozen trucks of various kinds stood in a parking lot next to it. Most of the light came from there, with the rest of the complex soaking up moonlight.

“It’s a dairy,” Jill realized aloud. “Feed and water in those long sheds, and they get milked twice a day in the big building.”

“Water,” Python croaked, and began struggling over the retaining fence around the nearest corral.

“Not yet. We’re too close to the main building. We might be seen. Let’s go around the perimeter to the farthest one.” Jill grabbed him and pulled him to the left, along the fence line.

Two hundred yards later she felt it safe to cross the barrier, and they trudged through the dimness atop drying dirty manure, aiming at the end of the feeding shed farthest from the central building. Its roof stood at least twenty feet high, providing shade and space for cows, and for trucks to pull up, to drop off feed and other supplies.

When they reached it, Jill and Python found troughs of relatively clean water, kept full by floater valves. They plunged their heads into the life-giving fluid, sputtering and drinking until they could hold no more. Most of the sleeping animals ignored them, but a few lowed mournfully, a sad sound of protest against their domain being invaded during the sacrosanct night.

“Now the feed,” Jill said, feeling herself strengthen already. “Must be some around here...” They split up and searched until they found a line of bins that looked like they would dispense grain. They found a few leftover buckets-full of stuff that they ate, unsure of its provenance. It smelled like food but tasted like wood.

Jill mused, “Silage, I think. Ground up corn with the cobs, stalks and all.

Mostly these cows eat hay, but silage adds protein.”

“How do you know all this stuff? I thought you were from the city?”

She replied, “If you grow up in California, at some point you’ll go on a school field trip to a dairy. It’s agribusiness. The state produces more milk and cheese than Wisconsin and more beef than Nebraska.”

“Okay, teach. But this stuff ain’t gonna be enough.”

“I know, but it’s all we got.”

“Why don’t we go try to steal a truck? Then we can go to the nearest town and get drive-through,” Python said.

“Hell, no. That’s asking for so much trouble. We can make it. Here, suck on some of this.” She took out her multi-tool and chipped a piece off a whitish block.

“What is it?”

“Salt block. Mostly salt, some sugar and minerals. Keeps them drinking, keeps them making milk.”

Python put it in his mouth and hummed with pleasure. “Makes me thirsty again.” He headed back for the water troughs, while Jill choked down a couple more gulps of silage, and dumped some more into her sack. Then she drank water again alongside him.

“Let’s go. Home stretch. Just a few miles, and then a swim.”

“Swim?” Python stopped short.

“Yeah, the Rio Grande is the border.”

“Oh, yeah. Okay.”

“You can swim, right?” Jill asked.

“Sure, I swim like a fish.” He didn’t sound sure.

Jill clapped him on the back. “Come on, snake. Let’s go. And remember, like you said, anything’s better than being caught. No matter what, we’re getting across.”

Python didn’t reply, just put on a burst of speed across the dirt and manure to escape from the corral over the fence. She followed him, and was just starting to relax when she heard the roar of an engine.

Looking back, she saw a pickup truck speeding along the outside of the dairy behind them. It turned the corner and picked up speed, chasing them from two hundred yards back.

“Run off the road,” Jill cried, and they turned left out into the scrublands, away from the dairy. The truck braked nearly to a stop in a cloud of dust, then turned its headlights toward them until they speared the two in their beams. A

moment later they heard a rifle shot, and a bullet kicked up dust near their feet.

“Separate, get out of the light, keep running!” Jill screamed, and turned right while shoving him left. Several more shots came before they got far enough away to be out of easy sight.

“They’re not supposed to shoot at people fleeing!” Python grumbled as he rejoined her in the dim moonlight.

“This is a new country, with martial law and all the fear. And besides, Texas is an HNK state.”

“What?”

“He Needed Killin’ . That’s the standard defense against manslaughter. Basically, if you see a crime in progress, you can confront and use any level of violence necessary to stop the felony from taking place.”

“That’s crazy!” Python said.

“Really? Texas has one of the lowest rates of violent crime in the nation. You were a hard case. Would you ply your trade here?”

“I’d look for an easier state,” he replied vehemently.

“I rest my case.”

“Okay, maybe not so crazy,” he conceded.

Jill held up a hand for silence, pulling Python to a stop. “I hear an engine again.” She looked back, but saw no headlights. “I got a bad feeling. Let’s run some more.” They sped up, jogging along a track that seemed to go in the right direction. She had no idea how far the border was. It could be five hundred yards or five miles, but she knew it was close.

The sound of a revving motor came louder and louder, but they still could not see anything. Stumbling over gorse and sage and other woody scrub, Jill caught a glimpse of something off to her right, movement and reflection in the light of the dairy behind them. It was a vehicle, some kind of light truck or SUV, running blacked out, jouncing over the rough terrain.

“Border Patrol, I bet. They must have night vision goggles, or infrared,” Jill yelled. “Somehow they can see us. Get lower down, and ditch the sacks.” She crouched and ran that way, feeling the fire of straining muscles with a surfeit of lactic acid and without enough glycogen. Python followed behind, his breathing ragged.

The sound of the engine steadied off to their right, not growing closer, but gradually getting around in front of them. “They’re trying to cut us off,” Jill panted. “Angle right. We’ll come across behind them. They won’t expect that.” They continued their bent-over scramble. Soon they seemed to be following in

the wake of the hunting vehicle, and then it moved off to their left.

A subwoofer pounding alerted Jill to another problem. "Helicopter," she said. "They'll have infrared for sure. Keep going. We have to keep going." Python said nothing, the only sound his labored breathing.

The aircraft arrived fast, from the northwest, the same direction from which the vehicle had come, probably from El Paso. Jill could see its running lights and strobe. Had she been armed, she might have used those markers to show them what fools they were, but as it was they hardly made a difference. The two could not run fast enough to dodge its range of vision.

The aircraft roared over them at low altitude with a blast of rotor wash, then climbed a couple of hundred feet as it turned back. Undoubtedly it had spotted them, so Jill straightened up. "Run now! Fast as you can!" They sprinted over the broken ground, miraculously avoiding anything more than brief spills and the tearing of sharp-thorned shrubs.

The helicopter came to a hover overhead and they saw the truck heading back for them, directed from above. Darkness loomed, and they thought all hope was gone, when the ground fell away in front of them. Suddenly they found themselves scrambling and rolling down a slope, toward an unnaturally flat stretch of ground in front of them.

This was no impediment to the helicopter, which hung overhead like an unavoidable angel of doom, but the truck slammed to a stop at the edge of the semi-cliff and they could hear yelling as searchers dismounted.

At the bottom of the slope, they bolted out into the open, only to find themselves suddenly ankle-deep, then up to their knees, in water. What they had thought was level ground in the darkness turned out to be river.

"This is it!" Jill cried as she stripped off her hoodie. "Swim, Keith, swim!" She waded farther out, until she was up to her armpits.

Checking backward, she noticed Python had stopped. "I lied, Jill," he said in an agonized voice. "I can't swim to save my life."

Irrationally, she came back toward him, frantically trying to think of a way out of this mess. "Why didn't you tell me? We could have tried to go across in town!"

"It doesn't matter. You have to get away. I deserve anything that happens to me, but you have to go!" He backed awkwardly to the shore, regaining dry ground where he stopped. "Go, swim, damn you! I'll buy you some time, so don't waste it. I love you Jill!" he cried, and then he was gone, running eastward along the shoreline.

Her heart tore within her, but she could see the line of four or five armed border guards coming down the slope. He was right; it made no sense for both of them to get caught. She swore to herself that she would figure out a way to come back for him, to come back for all of the unjustly imprisoned people that a frightened nation had made its scapegoats. Then she turned back to the river.

Shots rang out on the shoreline, and she turned to sidestroke, swimming so she faced eastward, straining to see what Python's fate would be. A blaze of gunfire, muzzle flashes in the night, showed that either he had gone down fighting, or they were not interested in taking prisoners. Her tears mingled with the water that surrounded her.

He said he couldn't go back, but I have to believe he might be alive.

Jill rolled over to begin a steady crawling stroke across the slow-flowing Rio Grande, when the first bullets smacked into the water near her. Startled, her training did not fail her as she gulped a breath and dove under, swimming frog-style beneath the surface. Suddenly, brightness blazed around her as the helicopter turned on its spotlight, its infrared now useless.

She stayed under as long as she could, then popped up for a breath. More splashes in the water showed they definitely had given up on the idea of arrest, and would be content to kill her.

Kill me for what? Escaping their clutches? It's proof that genuine law has broken down, to use deadly force against someone who is no threat to them. Ironic, how the worm has turned: Americans frantically trying to make it into Mexico.

One of the bullets poked hot into her calf, its momentum slowed but not stopped by two feet of water. Her lungs burned within her and she kicked off her cheap tennis shoes, all but wrecks now anyway. Another gulp of air and she stripped off the rest of her outer clothes, leaving nothing but bra and panties.

Pushing herself as far as she had ever done, she stayed under until she had to rise, thankfully outside of the circle of the helo's searchlight. Several deep breaths restored her somewhat, enough for another dozen yards beneath the surface. Then she did it again, and again, in increasing darkness. It appeared they had lost her, or given up.

Coming to the surface to swim, she saw a low bank in front of her, and reached down with her foot to find the river bed. Something sharp stabbed a toe as she tried to get purchase, but she ignored it, just grateful to have made it to the other side. Once she reached the waterline, she stopped to rest, just lying there with her head in the dirt.

Something rustled above her head, and she rolled over to look upward into the faintly dawning sky. The silhouette of a uniformed man with an M16 blocked her view as he bent over to look at her closely. “*Hola, Señora. Bienvenidos a México.*”

Jill started to cry, whether from joy or grief or just exhaustion, she was not sure. The Spanish she had learned so long ago from her grandmother came back to her, well enough. “*Gracias, Señor. Solicito asilo en México, por favor.*”

“*Si, bella dama. Ven conmigo.*” He held out his hand, and she took it.

Epilogue

Tunja, Colombia

Jill curiously examined the unmarked compound and compared it to the address on the piece of paper the Mexican civil servant had given her. It appeared to be the right place, and she saw several *gringo* faces behind the fence, along with people of other races. She walked up to the gate and pushed the button on the intercom, and waited.

The Mexican *Federales* had put her in a holding camp not much different from the one in Iowa, except that in this one, people also got to leave. Buses rolled up every day, names were called, and off they went to some form of resettlement. In her case, they'd sent her here, with a plastic bag of basic supplies and this address.

A man in khakis walked out of a nearby steel-framed building and let her in when she showed him the paper. He read it carefully before handing it back. "Military experience?" he asked as he shut the gate behind her.

"Semper Fi," she responded, baring her left shoulder.

"Excellent. We need women." With that cryptic comment he led her into the battered windowless warehouse. Inside, makeshift walls had been erected, reminding her of a temporary barracks on a deployment. People came and went, mostly men, all with the look of warriors.

"What did you do?" the man asked as they threaded their way toward the back.

"3RT. Tactical police and training."

He grunted, a sound that might have held pleasure. "Doubly excellent. I'm going to make an executive decision and take you straight to The Man." She could hear the capitals.

He knocked on a nondescript door, and then stuck his head inside. "Sir, I think I got a Class One for you. Jill Repeth. Marine Corps."

From inside she heard a male voice say, "Excellent." Apparently that was a buzzword around here. Her escort shoved the door wide open and motioned her to enter the room, and then closed it behind her, leaving her alone with its occupant.

Bright black eyes in a sharp face greeted her, beneath a severe buzz cut on

a man shorter than she by at least two inches. His height seemed immaterial, for he filled the room with a presence, a force that told her this was someone to be reckoned with.

He held out his hand with a smile. “Hello, Miss Repeth. I’m Tran Pham Nguyen. You may call me Spooky.”

“And you can call me Reaper. Nice to meet you, sir.”

“I’m putting together a special unit for covert operations within the United States. Interested?”

A slow smile filled Jill’s face. “Oh, yes sir. Yes sir; you bet your ass I am.”

THE END of *Reaper’s Run*.
[Return to *The Eden Plague*](#)

SKULL'S SHADOWS

by

David VanDyke

and

Ryan King

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Chapter 1

The worst things in life are never free, thought Alan “Skull” Denham as he watched the two-engine turboprop plane rise into the faint glow of approaching dawn from behind the wheel of his battered SUV. Though cool in the high desert of southern Arizona, he didn’t feel the chill.

A black ice of loneliness and wrath, a thing he’d fought off with action and hatred, now threatened to consume his being. He’d set those things aside long enough to get Daniel Markis, Larry Nightingale and the others safely away on that plane.

Now, he embraced those feelings. Now, the time had come for retribution.

People who knew the tall thin man might describe him as quietly unsettling. When he did speak, he did so purposefully, often accented by cutting sarcasm that revealed a quick and dangerous mind. Yet, he was neither a clown nor a man to be safely ignored.

Even those who knew him well would not have described him as exceptionally philosophical, but they’d have been wrong. Skull often contemplated deep truths about the world and himself.

One truth: genuine friendship was so extraordinarily rare it might as well be an apparition, a specter, a ghost. Another truth, one so deep and so hard it felt like a spear through his chest, was that Zeke Johnstone had been his last and truest friend. The depth of the emotion surprised him.

Against his will he relived the events outside Zeke’s Fayetteville, North Carolina home. Members of a secret government conspiracy had murdered Zeke in front of his wife and children. Undoubtedly they’d wanted him alive, to trace him back to the Sosthenes bunker where those infected with the healing Eden Plague hid, but they’d started the shooting.

In the mayhem, a bullet had blown Zeke’s head open.

Skull ground his teeth at the memory and walked back to the SUV. He thought of those men who had killed his friend and caused such pain to Zeke’s family. On Zeke’s orders, Skull, Spooky and Larry had injected the killers with the healing Eden Plague, in his opinion a grave injustice.

The killers had deserved to die.

More like them could be coming after him soon. Their crimes could not go unanswered. He knew his chances of finding the specific men responsible were

unlikely, but not impossible. The new INS, Inc. headquarters in Maryland would be a good place to start.

Skull felt the fluttering of dark wings around the edge of his mind and relied upon the old antidote: revenge and death. Many deserved it, cried out for it, and Skull knew he'd been made to fulfill that purpose, an angel of doom.

Why else had he been born?

Starting the SUV, he turned north away from the abandoned airfield outside of Tucson. He didn't fear anyone he might run into; he'd always known that when his time to die came it would be at his own hand, but until then, he didn't want anyone to interfere with his work.

The only work that was ever right.

His primary purpose for existence.

So be it, he thought and smiled grimly at the orange light rising over the stark mountains.

Driving just above the speed limit, Skull kept an eye out for anything unusual. His vehicle should be clean and as far as he knew no one who might be looking for him had his physical description, but it didn't hurt to be careful. This thought made him lean back in his seat until he felt the reassuring pressure of the Glock 37 .45 caliber compact pistol concealed at the back of his waist.

The sun rose on a beautiful day, the sky clear over the panoramic mountains. A man could almost forget that the U.S. government had detonated two nuclear weapons on its own soil in the last few days, or that martial law now oppressed all of America. He wondered what could be happening out in the larger world as he drove north.

South of Phoenix, Skull hit the first checkpoint, a hasty affair with plastic cones and police cars as barriers. He slowly rolled down the window to speak to the officer who waved him forward.

"How's it going?" asked Skull with a friendly smile.

"License and registration," the man answered back without any trace of personality.

"Sure," said Skull, pulling out a California driver's license with his picture and the name Victor Erickson. He reached for the registration and proof of insurance that matched the false identification.

The policeman examined the documents so closely, Skull wondered if the man could read. *Just sound it out*, Skull thought with internal sarcasm. *The big words can be tricky*. With iron self control, he kept the thoughts from spilling past his lips.

“Where are you headed, Mister Erickson?” the policeman finally asked.

“Back to Sacramento. Got to be at work on Monday.”

“And what is it you do for work?” The policeman seemed skeptical.

“I’m the manager of Prince Lumber and Construction Supply.” Skull felt confident giving these details because he had already paid for the backstopping. If the cop decided to call the company, they would verify that Victor Erickson, a tall bald man, worked there and was expected back to work on Monday.

The cop peered at the growing line of traffic behind Skull’s vehicle. “And just what was your purpose in Arizona?”

Skull saw in the line next to him officers had pulled the family out of their station wagon and were searching the vehicle and making them turn out their pockets. If they did that to him, the game could be up given all the weapons in the vehicle. He mentally marked the positions of the policemen. Only the one he was speaking to was paying him any attention.

“Sir? Why were you in Arizona?”

“I’m sorry, officer,” Skull replied with an embarrassed smile. “I was visiting my sick aunt in Sonoma and realized I was supposed to call my wife before I left and didn’t. She gets so pissed when I do that.”

The man seemed to relax a little. “Yeah, mine too.”

“Officer, is there some sort of problem? Is this because of the terrorist attacks?”

“Yeah,” he answered, leaning back so he could see the full extent of the forming lines. Now both vehicles on either side of Skull’s were getting tossed. “Martial law, you know. Those damn terrorists. I had friends in Los Angeles.”

Skull forced his eyes to get soft and watery. “I had a brother there.” He rubbed his face and looked away. “Haven’t heard from him since...since...well, since then.”

The policeman handed back his identification and papers. “We’ll all get through this. Just stay tough and hang together. The President will give those sons of bitches what they deserve.”

“I sure hope so,” said Skull taking the papers. “You take care.”

“You too,” the policeman answered. “And stay to the north. They’re saying fallout is still drifting east from L.A. Shouldn’t be too dangerous, but even a little radiated rain is bad.”

Indeed it is, thought Skull. It wouldn’t just be radioactive rain; it would be ashes from millions of innocents killed to cover up a lie. Skull was under no illusions what the leaders of the government would do to contain the Eden

Plague that threatened to disrupt their comfortable power blocs and politics. He'd seen dozens of examples in his time all over the world. The average Joe thought it couldn't happen in America, but all it took was a big enough threat. 9/11 had made people so afraid they were begging the government to take their rights in exchange for security. Decades had to pass for the feds to back away from knee-jerk reactions to every imagined danger, and now all that normalcy had been wiped away again.

Skull passed through several more checkpoints, none as thorough or efficient as the first one. These policemen appeared to only be making a show of checking people's identification and were nearly apologetic for stopping motorists. Fortunately, traffic was light. Most people likely stayed at home during this time of uncertainty and crisis, heeding the public service announcements.

Needing coffee and food, Skull pulled off at an exit for a large gas station. He noticed an agitated group of people near the pumps. Driving around them slowly, he examined the posted signs: ALL FUEL RATIONED BY ORDER OF THE GOVERNOR. SEE YOUR LOCAL COURTHOUSE FOR RATION CARD.

Skull looked down at his fuel gauge. *That could be a problem*, he thought. The large SUV still had over a quarter of a tank, but that wouldn't take him too much farther. Maybe he could get into New Mexico. Hopefully the governor there hadn't enacted similar measures.

Parking in a spot he could see from inside the large convenience store, he grabbed a basket from a stack near the door and started tossing in nuts, jerky, and any other food that would keep for several days. He also pitched in a few packages of flashlight batteries before getting himself an extra-large coffee with double cream and sugar to ward off what would be an inevitable burnt flavor. A couple of irradiated egg and meat sandwiches that had been under heat lamps for who knew how long would serve for breakfast.

Walking over to the checkout, he set his basket and coffee in front of a stick-thin woman with glasses.

"That be all for ya today?" she asked with a cheerfulness that seemed out of place.

"Sure," he answered. "What's up with the gas rationing?"

The cashier cackled loudly like a witch from one of the old movies Skull used to watch as a kid. "That just happened this morning. Pissed lots of people off. My manager ain't too happy either because we have to give gas to police and

state officials without charging them. We only get their receipt with a state IOU. Meanwhile, he says we still have to pay all our bills in cash.” She laughed and shook her head while placing his purchases in a bag, clearly enjoying herself.

“Total seems a little high, don’t you think?” Skull said as the numbers rang up.

“Got to charge more, otherwise the hoarders’d buy us out right off and we’d have nothing at all.” Reaching out to take his money, she lowered her voice. “Mark my words, this is all because of something those Jews in Israel did.” Then her smile faltered, as if noticing his bronzed skin for the first time and wondering at his background.

Actually, Apache in his ancestry had bequeathed him the skin color, much more noticeable when he’d gotten sun. “*Mazel Tov,*” Skull said with a straight face, taking his coffee and bag of food off the counter and walking to the door. He stopped at the sight of the newspaper stand near the exit. The headline read, *MILLIONS KILLED IN TERRORIST CULT ATTACKS IN LOS ANGELES AND WEST VIRGINIA. TWELVE STATES DECLARE EMERGENCIES.* He read a little further. The article stated that Federal authorities had placed Daniel Markis at the top of the FBI’s Most Wanted list as the leader of the terrorist group at fault. The article also told how his group was believed to be responsible for the sinking of the cruise ship *Royal Neptune*.

Skull knew he shouldn’t be surprised or disgusted, but felt both. *So Markis is America’s most wanted man, he thought. Maybe that’ll keep the heat off me. Let self-righteous DJ be the face of his new movement and draw all the attention so I can do what I need to.* Leafing through the paper, he didn’t see pictures of any others from the Sosthenes bunker group.

After loading his food and batteries into his pack, Skull sat in the SUV, ate his sandwiches and drank the sweet foul coffee. Watching the angry and growing crowd at the pumps, he decided things were getting a little too unpredictable right there. Better not to get caught up in a violent situation that was bound to attract a law enforcement response.

He hadn’t used the embedded vehicle GPS yet, but now he turned it on. The system wanted a destination, but he sure as hell wasn’t going to type in the INS Inc. facility in Maryland. Instead, he put in Amarillo, Texas, a good waypoint in the right direction. More importantly, he set the GPS to avoid traffic jams and freeways. That should help conserve gas and maybe even get him around most of the checkpoints, even if it did cost him time.

Skull drove the SUV back out onto the interstate and then, at the direction

of the GPS, exited six miles north at Camp Verde onto State Route 260 running generally southeast before turning back to the northeast. The two-lane road was nearly deserted except for an occasional pickup truck with a dog in back. The noon sun illuminated orange rock, pale soil, and hardy, stunted plants – all that survived in this harsh and desolate land.

Skull remembered how much he enjoyed the desert and its pitiless nature, unforgiving of errors or weakness.

Of all the places where he served as a Marine, rugged Afghanistan was the most beautiful, despite all the raghead assholes living there. High mountains, wide-open vistas, and in the north, green fields and swift primordial rivers. Skull had enjoyed watching the landscape from his sniper positions in the downtime between servicing targets.

Afghanistan had been as close to sniper heaven as he'd ever found.

Much like northern Arizona, Skull thought. I would really like to kill someone here. Someone deserving. Someone on the wrong side.

Only problem was, he wasn't yet sure of the sides. Still, he knew if he just stayed patient, evil would reveal itself.

It always did.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sight of a police car across the road ahead. Skull considered turning around, but they may have already seen him. Running now would be like fox scent to the hounds, an admission of guilt. Hoping this checkpoint would be no more difficult to get through than the others, he slowed as he approached the lone cruiser.

A policeman as tall as Skull, but much heavier, exited the driver's side door, paced by his shorter, younger partner. Both cops rested their hands on their weapons, a sign of the times.

The bigger officer held his free hand up for the SUV to stop. When Skull complied, the cop walked over, followed by the other.

Skull calmly handed them his license and registration. "How you doing today?"

The big cop looked at the license plate on the SUV and the identification. "California? You're way off the freeways, partner."

"I was trying to get around all the traffic and maybe find a place to buy gas," Skull improvised.

"Good luck with that," said the smaller cop. "Everyone in the state is scrambling to buy gas now. Damn thing caught everyone by surprise. Not just gas but other stuff too."

“Other stuff?” Skull asked.

The big cop gave his partner a stern look, shutting him up. “Where you headed to?”

“Amarillo,” Skull said, thinking of the destination he entered in the GPS. “I’ve got family there I’m going to visit.”

“Really?” asked the big cop. “Seems like a strange time to hit the road, if you don’t mind me saying so.”

“You mean with the crazy attacks and all?” asked Skull. “Well, my parents have been bugging me to come visit for a long time and with everything that has happened, it just seemed like maybe it wouldn’t be such a bad idea to get out of California.”

The cop nodded. “You carrying any contraband, Mister Erickson?”

“Contraband?” asked Skull with a confused look.

“Yeah, contraband,” said the smaller cop. “Drugs, explosives, guns.”

“Guns are contraband in Arizona?”

The big man frowned. “Ever since the State Security Measures were enacted, it is illegal to transport more than one weapon in a vehicle. Why? Are you carrying firearms?”

“Me?” Skull laughed. “Hell, no. I’m from California. If you even say the word ‘gun’ there, you get a ticket.”

“Then I guess you won’t have any problems with us searching your SUV, will you?”

Skull looked at both men and saw they had already made up their minds. They were likely just bored. Before martial law he might have been able to push back and assert his right to refuse, but things had changed.

“No problem at all,” he answered with a smile, getting out and stepping aside.

“Stand over there, please,” said the big cop, directing him near his partner.

Skull kept a sharp eye on both without seeming to. His weapons and gear were hidden, but a careful search would probably find them.

“Must get old sitting out here,” Skull said to the smaller cop, trying to distract him.

“You ain’t lying,” he answered. “All the action is up on the highways, but the chief thought someone might try and sneak through out here.”

“What exactly are you looking for?” asked Skull.

The cop shrugged. “You know. The usual suspicious types. The recent attacks have got everyone on edge; this is all mainly just a show of force. Calm

everyone down and make them feel safe.”

Skull stiffened as he saw the older cop lift out a long black case. He laid it on the hood of the SUV and began to unzip it.

“Mind if I take a piss over here,” asked Skull slipping behind the smaller cop and on the same side of the police car. “I drank at least four cups of coffee this morning.”

“I hear ya,” answered the cop, his attention on his partner.

Skull slipped behind the second man and off the side of the road to a slightly elevated position. He noted both men were wearing body armor under their uniforms.

“What...the...*hell?*” said the big cop turning slowly. He was holding the detached heavy barrel of Skull’s Barrett sniper rifle in one hand, the stock in the other.

Skull had already pulled the Glock from the small of his back. At first he’d thought to simply threaten and disarm the two, but a sick rage rose up in him plastered with a picture of Zeke’s head blown open like a melon.

He shot the man in the face.

The other policeman was so shocked he screamed and slid down to the ground to rest on his butt. He never even tried to reach for his weapon.

Shaking like a puppy pooping a pine cone, Skull thought, remembering his old drill sergeant’s favorite expression. Skull couldn’t keep his lips from curling in an ugly sneer. Still, he felt a detachment different from servicing a target as a sniper. The rage, the fury coated everything he did, yet he didn’t feel it from the inside. Instead, it hazed his vision with crimson, as if a curtain hung between him and the world, insulating him from its pain.

The remaining cop’s startled expression never changed even after Skull put a bullet into his eye. At some later, saner time he might regret the necessity of killing these duped Americans, but that didn’t slow him down. Death came to everyone eventually.

Today, it had simply come a bit sooner to these men.

Skull’s childhood priest had once told him that all had sinned and deserved eternal damnation; that only one man had ever been truly innocent, and for that embarrassing fact a stained and filthy world had nailed Him to a cross. If the priest was right, Skull was only speeding things up a bit.

Maybe when he saw the cops in Hell, he’d apologize.

Maybe.

Looking around, it didn’t appear that anyone had witnessed the scene, but

that didn't mean someone couldn't come by. Skull first went to the cop cruiser dash cam. He was pleased to see it was simply a camera that recorded and was later downloaded, as opposed to one of the newer cameras that broadcast real-time back to headquarters. Skull pulled out the drive card and tossed it on the passenger seat of his SUV. He then retrieved the vehicle registration, insurance, and driver's license for Victor Erickson. That identity was all blown now. He also placed them on the passenger seat. Checking the cruiser, he saw that it had a full gas tank.

Resealing his sniper bag, Skull gathered his gear and carried it to the cop car, placing it in the back. He then dragged the smaller cop's body to the trunk of the cruiser and lifted him in. Skull placed his pistol on the roof of the car along with everything in his pockets before stripping out of his clothes and putting them into one of his bags.

The other cop was much heavier than Skull, but the same height, so he would do. He manhandled the dead man out of his uniform and donned it himself after cutting an extra notch in the utility belt. The clothes were baggy, but would likely pass in a pinch, especially if he didn't have to exit the vehicle. He pulled the man's cell phone out of the pants pocket and placed it on the seat. Then he went to the trunk to retrieve the partner's cell and do the same.

Dragging the big cop's corpse over and levering him into the trunk was difficult, but Skull finally managed it and slammed the lid closed. He looked around again. *Almost there*, he thought.

Placing the Glock in the small of his back again, Skull returned all the items on the roof to his pockets. Pulling out the bigger man's wallet, Skull saw he now wore the uniform of Police Officer Raymond Stark. He pulled out a family photo of the officer with a plump wife and three adorable girls, and then stamped down ruthlessly on a lingering twinge of guilt.

Skull replaced the photo, removed a thermite grenade from his pack and returned to his SUV. Cranking it, he slowly drove the vehicle off the road and into a nearby gully. Once there, he pulled the pin on the incendiary device and set it carefully on top of the false identification documents and the hard drive from the cop's dash cam. He then walked back to the cop cruiser. The grenade would melt and incinerate everything in the cab, destroying the vehicle beyond anything but robust forensic examination. Even then it would be tough.

Skull had thought about putting the cops' bodies in the burning SUV, but wanted to delay associating the killings with Victor Erickson as long as possible. The partner might have already called the SUV plate in as soon as they stopped

him, but the vehicle was clean and not in any of the databases.

Focus on the things you can control, Skull told himself. Everything else will work out or it won't.

The cop car had a GPS, but Skull took a moment to disable it, and double-checked that the cruiser had no other location device. Without his technological crutch, he consulted a map book and plotted a course using secondary roads headed east.

A squawk of the police radio interrupted his thoughts. "Dispatch, this is Desert 48, checking in. We've completed our circuit of Route 3. Headed back to station now."

"Roger that, 48," responded a female voice.

That's going to be a problem, thought Skull, but maybe not for a little while. Might be good to make some miles down the road.

Once at highway speed, the day seemed just as beautiful as ever.

Chapter 2

Skull turned on a news radio station to help pass the time. He had been listening for over an hour to talking heads go around in circles, beefing up various conspiracy theories, when the narrator abruptly cut off his guests.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we have breaking news,” said the man breathlessly. “We’ve just heard that the People’s Republic of China has launched a full-scale amphibious invasion of Taiwan as of an hour ago. The invasion was preceded by rocket and air attacks. We’re hearing that the Taiwanese are appealing to the U.S. for help. The White House has issued a statement saying that the United States is gravely concerned and strongly condemns the Chinese acts, however in this time of insecurity in the homeland cannot commit any military assets. The President is quoted as saying, ‘Now is not the time for foreign adventures, not with all our military fully engaged in operations closer to home. Rest assured, we will defend America’s core interests, especially the security of its citizens.’”

It’s all going to start coming apart, thought Skull. The careful international balance of power built over generations has been overturned in a few weeks. What will replace it?

Skull wasn’t sure and admitted he didn’t care that much. He’d considered America the only country ever worth dying for, but had started having second thoughts about that even before Daniel Markis released the Eden Plague upon the world, what with all the punk-ass surrender monkeys that got elected unwilling to punish the enemies of liberty and justice around the world.

The police radio squawked and the same female voice filled with static called out. “Desert 32, this is dispatch. Just checking in. Everything okay?”

Lots of static. Must be getting outside of range, Skull realized. It would only be a matter of time before they missed the men and began a search and put out a “be on the lookout,” or BOLO, but the longer he could stall them and get some distance, the better.

Skull cleared his voice and deepened it to match the big cop as closely as possible. “Dispatch, this is Desert 32. We’ve had some radio problems, but everything is okay.”

“Now Raymond,” said the woman, “you know the protocol. If you have problems on the radio, you call and let me know on your cell. Besides which,

best go ahead and do that. Sheriff wants to talk to you.”

“About what?” asked Skull. He didn’t care, but thought this would be Raymond’s natural response.

“Uh...your weight or your inability to show up on time for work or maybe the fact that he can smell alcohol on your breath sometimes,” she said. “Not really sure; could be a lot of things, you know.”

Skull froze. He wasn’t sure how to respond. Was this casual light banter between the two, or serious? Was the proper response simply *screw you, that’s none of your business, or good one, you old bitch*. There was no sure right answer; he simply didn’t have enough info. Besides, they would know something was wrong soon when he didn’t call the sheriff on the phone or answer the cell.

Ignoring her further calls and conversation, he let her assume he had more radio problems or that maybe Raymond was pouting.

Pulling out the map, he flipped pages until he found an area to the east that might be good to hide out in. The Painted Desert. Skull had never been there, but he liked deserts and had seen lots of pictures of this place. It was somewhere he had longed to visit anyway.

“No time like the present,” he said aloud and grinned.

Although there was a gated entrance to the Painted Desert with a booth for visitors to pay for entering, the girl there just waved him through. Skull figured the squad car did it.

He thought a park map would be useful, but that would involve going into the welcome center and Skull didn’t want to talk to anyone while wearing the dead cop’s uniform if he could help it.

Spotting a large map on a board, Skull drove nearby and looked it over, identifying the access road that seemed most promising for taking him deepest into the Painted Desert while still heading east. With a snap of his fingers, he reached back into one of the bags behind him and pulled out a digital camera. Setting it on the highest resolution possible, he took several pictures of the map. This would give him something to consult, although he certainly didn’t plan on getting lost.

No one plans on getting lost, he thought.

Skull turned the wheel and circled around behind the welcome center, finding a sign stating, ACCESS ROAD 3E - PARK PERSONNEL ONLY. Hopefully no one would pay too much attention to a police car headed down the trail. Or at least if they did, they wouldn’t interfere or report him.

That's a whole lot of ifs, Skull thought. This mission is already FUBARed, Marine. Might be a good idea to get while the getting is good.

Skull kept driving. He wanted to make the most of the mobility and gas he had. Once he ditched the vehicle it would be slow going on foot, although he would certainly draw less attention.

Making his way carefully and slowly on rock-strewn and precarious roads, Skull was nevertheless amazed by the beauty of the place. Giant rock formations highlighted by a kaleidoscope of colors made him want to stop and gaze upon them like a brilliant work of art. In the setting sun, the effects were even more awe-inspiring.

Setting sun. Need to ditch the vehicle and be on my way by nightfall. Will potentially attract too much attention driving around out here at night.

After a quarter of an hour Skull found what he was looking for. He pulled the cruiser up into a small narrow draw filled with low, thin trees. Skull exited the vehicle and stripped out of the dead cop's uniform, keeping the two men's .40 Smith & Wesson pistols, all their ammo and both pairs of handcuffs. He was already set for weapons, but he knew you can never have enough and pistols are relatively light, taking up little space. The riot gun and body armor were another matter; they'd have to stay. If his load got too heavy, he'd drop some items.

Opening the cruiser hood, he popped the radiator fill cap off. First smelling, and then tasting it confirmed what he had hoped. In an area where it rarely dropped below freezing, it made no sense to spend money on antifreeze when water did just as well and was free.

Skull gathered several empty water and drink bottles from the vehicle's untidy interior, and then poked a small hole in the bottom of the radiator with his knife. It took several minutes to fill the bottles with dirty water. It certainly wouldn't taste good, but he was getting ready to walk into the desert and it might prove useful to augment his supply.

Skull loaded up his gear into his large rucksack. He debated carrying the MP5 submachine gun, but instead shoved it back into the pack, and then assembled his sniper rifle, a modified Barrett .50 caliber he'd carried throughout his career and managed to get a waiver to keep after he retired. The open spaces were more conducive to longer shots and he could put the scope to good use. Besides, if confronted, maybe he could pass himself off as a hunter if someone didn't look too close at his weapon.

Thinking of burning the vehicle and destroying any potential evidence, Skull decided he dared not risk the smoke from a fire. Hopefully Vinny Nguyen,

Spooky's hacker nephew, had deleted all their personnel data and fingerprints from as many federal databases as possible before he was killed. Besides, it was likely too late to worry about forensic evidence.

Using the scope, Skull checked the surrounding area. A little to the south he spotted a large rock formation that appeared to have several indentations large enough for him to sleep in. He started walking, intent on making the most of the remaining daylight.

Skull crossed the open space between the rock formation and the ravine where he'd hidden the police vehicle. Unconsciously, he increased his pace, feeling exposed out in the open. Dark shadows covered the entire area and only the glow of the setting sun could be seen in the sky. Very soon this world would become the hunting grounds of the owl, bat, and fox. He wished them the best and climbed steadily up the side of the rock formation.

Several hundred feet up the giant red sandstone structure, he found a narrow but deep indentation. Poking around with the barrel of his rifle to test for rattlers, he heard no response and climbed inside. After eating a little jerky and drinking some water, he laid out his sleeping bag before climbing inside. Scanning the area with his rifle, he saw nothing out of the ordinary. He watched a giant eagle soar on heated thermals in the last rays of the sun before he fell asleep, exhausted.

In his dream, Skull is the eagle. He is strong and fast, flying over the earth wherever he chooses. He is above regrets and concerns over what might have been. He is free and so very alive.

A desert mouse scurries a world below him. Skull's extraordinary eyes zoom in and mark every detail of the small furry creature. He can even see the drumbeat of its heart through its brown skin.

A second mouse appears. The two dance around a dead coyote, making an odd *whump whump whump* noise. Skull sees the sky grow darker and the wind more fierce. He wants to soar higher above all of this, but feels something important is here to be seen, some danger that he can't identify.

Whump whump whump comes in faster and faster rhythms. Maybe he should kill the mice simply to shut them up.

Whump whump whump WHUMP WHUMP WHUMP.

Skull awoke to darkness and the sound of helicopters. He could see two of them circling the park, searching, and lights on the ground near the ravine where

he had hidden the police cruiser.

“Damn,” he whispered. He’d hoped for more time. Now the chase would truly begin, and he would be the mouse...at least for a while. Cops didn’t take well to the murder of two of their own even in the best of times. With tensions running high, there was no predicting what lengths they would go to in order to capture or punish him. Maybe he should have tried to merely wound and disable them.

Burnt bridges. Nothing to be done about them now.

Skull vowed, as he had before with every enemy he’d faced, that they would not take him.

Summoning the spirits of his Apache ancestors who had astonished their horse-borne enemies by covering up to a hundred miles a day on foot, Skull began to run.

Chapter 3

Skull decided he'd been wrong. The desert was not beautiful. It was not a place of peace and tranquility and a gateway to enlightenment. The desert was death.

In modern vernacular: it sucked, big time.

He'd been running for three days now. They hadn't exactly found him yet, but his hunters stayed close enough he couldn't really catch his breath.

Sunburned and dehydrated, he'd finished off the last of the delicious radiator water an hour ago. Worse yet, he'd slipped and fallen down a crevice, leaving the tibia in his right leg stress-fractured. He hoped it wasn't a severe break, and stayed off it as much as possible. Still, he needed rest to let it heal.

The ambushes Skull laid for his pursuers had served to slow them down. He was fairly sure he had killed at least three of those after him, maybe more. He felt another slight twinge of guilt at killing the policemen, but wasn't certain if the emotion was genuine or merely indicated he knew that he should feel bad and felt guilty because it didn't bother him.

"Forget it," Skull croaked under his breath. So fatigued that it was a constant effort for him to focus, he knew this was likely the end. He just didn't want them to take him alive. The busted leg meant he could no longer move fast enough to elude them.

Besides, sunstroke was near. He could feel it sneaking up on him like a hungry puma.

Sighting through his scope, he observed a dozen more men coming up the trail. They looked like a combination of park guides, state police, and local SWAT, all of them deflated and tired, but driven forward by anger. Skull smiled, enjoying a perfect position to take at least half of them before they could flank him or get away. Had he still been mobile, with remaining water, he could play this game for days, but his time had run out. If the helicopters or dogs returned, he'd definitely be done for.

Time. Only a matter of time. The helicopters had gone. He'd brought one down with a superb shot at five hundred meters, straight through the transmission. After that, they stayed away.

Skull abruptly sensed someone watching him from his right rear, just outside his peripheral vision. That seemed impossible. Did someone actually get in behind him? Furious at himself, he slowly eased his hand down until it rested

on the butt of one of his pistols, and then in a quick, fluid movement rolled onto his back and pointed the weapon.

A large vulture sat on a nearby rock. Skull looked up and noted several more circling. "Not yet, boys," he said, throwing a rock to scare away the bird before turning back to the approaching men. Another ten minutes or so and they would be in the perfect kill zone. He'd have them bottled up front and rear, the entire stretch of trail his shooting gallery.

Again came that feeling, as if someone watched him, this time to the left rear. Skull turned with another rock, prepared to scare off more vultures, but this time he saw a small, old man sitting behind him, his skin brown and wrinkled, human leather. Silver hair hung in a long braid down his back, and dark eyes regarded him with disconcerting serenity. An Indian, a Native American or First Tribesman, whatever the politically correct term was nowadays.

Skull wasn't sure if he was hallucinating or not. He rubbed his eyes and looked away before turning back. The small Indian man remained.

"Come to watch the show?" asked Skull weakly. "See ol' Skull's last stand? I promise to make it worth your while." He chuckled, and then coughed.

The wizened man said nothing for several long seconds before standing. "If you come with me, I will hide you from those men," he said clearly, but with a heavy accent that gave his words a singsong impression.

Playing along with the apparition, Skull asked, "How do I know you won't just turn me over to them?"

"Because I just told you I wouldn't," the man said simply. "Also, I could go tell them where you are without getting close to you, but I haven't."

Skull thought about that and swore. He looked back through the rifle scope. It would soon be time to do or die. Even if he killed them all, more would come after him and he was at the end of his resources, both physical and emotional. For a lone man against many, morale was critical, and Skull felt his own failing. There would be no more running.

Skull turned back to the man. "Maybe you just want to scalp me."

The Indian smiled, his face like cracking sandstone. "Ugh. Now *that* we might do, paleface."

For some bizarre reason, this led Skull to trust the man. People leading you to the slaughter often used lies, but rarely humor.

"Okay, Tonto," said Skull struggling to stand while grabbing his gear and rifle. "You mind helping me move? My leg might be broke. It's certainly tender."

"My name is Larent. I have my donkey on the next hill. Can you make it

there?”

“Larent,” said Skull taking the old man’s shoulder to lean on. “Doesn’t sound very American-Indian to me.”

“I am Hopi,” the man said with a trace of sadness. “Our true names are secrets that few know. Larent is what you may call me.”

“Call me Skull, then.”

“Doesn’t sound very American-American to me,” Larent countered.

Skull chuckled at the man’s dry wit. “Also not my true name, but it will have to do.”

“It is a truer name than your real one,” the old man said, leading him down the rock-strewn trail behind the hill. They struggled up the opposite side of the canyon to the top of the next rise and, sure enough, a small jenny waited patiently, untethered, carrying a light pack. She lifted her soft nose to Larent in greeting, and he stroked her absently.

“We’re not going to make much of a speedy getaway on your little pet there. Don’t you have a truck, or at least a horse?”

“Horses are more trouble than they are worth out here,” Larent said, helping push Skull up on the donkey’s back behind the pack. “You might be surprised how quickly an old man and his pet can move in the desert.”

The ancient Indian pulled a small canteen from its place attached to the pack. “Here, sip some of this. Not too much and not too fast. You will become sick.”

Skull wanted to tell the man he knew about deserts and foundering. Instead, he sipped, and then caught himself thoughtlessly drinking too fast.

“Enough for now,” said Larent, pulling the canteen away.

Skull coughed, tempted to grab the water back, but mastered himself. He piled his rucksack and rifle onto the donkey’s pack, and then leaned forward over the whole arrangement to keep everything from falling off.

Larent took the donkey’s bridle and began walking surefootedly down the hill, away from the searching gunmen.

It was such a relief to be off his feet. Skull turned to look back at his pursuers, but saw only circling vultures as he lost himself to sleep.

Skull awoke to feel many hands upon him. Pushing, lifting, grabbing. He struggled, kicking and punching weakly, reaching for a pistol at his waist. Strong hands seized his and twisted them painfully away.

“Relax, Skull. Calm down,” said the old man close to him. “You will be safe here, but we need to hide you. Men may come here looking for you. We

need to put you someplace safe from them until nightfall.”

“No, we don’t, grandfather,” said a teenage boy glaring at Skull. “We can turn him over to them. What is this man to us, especially knowing who he is?”

Knowing who he is? What is that supposed to mean? wondered Skull.

“It is my decision to make,” said the old man, “and yours to obey.”

Skull’s knees buckled as he was lifted off the donkey. Two short but strong men began dragging him toward what looked like a well. He turned back for his rifle and pack, but saw two other men carrying the items with a look on their faces as if Skull’s gear had been marinated in pig shit.

“Why are you putting me in a well?” Skull asked with concern. “I thought you said I would be safe.”

“The outsiders have no jurisdiction here. The Third Mesa Reservation has its own constable who deals with them, but since the big bombs they are much more insistent. This is simply a precaution. Just be glad it’s the dry season, or the well would be full of water.”

Some other men attached a small wooden board to a rope and pulley.

“Isn’t there somewhere else you could hide me?” asked Skull, not liking the idea of being stuck down a dry well. If they wanted to leave him in there forever, or if they got detained and were unable to bring him up, he could do nothing about it. Larent’s serene face turned frustrated for the first time. “Do you want to be comfortable or do you want to be alive? Choose quickly, because there may not be much time.”

Sighing, Skull nodded. “Let’s do it then.” He looked back at his gear. “You should probably hide that with me.”

“We don’t want any of your *stuff*,” said the man carrying his rifle. “We’re not thieves.”

“Good to know,” answered Skull, allowing the men by the well to place him on the crude seat. They lifted him up effortlessly and began lowering him slowly. Looking down, he saw nothing but darkness and it surprised him when his bad leg hit the ground first. He gritted his teeth in pain and fell to the sandy floor.

“Quick, get off the seat,” one of the men said. “There’s a truck coming.”

“Lower my gear and rifle,” Skull called, pushing the board away from him and watching it rise toward the circle of light above.

The man lifted the rucksack and rifle and held them over the ledge.

“I’ll kill you if you drop that rifle,” Skull rasped with more force than he knew still remained within him.

The man hesitated, looked back over his shoulder and grumbled. He tied the rucksack and rifle to the board his partner had just pulled up and lowered the items down again quickly. “Untie it fast, thief.”

Skull couldn't see the knots in the dark and his fingers didn't seem to work.

“Hurry,” the man urged.

“It would have helped if you hadn't tied some sort of seaman's world-class treeball of rope. I'm a goddamn Marine, not a sailor,” yelled Skull.

He felt the other end of the rope come down on top of him. *Guess they weren't willing to wait*, thought Skull. He hoped that didn't complicate his extraction unduly.

Larent's face loomed over the edge again. “They're here,” he said quietly. He tossed down a canteen and a brown tarp. “Get everything under that covering and back in the dark shadows. If they look in it will just appear like the bottom.”

“And if not?” asked Skull.

“Well, they'll have a hell of a time getting you out of there,” the old man said. “I know we sure will.” Then he walked away.

Skull pulled himself and his equipment under the tarp and slowly drank from the canteen, forcing himself to sip. He listened to faint voices overhead, some of them angry. Probing at his injured leg, he wondered not for the first time if he shouldn't have accepted the Eden Plague, or at least kept a syringe handy for the worst-case scenario.

No. He rejected that notion once again. Better to die a man, complete and whole, good and bad together, than to be turned into some straight-arrow flower-power hippie-freak with kind thoughts for everyone.

Love your enemies, my ass, he thought. Enemies were made for killing.

Checking to make sure his MP5 was handy and loaded, he allowed himself to pass out from exhaustion.

Chapter 4

Skull awoke in the pitch black and he initially feared he was still in the well. The feel of the coarse blankets around him told him different. Flat on his back, he heard the deep breathing and snores of others sleeping nearby.

Carefully checking around himself, Skull couldn't locate any of his weapons or equipment. As a matter of fact, he seemed naked except for a crude but tight splint on his right leg. Sitting up, he was rewarded by instant pain in his head and leg. *Probably could have used several units of IV fluid and some painkillers*, he thought.

On the other hand, he wasn't dead, in custody, or getting tortured. It could be worse.

Rising slowly to his feet, Skull looked around, trying to get his bearings. Obviously he was indoors, but there did not appear to be any windows. Standing still, he closed his eyes and sensed the faintest of breezes from his front. Opening them again, he saw a long strip of cloth blow aside from what must serve as a door. Finding his clothes and gear he considered his first priority, but he really needed to piss.

The tyranny of the urgent over the important, he thought wryly. *A metaphor for war and life.*

Quiet and light as any cat, he began to pick his way across the room toward the door, moving carefully between sleeping figures.

A low growl to his front froze him. A series of loud barks sounded, and then Skull felt and heard teeth snap shut so close to his genitals that his testicles crawled up inside him. Moving backward, he tripped and sprawled over sleepers as his coordination fled.

More barking and questioning voices rose before someone lit a lantern. Skull saw that his naked body was sprawled across a middle-aged couple. Dozens of Hopi of all ages and sexes looked at him in surprise, and then disgust before either getting up or trying to return to sleep.

Larent hobbled over to him, extending a hand. Skull took it and allowed himself to be pulled to his feet, careful to avoid letting his splinted leg hit anything.

"Sorry I woke everyone," Skull said to the old man, but loud enough for others to hear.

“Don’t be concerned,” Larent answered. “It is near dawn and many of us would have been awakening soon anyway.”

Skull noticed several women begin preparing a fire for breakfast. Some of the younger girls looked at Skull and giggled. He remembered his nakedness and moved back to pull the blanket off his bed and wrap it around his body. “Where are my clothes and stuff?”

“Safe and hidden, just like you, one ‘injun’ among many,” Larent answered. “They will be returned to you when the time is right. Do not fear. For now, trust me when I tell you this way is best.”

Skull stared at the old man with irritation. He didn’t like being unarmed and naked among strange people, especially when those seeking his life could show at any moment. “For now,” Skull finally answered.

“I’ll take that as thanks,” said Larent archly.

Take it any way you like, thought Skull, but held his tongue. He suspected Larent’s kindness toward him wasn’t completely altruistic. The Hopi would let him know soon enough what they wanted in return.

The old man steered him toward the door. “Let’s sit outside and see the sun rise. The women don’t like us in the house when they’re cooking.”

They stepped through the curtain, Skull awkwardly hobbling on his splinted leg while trying to hold the blanket around his lower body. “The least you could do is give me some pants.”

Larent grinned. “No one would be offended or even notice much if you left that blanket inside. We are not a modest people. We live close together like our forefathers before us. It is the outside world that values privacy over intimacy.”

Skull sat down beside Larent on a rude bench made of mesquite wood and woven branches. “Don’t you get sick of each other? Every man needs a little privacy.”

The old man spread his arms to indicate the world before him. “We have the whole mesa for that. Everyone needs to be alone at times, but not in his home. The home is about family and togetherness. There should never be aloneness there.”

Skull couldn’t agree, but said nothing out of respect for Larent’s hospitality. Suddenly, a wave of pain washed through his head and he groaned involuntarily.

Larent turned to gaze at Skull speculatively.

“Dehydrated, I think,” Skull said. “Where’s the water?”

The old man yelled at a young boy walking by, who took a bucket from the

side of Larent's house and ran to a water pump.

"Some aspirin or something would help too," Skull said.

"Time and water will take away the pain."

"What, you don't believe in medicine either?"

"Oh, we believe very strongly in medicine," Larent answered, "we just understand that it is also very dear. Not to be wasted on temporary inconveniences just to make you comfortable."

Skull was impressed despite the nails driving through his head. These people lived a stoic and simple life. He could respect that.

The boy came back with a small bucket holding water and a copper ladle. Skull reached out to take it, but the young Hopi set it down with a frightened look at the thin man and scurried away.

Skull chuckled, scooping a large dipper full of water. He drank deeply of the cold and delicious liquid. Finishing the first, he drank another. While sipping the third, his eyes roamed over the village. Short, stout men, women, and children went about their business. None of them stared outright, but they glanced at him briefly or aimed looks out of the corners of their eyes. The looks were not friendly, but rather seemed a combination of fear and suspicion.

"It seems many here don't wish me to share in your intimacy," Skull said. "Believe it or not, I get it. I've brought danger and trouble to your door."

Larent chuckled and waved his hand. "Oh, no one cares about that. We've had to live alongside the likes of those who seek you for hundreds of years. Incidents like this are good for the tribe. Keeps us sharp and reminds us that we are different and capable of living our own lives by our own rules. Not those of the *behana*."

"*Behana*?" asked Skull.

"The Hopi term for outsiders. The white man, generally," Larent explained. "It's not a polite word."

Skull slowly drank another ladle of water and continued his examination of the village. Simple mud homes with rock chimneys seemed grown from the desert itself. He had seen similar structures in Africa and South America. Yet he also saw a few generators, lights, and a couple of rusty pickup trucks in the distance. A simple, poor life, yet they probably had everything they needed, so who was he to call them impoverished?

A squat old woman walked by, giving Skull a dark look and grumbling under her breath at him.

"What did she say?" Skull asked, amused.

“She called you a thief.”

“I haven’t stolen anything from you,” Skull said. “One of the men said the same thing yesterday.”

Larent sighed. “My people often refer to the Navajo by that term. Navajo have been oppressing and stealing from the Hopi for many centuries.”

“I’m not Navajo.”

The old man lifted his chin at Skull, narrowing his eyes. “You obviously have Navajo blood in you. The shape of your face and slight uplift of your brow gives you away.”

“My grandfather was Apache, I was told,” Skull said, “but I didn’t know him. He died before I was born.”

“He was Navajo,” Larent said with certainty.

Skull shook his head incredulously. “You mean to tell me all this attitude and dirty looks is because they think my grandfather was a Navajo?”

“We believe that a man is filled with the spirit of his tribe. It is good that your Navajo spirit has been diluted by the *behana* or the tribe would never let me bring you here. It was difficult enough as it was.”

These are strange people, thought Skull. They get angry at me for a ridiculous reason, but not for a good one.

“Then why did you help me at all?” Skull asked. “You could have left me there to die and none of this would have been your problem. I take it you’re not some sort of Good Samaritan, especially since I’m a *behana* and Navajo to boot.”

The old man shook his head. “No.”

“Then why?”

He looked at the rising sun as it cast brilliant rays over the hills of the mesa. “I’ve lived my whole life on this mesa. It is comforting and beautiful to me even if it can be harsh and dangerous.”

“I get that,” said Skull. “It does have its own beauty, even if it is a little on the dry side.”

“What would have happened if I hadn’t brought you here?” Larent asked.

“I would have died,” Skull answered without hesitation.

“Before that?”

Skull thought back. In his mind’s eye, he saw from his sniper’s hide that narrow path the men were coming up. “I would have killed most of them before they killed me.”

“Yes,” said Larent. “There would have been much death. Early death we

do not need here. It brings trouble to my people. This way is best.”

Taking another drink of water, Skull surveyed the surrounding hills. “Will I be safe here until I’m healed?”

“You will,” said Larent standing. “And then you must leave us.”

“Because I’m a Navajo thief?” asked Skull with a slight smile.

“No,” answered Larent, “because there is a darkness inside you that invites madness and the angry spirits.” Then he turned and walked back inside the crude mud dwelling.

Skull looked up to see the boy who had fetched the water peeking fearfully at him from behind the corner of a large wooden barrel. Skull scowled at the boy, picking the bucket up and sloshing the water toward him.

The boy turned and ran.

Chapter 5

The next two months passed slowly in Skull's bored mind. He probably could have left after the first month, but recognized that the need to be fully healed before departing. He knew he would not likely find a safe haven like this Hopi village and the Third Mesa Reservation for some time.

Skull did what he could to pitch in, especially with the hunting. Additionally, he learned a great deal from the Hopi about desert survival, medicinal plants, and the history of their people. He renewed his ability to slow down and be still, a skill he'd originally learned during the U.S. Marine Corps Scout Sniper Basic Course at Quantico, Virginia.

Snipers by their very nature must be patient. They may have to sit in one position for days, eating little and pissing in bottles in order to get the perfect shot. Skull didn't think of himself as an impatient man, but he realized he was a man of purpose, one who wanted to make things happen rather than wait.

Yet, life on the Hopi reservation was slow and relaxed to the point that Skull felt a sense of emotional vertigo. There were things you could do, or not do. People rarely gave directions or asked for help. You pitched in or you didn't. Few words were exchanged, and the mild terms of derision thrown at Skull when he entered the village were so unusual for the laconic people that the happenings would likely pass into legend, hardly to be believed.

The stillness forced him to go days without thinking seriously about anything. When he did turn his mind to what needed to be done, he found himself calm and calculating, as if a giant wind had come through and blown the cobwebs from his mind. Skull remained resolute in his goals, but they were no longer wrapped in clinging, stinking fury and uncontrolled vengeful desire.

This is the way a man should heal, Skull thought. Naturally, without some genetically engineered germ forcing changes. Spiritually as well as physically.

When he had recovered enough to depart, Skull felt more in control of himself than he had since Zeke's death. Surprisingly, he hadn't truly noticed the difference until he had something to compare it to.

Riding through the deepening twilight in the rusty pickup truck cab between two Hopi men was a quiet affair except for the constant rattle and squeal of old bolts and factory welds from its chassis, which must have been assembled during the Kennedy administration. Eventually he gave up trying to

find a place of rest away from the clattering engine.

They had left the reservation and crossed into New Mexico on a dry riverbed and were making their way back toward some semblance of civilization in order to take their leave. Skull told them they could drop him in the desert, that he would be fine, but the men exchanged knowing looks that Skull found mildly insulting and kept driving.

The Hopi had never come to accept Skull, but had at some point stopped scowling at him. None made any effort to converse with him except Larent, but that suited him just fine. Best not to get too close to any of them. He rather hoped for their sakes he never saw any of them again.

“This radio work?” Skull asked, reaching for the knob to turn on the ancient receiver.

“Leave it alone,” said the driver.

Skull ignored him and began turning the dial through the bands. Country and western stations were all he found before he finally landed on a news channel, hearing a near-hysterical voice in mid-sentence. “...are contagious. We all know that. They are sick; none bear them ill will, but we can’t let our children get sick. Think of your children, people. The President’s executive order is a wise and prudent measure. Everyone gets tested for the Eden Plague and those who are sick can get proper medical attention...away from where they can infect others. The national database and FEMA health identification cards will ensure those who *are* clean, *stay* clean.”

The Hopi to Skull’s right reached over and turned off the radio, uncertainty on his face.

“Testing for everyone,” said Skull thoughtfully. “Wonder if there will be an exemption for the Hopi. They didn’t mention anything like that. Where would all you folks go to get tested – Flagstaff? Maybe the testers will come onto the reservation. That would probably make the most sense.”

“We will not get tested,” said the driver.

“Really?” Skull said. “Presidential executive orders are usually specific. In normal times, you might be able to fight this through the courts or something, but these are not normal times, my small sturdy chatty friends. These are the *End Times*.” He snorted at his own use of a term from his childhood priest’s homilies.

“We will endure as we always have, like the Earth and the mountains,” said the man in the passenger seat. “What goes on Outside does not concern us.”

“Far be it from me to disagree with my excellent hosts,” said Skull, “but I think you’re full of shit. Now I can bullshit with the best of them, but the number

one rule is, you don't bullshit yourself. So...the important question is, do you have anything to hide? Any Eden carriers on the Third Mesa?"

The driver pulled the truck over suddenly on the dirt road. "This is far enough."

"What do you mean?" said Skull. "I thought we would go into town. Maybe have lunch together before you boys head back. My treat."

Both men were out of the truck and lifting Skull's rucksack and go-bag from the rusty bed before he finished the sentence. They set these on a nearby rock, and then stared into the cab until he got out.

"Seriously," said Skull climbing out of the cab. "Where are we?"

"The town of Aragon is four miles down that road," said the driver. "Just keep walking and you should be okay." They both got back in the truck.

"I get it," said Skull leaning into the passenger window. "I'm not one for long tearful good-byes either, but I expect you boys to stay in touch. I'm part of the Hopi tribe now, right? Mystic brotherhood and all that?"

The truck lurched forward, causing Skull to lean back. He followed along beside them for a few meters. "Hey, if I want to send you boys a postcard, what's a good address? Should I make it out to Dickhead and Shitkicker of the Third Mesa? Will that be specific enough to get to you two?"

Rocks and dust flew up in Skull's face as the truck tore away at the snail's crawl that was all the old derelict could manage. The driver stuck his hand out the window as it headed west, his middle finger extended.

"By the way, I'm Apache, you freaks!" Skull laughed, feeling unaccountably cheerful, even high. It was good to be moving again. He picked up his gear and began walking east down the dirt road in the bright moonlight.

After two months he found himself again alone, but this time aloneness was comforting. Orderly and predictable. He only needed people when he *needed* people. When he didn't, he was a rock, an island. Walking between narrow mountains spotted with stunted trees, he felt good.

He wondered about Markis, Larry, Spooky and the rest. They were all supposed to find a safe haven in Colombia where a powerful faction of the government promised to offer them sanctuary, but you never knew. Things changed, sometimes. If the U.S. government found out about the arrangement, they could exert significant pressure on the Colombians to give them up. Skull thought his brothers in arms were making a serious mistake by pinning themselves down. Best to stay mobile and hard to grasp.

Their urge to settle was understandable, though. Much of the group was

made up of children and extended family. Those sorts of complications clouded a man's judgment. This gutted his resolve to do the smart thing, or the necessary thing. Skull hoped that they found safety, but he wouldn't have placed his faith in vague promises from governments and uncertain allies.

Leaning forward into the steep rise, he pushed his legs. Life in the mesa hadn't been a trip to the health spa, but he needed to get his body back in real traveling shape. Cresting the rise at the edge of the valley, he followed the road down into another, smaller draw. He could see the dirt track lifting in and out of the hills for several miles to the east before finally resting on a small huddle of rude structures.

A thin ribbon of smoke spiraled into the air from off to the right of a burned building. The road led near the source. Skull pulled out his rifle and used the scope to examine the scene. What he saw did not bode well. No movement showed, except for what looked like carrion birds.

Why not just circle, pass it by out of sight and find the town, Skull wondered, but knew that would be unreasonable.

Today, Skull felt himself an exceptionally curious creature.

It took him nearly half an hour of walking until he reached a small black mailbox. On the side it read, "The Frabels." Skull turned right off the dirt road onto an even smaller, dustier track, checking the pistol in the small of his back and hefting his rifle as he made his way toward the house. Closer, he confirmed what he'd seen through the scope: the building had recently been burned out.

Skull saw four bodies hanging from the front crossbeam of the porch: a man, a woman and two small boys, the youngest of which couldn't be older than eight. A cardboard sign hung around the man's neck, which read, "Eden Sympathizers." Someone else had written underneath in a cruder hand, "Union Power!" along with a red, points-down trident symbol. The woman's body was naked from the waist down and appeared to have been raped and mutilated.

Unionists, Skull thought with disgust. He'd heard about them on Larent's radio when he could get the old man to let him turn it on. Some kind of new fascist-communist alliance promising the same bullshit every party did in troubled times: security, law and order, protection. That's all it took for the average citizen-sheep to give up his freedom. Promises to beat back the fear.

Slinging his rifle and drawing the Glock, Skull crept around the exterior of the house to make sure none of the attackers were still near, but the area seemed deserted. Walking up on the porch, he tilted his head to avoid contact with the littlest boy's swinging leg.

Inside the house, everything had been charred by fire, but seemed otherwise intact. The arson was evidently more rushed than thorough, and had gone out naturally because the house was largely built from stone and mortar. Skull started to walk back outside, but he heard a sound under his feet.

Something rustled faintly, scratching like a mouse making its way through the earth.

Skull pulled out a flashlight and began playing it across the floor, noticing a faint seam. Slipping his fingers under an edge, he pulled up carefully and shone the light down into the gloom of a hidden cellar.

Bloodshot, dead eyes looked back at him, set in the blackened face of a girl younger than the two boys on the porch. She appeared to have been trying to make her way up the stairs, but her hair and clothes were burned off and her flesh was charred black, accented with lines of red where the skin had broken open.

The eyes blinked at him moistly.

“Shit,” Skull muttered, dropping his pack and pulling out his canteen. He moved down carefully beside the little girl. The eyes followed him in fits and starts, as if the sockets were in need of lubricant. He lifted her head carefully and trickled water into her mouth. The inside of her throat was blackened like her skin, and her body felt cold despite its appearance of being fire-roasted.

She should be dead, Skull thought. Amazing what humans can endure.

Coughing, she tried to move, but only groaned faintly.

Pulling an emergency blanket from his pack, Skull wrapped her loosely, careful not to touch the ruined and sensitive skin if he could help it. He started to get up, but the girl grasped his hand weakly with fingers that look like burned hotdogs, bone visible through the cracks. All the nerves must be dead, for it seemed she felt no pain, a blessing in the midst of damnation.

“Don’t...leave...” she croaked faintly.

Skull sat on the stairs and laid a callused hand on her forehead. “I won’t.”

“Help...me?” she said uncertainly.

“I can’t,” he said wishing for the first time he had the Eden virus to pass on to her. It was the only thing that had a chance of saving someone so far gone. “I wish I could, but I can’t. Just go to sleep now, sweetheart.”

The girl closed her eyes and wheezed laboriously.

A deep flood of sadness and loss welled up within him. This was not the first time he’d seen innocents destroyed by jackals, but it was the first time he’d felt somehow responsible. He’d happily put down such animals that did these

things – Al Qaeda terrorists, Boko Haram fanatics, Taliban extremists, Somali pirates and South American cartel thugs. Kidnappers, rapists, “honor” killers, sellers of poison to children on the street and more.

Skull added homegrown arsonists to his list, if he ever found them. He shook his head in disgust. Bigots abounded, dividing society into smaller and smaller tribes merely for the purposed of exercising petty dominance and giving their hatred free rein.

Racism he could understand. People looking and acting different was bound to cause tension, even between two such outwardly similar peoples as the Hopi and Navajo. Assholes killing families because of their sympathy for the oppressed...that was incomprehensible evil.

Skull sat with the girl until she died. It took a surprisingly long time. He swaddled her body tightly in the emergency blanket and carried her outside into the bright moonlight. Finding a shovel in the shed out back, he buried the surprisingly weightless body in the rocky and unforgiving soil, and then cut down the rest of the family and interred them there as well.

Afterward, he slept nearby, head pillowed on a rock and rifle cradled in his arms like a lover. When the sun rose, Skull filled his canteen and water bottles from the kitchen faucet that still worked, resuming his walk into town.

Chapter 6

The vehicle tracks from the burned house all led to one place. The rapist, the arsonists, the murderers hadn't even tried to hide their trail.

Arrogant. Cruel. Evil.

Removing these people from the lands of the living seemed a simple necessity.

Skull disdained cruelty, especially for its own sake. Those he killed went out clean for the most part. Purposeless torture was an indulgence, demeaning those that did it.

Gazing down at the tiny town of Aragon through his rifle scope, his hand shading the end to prevent a reflective glare, Skull idly chewed dried meat and sipped water. Perhaps two dozen buildings clustered around a small stream where it intersected the road he'd been walking. Within the cluster of buildings it showed pavement, a hundred yards or so of modernity framed by structures before returning to the persistent dust, gravel and dirt that Skull had become so intimate with.

But Skull saw activity. He observed a score of men carrying rifles and shotguns sitting atop vehicles blocking the road at either end. Others – unarmed women, children, old and young males – walked around with heads bent down between their shoulder blades, scurrying like scared lambs.

It didn't take a genius to separate the wolves from the sheep.

Today, Skull was on the side of the sheep.

More or less.

In principle.

A man had to have a code. A moral center to keep him sane. Skull couldn't always put his code into words, but he knew evil when he saw it, and eliminated it when he could.

Several bodies hung from lampposts along the main street. Many of the armed men were drinking. Some used these bodies for desultory target practice. Skull saw that, more times than not, they drunkenly missed their targets despite the close range.

Pulling out his rangefinder, Skull noted that he was five hundred twelve yards from the farthest man. The closest stood at four hundred seventy-two. Not difficult shots at all for one with the proper training and weapon. The high-tech

infrared laser device gave him the humidity and ambient temperature as well. Fortunately, there didn't appear to be much wind, but even if there had been, he could have handled it. He'd made shots north of a thousand yards in such easy conditions.

Skull took out a small, specialized calculator and punched in numbers, writing down the results. He then removed a laminated card from a compartment within the butt-stock of his rifle. After carefully consulting the reference, he made adjustments to the scope's elevation and windage.

Only then did he crawl forward in his improvised ghillie suit, a patchwork of rag strips hand-tied to his hood, jacket and trousers, to the position he'd previously selected. He moved slowly, dragging his pack behind him. It didn't appear that anyone from the town was watching the hills, but it was better to be safe.

Besides, complacency made for bad habits, and bad habits got you dead. Skull had killed enough of those who had them to know.

Once at his selected position, Skull unfolded a bipod and pulled his go-bag up to serve as a support for his upper body. He laid a small tarp on the ground under the end of the rifle's muzzle. Skull didn't want them to be able to identify his location from the dust stirred up by the muzzle blast.

Then, he waited. Right now the sun was in his face and a glint off his scope might give away his position despite all his precautions.

Patience, Skull told himself. Their time will come soon enough.

Heat radiated from the ground in waves by the time the sun ranged high in the sky. Skull took the lens caps off his scope and peered through the crosshairs again. Seeing fewer men than before, Skull thought that maybe some were sleeping off their alcohol or their lunches in the heat of the day.

No matter. They would emerge when the action began. Curiosity would bring them forth, no matter how suicidal. It was simple human nature, and many of them, especially those not seasoned veterans, wouldn't believe what was happening. Not deep down. A proper sniper ambush often seemed to defy possibility for those on the receiving end.

Skull checked the ammunition again to make sure it was the proper lot number. With two different kinds of match grade ammunition, sight adjustments were slightly different for each. Skull wanted every shot to count. The sniper's mantra, the oldest one anyway, ran through his head.

One shot, one kill.

Lee Harvey Oswald had been an amateur. Three shots to kill Kennedy at a

hundred yards in a slow-moving car was child's play.

James Earl Ray – or whoever really fired the shot that killed Martin Luther King – had done it more professionally. One .30-06 round to the head.

Skull didn't judge the morality of these acts, of course. In fact, in his own thoughts he deplored them. The men who performed them were criminals, rebelling against lawfully constituted authority. *But if you're going to take a life,* he thought, *best you do it right.*

Skull thought once more about the two cops he'd killed. He hoped those would be the last unjust killings he'd be forced into. Much better to find those guilty of great evil, and then kill them.

Much easier to live with.

Checking the rangefinder once more, Skull saw the temperature had climbed a good ten degrees and the barometric reading had fallen. He made corresponding, minute adjustments to the sights.

Looking through the scope, Skull laid the crosshairs on a man sitting atop the hood of a truck at the far edge of town, the farthest target. He had a straw hat on his head and a shotgun across his lap.

The time had come.

Aiming at the center of the man's chest, Skull let the air partway out of his lungs, stopped his breath and slowly, gently squeezed the trigger. The rifle jumped against his shoulder and the man fell to lie flat on the hood, blood pouring from a hole in his chest and back. The windshield of the truck shattered as the bullet continued on through.

Excellent, Skull thought, adrenaline and cortisol flooding through him. Time slowed and took on that crystal clarity of performance perfection, the "zone" of athletes and martial artists. Without conscious thought he moved to his second target while deepening his breathing to slow his heart rate, countering the ill effects of stress hormones on his nervous system while retaining their benefits.

The tall man closest to Skull stood at the west edge of town, looking east toward the first target. He'd just begun to say something to the fat man beside him when Skull's second bullet took the top of his head off.

Skull didn't smile, but stored up the memories and the pleasure of these moments for later recall. Instead, he shifted to the next target, and then the next.

By the time the sun had set he'd picked off a total of fifteen men and one woman. He continued to seek more targets, until eventually even the stupidest concluded that deep cover was the only way to survive.

Doesn't matter, Skull thought. It's enough. If the downtrodden civilians in that town have any stones at all, they'll kill the rest of the thugs. If they don't, they deserve slavery.

Taking out his knife, Skull etched fifteen more notches in his rifle stock alongside the hundred-odd that were already there.

Fifteen more notches. Fifteen more lives. Fifteen wrongs wiped clean, if not entirely made right.

“Not a bad day's work if I do say so myself,” Skull said aloud.

Packing up his belongs and collecting fifteen spent shell casings, Skull slipped back behind the ridgeline and walked east, careful to stay out of sight of the town. They wouldn't come looking for a ghost, but if they spotted him, some might convince themselves that revenge was a possibility.

Better to be the ghost.

Sometimes, fear was a more effective weapon than bullets.

After nearly an hour of walking, Skull found a bowl in the rocks that would serve nicely to bank a fire from the evening wind and prevent anyone from seeing the light. He felt the need for flame tonight, even though the night wouldn't be cold.

A few of the simple snares the Hopi had taught him resulted in the capture of one large jackrabbit. After gutting and skinning the animal, Skull spitted it on a stick and propped it over the fire using rocks. He ate the rabbit while gazing at the bright edge of the Milky Way. Afterward, he threw the carcass downwind as far as he could. Better that the early, lucky scavengers found something at a distance, and the flames should deter the rest.

Lying down in his sleeping bag he thought of the family, and the little girl he'd buried. If there was a heaven, was she looking down on him now? Was she angry he couldn't help her? Was she pleased he'd avenged her family?

What a screwed-up world you've brought on, Markis, he thought. I wonder if you'd be as smugly self-righteous if you'd seen what I have lately. It's all very well to calculate your germs would save more than they killed, but how do you apologize to the dead?

Staring at the stars, he drifted off to dreamless slumber.

Chapter 7

With plentiful game, clear weather and few people or settlements to avoid, Skull made good time across New Mexico, walking generally northeast. As he approached the Texas border he saw a long line of cars along I-40. The queue seemed to be nearly at a standstill, and most people had their engines off, sitting outside their vehicles in the grass. In some places stood arrangements of tents and lawn chairs.

Watching for more than an hour from a low hill, Skull noticed only rarely did anyone have to move a car forward, and even then only a few yards. The people attached to each vehicle usually didn't bother to break camp.

I need information, Skull thought. This is a good place to blend in and get it.

Waiting until the hottest part of the day, when most people were napping beneath tent flaps or inside their cars, he wandered casually down the hill and drifted into the thin, populated swath alongside the freeway. Picking his way quietly along, he lifted his hand in greeting whenever anyone seemed to notice him, but continued until he found what he was looking for: a relatively relaxed group of four people sitting outside a large but old recreational vehicle, all on the downhill side of middle age.

"Hello," Skull said in his mildest voice. "Might I trouble you for a drink of water? It's as hot as the devil out here." He'd made his face as smooth and unthreatening as possible, aware that his mien wasn't one to make children leap into his arms.

"You can say that again," said a tough-looking woman with narrow eyes. "Hold on just a second," she said as she went inside the RV."

"What's up with the line?" Skull asked the two men and remaining woman sitting in the shade of the RV's attached awning.

"Haven't you heard about Texas?" the older of the two men asked.

"That it's too damn hot? I heard that." Skull hoped a little levity would ease the conversation.

The two men laughed. "That too. No, I mean the New Republic."

Skull shook his head. "Been out hiking. Living off the land. Haven't heard much of anything in awhile."

"Well, I'm afraid you're going to find lots of things have changed," said

the other man. "Texas has closed her borders."

"To keep out the Edens?" Skull asked.

"No," answered the woman. "They've decided to go against the executive order for universal testing. Federal troops are threatening to come in to enforce it and the governor has closed the border in response. He's also put an end to martial law within Texas. Some are talking about the New Republic of Texas. You know, saying they're the only ones who can legally secede because they were once an independent nation."

"You said 'they,' so you folks aren't from Texas," Skull stated.

The woman shook her head. "Colorado, but things are going all to shit there. Bunch of jackboot thugs all up in your business. Figure we'll try Texas for awhile."

"I thought Colorado was pretty liberal. Legalized pot and all that."

The woman spat deliberately and her narrow eyes squeezed further together. "Liberal and libertarian ain't the same thing, bub. We just figure the government shouldn't tell you what you can't buy – guns, dope, whatever. Long as you ain't hurting anyone else. But the feds are pushing law enforcement hard to crack down, so most of 'em forgot about little details like warrants, probable cause and innocent until proven guilty a while back." Her voice turned bitter. "So much easier to catch bad guys when you ain't gotta actually prove they done nothing wrong."

Skull glanced around and decided getting into a political discussion was a stupid move, like always. Still, he needed to test the prevailing wind on the most divisive hot-button issue of them all. "Aren't you worried you might get the Eden Plague?"

"Doesn't sound much like a plague to me," said the first man. "I could use a little relief from my hemorrhoids."

"Not if it turns your brain to mush," countered the other man. "Dopers are bad enough."

"I bet if you got cancer you'd smoke a little dope yourself, Harry," the first one said without heat. The two couples seemed like old friends, the kind who could argue without ever settling anything or getting upset with each other.

The first woman returned with a plastic cup filled with water, handing it to Skull.

"Thank you kindly, ma'am," he said and took a deep drink.

"You're welcome," she answered. "Looks like you've traveled far."

"I have at that," Skull said, his eyes drifting to the lines of vehicles that

extended eastward as far as he could see. “All this because of the closed border?”

“Yeah,” answered the second man. “The internet says they’re worried about fed spies and undesirables entering. You gotta surrender all weapons until you can be processed at the welcome center.”

“Welcome center,” Skull said. “Sounds Orwellian.”

They peered at him with blank stares.

“You know. Big brother is watching?”

“Oh, yeah,” said one man knowingly, though Skull doubted he really understood.

“Anyway,” said Skull after drinking down the last of his water and handing the empty cup back, “thank you for the water and the information.”

“Our pleasure,” she responded. “Watch out for the feds on this side of the border. Hear they’re harassing the hell out of people up near the line.”

“And you’re not worried?” Skull asked.

The woman shrugged. “I’ll worry when we get closer than ten miles. At the rate we’re moving, we might be there in a month.”

Skull put on a bemused smile and waved goodbye. He walked east on the pavement between the lines of vehicles. A near-carnival atmosphere prevailed, with music playing and kids tossing Frisbees and balls in the grassy median. Small clumps of people sat in chairs drinking beer beneath awnings while dogs lay at their feet panting in the shade.

Yet some groups looked nervous and hunted. Skull studied them out of the corner of his eyes and saw all the adults appeared exceptionally young and healthy, though many were thin as proverbial rails.

Edens with nowhere to go, he thought. *They’re being chased down nearly everywhere.*

By evening he could see the border and several hundred police and Texas National Guard troops, faced by what looked like half that many U.S. Army soldiers on the New Mexico side.

Vehicles moving forward in the line were directed through several stations. Cars were being searched, occupants fingerprinted and photographed. Working dogs sniffed everything. It all moved in slow motion on the near side of the border. Once across the Texas state line the processing seemed swifter.

A cyclone fence topped by rolls of concertina wire held several forlorn-looking people, guarded by what seemed to Skull an inordinate number of soldiers. He wondered if they were Edens, people with warrants out, or some

other sort of undesirable entirely.

Cop killers, for example?

Guess I could go north around the panhandle of Texas, Skull mused, looking at the newly erected fence along the border. It stretched as far as he could see, at least several miles in either direction. He didn't relish the time it might take to bypass. He'd been content to rest at the Third Mesa when he needed to heal, but now that he was moving again he felt as if he was behind schedule.

For exactly what, he didn't know for sure. INS Inc. seemed a slippery fish in the pond of his intentions.

Behind him lay a large rest stop, the last place to relax before getting in the snail's-paced line to cross. The entire area was jammed full of cars, vans, RVs, semis, and every other mode of transportation that a very creative person could imagine. Skull saw tractors, motorcycles, dune buggies, ATVs, even a riding mower pulling a yard trailer full of camping gear.

Making his way back up the exit ramp, Skull passed waiting vehicles adding to the jam as they tried to squeeze onto the freeway. Continuing backward, he saw a large truckers' rest stop, a gas station with at least thirty pumps, a hotel that might have rooms for twenty, and fast food restaurant so filled with people that it looked like they had been crammed in there at gunpoint. He was amazed people hadn't started shooting each other over toilet privileges, but for now, things seemed more or less peaceable.

As night fell, Skull resolved to get across the border somehow. He wasn't willing to give up his weapons or other gear, though he had a feeling any search would spotlight him in a very unfortunate way even if they didn't connect him to the cop killings.

Semis and other big trucks abounded, some of them even unlocked, but they appeared to get more scrutiny at the border. The same seemed true of RVs. He needed something that looked clean, innocuous and not inviting of further examination.

Walking around the back of the hotel, he spotted something that might work and made a mental note for later.

Returning to the truck stop, Skull paid for a shower token, standing in line for over an hour to use it. Soldiers were everywhere looking alert, but for the most part didn't appear interested in doing anything. In fact, several of them seemed to be trying to hit on the prettier women in line. Most looked to be privates barely out of boot camp. Skull had heard the draft had been reinstated.

He felt better, seeing the situation. Draftees had to be motivated and experienced to be effective. Skull doubted these were either.

After the shower and a tepid meal that he had to pay double the listed price for to eat standing, Skull made his way back around to the rear of the hotel. Fully dark now, he sought out the station wagon with the hard-sided cargo carrier on top, the one he'd marked before. A bike rack on the back held two mountain bikes locked to it.

Skull watched the area for nearly an hour until he was sure there was no one nearby or guarding the car. He then walked over casually and examined the padlock on the car-top carrier using a tiny single-LED light. The case was sturdy, but he knew his way around such devices from a locksmithing job he'd had after leaving the Corps.

Skull saw that it was a three-pin and, after digging through his bag for the tools, pulled out an appropriate rake and torsion bar. Fading into the shadows and tuning out the world around him, he focused on the task at hand.

You never knew what you were going to get with a lock. Any one of them might take ten seconds or three hours. Picking was never predictable. If it ended up too difficult, he knew he might have to use force.

This time, he got lucky. The lock popped after a minute. Skull put the tools away, and then snapped it shut again only on one side so that to a casual observer it might still appear secure. He looked inside and pulled out two suitcases and a duffle bag after a quick calculation. Closing the carrier again, he walked around the corner of the hotel where it was darkest and leaned the bags against the wall before returning to the car.

Now for the most dangerous part. Anything Skull had done up to that point he might explain away if caught, but there was no talking his way out of what he was about to do. After slipping on his hooded ghillie jacket and pants, he glanced around as casually as he could before climbing up into the carrier, pulling his own ruck and go-bag after him. He pushed the owner's luggage closest to the opening. It and the ragged cloth strips might give him concealment if it were opened.

Then he pulled the lid shut.

Taking out his pistol, Skull attached a suppressor and listened. Nothing. He'd been lucky so far, and hoped the owners wouldn't check or open the carrier in the morning. If they did, he'd try to talk his way out of it as a vagabond with nowhere to sleep, and then flee.

If that didn't work, there was always the gun.

Skull awoke to the station wagon's engine starting. The light leaking in through the seams and the heat of the fiberglass above his head told him morning had come.

Good thing no one opened the carrier, he thought. I was sleeping hard. Would have been dead meat. Must have gotten soft around all those Hopi pacifists.

The car rolled forward and Skull tried to wedge himself in so that his body wouldn't shift and attract attention. There was a great deal of starting and stopping. The air inside the tight carrier turned hot and stifling, but he forced himself to relax and even doze at times.

The vehicle stopped again. "Good morning, sir," said a voice near Skull's head. "Are you aware that you are about to leave the compliant United States and enter the noncompliant state of Texas?"

"I am," said a man's voice below Skull.

"Are you also aware that Texas is violating federal law by refusing to carry out the executive order regarding mandatory testing for bioterrorist pathogens?"

"I am," answered the driver.

"Then please sign this release," the soldier said. "It absolves the U.S. Government of any liability. I will also need to digitally photograph identification cards for every member in the vehicle, and get an index fingerprint on this scanner."

"Why?" asked the driver.

"Presidential orders," said the soldier. "You are entering territory without bioterrorist pathogen controls and may have to undergo additional testing before exiting the state of Texas."

"If we ever exit," said a woman's voice.

"Barbara," said the driver sharply, and then turned to the soldier. "She's from Amarillo. We're just going to visit family."

"I understand, sir. If you refuse processing, you'll have to turn around and go back. If you proceed, you are required to verbally acknowledge that you are taking your life and that of your family into your own hands. Do you understand the risks?"

"We understand them," said the woman, "now can we please go? It's damn hot out here and the kids are tired."

"Sir?"

"I understand."

“Please proceed to the next station. Thank you for your cooperation.”

Skull could really do nothing except pull his ghillie hood close around him and make sure his hands and feet were drawn back. A soldier taking a quick look inside the cartop carrier might miss him.

Well, he was committed now.

The car moved forward again, and then stopped. Skull heard a bored male voice ask a series of questions about what the family was transporting – no contraband, no drugs, no prohibited items, and so on.

Then Skull’s blood ran cold as the cartop lock rattled. “You know this is open?” said a voice.

“Oh, really? No, sir, I didn’t.”

Skull buried his face and waited. Light leaked through his eyelids and he felt fresh air, a sure sign the carrier’s clamshell top had been lifted. Then, the lid slammed and he heard the lock click shut. “There you go.”

Deliberately, Skull relaxed his hand and removed his finger from the trigger of the pistol.

The car started and moved forward at a quick pace, and then slowed before starting and stopping several more times. Finally, another voice spoke near Skull’s head. “What is your purpose for entering the state of Texas?”

“Do we really have to have a reason?” the woman asked.

“You do if you want to get in,” answered the man.

“She’s from Amarillo,” said the driver. “We’re just here to visit family.”

“You got any proof of that?” the man asked.

“Here’s my Texas driver’s license. Will that work?”

Silence reigned for several moments. “Okay, please pull forward to the screening station and take directions from the officers there.”

The station wagon moved forward slowly before stopping again.

“Welcome to Texas. Are any of y’all currently infected with the Eden virus?” a gruff voice asked.

“I should think not,” answered the driver, clearly offended.

“Have you been in contact with anyone who might be infected?”

“No.”

“Have you been to a hospital or medical clinic in the last thirty days?”

“I had a pap smear about three weeks ago,” the woman said sarcastically. “I can give you the intimate details if you’d like.”

“That won’t be necessary,” the man answered. “Are you carrying any narcotics, weapons, or explosives?”

Skull heard a dog nearby, barking insistently.

“A pistol in the glove box,” answered the driver. “I have a New Mexico permit.”

“You’ll need to register that at the welcome center,” said the man. “Give them this form after you fill it out.”

The first dog’s barking was joined by that of one from the other side.

“Look at the doggies,” said a young female voice from the rear of the vehicle.

“Keep the window up, dear,” said the woman. “What is up with all the dogs anyway? They seem to be a little on the aggressive side.”

There was a pause. “They’re here to help with searches. Normally they only get agitated when there is a reason. What exactly is in your carrier?”

“Luggage,” the driver answered. “Clothes and stuff.”

“Can you please be a little more specific?”

“I got five thongs,” said the woman, “and three bras. I forget the exact number of tampons I have, but we can get them out and count them if you want. I might even have a douche kit up there too. You think the dogs are going crazy over those?”

“No, I do not,” said the man, sighing.

The dogs sounded as if they were having some sort of canine fit.

“Sir, I’m going to need you to – ” He was interrupted by yelling and a single gunshot to the rear of the carrier.

“Move forward,” the guard said hurriedly. “Proceed to the welcome center, now!” Then much fainter as they rolled forward, “Shut down lane three!”

The station wagon surged forward again, turned to the right, and then stopped. Skull heard doors open and close as the occupants departed the station wagon. Then came a long, hot wait. Skull pressed his face to the seam and used his fingers to pry open the fiberglass, giving himself some air.

After what seemed like hours, but in reality his Patek chronometer declared was only forty-one minutes, the family returned and got in the vehicle. This time they accelerated to cruising speed fairly quickly and remained there. Wind resistance forced enough air into the cracks of the carrier to give Skull welcome relief.

After several hours of highway driving, the vehicle decelerated before making several turns, and then stopping. Doors opened and closed.

“I’m going to take her inside,” the woman said. “She’s already crashed out.”

“No problem,” said the driver. “I’ll bring in the luggage.”

Skull stiffened, getting ready.

The driver jingled some keys before unlocking the lock.

Now or never.

Pushing the lid on the carrier up, Skull put the barrel of the suppressed pistol on the tip of the surprised man’s nose. “You yell or run, you’re dead. Step back slowly and be cool, and you’ll stay alive. No trouble. I just needed a ride.”

The man retreated a few paces and looked around in the dimly lit suburban street as if searching for help.

“Don’t worry,” said Skull climbing down. “And don’t try to be a hero. Do as I say and you’ll be safe in bed with your family in five minutes.”

The man nodded.

Skull donned his rucksack and clipped on the smaller go-bag, looking at the rear of the station wagon. “Unlock that and give me one of the bikes.”

Shaking, the man started to search for his keys in his pockets.

“They’re already in your hand,” Skull said.

The man smiled, embarrassed, and then regained the look of fear as he unlocked the bikes and lifted one down.

Skull examined the man carefully. He still shook as if caught naked in a blizzard, and had his hands out in front of him to protect himself.

He’ll likely call the authorities before I can get to the end of the block, Skull thought.

“If you call the cops or report me,” Skull said slowly and distinctly, “I’ll swear on a stack of Bibles that I paid you money to smuggle me across the border in your carrier. Doesn’t matter if they believe me or not. They’ll either kick your family out of Texas or arrest you. Maybe both.”

“But I didn’t smuggle anything,” the man said looking near tears now.

Skull slapped him with his free hand, fast and hard across the face. The man stepped back a few paces, his hand to a red cheek beside his open mouth.

“Listen up,” said Skull with a soft voice. “Right now it’s easiest for me to ride off and leave you alone, but you’re making that real hard. Keep your mouth shut. I need to believe you can do that. If not, I’ll have to put a bullet in your head. I’m good either way, but don’t take all night deciding.”

The shaking citizen squeezed his eyes together as if trying to shut out the sight of the thin, bald man. “I won’t say a word.”

“Good choice,” said Skull, putting the pistol back in his belt and climbing up on the bike. “God bless Texas.”

Chapter 8

Skull made much better time on the mountain bike. He bought a detailed topographic map and traveled off the paved roads as much as possible, sleeping in culverts or ditches at night. A soldier told him that Oklahoma was giving people a very hard time about crossing the border from Texas, so he pushed to the south to exit Texas into Arkansas. Skull knew he needed to find a crossing unlikely to be guarded. Once in the Land of Opportunity he should be able to cross quickly toward his goal of the Maryland laboratory.

He eventually found a small game trail on private property that straddled the border. Crossing in the middle of a dark night, he heard dogs barking from the farmhouse in the distance. Soon he found a small road leading east and hopped on the mountain bike. By morning he made it across the border and the day after that reached the town of Prescott, Arkansas.

The place turned out to resemble one of those iconic Norman Rockwell scenes. There was a main street with barbershops, a drugstore with an ice cream parlor, and even a one-screen movie theater, although it was boarded up and the marquee declared the space was for rent. Skull didn't see any army or additional security in town, and he was glad to spot a small diner. The smell of eggs and bacon convinced him he could use a hot meal.

Parking his bike out front, he tried to look as casual as possible as he walked into the diner. A dozen faces all turned to study him before going back to their breakfasts. Skull slid into an empty booth, pushing his rucksack and small bag into the seat across from him.

"What can I get for you, hon?" asked a middle-aged woman, chewing gum loudly and sporting about a dozen pens and pencils sticking out of her wild bird's nest of auburn hair.

"I'll take coffee and an orange juice for starters," answered Skull with a smile, looking over the posted menu hanging high. "I'll also take an omelet with everything, a side of bacon and some toast."

"Hungry," she said. "That's how we like 'em. I'll be right back with the coffee and juice."

She walked away and Skull turned to watch the television in the corner. The sound was set down low, but by concentrating he could just make out what the reporter was saying. A shot of the Kremlin opened a segment showing a

thick man with bushy eyebrows speaking. The reporter said that the Russian President had vowed to reconstitute the Soviet Union as a self-preservation measure and had already moved troops to the Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan borders. Meanwhile, it had already seized the Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova in bloodless coups. The European Union and NATO had condemned these acts, but with the U.S. focus almost entirely within its own borders, both organizations' protests lacked credibility.

"Here you go," said the waitress, sliding a cup of black coffee in front of him along with a glass of juice. "Cream and sugar are right there on the table," she said helpfully. "Food should be out in just a bit."

"Thanks," answered Skull, pouring a couple of packets of creamer into his coffee. He saw two older men at the counter. Both had coffee cups in front of them, but were leaning in and talking in hushed tones. Skull shifted slightly forward as if in thought until he was able to make out their conversation.

"...came last night," said a man with a green John Deere hat. "Took the whole family."

"Were they sickos?" asked the man beside him sporting an Arkansas Razorbacks cap.

Skull looked around and realized he was the only male in the establishment not wearing a hat.

"*Course* they were sickos," answered John Deere. "Why else would they come get them?"

"Where you think they took 'em?" asked Razorback.

"That camp due east off Route 24 near the county line. I hear they've been rounding up lots of 'em lately."

"Lots?" asked Razorback nervously.

"Yes. The government needs to do something soon before we get overrun."

"That's why I'm voting for the Unionists," said Razorback. "They're the only ones what knows how to get serious with these sickos. Everyone else is worried about their rights. Well, what about my rights not to get infected?"

"Can you believe there were sickos right there next door to me?" John Deere asked, shaking his head. "Hell, they might have infected me if they hadn't been taken away."

Razorback moved over a seat. "Maybe you should go get checked out."

"Here you go," said the waitress, returning with several plates. "Can I get you anything else for now?"

"No, this looks great," answered Skull, not lying at all. He hadn't eaten

well in some time.

She smiled and walked away with a bit of a sashay.

Skull plied his plates, shoveling good old-fashioned American breakfast food into his face until he was sated. When he looked up he saw that both men were gone. Over the rest of the breakfast, he continued to think.

The eastern part of the county appeared to be a giant kudzu forest dotted by occasional trailer homes or small farms cut through by narrow two-lane roads.

It wasn't hard to find the camp the two men had been discussing. It was the only structure anywhere around with multiple large buildings and surrounded by several layers of chain link fence topped with no-kidding razor wire, the kind that used to be illegal for civilian use. Getting close enough to observe what was going on inside without being seen from one of the eight tall guard towers was going to be difficult.

Approximately a quarter of a mile to the east, Skull found a drainage pipe that fed into a small stream, large enough to walk in. The construction appeared fairly new and stretched back toward the camp. Skull hid his bike and rucksack in the thick kudzu, pulled out a flashlight and pistol, and began heading west down the drain.

Every one hundred yards Skull saw a ladder leading up to a covered mesh on the surface. Climbing up and looking around, he saw only trees and thick vegetation. He finally made it to a place where there was an iron grating in front of him on new hinges. The opposite side was secured by a thick padlock.

Skull had his lockpicking tools on him, but decided to climb the nearby ladder and see if he was close. At the top he was surprised to discover he was less than fifty yards from the edge of the fence line. He leaned back in the shadows, afraid someone might spot him. Then he drew himself forward again to study what lay before him.

Three large areas were separated by internal fence lines. The section on the left contained men, the one on the right women, with children in the middle. All appeared downcast and wore dirty grey uniforms with no shoes. Hundreds of gaunt figures shuffled around, trying to get out of each other's way.

They're starving them, Skull thought. Wouldn't take much with an Eden; their metabolism burns so fast, especially if they are healing.

Skull saw guards in biohazard suits near one location by the central complex. Behind a window, he could see a room with a man in lab coat, a clipboard in his hand. The man gave the hazard-suited people a nod.

“Clear the food distribution areas,” blasted a voice over the loudspeaker. “There will be plenty of food for everyone soon. Clear the food distribution areas.”

The announcement had the opposite effect as the tightly packed wraiths crowded into one location. Skull believed he could hear their collective stomachs growling like the sound of distant thunder.

Three crane booms swung over each of the three areas simultaneously. Attached to the end of each was a grey, flaccid blob that was slowly lowered into each area.

Skull realized the blobs were naked corpses.

The Edens realized it at the same time and moved away, crying and yelling in frustration and horror. The children were not as quick to back up. The adults had to urge them not to touch the dead bodies no matter how hungry they were. Many of the Edens had fallen to the ground in despair and others simply stared skyward with vacant expressions.

The man with the clipboard was busily making notes on his clipboard.

And they call the Edens sickos, Skull thought, disgusted.

Skull’s hands hurt, and he realized he’d been gripping the rungs of the metal ladder tightly. Someone who didn’t know him would think it was a reaction to a desire for revenge. Actually, there was little of vengeance in his emotional state. In reality, his entire being cried out for annihilation, wiping those responsible from existence.

Simply put, his psyche begged permission to unleash the joy of the kill within him.

Not for revenge. Does a man take revenge upon rats?

No, this desire was for justice.

For balance.

For cleansing.

But the time was not yet. Too many security forces swarmed within the camp, armed guards with radios driving Humvees mounting heavy machineguns. As much as Skull’s body cried out for the orgasmic release of his bullets splitting heads like melons, he mastered it and moved on.

In a fugue, Skull made his way back to his hidden bike and pack. He splashed water from the stream on his face as if he could wash the filth off of

him, but the images remained. Making his way back to the road, he headed east again, determined to kill the first deserving man he ran into.

Unfortunately, he found the road deserted.

Chapter 9

Sitting down at one of the few internet cafes still in business in Hampton, Arkansas, Skull logged on to an anonymizer service and used an established throwaway alias. He then proceeded to the website Vinny had set up for their group to exchange messages.

Their group, not your group, Skull reminded himself. With Zeke dead, his link to Markis and the others grew more tenuous all the time.

Logging in, Skull saw brevity codes confirming that, in addition to the first group of family members making it safely to Buenos Aires, Argentina, Markis and his crew were now in Colombia. Safety signals indicated they were not under duress or being forced to allow others to use the site. They were secure for now. He allowed himself to feel a sense of relief.

Be careful, a voice said in Skull's head. *You can't afford sentimentality. Don't fool yourself into thinking most of them care about you. Spooky and Larry might, but not Markis. Not the rest.*

Spooky should be running the covert action ops now. He would likely be looking for Skull to make contact, to send them a sign that he was free and available.

He hesitated, thinking, and eventually departed the site without leaving a message.

Instead, Skull went to a few of the more prominent news sites. The Russians, in the guise of the new Soviet Union, had made good on their promise of empire. Forces were pushing south, re-annexing the oil-rich Central Asian "stans."

China had also not stopped at seizing Taiwan, but just the past week annexed Mongolia and was pressuring Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos to accept its direct hegemony as new provinces of the Middle Kingdom. All three had refused, and were rapidly rearming in expectation of another war.

The North Koreans had pushed south across the DMZ under the pretext of a large outbreak of the Eden virus in the south. Ironically, truth had overwhelmed disinformation as the advance stalled due to mass infection of the North Korean Army. It now appeared that both sides had lost control of their forces and their governments were in disarray. Chaos reigned, but violence was surprisingly light. It appeared that getting food and dealing with the "virtue

effect” were both armies’ top priorities.

Skull chuckled to himself at the confirmation of his desire to remain Plague-free. *What use is a killer who can’t kill?*

Most distressing, Pakistan and India had exchanged nuclear salvos with each other and both capitals were now smoking ruins. Iran had taken advantage of the situation and pushed its forces east to annex the western portions of both Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The world is going to shit, Skull thought, closing out of the news sites. He noticed the pimply-faced teenager running the internet cafe making a call while trying not to look at Skull.

Time to go, Skull realized, noticing the look of alarm on the boy’s face as he slipped out and around a corner. He made several twists and turns in the small town in order to get away from whomever the boy had called. Skull would have to double back to get his bike later, but that could wait for nightfall. Worst case, he would abandon it and get another.

Walking down a high-walled alley, Skull slipped behind a large dumpster near a barbecue restaurant. He crouched down and looked through the crack between the container and the wall to see if anyone was following him. Waiting five minutes, he finally relaxed, confident no one was tailing him directly.

Skull stood up, shouldering his bags and walking casually down the alley again, turning a corner.

Three policemen waited for him.

Waving absently as if lost, Skull turned around and ambled back the other way.

Four more policemen stood at the other end of the alley.

“Where you going, stranger?” said an exceptionally large man.

“Down this alley,” answered Skull. “It’s wide enough for both of us, although I hope you don’t mind me saying you could stand to drop a few pounds.”

A man behind Skull laughed.

The big man pulled out a telescoping metal asp and extended it to its full length with a practiced flick of his arm. “This indigent got a smart mouth.”

“Easy now, Wallace,” said an older officer in the middle. “We’re just talking here.”

“What exactly are we talking about?” asked Skull.

“Whatever the hell we want to talk about,” answered Wallace, his face red. He slapped the steel rod’s shaft into one meaty palm.

Skull shrugged. “Well, some say I’m a brilliant conversationalist. Would you like to discuss the Punic Wars? Impressionist art? Philosophy? I’m game for whatever, but it would help if you were a little more specific.”

“Let’s start with who you are and why you’re here,” said the older policeman, obviously in charge.

“Just a traveler, nothing more.”

“Put down your packs and turn out your pockets,” said Wallace.

“Is that really necessary?” asked Skull. “I mean I’ve g—”

Skull’s words were cut short as his body seized up, every muscle contracting. He fell to his face as electric current stunned him, and then ceased.

Policemen rushed forward, pressing their knees into Skull’s back while pulling taser darts from his skin. They yanked his hands roughly behind him, snapping on handcuffs before turning him over.

“What the hell was all that for?” asked Skull.

“That was for not obeying the sheriff’s office’s very polite and reasonable request,” said Wallace. “And this,” he lifted the asp, “is for calling me fat.” He struck Skull in the middle of the forehead with the heavy, blunt tip.

Skull felt blood running down his face as he fought not to lose consciousness.

He lost that fight.

Chapter 10

Skull slowly regained consciousness, but pretended to be asleep in order to assess his situation. He smelled antiseptic and sensed that he was strapped into a chair. It seemed unlike any jail cell he had ever heard of.

“Sonofabitch had a silenced pistol, for God’s sake,” said a voice to Skull’s front.

“Not to mention the sniper rifle, grenades, and a full-auto submachine gun,” said another. “Those are federal offenses, at least twenty years.”

“And we don’t know who the hell he is,” continued a voice that sounded like Wallace. “He has three full sets of identification.”

“I bet none of them are real,” said the older man, the one in charge. “His prints aren’t in the system, though, so he doesn’t have a criminal record.”

“That don’t mean he’s not a killer,” said Wallace. “We should call the state police. This is a slam dunk case.”

There was silence for a few moments and Skull imagined everyone looking at the sheriff. The older man finally spoke. “The troopers are busy, and besides, we can run our own house. Other than false identification and illegal weapons, what else do we have?”

“Lots of technical gear,” said one of the earlier voices. “Lockpicks.”

“And he’s not a sicko. Doc called a few minutes ago and confirmed he’s clean.”

“I think he’s playing possum, boss,” said Wallace.

A hand slapped Skull’s face, not gently. He looked up at the older man. The movement made his head hurt like hell.

“There he is,” said the sheriff. “Nice of you to finally wake up.”

“Fuck you,” croaked Skull.

Wallace punched him in the stomach.

“Come on now,” the sheriff said to him with a smile. “That’s not how civilized people talk to each other. I’ll chalk that up to a possible concussion. You fell and bumped your head pretty hard, don’t you know?”

“What do you want from me?” Skull asked.

“Some answers, to begin with. First of all, what is your name and what are you doing here?”

“I’m Jonathan Winslow from Boise, Idaho,” Skull said, pulling up one of

his throwaway aliases.

“What’s with all the guns and false IDs?” the sheriff asked.

“I do contract work,” Skull answered. “Sometimes for the government, sometimes privately. Discreet sort of work, if you know what I mean.”

“Wet work?” asked Wallace.

“Sometimes.”

“He’s some kind of goddamn mercenary,” said one of the other policemen.

“We in the biz prefer the term *security specialist*.”

“That doesn’t explain what you’re doing here,” said the sheriff.

Skull thought for a moment. If they were going to turn him over to the feds, they would have done it already, or at least notified their higher-ups. Instead, they hadn’t. Skull thought maybe they wanted something from him. How he answered in the next few minutes would likely determine his fate.

Skull sighed heavily and looked away.

“Tell us, asshole,” said Wallace, “or I’ll crack your skull again, I swear to God.”

“All right,” said Skull heavily. “I was working for a group that was trying to find and eliminate Edens. Everything was fine at first. We’d gather them up and get rid of them.”

“Get *rid* of them?” asked one of the younger cops.

Skull and the others stared at the kid patiently. He blushed and cast his eyes down.

“Anyway,” continued Skull. “Unbeknownst to me, our team leader got infected. One of the sickos bit him or something, but he hid it really well. Then he started infecting the rest of the team secretly. By the time I learned what was going on, only me and one other guy were still normal. There was a firefight and I ran. I’m afraid they’re still on my trail.”

“Why do they care if you run?” asked one of the policemen.

“Because I could hurt the company’s reputation if I tell people they’ve been infiltrated by sickos. It’s all about protecting the profit. There are hundreds of millions of dollars at stake. They aren’t going to let me get in the way of that.”

“Maybe these guys would pay to get Mister Winslow from Idaho back,” said Wallace.

“Sure they would,” said Skull, “right before they killed all of you to cover their tracks. I know. I’ve had to clean up messes like this before. These guys are pros.”

“Caught you easy enough, didn’t we?” Wallace sneered.

“With surprise and overwhelming numbers? Sure. But if you cross them, these guys will come at you when you least expect it. They’ll take *you* down by surprise and with overwhelming numbers.”

The sheriff looked at Skull speculatively. “So, let me get this right. You’re a man with lots of military expertise who is used to obeying morally ambiguous orders. You also don’t seem to have any trouble carrying out those orders or giving your loyalty to whomever you work for?”

“Hey, don’t hate the player,” said Skull. “Hate the game.”

“Oh, I don’t hate either,” answered the sheriff.

“I do have my moral limits,” Skull admitted. “They’re pretty flexible, though. Kind of like Wallace here. I can see why you keep him around.”

The sheriff held up a hand to keep Wallace from thumping Skull again. “I’m just thinking we might have us an opportunity.”

“What do you mean?” asked Skull and Wallace at the same time.

“Well,” said the sheriff, “we’ve been given a green light by the state to hire more deputies for anti-sicko ops. Even said they would kick in some extra funding. We need men who know what they’re doing.”

“But we don’t even know this guy,” protested Wallace. “He ain’t from aroun’ here.”

“I know,” said the sheriff, “and that’s part of his appeal. Things are likely to get real hairy *aroun’ here* soon. I need someone who can do the dirty work you boys might not be willing to.”

“You don’t have to worry about that,” blustered one of the men.

“Really? What about when I tell you to go arrest your father-in-law because his grey hair is turning black? How will that go over with your wife when we send her dad to a camp?”

The deputy paled, saying nothing.

“We don’t need this guy,” repeated Wallace.

“Correction,” said the sheriff, “we *may* not need him. Then again, we might. We just don’t know. Best to have him and not need him than need him and not have him.”

“Very wise,” said Skull. “See, told you I could talk philosophy.”

“Shut the hell up, scumbag,” Wallace said to Skull before turning back to the sheriff. “Boss, this is a mistake. We can put this loser away for a long, long time. That makes us look good on so many levels.”

“Well, except when I tell them about you guys,” said Skull, “and cut a deal with the feds to testify against you. I’ll even throw in all sorts of interesting stuff

I witnessed about corruption and taking bribes and such.”

“Wrong call,” said Wallace. “You just earned yourself a bullet in the head there, buddy.” He turned to the sheriff. “Let me take care of him. You don’t even have to say the word. Just go get a cup of coffee.”

“No,” said the sheriff with a smile. “I think I’m going to go a different way. Keep you boys on your toes. Mister Winslow, if that even is your name, how do you feel about becoming a deputy sheriff for Calhoun County?”

“Depends,” said Skull. “Got a union? How are the pay and benefits?”

“Fantastic, actually,” said the sheriff. “Food, lodging, a decent wage, and the avoidance of excruciating torture and slow death with Wallace, here.”

“Sign me up,” said Skull, smiling at Wallace.

“This isn’t over,” Wallace snarled at Skull. “When shit goes south, I’ll be the one who puts you down, mark my words.”

“Wrong call,” Skull echoed the other man, as his smile got wider and his eyes went dead. Wallace paled, but didn’t blanch.

“Let’s just call this a trial basis sort of thing. See how it works out,” said the sheriff.

Skull shrugged. “Makes no difference to me, boss. Just tell me what you want and consider it done.”

“See there, boys?” said the sheriff looking around. “That’s the sort of can-do attitude I’ve been looking for.” He pulled a knife from his belt, cutting the duct tape securing Skull to the chair.

Skull stood and pulled the bits of tape off. “So which one of you lucky rednecks gets to be my partner.”

“Wallace here will do the honors,” said the sheriff.

The big man stared at the sheriff, disbelieving. “The hell I will.”

“Wallace,” said Skull with relish, “I’m not sure you understand how the employee-employer relationship works.”

“Come on, boss,” Wallace pleaded.

“It’s gonna be great,” said Skull. “Do I get a badge?”

“Let’s take it one step at a time,” said the sheriff.

“Fine by me,” answered Skull. “Here, let me start with the asp.” He snagged one, lightning-quick, from the belt of a deputy and flicked it open.

“We’re going to get along great, *partner*,” said Skull before cracking Wallace across the forehead with the asp. The big man crashed to the ground, bleeding and moaning. He handed the high-tech baton back to the stunned owner. “Now, where’s my stuff?”

Chapter 11

A week later, Wallace and Skull were heading back to the sheriff's office after a quick liaison meeting with the State Police at the headquarters in Little Rock. Skull now wore a deputy sheriff's uniform, his Glock in a standard holster on his hip. Sometimes he mixed it up and carried one of the handguns from the two cops he had killed in Arizona, though he'd long since filed the serial numbers off. This just seemed to add to his mystique in the eyes of the regular deputies.

"I told you to keep your mouth shut and let me do the talking," said Wallace, fuming.

Skull ignored him.

"When we get back to the station you will clean this car inside and out," Wallace said. "Then you will clean my locker, *then* you'll come see me to find out if there is anything else I need doing. You got that, you skinny turd?"

"You really sure you want to go this way?" asked Skull.

"Yeah, I am," answered Wallace. "It's the way where you do whatever I tell you and keep out of my way."

"You live at 29 North Lee Street, right?" asked Skull.

"What?"

"And you have a pretty blond wife named Ellen and two young adorable daughters," said Skull. "Their names are Julie and Jane, am I right?"

"You don't talk about my family," said Wallace, his face clouding with anger.

"Let me paint you a picture," said Skull conversationally. "One of these days, on a day just like any other, the sheriff will send you out on a job. Any job, doesn't matter. I'll tell everyone I'm feeling sick, might even have a burrito from Mexican Sam's down the street so that it's believable." He chuckled. "Then I'll leave work and go to your house. I'll make sure it's during school so no one is home but your wife."

"Shut the fuck up."

"Then I'll tie her up and rape her until I just can't go anymore," said Skull with a dreamy, far-off expression. "Then I'll cut her throat. Or maybe not. Maybe I'll just leave her pregnant, pining for my touch."

Of course, he'd never do such a thing. Far too messy. In reality, if he had to, he'd just put one round in Ellen's head and be done with it.

No one could say Skull lacked kindness.

“I’m going to fucking kill you,” Wallace growled.

“Then when your girls get home, I’ll go show them their mother.”

“Don’t you touch them, you asshole.”

Skull laughed. “Oh come on now. I’m not an animal. I’d never rape a little girl. What kind of sick bastard do you think I am? No, I’ll just stick a knife through each of their eyes and into their brains. I can’t decide if I’ll start with the older or younger.”

Wallace stepped on the brake and tried to pull his pistol.

Reaching over, Skull forced the man’s hand down so Wallace couldn’t draw the weapon as the cruiser pulled to a stop in the middle of the road. He grasped the heavier man’s other hand and locked it painfully against the steering wheel.

“I can do all of this if I choose and there wouldn’t be a thing you could do to stop me,” said Skull with a smile. “I really don’t want to do these...*terrible* things, but I can.”

“Oh, you sick bastard,” said Wallace trying unsuccessfully to struggle out of Skull’s grasp.

“So, you have to ask yourself one question.”

“What question?”

Skull whispered in the man’s ear. “Is this really the sort of man I want to fuck with?” He then kissed Wallace gently on the cheek and released him, sitting back in his seat.

Wallace stared at him incredulously, frozen and shaking.

“Hey, isn’t it Wednesday?” asked Skull. “I think Daryl’s has half price wings and pitchers of beer on Wednesdays. Why don’t we go by there after work, *partner?*”

The big man began driving again and didn’t say another word as he stared straight ahead.

When they arrived at the station, Wallace walked right into the sheriff’s office and slammed the door. His bellows and hollering could be heard throughout the adjoining offices. Skull sat down in Wallace’s chair behind the big man’s desk while he threw a slim dagger up in the air and caught it by the tip again and again. He wasn’t really as good with a knife as he was with a rifle, but he’d found that blades made a greater impression somehow.

The other policemen in the office shifted their gazes uncomfortably between Skull and the Sheriff’s office. Finally the door flew open and Wallace

stormed out. Spotting Skull sitting at his desk, he strode over to stand over the thin man.

“Get out of my chair, you piece of filth.”

Skull picked up the family photo on Wallace’s desk and tapped the glass with the tip of his dagger. “Your wife really *is* beautiful. I’m surprised you can stand to leave her alone every day.”

Wallace began to shake as if there were an earthquake at the station, one that only he could feel. Red-faced, he stormed away.

“You,” yelled the sheriff, pointing at Skull. “Get in here.”

Skull got up and walked into the office, closing the door behind him.

“Did you really tell Wallace that you would rape and kill his family?”

“Of course not.”

The Sheriff sighed and leaned back.

“I told him I would rape and *possibly* kill his wife. I only threatened to murder his two girls.”

The Sheriff looked at him with wide eyes before asking. “Would you really do that?”

“Hmm. It depends.”

“On what?”

“On whether you told me to or not.”

A smile grew and spread across the Sheriff’s face. “So, you’re just screwing with Wallace?”

“No more than he’s screwing with me,” explained Skull, “but you don’t see me coming in here to spill my whiny tears on your nice clean desk. Maybe he shouldn’t bring every little interpersonal problem to you, boss. You’re a busy man with a lot going on.”

“He *is* my nephew; he ain’t that bad.”

Skull shrugged. “But I am.” He sighed theatrically. “Why can’t we all just get along?”

The Sheriff released a more genuine sigh, putting his hand to his head. “I need to know you’re not going to go off the rails on me.”

I got you right where I want you, you stupid shit, thought Skull. None of the other deputies had the guts for the sheriff’s little jobs, and he knew it. Still, seeming reasonable and giving the man the illusion of control was imperative.

Skull leaned forward on the desk with a friendly smile. “Boss, you don’t have to worry about me. Our initial meeting was a little unorthodox, but you’ve given me nothing but a fair shake since then and I appreciate it. I don’t expect to

spend the rest of my life here, but it's better than anything else I got going on for now. When it's time for me to go, I'll come to you like a man and discuss it. I don't plan on burning any bridges, regardless."

The Sheriff relaxed. "Good. That's what I wanted to hear. Now, I've got another one of those *special* jobs I need you to handle."

Skull listened.

The train cars were backed into the old rail yard. On either side of the lines Skull saw fenced-in areas with giant Army tents, which housed hundreds of people on cots.

Skull walked up to a National Guard soldier at the rail yard entrance. "I need to see Captain Boltz. I'm on official business from Sheriff Cox."

"Hang on just a second," the soldier said while he made a call that lasted several seconds. Hanging up, he opened the gate with a key at his belt. "Go on in. It's the third building on the left."

Skull made his way down the corridor between the fenced-in yards. The captive eyes that peered at him from across the wire seemed more curious than desperate. *This may be an Eden detention camp, but it's not as sadistic as the other*, he thought. Then again, the average German citizen in 1942 looking at Jews being loaded into boxcars had no inkling of what awaited them at the other end.

Skull could see men and women climbing up onto flatbed train cars. Soldiers helped them up, and then handed them their belongings. He stopped a passing uniform. "Where's that train going?"

The soldiers hesitated, looking at Skull's uniform and badge before answering. "Maryland. Supposed to be a medical research laboratory there. Trying to find a cure."

Maryland, Skull thought as the soldier walked away from him. *Viruses are hellishly hard to cure. These folks are going to be dissected and experimented on, and none are volunteers.*

He made his way to the designated third building and, after talking to another soldier, was escorted to the office of Captain Boltz.

"Yes, can I help you, Deputy?" the man asked.

"Indeed," replied Skull. "I've been sent by Sheriff Cox. He regrets to inform you that there has been a false positive test." he pulled out a piece of

paperwork with lab results. “It’s rare, but does happen. At least we discovered it now.”

“Joshua McReynolds,” the captain said. “Are you sure? According to his records, this guy is over sixty, but looks no older than I do.”

“No doubt about it,” said Skull. “Must be something else. A clerical error. He’s only thirty-five. Good genes.”

“I don’t know about this,” said the captain, rubbing his head.

“Doesn’t make any difference to me,” said Skull. “Just wanted to save you some headache. The standing orders are very specific, from my understanding: send only those with a positive XHV result. When a non-infected one arrives there will be questions. If he’s clean, his rights are being violated. Maybe you could count on him getting infected *en route*, maybe not. Personally, I wouldn’t risk it. It’s not like there’s a quota or anything, right? And how would you feel if it was you?”

The captain pondered before making up his mind as Skull had hoped. He walked to the door and yelled out, “Sergeant Simmons.”

A fireplug of a man appeared in front of him as if from thin air.

“Take the deputy here to get Joshua McReynolds. Release him into this man’s custody.”

“Sir?”

“Is there a problem, Sergeant?” Boltz asked.

“No sir, it’s just...unusual.”

“Unusual?” Boltz asked. “You mean there something we’re doing out here that *is* usual? If so, I would really like to know.”

Simmons snapped to attention. “Roger that, sir. No worries.”

“Just make sure you get a signature on the release.”

“Thank you, Captain,” said Skull, shaking the officer’s hand. “This is tough duty you got out here.”

“It’s a God-forsaken duty,” said the man with sad eyes. “People don’t ask to get sick, most of them.”

Skull nodded and followed the sergeant out of the building and through another guarded checkpoint into a fenced-off area.

“I can’t help but notice no one is in biohazard suits,” said Skull to Simmons.

Skull’s question seemed to loosen the man’s tongue. Despite his straight-arrow manner, or perhaps because of it, he spoke quickly and clearly, keeping his eyes to the front. “The CDC has confirmed that XHV is only spread through

transfer of bodily fluid. Everything out there about the virus being airborne or getting it from shaking an infectee's hand is misinformation. You know, like HIV was when they first discovered it. They've also confirmed that most animals are unaffected. Close primates like chimps can be carriers, but not dogs and cats and horses. Or rats. This is a human virus. The government is trying to get word out because testing centers are still overwhelmed by people bringing in pets and farm animals."

"They're unaffected until the virus mutates, you mean."

Simmons stopped in his tracks at these words and turned to Skull. "Let's hope to God that if this damn thing mutates we get some warning from CDC."

"Just between the two of us," Skull said, "why is everyone so scared of this thing? From what I've seen it doesn't appear so bad."

The stocky man laughed. "That's the problem. All the benefits are visible and the downsides invisible. That's one of the reasons it's so dangerous."

"Seriously?" Skull asked feigning ignorance. "What's wrong with growing young again?"

"Haven't you been listening to the reports? Migraines, nightmares, early senility, and over time, brain damage and mental deterioration. Edens become like little children. Can't even wipe their own asses. Hell, I even read a report yesterday the Plague causes erectile dysfunction and infertility."

"No way!" said Skull with a look of horror on his face.

"Yes," deadpanned the sergeant. "I can deal with all the other shit, but if I can't get it up, all my girlfriends would leave me."

Skull wasn't sure if the man was being serious or not. "Now I'm really freaked out."

Simmons nodded knowingly and consulted a hanging clipboard before calling out loudly, "Joshua McReynolds. You here?"

"He's over there," said a small, skinny boy. "We're hungry, sir."

Simmons ignored the kid as he and Skull began walking, still outside the fence, to the back of the tent where about two dozen men were clustered sleeping, talking, or playing cards.

"Mister McReynolds," Simmons called again.

A man with dark hair and lean, fit build sat up from a cot and looked at them. Thin like all of the prisoners, with sunken cheeks, he didn't seem as malnourished as those Skull had seen at the earlier detention camp. All conversation nearby had ceased. "Right here," McReynolds said.

"Come with me please, sir," said Skull, waving him over to the gate.

The man hesitated, looking at the other men before swinging his legs to the floor and standing. “Am I under arrest, deputy?” he asked.

“Looks like you’re already under arrest, sir. This is just a transfer of custody.”

“Words, then,” the man retorted. “Leave me alone.”

“You sound like a man with a guilty conscience,” said Skull.

“You’re not wrong,” answered McReynolds.

Skull stared hard at the man. “Just come with me, sir. Things will be explained soon enough.”

The prisoner shrugged and met Skull at the gate. From there, they marched to the front exit of the rail yard under the curious eyes of hundreds of captives. There, Sergeant Simmons had Skull sign a release form, which he did without bothering to read. It wasn’t his real name anyway. What did a scribble on a piece of paper matter?

“Best of luck to you, Deputy,” said Simmons as they walked out.

McReynolds remained quiet until they got into the police cruiser. “Okay now, Deputy Winslow. What’s this about?”

After starting the car and easing it out of the parking lot onto the road, Skull replied, “I’m here on behalf of your son-in-law, Sheriff Cox. You’re no longer recorded as an Eden carrier. At least, not in any records around here. You’ve been cleared and released.”

The man looked at Skull in surprise before finally speaking. “And to think I told my daughter her husband was good for nothing, even if he was the sheriff.”

“Here,” said Skull pulling a bag from the rear of the vehicle and putting it in the man’s lap. It contained protein shakes and energy bars.

McReynolds started guzzling down the shakes like a teenager chugging beers on spring break.

“Easy there,” said Skull putting a hand on his arm. “Too much too fast and you’ll shock your system.”

“So you know I’m an Eden?”

“How old are you, sir?”

The man smiled shyly. “I’m sixty-eight next week.”

“There you go then,” answered Skull. “You look like a freaking male underwear model.”

McReynolds chuckled, and then his visage turned serious. “What am I supposed to do? I can’t go home. My neighbors will know right off.”

“Head southwest,” Skull answered. “Try to get into Texas. They’re allowing Edens in and aren’t persecuting them.”

“Texas,” the man answered. “This is my home. I grew up here. All my family is here. I hate Texas.”

“Well, I suggest you keep that opinion to yourself once in the Lone Star State,” said Skull. “From my experience, if you made a statement like that, even before the current apocalypse, it would have earned you a serious ass-beating by some proud native sons.”

“But Texas?” asked the man. “Can’t I just hide out in my cellar for a few weeks until this blows over?”

Skull stared hard at the man. “Tell me, are you stupid? Or just in denial?”

“I don’t reckon I appreciate bein’ talked to like that.”

“How about if I throw you back in the camp there?” Skull asked. “That train is headed to a research facility where they are going to dissect Eden carriers. Do you like the idea of that?”

“Not particularly,” McReynolds answered, looking away.

“This isn’t blowing over. Not for years, if ever. You’d better do as I say,” said Skull. “You can either stay here and die, or go to Texas and live.”

McReynolds’ chin rested on his chest for several moments before looking back. “Okay. Doesn’t seem like I got much choice.”

“Glad to see you’re not stupid after all,” Skull said pulling a rucksack from behind the seat and setting it in the man’s lap on top of the first bag. “Go through everything in this pack and get familiar with it.”

“What’s in it?”

Skull sighed in exasperation. “Didn’t I just tell you to go through it? It’s got everything you’ll need to survive. I know because I packed it myself. If there’s anything in there you don’t recognize or don’t know how it works, tell me. I’ll explain it while we’re driving.”

“You’re driving me to Texas?”

“Not all the way,” Skull answered, “but I’ll get you started. It’s important you show up looking a little worn, otherwise they might not believe your story.”

“What story?”

“Buckle up,” Skull said. “I’ll tell you everything as we drive.”

McReynolds cracked open another protein shake and chugged it as they rolled southwest toward his freedom.

Where’s my freedom? Skull wondered idly. *Where does this all end?*

Chapter 12

Skull walked into the sheriff's station the next morning to find most of the deputies and staff gathered around the wall-mounted widescreen. Skull thought it odd that neither the sheriff nor Wallace were in attendance. He looked over at the Sheriff's office and saw the door closed, which usually happened only when he was having a private meeting.

"What's going on?" Skull asked no one in particular.

The young secretary, Shirley, who had been trying to flirt with Skull on and off, rushed over and grabbed him by the arm. "You haven't heard the news?"

"What news? We've all been given raises?"

"Not likely," answered another deputy without looking at them.

Shirley looked confused and shook her head. "No, not a raise, at least not that I know of. It's about Texas. They've really crossed the line this time. There'll be hell to pay soon."

"It's coming on," said someone. "Quiet."

The screen showed a dignified, middle-aged man with a strong jaw. Underneath his picture the national news network's caption read, "Texas Governor Bret Tucker Addresses State Legislature."

"Good morning my fellow citizens of the Republic of Texas and of the United States." Tucker made it sound as if those were two different categories. "As you know, several months ago the President of the United States issued an executive order implementing martial law. Part of these measures included mandatory testing for the so-called Eden Plague, or XHV. There were immediately hundreds of lawsuits brought before Texas courts, and several were referred to the United States Supreme Court, but that august body has remained mute since this crisis began, failing to fulfill its constitutionally mandated role to exercise checks and balances upon the overwhelming power of the Executive Branch."

The governor paused and looked at the camera. "The Republic of Texas made the decision to suspend mandatory testing until a proper legal decision was rendered by the Supreme Court. This decision was not made to defy the president or the federal government, but simply to protect the citizens of this great state, where all are innocent until proven guilty of crimes beyond a reasonable doubt by juries of their peers."

Tucker rustled his papers and went on. “In the absence of a U.S. Supreme Court ruling, this matter was referred to the Republic of Texas Supreme Court and I pledged to abide by their ruling, enforced by the full powers of my office. Last night that esteemed group of fellow Texans returned a unanimous ruling.”

Clearing his throat, the governor lowered his reading glasses to the end of his nose and peered through them. “The nine men and women of our highest court ruled that mandatory medical testing is, in effect, an unlawful search and therefore unconstitutional under the Fourth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, guaranteeing all Americans’ right to privacy and security of their residences, papers and persons. Furthermore, they have ruled that mandatory testing sets a dangerous precedent for infringing upon those selfsame rights. You may all read the full verdict posted on the state capital website, but as of this moment, no person within the borders of Texas will be required to undergo testing for XHV. Free testing will remain available, but on a voluntary basis only.”

The caption under the governor now read, “Governor Endangering Texans With Refusal to Fight Eden Plague.”

“Furthermore,” continued the Governor, “I have seen no evidence that individuals infected with XHV pose any threat to those around them, as long as they do not deliberately infect anyone else against their will. Such actions, if any, will be prosecuted just as intentionally infecting another person with any disease would be, under current felony statutes. According to the Surgeon General of Texas, this virus poses no more threat to society than any other, and I for one have seen no evidence of long-term health issues regarding Eden carriers.”

He’s infected, Skull realized suddenly, seeing the vitality emanating from the man. *Recently, as he doesn’t look twenty-five yet, but still...*

“I now speak to all citizens of the United States. I urge you not to persecute those infected with this virus. At best, they are harmless and no threat to you, and at worst, victims that deserve your support and compassion. We start down a terrible path when we fail to recognize the humanity in others. What we are beginning to see is called eliminationism. You can seek out numerous examples of this phenomenon. Places like the Ukraine, Albania, the Balkans, Congo and Rwanda or Cambodia or El Salvador. The list stretches onward. Eliminationism is the first step toward genocide. Genocide is the most extreme expression of tribalism and fear, and I had hoped we were moving beyond that scourge. Please recognize that those infected with the Eden virus are not inhuman or perverted or evil. They are your friends and your neighbors. They are us.”

Skull wondered if Markis and his friends were watching this broadcast and if so what they would do.

Tucker appeared nervous now and opened another folder before going on. “Over one hundred and fifty years ago, Texas gained its independence from Mexico and became a sovereign nation called the Lone Star Republic and remained so for the next ten years. At the end of that ten years the Lone Star Republic asked to be admitted to the United States, which agreed to make it a state. Texas placed a caveat into the agreement that no other state has enjoyed before or since, which is that Texas might remove itself from the Union at any time.

“The Texas State Legislature, at 09:37 this morning, passed a bill to place this matter before the citizens of Texas in the fall elections. A popular referendum will determine whether Texas remains a part of the United States, or again legally becomes the Lone Star Republic. If the decision is to leave the United States, I will serve as the interim president until elections can be held in the spring.”

The caption below the governor now read, “Texas Rebels! Governor Declares Himself Dictator.”

“Neither I nor the state legislature take this matter lightly, and we trust in the collective wisdom and ultimate sovereignty of the people of Texas. I pledge that I will carry out that decision, whatever it may be, with all my authority and power.”

Tucker looked straight into the camera again. “To our fellow Americans outside of our fair state, we wish you to understand that you all bear a special and unique place in our hearts. If we go our own way, we hope it can be as friends. If not, we remain loyal citizens despite our disagreements. To the President of the United States and the various branches and agencies of the federal government, we ask that you give us time and space to go through this process. We intend to be as transparent as possible and welcome open dialogue on all sides. Until this matter is resolved one way or the other, the borders of Texas will remain under strict state control, for security purposes.”

The caption now read - Civil War On Its Way! Texas Secedes from the U.S. Other States to Follow?

“As Thomas Paine said,” continued the governor, “These are the times that try men’s souls. Let our souls be tried and made stronger. Let the bond and spirit of brotherhood that has sustained this union for over two centuries infuse us all. It is not as enemies that we take this step, but as friends. Let us remain so. Thank

you all. May God bless the great state of Texas, and may God bless the United States of America.”

Governor Tucker stepped off the podium to a standing and enthusiastic ovation from the Texas legislature. The feed immediately cut to a national broadcaster, who began lambasting the governor and Texas in general as irresponsible and dangerous.

The sheriff’s office break room broke into an uproar, with raised voices, argument and confusion. Skull fixed himself a cup of coffee, sat against the wall and enjoyed the show. If a roomful of educated adults couldn’t make up their own minds about the situation, he wasn’t going to be able to help them do it. Besides, most still considered him an outsider.

After about a quarter of an hour, Sheriff Cox’s office door opened and Wallace and the sheriff emerged with strained faces. Cox carried a sheet of paper in his hand. Wallace looked in Skull’s direction, and then away.

“Listen up everyone,” yelled the sheriff. Slowly, the noise died down and those in the room turned to look at their boss.

“Turn that TV off,” Wallace barked, and someone quickly complied.

Cox cleared his throat several times before finally speaking. “I have a directive in my hand from the state capital that I received several minutes ago. It states that *posse comitatus* has been suspended by the president until further notice. Also, all state and local law enforcement agencies are now subordinate to the authority of federal agencies, to include the military.”

“What about the National Guard?” someone asked.

“Them too,” answered Wallace. “They got federalized by the president.”

“Seems like a really quick response to what Texas did,” said one of the deputies.

“It was already prepared,” said Skull startling a few people. “They knew this was coming.”

“Regardless,” continued the sheriff, “we will continue to do our jobs. If there are any conflicts or issues you can’t figure out, refer them to me. Now back to work.”

The crowd slowly dispersed and went about their jobs in a daze.

Two hours later the President of the United States made an address and the office was again gathered around the television.

A grey-haired and tired-looking man addressed the nation from the Oval Office. “My fellow Americans, I am sure you have seen or heard of the actions taken by a few men in the state of Texas. I feel confident that those actions do

not represent the wishes or desires of the vast majority of loyal Americans there. To those, I say that I am still your President and you are still citizens of the United States, with your ultimate loyalty to our Constitution, not misguided local authorities. To those members of the Texas state legislature and governor, I urge you to immediately resign your positions. Your actions are reckless, irresponsible and endanger those you are supposed to be representing. XHV, commonly known as the Eden Plague, is real and it is dangerous. It is a powerful pathogen engineered by bioterrorists for the sole purpose of attacking America and destroying our way of life. As your President, I do not take any of these measures to contain the spread of the virus lightly. It is a global pandemic that now threatens all of humanity. All scientific evidence supports this, and to assert otherwise is simply ridiculous.”

The president’s face grew red, a vein throbbing in his forehead. “The current governor of the state of Texas has asked us to provide him time and space to go through this *process*. I can only pledge that we will take whatever measures are in the best interests of this great nation, its people, and each of the States, to include Texas. If there is a vote, we hope wisdom prevails and this unlawful bill is struck down.”

His hands remained clasped tightly together in front of him. “If somehow those irresponsible and power-hungry politicians manipulate the ballot process or pervert the minds of the people, rest assured, the United States will never allow the state of Texas to secede. In the footsteps of our greatest President, Abraham Lincoln, who responded to Texas’ and other states rebellion with the force of righteousness, we will use any and all means necessary to maintain the integrity of our nation. No other options will be considered.

“All national military bases and federal offices within Texas will continue to operate as normal, but will allow no incursion by state authorities. Until further notice, all direct federal funding is cut off from the state of Texas, as it could be misused by these irresponsible agitators. Additionally, all legal verdicts handed down by courts within Texas from this moment onward will be considered suspect and may be nullified at any time.

“Any and all citizens of Texas are welcome to leave the state and will find sanctuary outside its borders. To the great people of Texas, I urge you to think clearly during this time of crisis. The United States is not the enemy. The federal government is not the enemy. I am not your enemy.

“The enemy is your own leadership. They are needlessly endangering you and your children. Remember who you are, what this is about and where your

true loyalties reside. Good night and God bless the United States of America.”

This time, the room remained silent for nearly half a minute.

“Does that mean there’s gonna be a war?” asked Shirley.

“No,” Skull said. “It means we’re already at war.”

And I’m on the wrong side, he thought.

Chapter 13

Military convoys began flowing through Hampton within a few days. They secured food, supplies and fuel using requisition forms promising full compensation at some point in the future. Any who resisted giving over their goods were arrested and placed in the county jail, if they were lucky. Many were simply clubbed down and left on the ground by impatient soldiers.

The town and the sheriff's office grumbled, national patriotism melting away when it came into conflict with local sentiment and personal sacrifice.

Skull found it all darkly amusing. *What did you all think was going to happen? It would be different if you were in Vermont, but you're near the epicenter of the conflict. None of you will come out of this unscathed. With any luck you'll emerge a little wiser.*

Calhoun County received its first official Union Party Advisor that week. He was a rat-faced man with shifty eyes, a haughty demeanor and a Boston accent that clashed with the common people's Arkansas drawl.

Sheriff Cox shifted nervously from foot to foot when the man entered the station. Skull nearly ran into them as he was exiting the break room. He'd never seen the sheriff so off-balance.

"Mister Evans," said the sheriff, "this is one of my men, Deputy Sheriff Jonathan Winslow."

Evans looked at Skull, and then back at the sheriff. "Sheriff Cox. It is not necessary that I personally meet all your subordinates. It is sufficient that I interact exclusively with you and the County Executive. It is through you two that I will make my requests and pass along directives from the Party in Washington. As a courtesy, I will require you run all major decisions through me."

Cox nodded, abashed and mumbled an apology.

"You *can* get me a cup of coffee, Deputy," Evans said looking at Skull again.

"No problem," Skull answered with a smile. "Would you like that with cream, fuck you, or both?"

A deafening silence descended on the room.

"Whom did you say this one was?" Evans asked pulling out a small notebook and an elegant fountain pen.

“Deputy Sheriff Jonathan Winslow,” the sheriff answered, giving Skull a frozen look.

“What, you going to write me some sort of love letter?” Skull asked. “You can state your true emotions for me here in front of everyone. Gay marriage is legal in the state, though it’s still not all that popular. Don’t mean I’ll favor you, though. I’m picky. My type is more...tall and willowy, I think.”

The man stared up at Skull, quivering with rage. “Mister Winslow, I’m afraid you don’t know who I am.”

“I have no doubt you’re afraid. At least, you should be,” answered Skull. “You’re the little puffed-up pipsqueak that I’m going to stomp the shit out of sometime in the next few weeks. When’s good for you?”

Evans stepped back and pointed at Skull with a shaking finger. “Arrest this man immediately! Right now. I demand it! He threatened a federal officer!”

“Are you really a federal officer?” asked Skull. “If you can show me your U.S. badge and credentials, I will heartily and humbly apologize.”

The rat-faced man stammered. “Well...well, I wield significant influence within the Unionist Party...the Party currently in the majority in Congress. We have advisors in the White House, and no doubt will gain even more positions in the upcoming elections.” He seemed to regain his composure somewhat, shaking his finger at Skull. “You’d do well to see which way the wind is blowing, you, you...”

“Let me show you the new wing of the station, built with a generous grant from the federal government,” the sheriff interrupted, steering the small man away from Skull while shooting him a look filled with daggers. Wallace followed, giving Skull a gleeful grin.

“You sure that was smart?” Shirley purred, sliding up to Skull and leaning her buxom figure against him as if by accident.

“Yes,” answered Skull, reaching down to pinch Shirley’s butt. He’d decided a while back to keep her sweet by flirting with her. It had helped him fit in, a little.

He stepped away and began fixing a cup of coffee. “With that sort you have to set the boundaries early or it will be even tougher to move them back later on. You all might want to consider doing the same.”

“But he can call Washington at any time.”

Skull turned to her. “How many of these Advisors you think are out here?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Neither am I,” answered Skull. “But if a little town like Hampton gets

one, there have to be thousands spread throughout the U.S. Mister Evans there can't call Washington to complain every time someone is mean or insulting to him. It shows his superiors that he isn't capable of handling his own business or inspiring respect. Most of his threats are just talk."

Shirley shook her head and walked away.

Skull took his coffee and walked back into the evidence room to come face to face with the little rat-faced man as they were emerging. "Maybe we got off on the wrong foot earlier. What's your first name, Mister Evans?"

The man stammered. "It's Arthur...but...you may call me...call me Mister _"

"Arthur," said Skull with a warm, insincere smile. "Here's that coffee you asked for. I really hope you enjoy it." Skull pointed at the man with one hand, passing him the cup with the other. "I made it extra special just for you." He winked, and then walked away.

Evans looked at the cup of coffee for a moment before handing it to Sheriff Cox, who dropped it into a nearby trashcan.

Skull believed he'd had enough of the office for a while. Although only midmorning, he decided to go to the local diner to have some coffee and think. He realized he'd gotten stuck in a rut in Hampton and needed to find a way back on the road. The INS Inc. lab in Maryland was his goal, not harassing rednecks and government bureaucrats in Arkansas. Yet, he had the feeling a few more things here needed doing before he could leave.

Walking out of the building, Justin, one of the new young deputies, ran into Skull through the front doors.

"Easy there now," said Skull grabbing the kid by the shoulders. "What's going on with you? Don't think I've ever actually seen you hurry, son. Wouldn't have believed it possible."

"They've broken away!" the teenager said breathlessly. His eyes rested on Skull briefly before shooting away to roam around wildly, and then come back.

"Who's broken away?" Skull asked.

"And from what?" asked someone else behind them.

"The whole southwestern part of the state," the boy said with a smile, and then a worried frown. "Calling themselves the Arkansas Free State. They've stopped the Eden testing. Some say they're going to join with Texas."

"That's not going to happen," said Advisor Evans in a voice of certainty. "This is likely just a small group of troublemakers that the Army will squash quickly."

“A lot of the National Guard has gone over to their side,” Justin said. “They’ve set up barricades and blocked roads.”

The small man frowned and started to reply when Shirley called out from across the room. “Mister Evans, you have a call from Washington. They say it’s very important that you take it now.”

“Of course,” answered Evans, “transfer it to the Sheriff’s phone. I’ll take it in there.” He walked into Cox’s office and closed the door.

“Nice of you to offer him use of your office,” Skull said to Cox.

The Sheriff scowled and pointed in Skull’s face. “Don’t screw with me. Not now. We got too many irons in the fire to play games.”

“Sure, boss. Just trying to lighten the mood a little, that’s all.”

Cox started to respond, but just then Evans emerged from the office looking flustered. “Sheriff, I’m afraid I am going to need your assistance.”

“Anything you need,” Cox replied.

“It appears these rumors regarding the Arkansas Free State might have some basis in fact. All of the federal troops are already committed to securing the Texas border and running the Eden testing and quarantine program.” Evans looked at them all a bit nervously. “I’ve been directed to visit the area personally in order to render an account of the situation on the ground. I’ll need at least one representative from your office and any other volunteers you can provide, the more the better.”

The men and women of the office looked around at each other, and then at Skull.

“What?”

“I think Deputy Winslow would be an excellent choice for this mission,” said Wallace.

“Why, Deputy Wallace,” Skull said. “I cannot tell you how much your support and confidence mean to me.”

“Absolutely not,” said Evans. “Pick someone else. Someone with a little more...respect.”

“Sir,” said Cox with forced patience. “Deputy Winslow is one of my best men. He has experience and is very capable. Additionally, everyone else here has family that they wouldn’t want to leave at such a time.”

“I don’t care about your families,” Evans said angrily.

“That’s clear,” came an unidentified mutter from the back of the room.

“Let’s just give it a chance,” Skull said, smiling reassuringly at the little man. “You won’t have a lick of trouble out of me, swear to God.”

Evans shook his head.

“Now look here,” Cox said his lips tight. “I think I’ve been more than cooperative. We’ve been told to provide a deputy and Winslow is it. I doubt your orders say you could personally pick the representative that would accompany you.”

“It was presumed that it would be a responsible official,” Evans whined.

“Deputy Winslow *is* a responsible official,” the sheriff responded. “He’s your man.”

“We’ll need some more volunteers,” Evans finally said. “My office recommended you arm and deputize them.”

“We can probably do that,” the sheriff answered. “When do you plan on leaving?”

“As soon as practicable. Tomorrow morning would be best.”

Cox looked at Wallace, who said, “I’ll see who I can round up.” For the first time in weeks the big man appeared positively jovial.

“I’ll go pack my gear,” said Skull walking away with a bland expression.

Chapter 14

Silas Crouch tried to suppress the frustration he felt toward his oldest son. He knew yelling at the kid wouldn't get him anywhere.

"You can't stop me, Pa," Anson said. "I talked to the recruiting sergeant and he already said they would take me."

"Don't you realize the Homeland Defense League is taking *anybody*?" Silas told his son. "They don't have any choice, because they don't have enough people to win this thing. The Arkansas Free State is a fantasy and it's going to get a lot of people killed. Maybe you, too."

"How can you say that?" his son wailed. "You were a soldier for twenty-five years. I've looked in your footlocker in the basement and seen all those medals. You could help us. I bet they would even give you a command."

"Command? Of what? Boys and farmers?"

Anson's face got tight. "Isn't that how all soldiers start out? They're asking for patriots, for men of courage. I'm not a coward."

Silas sighed and ran his hand through his hair. "Of course you're not a coward. This is *not* about bravery or lack thereof; this is about using your head, son."

"My mind is made up, Pa."

"Anson, you are sixteen years old. Do you hear that crying in the other room? That's your mother and she's worried sick. Your two little sisters wouldn't understand any better than her. And Kevin is only fourteen. He idolizes you, so he'll want to follow you."

"So what are we supposed to do? Just sit here and let the war come to us?"

Silas had already thought about this himself. He knew the Arkansas Free State would get crushed. The only reason it hadn't already was because the existing U.S. troops were overextended, but that wouldn't last forever. The generals would move symbols around on their maps, freeing up at least one heavy brigade, which would wipe the pitiful folks playing army from the face of the Earth. Worse, everyone else would suffer. Silas could see it played out in his mind as clear as day. Families of rebels forcibly thrown off their property and separated, sent to reeducation camps until they could prove their loyalty. Crushing poverty and oppression that would strip away all dignity.

"We'll go to Texas," Silas said.

“Leave Arkansas?” asked Anson. “Run from our homes? To some sicko haven? No way, not me!”

“Son,” said Silas putting a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “We can make a home anywhere. The only thing special about Arkansas is the fact that we are all here together. As far as the Eden virus, have you thought about what it could do for your sister?”

“She’s deaf, Pa, not sick.”

“That’s not what I’m saying. She’ll be fine no matter what, but what if the Eden can restore her hearing?”

Anson frowned. “They say it makes you retarded.”

“That’s just propaganda. The government is scared because they know they’re losing control. They will do or say anything to regain that control.”

“None of this has anything to do with me,” Anson said in exasperation. “I’m going to fight and we’re going to win and everything will be okay. We don’t need go to Texas.”

Silas squeezed his fists together, and then let them out. “Son, you have no idea what is coming this way, but I do. It will be hell on Earth. It will not be glorious or exciting; it will be dirty and ugly and there will be nothing redeeming or admirable about it. Good people will die and no one will care. Worse yet, their deaths will serve no purpose. It will be a senseless loss.”

“How can you say that?” Anson asked his voice rising. “Uncle Mark died in Iraq. Are you saying that was for nothing?”

“No,” said Silas thinking *yes*. “That was totally different. He was fighting for his country and the freedom of an oppressed people. He was trained and prepared. You are not.”

“I’m a soldier.”

“You are no such thing,” Silas said, putting his hands on the boy’s shoulders.

Anson shook them off roughly and backed away. “Like I said, Pa, you can’t stop me.” He opened the door, picking up the pack and hunting rifle on the porch and began running across the open field.

“Anson!” Silas yelled. “Come back, son. At least come say good-bye to your mother.”

The boy stopped running for a few seconds to walk, and then he began running again.

“Wait, Anson,” came a cry from behind the barn. Kevin came racing out after his older brother. He also carried a pack and his .22 rifle. “I’m going too.”

“Kevin, no!” yelled Silas, running after them, but the boys quickly outdistanced him. Outmatched, he turned back to his house, ignoring the questions and cries of his wife and daughters. Instead, he climbed into his pickup truck and headed northeast.

Within an hour Silas found them at the HDL recruiting station, two boys in a long line of the same. He walked up to his two nervous sons, placing his hands on them. “Come here for a second.”

Anson pulled away. “We’re doing this, Pa. No sense in trying to stop us.”

“I know,” said Silas sadly. “That’s not why I’m here.”

“Why then?” asked Kevin.

“Come here,” Silas said, putting his strong arms around each of their shoulders. “Bow your heads, sons.” He was then quiet for several seconds. When he next spoke his voice was calm and filled with unusual power.

“Almighty God,” Silas prayed, “may Your blessing be upon Anson and Kevin. Watch over them and protect them and fill them with Your Spirit. Place Your angels as a hedge of protection around them. Keep them from evil and temptation and close to You. And Lord, if it be Your will, let this family come together again safe. And if this is not Your will, please receive their immortal souls into Your presence. In Your name we pray, amen.”

Silas then took Kevin into his arms, kissing him on each cheek, and then did the same with Anson.

The boys were stunned to see their father crying.

“I love you both,” Silas told them. “Watch out for each other and trust God. Find us when this is all over, however it turns out. I’d come with you, but your mother and sisters need me.” Then he turned and walked away from the two speechless brothers.

Chapter 15

Skull, the Unionist Advisor Evans and six deputized civilians rode southwest in a cargo panel van on secondary roads. None of them wore uniforms, but they carried them packed in their bags. Although Evans was officially in charge, the men all looked to Skull for direction.

“Take the next left,” he told the driver while looking at a map.

“Go straight,” Evans ordered.

Skull simply stared at the driver until he turned left.

“You men should know this will all be in my report when this is over.”

Evans stated making a note in his small book.

Reaching out lightning-quick, Skull snatched the notebook from the man’s hand and tossed it out the open window.

“How dare you?” Evans said, shocked.

“Can’t afford to take something like that into enemy territory,” Skull explained. “Would be a security risk if captured.”

“Enemy territory?” Evans asked. “Who says we’re going into the contested areas?”

Skull ignored him and looked at the map again. Within minutes, they approached a loyalist National Guard checkpoint with Humvees and soldiers. Skull got out and Evans followed.

“Who is in charge here?” Skull asked the first soldier he saw.

“Master Sergeant Tomasu,” the soldier answered. “That’s him walking our way now.”

Skull looked up to see a man with the skin tone and features of a Pacific Islander.

“Road’s closed, folks,” Tomasu said. “I need you to turn around and head the other direction.”

Evans stepped up in front of him, his chin up. “I am an official of the Federal Government. You will not hinder me in my mission.”

Tomasu looked at Skull questioningly and Skull just shrugged.

“Do you have any documentation, sir?” Tomasu asked.

“I do,” answered Evans, “if my word is not sufficient for you I will show it. First I must get your name so I...” he reached for his small notebook but realized it was gone.

Skull and Tomasu stared at the man expectantly. Evans pulled out a folded sheet of paper from an inside jacket pocket and handed it to Tomasu.

The Master Sergeant read the document carefully, and then handed it back, satisfied. "Very good, sir. What can I do for you?"

Evans seemed uncertain about what he wanted now that he had won the argument. Eventually he said, "We need to pass through your lines. To observe the situation."

"How far are we from the contested area?" Skull asked.

Tomasu pointed at the road they had been traveling on. "Technically it starts about a couple hundred meters down that road where they've set up a checkpoint."

"Are they armed?" Skull asked.

Tomasu nodded. "National Guard troops from Fort Smith. Guy in charge is Lieutenant Nelson. I played football against his older brother in high school."

"Very fascinating," said Evans, clearly not interested. "Why have you allowed him to set up a roadblock?"

Tomasu stared at the man coldly. "My orders are to man this checkpoint and only fire in defense, not to attack the rebels. I'm not going to start a civil war."

"I order you to clear that enemy checkpoint and remove all resistance so that we might proceed down the road."

"You're going to have to talk to my commanding officer about that, Mister Evans," Tomasu explained patiently.

"Do you know who I am?" Evans asked.

"Sure I do," the man answered. "You're an official civilian *advisor*, sir. I'll only conduct operations at the orders of my chain of command. Is there anything else I *can* do for you?"

"And just who is your commanding officer and where can I find him?" Evans stammered angrily.

Skull stepped between the men and gently but firmly guided him back toward the van. "Where in the hell did you learn to talk to people?"

"You should know," retorted Evans, "that I have a graduate degree from Harvard in organizational communications. I am one of the country's foremost experts in negotiation and how to effectively communicate with people."

"Uh huh," said Skull. "Well, I don't think the good master sergeant is going to attack that checkpoint and neither would I. Even if he wanted to, he doesn't have the authority to act on his own. Which leads us back to our mission."

What are we going to do?”

“We’re here to render a firsthand report—“

“Yeah, I know what your orders say,” Skull said cutting him off. “Enough of the *what*, it’s time for the *how*.”

Evans peered at him blankly.

Skull sighed and shook his head. “The way I see it, there are two options. One, we go in officially. Say we are here to talk to the resistance and render a report to Washington.”

“Just walk in there?” Evans asked, shocked. “Are you mad? They could lock us up somewhere.”

“They might,” answered Skull, “although we don’t know yet.”

“What’s the other option?” asked one of the men in the back of the van.

“Glad you asked,” said Skull. “We sneak in and pretend to be with them. If caught and questioned, we say we’re fleeing from the northeast and trying to get to Texas.”

“Pretend to be rebel sympathizers?” Evans asked in evident disbelief.

“No,” answered Skull. “We pretend to be rebels ourselves. Cross over into their lines without being detected and just blend in. I doubt there is very much bureaucracy in place yet and they would take our word for it.”

“I don’t like it,” said Evans.

Skull turned to the man. “Whether you know it or not, you have been given an intelligence reconnaissance mission where you must go in behind enemy lines in order to render a report. I don’t know why some idiot in Washington gave *you* this mission, since you are so obviously unsuited for it, but they did. I, unlike you, have extensive experience in working behind enemy lines, intelligence operations, and reconnaissance. You need to listen to me and do it my way.”

“Or what?” Evans asked.

“Or the men and I leave you here. We’ll do it ourselves and report back to you later.” In fact, Skull hoped the man would take his suggestion.

Evans’ face seemed to elongate even more into something resembling a rodent’s. “You’ll have to answer for this.”

“So will you,” Skull said. “You’ll have to explain to your superiors in Washington how you completely failed at such a simple mission. I wouldn’t want to be in your shoes.”

Evans stared angrily at Skull before speaking. “Fine. But I’m still in charge.”

“Of course you are,” answered Skull with a grin.

“So, how are we supposed to get in there?” asked another man.
“Just leave that to me,” said Skull.

Chapter 16

After hiding their uniforms, badges and much of their gear in a collapsed, abandoned shed, they traded a farmer the expensive panel van for a johnboat with a trolling motor.

“The Sheriff ain’t going to be happy about us givin’ away his van,” said one of the men as he climbed into the boat.

“He’ll be fine,” Skull answered. “Besides, I’m sure the government will reimburse him. Mister Evans here has pull and resources that we have not yet begun to comprehend.”

The advisor opened his mouth to say something, and then shut it, clambering into the boat to take a seat.

“Maybe we should go back and check in,” one of the men suggested as they floated down the river in the darkness.

“Do as you please,” Skull said. He’d quickly discovered that all the men who’d volunteered had done so looking for thrills, but now the excitement had worn off. None of them had even been out of the county where they were born more than a few times and were now desperately homesick.

“Really?” asked the man.

“Sure,” answered Skull. “Just make sure you tell the sheriff he’s supposed to put you in jail for me until I get back.”

With that, the men got quiet and the flat-bottomed boat drifted slowly down the idle river, pulled along by a silent trolling motor. Skull occasionally used a banked flashlight to get their bearings, but for the most part they were able to see enough to navigate the river.

Spotting a bridge ahead, Skull pulled out a tarp and covered himself to block out any light. Once he’d consulted the map, he said, “That bridge should mark Route 16, which leads west to the town of Garland. Reports indicate it’s one of the resistance hubs.”

“How are we supposed to get there?” one of the men asked.

“We walk,” Skull answered. “It’s not more than four or five miles.”

“What about the boat?” Evans asked.

Skull looked around and saw a rock bank that hung out over the water. “We sink it undamaged there in the water where no one is likely to find it. We’ll pull the motor and battery off and hide them in the underbrush.”

“What if we need it to get out of here?” asked another of the men.

“Then we pull it up out of the water and bail it out,” Skull explained patiently. “That’s one of the good things about a johnboat. It’s just a metal form.”

They heard a vehicle approaching and dropped down low in the boat. A Humvee drove over the bridge without slowing.

“What if they catch us coming in?” a volunteer asked.

“I’m counting on it,” said Skull.

“What?” asked Evans in alarm.

“Listen, people,” Skull explained. “We’re here to do a mission and that’s to find out what is going on. The best way to do that is pretend to be one of them. Remember your story - you hate what the federal government is doing and want no part in it. You’re not an Eden, and have no strong feelings one way or the other in that regard. You’re mainly concerned about the government stepping all over your rights and want to live somewhere that respects those rights. Some of you have family you plan to send for when you can. That is your story; everything else can be the truth. They ask where you went to high school? Tell them. They ask the name of your dog? Tell them. Tell them the truth about everything except why you’re here, got it?”

They mumbled their agreement and understanding.

“Okay,” said Skull, “Let’s unload and sink the USS *Skull*.”

“The what?” asked Evans.

“Never mind,” answered Skull handing their gear to a few of the men now on the bank. Once the boat was emptied, he unhooked the trolling motor and battery and handed them ashore. Then he pushed the boat near the rock overhang and, while holding onto the rock surface, stood and walked to the front of the boat. Skull pushed down, using the rock surface as an anchor for his upper body until the edge of the boat was under the river’s surface and began to fill with water. It was slow at first, but picked up speed. After several minutes the boat rested on the river’s bottom and Skull stood atop it in waist-deep water. When he tried to step off, the boat started to rise again.

“There’s air in the seams,” he explained. “Damn fine boat. Pass me some good-sized rocks.”

They did and he laid them around the edges of the boat until it no longer threatened to rise, and then added a few more for good measure. Then he climbed out of the water and retrieved his gear.

“Let’s go,” he said simply and started walking west.

After about an hour they began to see lights. A few minutes later they came

to the edge of a town and moved toward the courthouse in the distance, highlighted by the rising sun.

People were already going about their business. Skull and the group kept expecting to be challenged, but no one seemed to notice they didn't belong. Many even nodded or said good morning.

"Pitiful security," Skull said disapprovingly. He turned to Evans. "You can note that in your report. If someone wanted to they could infiltrate a full company of commandos before anyone noticed."

They continued to walk down the street. Skull saw a large tent with the smell of breakfast emanating on the gentle breeze. "Come on," he told them and then got in line.

They received a simple breakfast of eggs and toast with coffee and milk. Skull led them to an unoccupied table and they sat down, dropping their packs to the floor around them. Within seconds they began digging into their food.

"Not bad," said one of the men around a mouthful.

Skull nodded in agreement and looked at Evans pointedly. "They're not hurting for food. Either in quality or quantity. Maybe in variety. No bacon, no ham, no sausage." They all ate quietly, looking around at the tent filled with men and women of all ages.

"What the hell does a man have to do around here to get accosted?" Skull wondered out loud. Then he spotted what he was looking for: a sergeant major in uniform.

Skull waved at him and put on his biggest smile.

The man made a beeline for their table.

"How's it going, Smaj?" Skull asked. "Did you get some of them eggs? Those were delicious."

"When was the last time you men shaved?" the hard-bitten senior NCO asked. "And where are your uniforms?" His nametag read *Landers*.

"Don't have any yet, Smaj," Skull answered taking a bite of buttered toast.

"Who's your platoon sergeant?" Landers asked sternly.

"Don't have one yet, Smaj," Skull answered, still eating. "We just got here. Walked in on Route 16 and thought we would eat some breakfast. Damn glad we did too. We're hungry."

The sergeant major got pale, and then turned red. He started quivering, spun, and then took a step away from them before reversing course and coming back to their table.

"Do you mean to tell me you men just walked in from outside of our lines,

sat down to eat breakfast, and no one stopped you?”

“Yeah, Smaj,” replied Skull. “Pathetic, huh?”

Landers looked at them in amazement. “You men wait here. Don’t go anywhere. I’ll be right back.”

“Think he would mind if I got seconds?” asked one of the men.

“Not at all,” Skull said. “You men eat all you want.”

All of them except Skull and Evans went back for more.

“You sure you know what you’re doing?” Evans asked.

“Not in the least,” Skull smiled. “There’s a very strong chance we’re all going to die a slow and painful death. Especially if you decide to open your mouth and speak.”

Evans started to respond, but by then the men were returning with plates piled high.

A few minutes later, Landers approached with a lieutenant colonel and two captains in tow. “Here they are, sir. Just like I said.”

Skull stood and took note of the nametag of the man in charge. “Lieutenant Colonel Deets. I’m Jonathan Winslow and these are my friends. We came here all the way from Calhoun County after hearing what you’re doing here. We’d like to join up.”

Evans choked on milk beside Skull, so he slapped the small man in the back helpfully.

“You men want to enlist in the Homeland Defense League?” Deets asked.

“Yes, sir,” said Skull with a smile.

“And you’re committed to helping the Arkansas Free State?”

“You bet.”

“Maybe we should learn a little more about these men and how they got here, sir,” said the sergeant major.

“Yes, yes,” Deets answered, “but we’re short men and got to take what we can get.”

“We’re your men,” said Skull.

“What do you think?” Deets asked the two captains behind him.

“Sir,” said one. “They’ll need to go through our initial training unless they have military experience already.”

“Any of you have that?” Deets asked.

“None but myself,” Skull answered for them. “I’m retired Marine Corps. Force Recon.”

The four men all raised their eyebrows.

“Very impressive,” said Deets. “We might use you to help with training the new recruits.”

“It would be my pleasure, sir.”

“All right then,” he answered with a smile. “My exec and ops officers here will get you boys assigned to a platoon and inprocessed. Welcome to the Free State.”

“Thank you, sir,” Skull answered for them.

Deets walked away with the sergeant major. One of the two captains turned to them. “Go ahead and finish your breakfast, and then report to that building over there,” he pointed to a small grey structure to the left of the courthouse. “We’ll get you settled in there.”

“Roger that, sir,” answered Skull as the two captains walked away.

“What just happened?” Evans asked.

Skull sat back down and leaned over close to the small man. “Remember when we first met and I told you I would soon be stomping your ass? Well it turns out I don’t need to do that.”

“Why?”

“Because these local boys are going to do it for me,” Skull answered slapping the advisor on the back and laughing. “Welcome to boot camp.”

Chapter 17

Skull, Evans and the other six were all assigned to a newly formed platoon, part of a company composed of recruits. Filled with mostly young men, it also included teenagers. Two were brothers named Anson and Kevin.

Because of his experience, Skull was brevetted to Sergeant in order to help with training new recruits like the men who arrived with him. He didn't bother to tell anyone he'd retired with twenty years in the Corps as a gunnery sergeant, two ranks higher. To the Free State's Homeland Defense League, he was still just a new guy and had to prove himself. Besides, he already had all the responsibility and authority he wanted.

Skull's platoon was led by Staff Sergeant Talbot, who was only too happy to give Skull free rein and allow him to do as he pleased when it came to training. While Skull had never been a drill instructor or really any kind of formal trainer, he was surprised to find he enjoyed teaching young men how to fight and stay alive.

All of them, veterans and trainees alike, felt a battle coming, and there was no question they knew Skull's training might save their lives.

Skull primarily focused on small unit defensive operations. It was unlikely they would go on the offensive, as any conceivable enemy would likely have them outmanned and outgunned. As a matter of fact, the overall strategy of the HDL seemed to be to hold on until the Texans came in to save the day. Exactly why anyone thought the reconstituted Republic of Texas would leave its borders and come to the rescue of a piece of its old rival Arkansas was anyone's guess.

Much of their training involved constant digging of fighting positions, barriers, bomb shelters, latrines, and mantraps. The young men and boys came dragging in at the end of each day tired and dirty. Evans was usually the last of all and sometimes had to be carried. Skull hoped each day that he wouldn't return, that the little man's heart would explode while digging ditches, but no such luck.

As the days passed, Skull could see that the HDL was woefully ill-prepared to withstand an attack of fleas – as a matter of fact they were already overrun with them – much less a concerted attack by a real military force. Discipline and hygiene were incessant problems and the force was marked by constant desertions, increasingly severe punishments for minor infractions, and a medical

tent spilling over.

Plenty of civilians mixed with the troops, but generally as transients, hangers-on, and contractors. Some delivered supplies or food, some “encouraged” the men, often after dark, and some just visited, and then went back home.

Opportunities for recreation or down time were rare, but they did exist. The Homeland Defense League commander had outlawed alcohol to anyone who had not completed their initial training, but a small tent had been set up with soft drinks, snacks and equipment to watch television, movies or play games.

One night when Skull made his usual rounds at the morale tent he noticed a flurry of excitement. Evidently, there was a new Daniel Markis video on the web and they had gathered to watch it.

Oh, hell, thought Skull, *what now, Markis?* He slid into a place near the back where his height allowed him to look over the heads of most there. “Down in front!” he snapped, and some of the young men sat down to make it easier to see.

The room got quiet as the lights were lowered a bit. A projector attached to a laptop illuminated the large screen at the front of the tent. Suddenly, Daniel Markis’ face stared straight at him.

Son of a bitch looks younger than the last time I saw him, thought Skull. *Guess sitting on your ass in Colombia is relaxing.*

“People of the world, many of you know me already, but if not, let me introduce myself. I’m Daniel Markis. I’m recording this video from one of the many Free Communities that we’re establishing around the world. Some, such as the Colombia Free Community, are congruent with their former nations. Others are new states within states, such as Roraima in northern Brazil, or the Republic of Texas in the United States. These Free Communities are a loose alliance of sanctuaries for any Edens. If you are being harassed, persecuted, hunted, arrested or are in fear for your life, know that there are places where you will be safe and welcome. Click on one of the links below to find a sanctuary you can reach. You will be able to verify your Eden status online with one of our resistance specialists, and then get personalized support.”

Sounds like one of those TV ads for home insurance, thought Skull.

Markis continued, “To the governments of the world who have not joined the Free Communities structure, I urge you to protect the Edens within your borders just like any other citizens. Do not allow them to be persecuted. Follow the examples of New Zealand, Australia, Argentina, Colombia, South Africa,

Texas and others on the list below. Enlightened leaders of these nations refuse to believe the vile propaganda about the Eden virus. Please do not be fooled yourself.”

The video cut to images of a young barefoot boy playing soccer with other laughing children. The caption below the video read *Ravi, age 8, Calcutta, India*. “Ravi here is an energetic kid, but less than six weeks ago he was crippled and confined to a wheelchair until his parents gave him the Eden virus.”

The view changed to show a teenage girl playing Ping-Pong, and then painting a brilliantly colored sunrise. The caption read *Jeanne, age 17, Galveston, Texas*. “Jeanne here is an incredibly gifted artist. Her paintings show an insight into colors and depth that is typically only seen in the great masters. Is she a prodigy? She is more than that. She was born blind. Ten days ago she chose to receive the Eden virus and could see within one day.”

Next, a baby in a crib filled the screen, teetering on chubby toddler legs and gripping the edge of the playpen in one hand, a stuffed turtle in the other. He shook the turtle vigorously and made happy, eager baby noises. The caption read *Timmy, age 8 months, Canberra, Australia*. “Timmy is an adorable and healthy baby boy, yet he is a true miracle. Timmy was born four months premature when his mother tragically leaped from a five-story building and killed herself in a drug-induced depression. Worse, little Timmy was born HIV positive and addicted to heroin and other narcotics. Doctors had given up hope and decided to take Timmy off life support, but a brave nurse took matters into her own hands and fed Timmy a tiny drop of the Eden virus. When the doctors took him off life support, he did not die as expected, but continued to recover and is now the joy of the young family that adopted him.”

Markis’ image filled the screen again. “I know this makes some of you uncomfortable. Giving people diseases to save their lives, or make those lives worth living, goes against every intuition we’ve grown up with, as does treating even crippled children against their will. However, these are but a few of thousands of such stories. The Eden virus is a blessing to all who do not wish to do evil, and a miracle to the sick, lame and blind. Don’t believe those who fear the unknown. Consider this option if you or a loved one is sick, or very old, or suffers from a disability. Modern medicine may do nothing further for you, but the Eden virus can.

“If you wish to be a part of the miracles you have seen, you need only find an Eden. The virus is passed from one person to the other through any bodily fluid. Or, you can make your way to one of the Free Communities or Eden

Sanctuaries and receive the treatment at any medical facility.

“For those persecuted Edens out there, please know that you are not alone. For those who choose not to take the virus, please know that we don’t bear you any ill will. Let the persecution and fear end, we all know there is a better way. Thank you for your time.”

The screen faded to a beautiful sunrise on a perfect white beach.

Typical Daniel Markis, thought Skull. Idealistic and syrupy sweet. The beach scene at the end was a nice touch, a positive psychological anchor. Does he really think these videos will change anything?

The room was quiet as the lights came back on. A tall, crew-cut man stood up at the front of the room. “I’m convinced. Someone kiss me.” He then went to the most beautiful woman in the room and bent down with his lips pursed. She slapped him across the face and the room erupted in laughter.

This broke the paralysis and the men and women went back to their normal routines: drinking, dancing, talking, and doing their best to enjoy themselves.

Skull had an early morning and decided to call it a night, so he slipped quietly into his tent. It was dark and filled with sleeping recruits, as he was the only one allowed in the morale tent. He was also the only one not brutally exhausted.

Sensing someone in the shadows near his bunk, he struck with a vicious sidekick, feeling his foot connect and the target give a loud groan. Skull pounced on the crumpled figure and twisted an arm up behind the small man’s back until he could feel it was on the verge of dislocation.

“Stop,” hissed the voice weakly. “Please, it’s me, Evans.”

Skull held on for a moment longer and even increased the pressure, wanting to hurt the man, but eventually released him. “What the hell are you doing?”

Evans lay back against Skull’s cot, one arm cradling the other across his stomach. “We need to go back. It’s time.”

“Why do you say that?”

“We’ve learned all we can learn,” Evans insisted. “We have to tell them what is going on.”

Skull studied the small man. He’d lost probably fifteen pounds and wasn’t heavy to begin with. His eyes seemed hollow and weak. Haunted.

“You’re quitting,” Skull said. “This has nothing to do with the mission; you just can’t hack it.”

“So what if I am?” hissed the man. “This is my mission. I’m in charge and

I say it's over. That's it. Let's go."

"No," said Skull.

"What do you mean, *no*?"

"You're not going anywhere," answered Skull. "That's what I mean. If you get caught it will endanger the integrity of the mission."

The man's old arrogance returned. "I don't need *your* permission. The other men want to leave too. We know where the boat is and can get out on our own."

"Then you better be very fast and very quiet when you finally make your move," Skull said ominously.

"And why is that?" Evans asked. "Afraid we'll get caught and give you away."

"No," answered Skull. "You won't get that far."

"You don't know anything."

Skull pulled his knife from the small of his back and laid it on the small man's cheek just under his eye.

Evans whimpered and tried to pull back.

"Let me be clear," Skull said leaning in. "If you try to leave without my permission, I will catch you and stick this knife in your face. Many, many times. Until I'm tired of doing it or I get tennis elbow. You understand me?"

"You can't get away with talking to me like that," Evans whined.

Skull had grown tired of this. "Get back to your cot and get some sleep. You've got a long day ahead of you."

Evans stood slowly and slunk off to his bunk.

Skull sensed eyes upon him and looked up into those of the young boy Kevin. He looked as haunted as Evans.

"Go to sleep," he told the boy. "It will be better tomorrow."

"No, it won't," the boy answered before turning away from Skull.

No, it won't, Skull agreed silently.

Chapter 18

Kevin watched Anson and felt an odd combination of pride and resentment. Everything seemed to come easily to his older brother. Sports, school, girls, and now even soldiering. Kevin had wanted nothing more than to follow Anson his entire life. Now, he had been left behind again.

Anson had gained the admiration of the other recruits and the trainers. He was now a trainee squad leader and entrusted with more and more responsibility. Kevin could tell his brother was having the time of his life.

Kevin, on the other hand, was miserable. He missed his family and didn't fit in here. Nothing he did was right and the constant harassment and disdain threatened to crush his spirit. Worse yet, Anson, who had always taken up for him, wasn't protecting him anymore. Kevin knew if he asked his brother about this, he would explain that it was for Kevin's own good. To make him tougher and a better soldier. To help him grow up.

Kevin thought that was a load of bull.

Kevin thought Anson was ashamed of him.

It was a hard thing to think and harder to accept. The brother he had idolized all his life no longer helped him. Still, in many ways he realized it freed him. If his brother had given up on him anyway, then there was nothing he could do, and he had nothing to lose.

That meant he was free to leave. He could go back to his family.

"Keep digging, maggot," said Sergeant Talbot, kicking dirt into his face.

Kevin bent his aching back and lifted another spade full of tough soil. He looked over and saw Anson talking with the other NCOs, likely discussing real army stuff. Things Kevin obviously wouldn't understand or relate to. Not the inadequate little brother.

He wondered where his father and mother and the girls were now. Were they safe somewhere, worrying about and sending up daily prayers for their two sons? Were they still on the road, refugees seeking a place of rest? Were they in some prison camp? Were they even alive? Not for the first time, he wondered why he had ever left. If he'd stayed, he'd be the oldest son. His dad would have to treat him like a grownup.

Pushing the thought aside, he began to dig harder. These worries were with him often now and he had nightmares where his family had been caught and

interned, or worse, slaughtered. Kevin had tried to talk to Anson about his nightmares, but his brother wouldn't even listen to him, just told him, "Shut up and soldier."

What am I staying here for? Kevin wondered. He realized that was a good question. Maybe *the* question. Why was he still here? He so very obviously did not belong.

Turning the question over and over in his head while he dug the ditch, it took him a long time to come up with the answer, but when he did there was no denying its truth.

He was here because he wanted Anson to love him again. The way he had when they were younger.

But it wasn't working. It wouldn't. If anything, Kevin's presence was driving them further apart.

Kevin wiped tears away from his cheeks before anyone could see. He'd followed Anson's lead in everything as long as he could remember, but maybe it was time to stop. The thought frightened him, but it felt right.

At lunch he tried to talk to his brother, but the older boy was busy. Same at afternoon break and dinner. Just before lights out, he finally had a chance.

"What is it, Kevin?" Anson asked impatiently. "You've been hounding me all day to talk about something."

"It's important," Kevin said.

"I'm sure you think it's important," said Anson, "but I doubt it's more important than getting a good night's rest. We got training tomorrow and you need to start picking it up."

"There is no picking it up," Kevin said flatly. "This is all I've got."

Anson looked at him with surprise and realized his little brother was sincere. "Don't tell me that. You just need to dig deeper and work harder."

"Why?" asked Kevin. "Aren't they just going to kick me out?"

"They just might," said Anson. "Don't tempt them. They could send you home to mamma like a little boy."

"Good," said Kevin.

"What did you say?" Anson asked. For the first time he gave his full attention to his little brother.

"I said 'good.' If they want to send me home, that's fine by me."

"Don't say that," said Anson, "you're already making me look..." The older boy ground to a halt.

"Go on. Say it."

“Doesn’t matter.”

“I’m making you look bad in front of your new friends,” Kevin said. He couldn’t remember ever not caring what Anson thought of him, but realized with a surge of strength that now he didn’t give a rat’s ass.

“I don’t belong here,” Kevin continued. “You know it and so does everyone else.”

“You just need to stick it out a little while longer,” Anson insisted. “Father was a soldier. We’ll be soldiers too. You said so yourself.”

“Why?” asked Kevin. “Why is it so important that I be a soldier? And why do I have to make up my mind now? I’m fourteen, Anson. I wish I was older, but I ain’t. I can’t carry as much, run as far or dig as deep as anyone else here.”

Anson seemed at a loss for an answer. He finally said, “I always wanted to be like Father.”

“I get that,” said Kevin, “but what does that have to do with *me*? Why do I have to be like Father? Maybe I just want to be *with* Father?”

“So you want to go home, is that it?”

“Yes.”

“Just run off and leave us in our time of need?” Anson asked. “How could you do that to us?”

“Come with me,” Kevin pleaded. “We can go together tonight. I’ve been watching. Security isn’t tight. We could slip right through and go find our family.”

Anson looked around startled. “Don’t say that. Someone could hear.”

“I’m serious, Anson. I’ve always followed you no matter where you led. For just this once, follow *me*.”

Anson’s face got hard. “I can’t do that.”

Kevin stared at him for a long moment before looking away and wiping his eyes. “Fine. Then I’ll go without you.”

“No you won’t,” said Anson. “I won’t let you.”

“You can’t stop me.”

“The hell I can’t,” insisted Anson. “I’ll tell them what you’re planning.”

“Why do you even care?” asked Kevin. “This is supposed to be a volunteer army. Well, I’m un-volunteering now. It’s not like I’m going to make any difference in the fighting.”

Anson didn’t answer, but his eyes flicked involuntarily to the NCOs talking at the end of the tent.

Kevin looked at them, and then turned back to Anson. “So that’s it?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You don’t want me to go because it might make you look bad?”

Anson turned away. “That’s ridiculous. This whole conversation is ridiculous. Get to your bunk and go to sleep before I report you.”

Kevin stared silently at his brother’s back for a long time. It was as if he saw him for the first time. Finally he turned and walked away.

After watching Kevin return to his bunk, Anson let out his breath and turned around.

He found that tall thin scary man, Sergeant Winslow with the face like a skull, looking at him. Looking deep into him.

“What?”

Winslow shook his head sadly. “He was right about most everything.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Anson said turning from those penetrating eyes.

Winslow continued to stare at him until the boy had no choice but to look back. Once he had Anson’s attention he said, “You should let him go. Not everyone’s cut out for this.”

“He wanted to join up. He followed me against Father’s wishes, and he swore an oath!”

“So it’s all right to desert your family, but not your State?”

Anson started to say something, anything, but then the lights went off and the tent quieted down for sleep.

The darkness was pleasant. It hid and covered him, concealing his confusion.

The silence would have been welcome except for a persistent sound from the other end of the long tent.

It was the sound of Kevin sobbing.

Chapter 19

Skull was surprised to be summoned for a senior leader's meeting, but by now most of the officers and NCOs considered him one of the cadre. Arriving at the courthouse, he sat near the back. It became apparent from the curious looks and questions that this was not a normal meeting, and no one in the room seemed to know the purpose for the gathering.

"Stand by," announced the sergeant major and everyone in the room rose. "The commander," he announced as Lieutenant Colonel Deets walked in.

"Take your seats, please," Deets said while still walking toward the front of the room. "Thank you all for coming." He looked out over the group with his hands clasped behind his back. "I've asked Doctor Abraham to brief you on a development that he made me aware of only recently. Doctor Abraham?"

Deets sat on the edge of the stage as a bespectacled, hunched man stood and looked at them critically.

"I'm sure it comes as no surprise to many in this room," he said slowly, "that there are prostitutes operating out of an abandoned house just to the south of camp. Sometimes they even make their way to the morale tent, I'm told."

There were some whistles and murmurs of appreciation.

"As I suspected," he continued, "some of you are personally acquainted with the Porter sisters, Mary and Molly, and their friends."

More cries and whistles.

The doctor's expression did not change and he continued. "I have of late noticed an unexpected rise in the number of individuals in this camp who have been infected by the Eden virus."

The courtroom was suddenly silent, with many looking around at each other.

"The commander has decided to keep confidential the identities of those infected," the doctor said. "But it might come as a surprise to you to know that Edens now comprise a significant proportion of the HDL. I estimate over one third."

Murmurs of agitation filled the room.

"How?" asked one officer from the front. "Who is doing this and how are they being infected?"

The doctor smiled for the first time. "I thought I made that plain. The

winsome Porter sisters and their happy contingent, of course.”

There was stunned silence for a full second before pandemonium broke out.

“At ease! Shut the hell up!” bellowed the sergeant major and the noise died down. “Please continue, doctor.”

“Thank you,” said Abraham. “I’m sure there are many of you in the room who have availed yourselves of the girls’ services and are now wondering if you are infected. After this meeting you may set up a time to come get tested. You will have my discretion in this matter. Additionally, I have treated hundreds of infectees and can assure you that it is not the end of the world should you test positive. There are many who even consider it a good thing.”

“What about the girls?” asked an NCO from the back.

Lieutenant Colonel Deets stood up and took the podium. “They have all been arrested, questioned, and sent back to Texas where they came from.”

“But why did they do it?” asked someone close to Skull.

“There were both part of an organized group,” explained Deets. “Their motives were, at least in their own minds, charitable. They were part of a larger group called Eden’s Eves, prostitutes who use their services to spread the Eden virus.”

“You mean those whores did this to us on purpose?”

“Yes,” answered Deets. “Their intentions were to spread the virus to as many people as they could. The stated goal of Eden’s Eves is to help people.”

“Why were they released?” asked a first sergeant. “They should be prosecuted.”

“Stand down, First Sergeant,” yelled the sergeant major.

“No, it’s fine,” answered Deets. “It was my call. I didn’t see any malice in them and was afraid what might happen if they were still around when you all found out.”

“They should be executed for this,” someone cried. “They infected us against our will.”

“And you disobeyed my standing order against prostitution,” said Deets calmly. “Every one of you should be prosecuted for that, but I’d say you got what you deserve. Best as I can tell, the effects are far better than gonorrhoea or herpes, which is what you typically get from camp prostitutes.”

Deets is taking this rather easily, thought Skull. Maybe a little too much in stride...unless he’s an Eden. He looked around and saw a large number of men with stunned looks on their faces. Others seemed to be trying a bit too hard to

appear relaxed and casual.

Doctor Abraham's estimate might be on the low side, he thought.

“What’s done is done,” Deets continued. “If you think you might be infected, go see Doctor Abraham. Or don’t. It’s a private affair, as I’ve always said. One of the reasons the HDL even exists is to stop the persecutions of people with the virus. Let me also remind you that my standing order against patronizing prostitutes is still in force. If you NCOs and officers can’t follow policy, how do you expect the rank and file to do so?”

Murmurs and ashamed noises swept through the crowd.

“Each of you also has an important role to play,” continued Deets. “I’ll post an official notice explaining in much less detail what we have talked about here tonight on the bulletin boards for the troops. As you might imagine, there could be concern and confusion. Your job as leaders is to calm them down. Reassure them of their duty and why they are here. We can’t afford any distractions with the Federal Army moving to the northeast.”

“Do we know anything more about the Texans?” asked an officer. “Are they moving to help us?”

Deets shook his head. “Nothing yet, but our leadership is in Austin trying to broker a deal for support. They’ve already sent us weapons and supplies, unofficially. We expect word any day now.”

Don’t hold your breath, thought Skull.

“What about the U.S. Army?” asked another officer. “Do we know how much time we have until they try to attack?”

“First of all,” said Deets, “we don’t know if they will attack. With that said, I think you have the right attitude. We have to prepare for the worst and assume they will come against us at some point. That could be in two hours or two months or never. We just don’t know. The only thing we can do is prepare as well as possible. Everyone got that?”

Flurries of *yes, sir* and *roger, sir* bounced from person to person

“Good,” he said. “Now if there are no further questions, carry on.”

Everyone in the room stood at attention as the commander walked out. As soon as he cleared the doors, there came a loud buzz of conversation accompanied by worried looks.

Skull slipped out the back and thought as he made his way toward his tent. He had never heard of Eden’s Eves and was impressed by the women’s dedication. He also found himself glad he’d never taken advantage of the working girls’ services. Skull wondered if Markis was behind this and quickly

decided against it. Daniel was too idealistic and would consider it to be exploiting women even if they volunteered.

Now, Spooky on the other hand...

As he approached the tent he mentally checked off the men and their bunks. Living in such tight quarters, most everyone knew what everyone else did in their free time, to include visiting prostitutes. Time off was limited for the recruits, but there was still some opportunity to engage in recreational activities. Maybe even more of an opportunity for the new recruits to visit the prostitutes, since they were banned from the morale tent.

Thinking deeply, Skull figured all the men who had come with him from Arkansas had visited the girls with the exception of Evans. The small man was so exhausted at the end of each day that he went straight to bed and collapsed. The two young brothers were a question mark, but if he would have to guess, he would put a *yes* next to both of them. Kevin, the youngest had been acting differently of late.

But the oldest wasn't acting differently at all. Skull stopped. It was almost inconceivable that the younger boy would do anything so significant without following his older brother's lead. Maybe the younger had gotten infected and not the older. Maybe the effects simply acted at different rates. Or perhaps some of the rumors were true and the normal "virtue effect" varied far more wildly than most thought. Some said a few who got infected went cold, turning into psychopaths.

Who truly knew? Probably only someone like Elise Markis, studying the pathogen and its effects on people.

Skull kept walking. He knew he didn't want to be in this camp when the U.S. Army arrived and the shooting started. Being among a bunch of undertrained and inexperienced young men and boys with a hyped-up moral aversion to killing seemed a really bad idea. He imagined these troops trying to shoot the attackers in the leg or shoulder or the weapons from out of their hands like some ridiculous old time Western movie because they couldn't stand to kill. Maybe they would try to reason with the attackers, or even surrender *en masse* out of a sense of responsibility to the human race.

You just can't trust Edens, Skull thought. Too much moral certitude. Too much impulse toward personal sacrifice. Too little predictability. Too little practicality.

Nope. He would need to be long gone before these boys even got close to busting their combat cherry.

He just needed a little more time to finalize a plan.

Chapter 20

The high-pitched wail of air raid sirens jerked Skull from sleep, a blessing. In his dream, he'd been back at the scene of the motorcycle crash on the winding road up Mount Tamalpais, staring at Linde's body spitted on that post as she reached for him with one weak hand. No matter how many times he had the same nightmare, he could never reach her fingers, could never even touch her before life fled, leaving him forever desolate and alone.

He crammed his feelings down hard again, forcing them into a tiny place labeled *tomorrow*.

Yet tomorrow never came, and that was fine with Skull.

The sirens continued for several seconds before ending, replaced by an intercom announcement.

"Inbound planes detected on radar," said the voice. "I repeat, inbound planes on radar. This is not a drill. Air defense personnel assume positions. All others report to assigned air raid shelters." The announcement repeated several times, interspersed with more sirens.

Air defense radars had arrived from Texas only the week before, along with several old Stinger shoulder-fired weapons, but that meant the men manning them also only had one week of training. Skull suspected the short-ranged Stingers wouldn't be very useful at night in the hands of those with limited training and experience, especially if strike aircraft came in at high altitude. The Stingers would be most useful against helicopters.

Someone switched on the lights in the tent, immediately followed by yells for the beating of whatever brain-deficient sonofabitch would be so stupid as to turn on lights during an air raid. The lights went black. Men scrambled in the dark, bumping into each other and their cots, cursing and fumbling. Some of the brighter ones switched on tiny red LED map-lights.

Skull chuckled. All these men had navigated the dark tent at night flawlessly hundreds of times to get ready in the morning, go to the bathroom in the middle of the night, or sneak off to see the working girls, but with the added pressure of the sirens it was like they had been dropped into a crystal shop blindfolded.

Most of the men were simply grabbing their assigned weapons and running out of the tent as instructed. Skull got fully dressed and grabbed his pack, which

he always kept prepared, along with the M4 assault rifle they had issued him.

He looked up toward the young brothers and saw the oldest already gone, the younger moving in that direction. Evans was still in his sleeping bag on his assigned cot. His confused eyes and tangled hair poked out above an open mouth.

Making a fast decision, Skull strode over to Evans. "Quick, get up. Let's go."

"What's happening?" he asked in a slow voice.

"Well," said Skull looking up at the ceiling. "Since there are multiple planes inbound and not just one, I suspect we're about to be bombed. Maybe the first in a series of strikes. Might be a long night."

Evans was finally moving. He pulled himself out of the bag and tugged on pants and shoes. "Where's our air raid shelter?" he asked. "I forget."

"We're not going to the shelter," Skull answered.

The little man froze and looked at him.

"If you really want to get out of here, the time is now."

Evans face slowly registered a smile. He began moving faster, packing his own ruck and standing quickly. "Let's go."

"Follow me," said Skull walking away from the center of camp. They made their way down the main street, the one they'd taken into town. Lots of soldiers were running around, but in the confusion no one took notice of them. At the edge of town, Skull pulled Evans off the road and into the dense woods.

"Wouldn't it be faster on the road?" Evans asked.

"It would," answered Skull searching around for a good spot, "but this is safer."

He spotted what he was looking for - a small hollow in the ground with low-hanging trees over it. "Quick, get down in there."

Evans froze. "What for?"

Skull hissed at him angrily. "Can't you hear those bombers? If we're above ground we're dead. We have to survive before we run."

The little man tilted his head to the sky. "I hear them now." He scrambled into the hollow.

Skull listened carefully, although there was no aircraft sound. *The power of suggestion*, he thought with a smile.

Once he saw the man lay fully in the depression, Skull climbed in next to him, drawing his knife. He used his body to press down on the little man and then, placing his hand on the other's forehead, turned it to face him, wide eyes

looking at him with surprise, but not yet fear. Holding him utterly immobile, Skull placed the tip of the blade at the other's throat.

Evans struggled weakly, but after a few seconds lay still. "Why?" he gasped.

"Several reasons actually," Skull said cheerfully. "All of them good. Would you like to hear?"

The little man didn't answer.

"It's impolite not to answer someone when they ask you a question," Skull said. "With that said, it doesn't really surprise me coming from you. Anyway, you asked why."

Evans' eyes jerked this way and that like a panicked rabbit, but he didn't move.

"First," said Skull holding up one finger in front of Evans to accent his point. "You'd eventually try to run away, probably at a very bad time. You'd get caught and spill your guts, putting me in a very bad spot. Can't have that."

He held up two fingers in front of Evans' face. "Two, let's say for the sake of argument you did successfully escape, you would make trouble for me back in Arkansas if I have to go back through there. You might even make trouble for me elsewhere if you have half a chance. Very inconsiderate on your part, given all I've done for you."

Three fingers were now out. "And finally, because you are a dangerous, pompous, arrogant, stupid, bullying, vindictive, little shit. Everyone will be better off without you and I'm doing the rest of mankind a major solid by leaving you here dead in the woods. I suspect there won't be a soul on this planet that will miss or mourn you."

Skull felt a warmth spreading on his knee where it pressed into the smaller man's crotch, but he ignored it.

"If you weren't going to be dead anyway, I'd give you some advice. I would tell you it never pays to needlessly treat people like crap. There may come a time for it, but it needs to have purpose and that purpose should never be to make yourself feel bigger and better. Do you understand?"

Incredibly, the man nodded.

"Good," said Skull. "It's rude on my part to leave you like this, but I'm afraid I have no choice. As a consolation I'll tell you that you were correct not to trust me, but I bet you've already figured that out. Farewell." Skull reached around the man's head and quickly cut Evans' throat, his razor-sharp combat knife slicing through the carotid arteries, the jugular veins and the esophagus. He

rolled away quickly to avoid the spurting blood.

Skull stood and covered Evans with fallen branches and piles of dead leaves, and then walked out of the brush and back to the road. If he didn't leave within the next day or so, he'd need to come back and make sure the body was still hidden, but he would worry about that later.

Jogging down the road, the streets of the town were much less crowded. The siren still blared loudly.

"Hey," yelled a voice off to his left. The sergeant major waved from one of the shelters. "What the hell are you doing out? Can't you hear the sirens?"

"Evans ran off," Skull explained pointing in the direction of the dead man's body. "I tried to stop him, but I lost him in the dark."

"Forget about him," said the sergeant major. "We'll worry about that later. Quick, get in here."

Skull kept running. "Thanks, Smaj, but I'll go to my assigned shelter. Don't want my platoon sergeant to worry and I have to tell him about Evans."

The sergeant major yelled at him again, but Skull ran out of sight. Racing to his assigned bunker, he hurried down the short flight of stairs and past the L-turn designed to keep out debris. Skull saw his assigned seat next to the two brothers, Anson and Kevin.

Staff Sergeant Talbot barked from the other end, "Where the hell have you been?"

Skull started to answer but his highly attuned sense of danger warned him what was coming. He stuffed his fingers into his ears, closed his eyes tightly, and opened his mouth to compensate for the overpressure.

The ground exploded around them. Skull was lifted off the rough bench and thrown into the two brothers before finding himself on the ground covered in dirt and bodies. He could hear yells and cries faintly through ringing ears.

"Stay down!" Skull roared. "There's more coming. That's just—"

The earth shook again, worse than before. A wave of energy washed over them and Skull could see the resultant ripples on the men's faces and clothes as if in slow motion. He plugged his ears, closed his eyes, and opened his mouth again while trying to pull himself into a tight ball on the floor.

The men in the bunker endured six more such impacts over the next five minutes, although the last few seemed to be farther away. After ten minutes passed without more bombs, Skull opened his eyes and climbed out from under a pile of stunned bodies and dirt. Wiping away a trickle of blood from his nose, he looked around.

Vacant eyes stare back at him. It was hard to distinguish individual bodies from the dirt and fallen timbers, especially in the dimness cast by the emergency battery lights. Everything was covered in a thick sheen of grey dust.

He heard another distinct high-pitched whistle, and then nothing. *Coming down right on top of us*, Skull thought. He hadn't been in many artillery or mortar attacks, but he knew that as long as you heard the whistle of the shell breaking through the air, you were fine. Once the whistling stopped, you were in trouble because the shell was coming down right on top of you, traveling faster than the sound waves.

"Incoming!" Skull screamed and dove for cover again.

A split second later, the earth erupted into deafening noise and a series of giant rumbles. Skull imagined them all in a giant snow globe with someone shaking it vigorously.

The artillery bombardment took much longer, perhaps twenty minutes. *This is preparatory fire*, Skull realized. The aerial bombardment alone might be harassment, but combined with sustained artillery, it presaged the beginning of a full assault.

He imagined the U.S. Army moving up to positions along the borders. Those troops were undoubtedly checking their gear for the hundredth time and awaiting the end of the artillery bombardment to begin their assault.

We don't stand a chance, Skull thought. *They're probably doing the same throughout the Arkansas Free State's border. They intend to eliminate this pocket of resistance once and for all; that's why they've waited so long to respond, gathering overwhelming force. They mean to finish this. To finish us.*

It took Skull minutes to realize the artillery had ceased. He picked himself up, pushing a fallen wooden crossbeam away from him. There were half a dozen bodies around him that were obviously dead. Several others had blood coming out of the ears and eyes and a few looked catatonic.

He peered at the two brothers. Both were stunned, but seemed to be recovering quickly.

Edens, he thought.

Both were obviously scared and hurt. If they stayed to fight, they'd die or end up in one of those Eden torture camps he'd seen earlier.

Why do you care? Skull asked himself. He wasn't sure, but for some reason he did. Maybe it was the echo of the dream of Linde, the strangled promise of a life and family. Maybe it was simply instinct, and he was a man who'd learned to follow his instincts.

“They’re coming!” Skull yelled out into the bunker. “Assume your defensive positions and prepare for enemy assault!”

Blank faces looked at him, but slowly, men began to move and the inertia suddenly broke.

“Come on,” one said, and another, “Here let me help you up,” and, “You all right?” farther away. Men and boys began climbing through the rubble toward the surface and Skull followed them, staying close to the brothers.

On the surface the open air felt heavenly and cool. The annoying sirens had finally stopped and people stumbled around, many seeming to have no idea what to do.

“Get to your defensive positions and prepare for assault!” Skull roared out again. He would need them to delay any attack, to give him time to get away.

You’re going to throw their lives away to save your own? asked a voice in his head that sounded annoyingly like Daniel Markis.

They already threw their own lives away, he answered himself. *I can’t change that, but maybe they can at least go down fighting.*

The two brothers started to move toward the line of bunkers to the east, but he grabbed their arms. “Not you two,” he said. “You’re with me.”

“What do you mean?” asked Anson.

Skull checked his M4 before saying, “I’ve been given a special mission by the commander. I need you two to come with me, but you have to keep up. We’ll be moving fast.”

“We can keep up,” answered Anson eagerly.

“Why us?” asked Kevin suspiciously.

Good question, thought Skull. *You don’t know it yet, but you’re the smarter of the two.* “Frankly, because you two are here in front of me right now. I don’t have time to hold tryouts or find the men assigned to me in this mess.”

“We’re ready,” said Anson. “Where are we going?”

“This way,” answered Skull and started jogging west.

Chapter 21

Skull led the two boys west, away from the growing sounds of gunfire from the north and east.

“Come on,” Skull urged Anson for the tenth time. The boy kept stopping and looking back toward the fighting.

“We should be with them,” Anson said, reluctantly walking again.

“We’re *exactly* where we should be,” responded Skull.

Kevin stumbled. “I’m really hungry,” he said.

Skull looked down at the boy. He could still see the dried blood from where his eardrums had burst. The Eden virus had obviously healed him, but his body now craved calories because the healing had depleted all the stored fat and was now catabolizing the body’s protein.

Stopping and opening his bag, Skull pulled out a large ziplock bag of jerky he still had from Arizona. Both boys pounced on it and Skull stepped back out of the way as they eagerly devoured all the dried meat.

“Got any more?” asked Kevin.

“Not for now,” answered Skull. “You need to space this sort of thing out. Besides, we need to keep moving.”

“What sort of thing? And what needs to be spaced out?” asked Kevin.

“Eating. Healing. I’ll explain later,” answered Skull. “We have to keep moving if we’re going to meet our objective.”

“Exactly what is our objective?” asked Anson.

“I’ll tell you when the time is right, but we need to keep moving.”

The older boy looked around at them. “Wouldn’t it have been faster for us to take a vehicle?”

“Faster, but not as quiet. We’ll pick up something later.”

“What type of mission has us leaving right in the middle of the fighting?” asked Anson. “I thought maybe we were going to circle around the enemy and hit ’em from behind, but we keep moving away.”

Kevin looked at Skull with wide eyes. “We’re not on a mission, are we? We’re running away.”

Smart kid, Skull thought. “Trust me, boys, we just need to keep moving. It will all make sense soon enough.”

Anson’s face scrunched up and he began to shake his head stubbornly.

“I’m not running. I’m no coward.”

“All of us are cowards when we need to be, and we’re all courageous heroes when we need to be. There’s nothing any of us can do for anyone back there.”

“How can you say that?” said Anson. “I thought you were a Marine.”

“I *am* a Marine,” Skull answered. “I’ve seen more fighting and blood and death than either of you can imagine. But I’ve also seen senseless battles turn life as cheap as dirt. Everyone back there is dead, or by nightfall will wish they were. It was always a fool’s cause. Always.”

“I’m going back,” said Anson.

“Don’t be stupid, son,” hissed Skull. “I’ve heard you two talk about that family you left. Don’t you think your duty lies with them now? You’ve learned some important skills here, but they need your help. There’ll be time enough to throw away your life down the road if you want to, believe me. Just make sure you do it for a reason.”

“Listen to him,” said Kevin. “Let’s just go find ma and pa and our sisters.”

“Listen to yourself,” countered Anson. “Run away from our friends who are fighting for their lives, just when they need us most? We signed up to fight, but we’re running away.”

So idealistic, thought Skull with frustration. *He and Markis would make a wonderful pair. Or they might kill each other. After all, only one side of an argument can seize the moral high ground. At least Markis knew when to retreat.*

“None of that matters, son,” Skull said. “All that matters is—” He stopped and turned to his left, sensing something.

“None of it matters?” asked Anson. “How can you say that?”

“Shut up,” commanded Skull in a low voice, easing sideways and circling toward the sound. “Get down on the ground and stay there.”

Both boys saw the look on his face and obeyed.

Pulling his rifle up to the ready position, he crept obliquely right and forward. Just in front of him, low to the ground, he saw a nearly invisible man in a camouflage uniform and face paint. Skull could only make out one eye, but it was enough. Now that he knew what to look for, he could see a line of men spread out behind him. Fortunately, the man hadn’t seen him, and seemed focused in the direction of the boys, where he’d undoubtedly heard their arguing voices.

Light infantry, thought Skull. *Rangers, probably. They’ve been sent to attack the rear and cut off escape. They won’t take us prisoner. They have to*

move fast and quietly. Probably try to kill us without firing in order to maintain surprise and secrecy.

All of this occurred to him in flash. After all, he had performed this exact mission many times in Force Recon.

There was only one way out of such an ambush: aggressive speed and accuracy. Skull pulled the rifle up to his shoulder in one fluid motion and drilled the point man in the forehead, then shifted his aim to the second in line, shooting him too. Then the third.

By then, the undergrowth erupted in gunfire.

Skull dropped and rolled as far as he could to the right. He found a thick tree trunk and stood back up in the dark. The patrol was still shooting, but at where Skull had been, not where he was.

He counted muzzle flashes. Eleven. Aiming by feel rather than the iron sights he couldn't see in the dark, Skull fired slightly to the rear and right of one of the muzzle flashes. Then he did the same with another, and another.

Return fire spattered into the thick trunk of his covering tree. He dropped to the ground and high-crawled farther to the right in order to take another firing position.

Abruptly the enemy fire shifted again as two rifles began shooting at the infiltrators. The remaining eight soldiers concentrated their shots on the new threat firing at them.

Stupid boys, thought Skull with a combination of frustration and pride. They had at least drawn the attention away from him.

He came to a knee behind a fallen log and knocked out three more before he was driven back by return fire. A bullet plucked at his sleeve and he low-crawled away.

"They're trying to flank us," said one of the commandos.

"Krill, keep suppressive fire on the ones to our front," ordered another voice. "Everyone else focus on the flanking force."

It's just me, assholes, thought Skull, *and I've been doing this for a lot longer than you have.*

Rounds continued to come his way, but they all went over him as he hugged the forest floor. Raising his head carefully, he could see the muzzle flashes and the enemy perimeter had shrunk to the point that the men were in a fairly tight circle. These were regulars, but Skull downgraded his opinion of their elite status. Veteran troops wouldn't continue to highlight themselves this way, or fall back to a cluster, as if being close together improved their survivability.

In fact, it wouldn't.

Skull dug through his pack and pulled out two fragmentation grenades. He pulled the pin on the first and tossed it into the middle of the flashes, repeating the process with the second. Then he put his head down and covered his ears.

The firing continued for a few more seconds before there came a muffled whump, followed shortly after by another.

Skull jumped up without his rifle, pulling out his flashlight and Glock to rush toward the center of the enemy. One badly wounded soldier turned to fire at him, but Skull kicked at the weapon, and then shot the man dead.

He saw another with blood pooling out of his side trying to crawl into the dark undergrowth. Skull plugged him in the back. The other men were already dead.

"It's me," Skull called to the two boys. "It's all done. I'm coming out. Hold your fire." Walking slowly forward, he used his flashlight to make sure there were no more enemies in hiding, but was confident he'd taken them all out.

"Anson, it should make you happy to know," Skull said when he approached, "that we have officially helped your friends back there fighting. If this group had gotten into their rear area and..."

Skull's voice trailed off. He saw Anson sitting and sobbing. He was holding Kevin's upper body in his arms. There was a neat bullet hole in the center of the younger boy's forehead with an ugly exit wound on the other side dribbling brain matter onto his brother's shoulder.

Head shot, Skull thought as his chest squeezed tight. *Just like Zeke. Edens can't heal that much damage.* Cursing under his breath, Skull walked up to the boy. "Come on Anson. We have to go."

"He's dead," the older boy sobbed.

"I know," Skull answered. "There's nothing you can do for him now."

"Just leave me," the boy said, rocking his brother.

Why not? Skull thought. *I'm not responsible for either of them. Just keep walking, I've done what I could and I owe them nothing.*

Instead, he reached out and grabbed the older brother by the trapezium muscles at each shoulder, lifting him painfully to his feet.

"*Ahh!*" screamed Anson, coming out of his daze. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Saving your life," Skull answered. "Now follow me."

Anson shook the other man's hands off. "I'm not going anywhere. Didn't you hear me? Kevin's dead."

“Yes, I hear you,” Skull answered. “He’s not Kevin anymore.” Skull kicked the body in the side. “It’s just a piece of dead meat.” He kicked him again and again. “He can’t feel anything.”

“Stop that!” Anson cried out.

“This dead lump of flesh is not your brother,” Skull said, “no more than that rock or tree. Are you going to stay here and get killed over a lump of dead meat or a rock or tree? Or do you want to see your mother and father again?”

Anson looked at Skull angrily, and then his defiance seemed to melt away. He put his face in his hands and began to cry.

Skull reached out and grabbed him by one sleeve, dragging him westward. This time, the boy didn’t resist him. Skull collected his gear and started moving as quickly as he could dragging the boy behind him.

They traveled this way for about an hour before coming to a dark farmhouse. A late model sedan and an old farm truck sat in the driveway. Skull made his way to the truck, knowing it would be easier to do what he needed to with an older vehicle.

Skull opened the driver’s side door of the truck and bent down under the dash. Holding his flashlight in his mouth, he pulled the ignition wiring harness down and separated the green, red, blue and yellow wires. Taking out his knife, he stripped a section of each wire. Looking around with his flashlight, he noticed an ancient cassette tape in the cab. Skull yanked out a length of the polymer tape and cut it with his knife. He then used the stuff to bind the blue and yellow stripped sections as tightly together as he could. A piece of copper would be better, but maybe this would do.

Yellow and blue and Christmas too, he thought, reciting the litany to remember how to hotwire a car.

He then held the green and red wires, touching the bare sections together.

The starter and ignition engaged. It took several tries, but finally the vehicle rumbled to life.

Skull stood back up. “We’re in business. Get in.” He looked around and didn’t see the boy.

A dog began to bark from inside the farmhouse. A light went on upstairs.

“Dammit, son,” Skull hissed. “Where in the hell are you?” He walked around the truck and scanned the area with his flashlight, seeing the boy standing nearby looking out over a pond by the house.

An outside door slammed.

Skull turned off the flashlight, ran to the boy and grabbed him by the

shoulder.

“You better get off my prop-ar-tee,” yelled an old man’s voice.

Pushing the boy toward the truck, they were blinded by the old man’s flashlight.

“Stop or I’ll shoot!” A shotgun blast took out the truck’s passenger side window.

Skull shoved the boy into the cab of the truck and heard another blast, putting dozens of tiny holes and dings in the truck just to his left.

Turning with his flashlight and Glock in opposite hands, Skull moved toward the shooter.

He saw an old man in a bathrobe and slippers trying to reload a double-barreled shotgun while holding a large flashlight of his own. He kept dropping shells, and then reaching down to pick them up.

“Leave it,” Skull said coldly a few feet from the old man.

The farmer’s fingers went lax. The shells and shotgun slipped to the ground. He held on to the flashlight long enough to get a look at the apparition of death in front of him, and then he dropped that too.

“If you ever want to see the sun again this side of heaven,” Skull told him, “you best turn around and go back to bed. I need your truck, not your life.”

The farmer stood still for a moment, and then spun on his heel, leaving the shotgun, shells, and flashlight where he’d dropped them. He walked into his house and several seconds later the upstairs light went off. The dog stopped barking.

Skull hurried back to the truck and climbed in the driver’s side, making sure Anson was secure in the passenger seat. Putting the truck in gear, he drove down the driveway and at the next road turned west. He continued for the next several hours, trying his best to keep going in a westerly direction at every road junction.

Finally Anson roused himself. He turned to look at Skull. “We should have buried him.”

“There was no time,” Skull answered.

“But, he could get eaten by animals,” Anson said, “or rot in the heat. It’s not right.”

“It’s not wrong either,” Skull insisted. “Like I told you back there, it’s a piece of meat and no more. Your brother is gone.”

Anson was silent for a long time. “So, why do we ever bury anyone?”

Skull looked at the boy and then back at the road. “Habit. Superstition.

Comfort. I don't know. All I know is that it doesn't make a lick of difference to the dead."

"It just seems wrong is all," said Anson, "he was my brother." Then he was quiet again.

It is wrong, thought Skull, remembering the girl he buried in New Mexico. They rode in silence down the dark road.

Chapter 22

Skull and Anson continued driving generally southwest for several days. Traffic grew in intensity and many of the vehicles were packed with people and belongings, refugees from the fighting. Skull was amused to see the sorts of things people decided to take with them when they were on the verge of losing everything.

Strapped down on top of vehicles or in truck beds he saw widescreen televisions, mattresses, sofas, china cabinets, gas grills, satellite dishes, an exercise bike, a grandfather clock, canoes, a large stone statue of the Virgin Mary, a small pool table, several stuffed deer heads, jet skis on trailers, riding lawn mowers on flatbeds, a portable Jacuzzi, beer kegs, a huge saltwater aquarium still filled with tropical fish, and what looked like at least one Civil War era cannon in incredibly restored shape.

Skull realized he and Anson were exceptionally conspicuous because their truck was empty, drawing some funny looks.

Fortunately, they spotted a set of life-size plastic animals in front of an abandoned house one evening and loaded them up. No one paid them any further attention now that the truck bed contained three pink flamingos, two deer, a black bear, a blue ox, and what might be Paul Bunyan complete with ax solidly planted on plastic shoulder.

At night they stopped and slept in the cab and then continued during the day. It was too dangerous to drive at night anymore as people were camping out on the roads and had taken to driving without headlights for some inexplicable reason. Skull had thought that the best plan would be to get over into Texas again and travel south until they could cross over into Louisiana. Maybe the presence of the boy would help get them across, making an armed man seem less worrisome.

Skull wondered how he would manage to ever make it to Maryland and the mission he'd set himself if he kept getting distracted by these pressing but unimportant matters. *I'm lying to myself*, he thought after a while. *Do I really want to sneak or fight my way across the U.S. into a heavily populated area just to take vengeance, or maybe to cause a pinprick to a governmental organization that will probably hardly notice the disruption? They must be shoveling money like coal at Plague research.*

Yet, what else can I do that might make a real difference?

Anson hadn't said a word since the conversation about burying his little brother. Skull had almost forgotten he was there and jumped slightly when the boy finally spoke.

"It's my fault he's dead, isn't it?"

Skull wanted to lie to him to ease the kid's pain, but couldn't. Shouldn't. "You certainly didn't pull the trigger, but at least partially, yes."

Anson wiped an eye. "Stupid kid. He never really wanted to come in the first place. Always followed me wherever I went and did what I did." He blinked sadly and looked at the man beside him. "I should have let him go, like you said."

"Yup," Skull answered without hesitation.

Anson sighed and watched the road. Finally he asked, "What am I supposed to do now?"

"You learn to live with it or go ahead and die with it," said Skull from hard experience.

The boy fidgeted. "I don't know how to live with it."

"It's your choice. The hurt will fade some, but you'll never really get over it. This will always be with you."

A sudden realization seemed to come over him. "What am I supposed to tell my family?"

"You tell them the truth," said Skull. "All of it. That's best. Don't hide from it and don't hide from them. They deserve to know what happened to their son. You talked about courage and not running from your duty back there...well, telling them the truth is your duty now and may be the bravest thing you'll ever have to do."

Silence fell again, and this time the boy didn't break it.

Skull turned on the radio to fill the void. He'd listened off and on for several days, but most of what they heard was rumor or conjecture. Working his way through the stations, he found one that sounded more official than the rest.

"...have confirmed that a major military operation is underway in southwestern Arkansas involving active duty, reserve, and National Guard troops from multiple services. The White House has issued a statement describing surgical strikes throughout the self-proclaimed Arkansas Free State to eliminate criminal elements violating federal and state law. Casualty figures are still coming in, but appear to be in the hundreds at least. Many more have been arrested and now the roads are filled with civilians fleeing toward what they

believe is sanctuary in Texas. Now, we return to your country oldies. Coming up, Hank Williams...”

Skull scanned forward until he found more news.

“...House stated that citizens of Arkansas have nothing to fear and urged them to return to their homes. Meanwhile the governor of Arkansas has resigned in the scandal and been replaced by Cantrell Boyd, leader of the majority Unionist Party in the Arkansas State Senate. Elections are expected to take place in...”

Skull hit the button again.

“...Texas asking people not to try to cross the border. Their police and military are evidently overwhelmed and there have been some reports of armed clashes between Texas border personnel and frustrated citizens waiting to cross. Meanwhile, Congress passed a resolution this morning authorizing the president to use the U.S. Navy to blockade the Texas coast in an attempt to contain the Plague and the Mexican government has agreed to close their border with Texas in return for cancellation of all debts owed to the U.S. Government. There are still flights in and out of the state, but they are under intense scrutiny for...”

Skull skimmed until the radio found a classic rock station and left it there.

By the next morning, traffic came to a standstill and didn't move any further. Skull got out and walked forward a few hundred meters to talk to people on ahead. They told him the traffic hadn't budged since the previous morning.

“Time to walk again,” Skull told Anson when he returned to the vehicle. He broke down his M4 into two pieces and stowed it in his rucksack before putting it on. He didn't want to spook any border personnel, and if he needed to defend himself had the concealed Glock and his knife. Besides, a lot of men and some women stalled on the highway went armed, some conspicuously.

They walked slowly and steadily, resting in the shade and eating what food they had every couple of hours. That night they slept under a large tarp attached to several trees with a few dozen other strangers. A campfire provided something to cluster around, but Skull heard little talk. These refugees seemed to be the orphans, the loners, those without family or a group to belong to.

The look of the lost, Skull thought. Those who mourn.

That night they were awakened by a gunshot. In the dim light from the burned-down embers of the campfire, Skull and the others could see a man slumped over. Skull reached out and pulled the man towards him by his shoulder. His head lolled back and the light revealed a black hole where his right eye used to be. Both hands fell from his lap toward the ground. One contained a

small-caliber pistol and the other a photograph of the man with a pretty woman and baby.

Skull and the men dragged the body away from the fire into a nearby field, and then went back to sleep.

The next morning they started walking again and by noon saw the Texas border. Military vehicles, floodlights, and silent loudspeakers lined the area. People were jammed in together tight, and the federal troops facing the Texas border appeared to be simply watching people try to cross instead of questioning or screening them as before.

The reason became apparent after the two were able to push their way through the mass of humanity. A large construction work sign read, *Texas Border Closed to Everyone Except Edens Seeking Sanctuary*. Lines of people waited nearby to enter one of the large medical tents, presumably to prove their status.

“Let’s go,” said Skull pulling them forward.

“Why?” Anson asked. “They won’t let us through.”

“I think they might,” replied Skull.

They pushed their way forward until Skull stood in front of a young man in uniform, who looked at them with a bored expression.

“Corporal,” Skull said. “This boy here needs to cross. He has been separated from his family that we believe is now in Texas.”

“Can’t you read the sign?”

“The boy has the Eden virus,” Skull explained. “He’s a carrier.”

“No, I’m not!” exclaimed Anson.

The corporal pointed tiredly to the line at the medical tent and recited, “Go over there and get tested, and if positive you may be allowed to enter. For all others, the border is temporarily closed.”

Skull looked at the long lines to get tested and then back at the crossing in front of him. So close.

“Why would you say that?” said Anson. “I’m not standing in that line to get tested.”

People began pushing them out of the way from behind and the corporal’s eyes moved on to someone else.

Skull yanked his knife from the small of his back and slammed it down through Anson’s right hand and into the makeshift barrier on which it rested.

Anson screamed and tried to pull his hand back, but only succeeded in widening the cut. The boy’s cries rose and space opened up around them as the crowd moved away from the dangerous man stabbing people.

The corporal's eyes widened as Skull pulled the knife free, and then grabbed Anson's right wrist. He held the hand up so everyone could see the bleeding slow, stop, and the palm begin healing before their eyes. "He's got the stuff, all right. Let him in."

Some in the crowd gasped, as if they witnessed a miracle before their very eyes. Some did fall to their knees. The corporal seemed terrified and took several steps backward until his butt hit a large wooden crate.

"Let me see that," said an authoritative voice.

Skull looked up to see a man in a white lab coat from the tent making his way to them. He didn't seem unnerved. Grasping the boy's hand from Skull, he peered at it closely and muttered, "Remarkable. This one's healing rate is far above normal."

"Good genes, I guess," said Skull. "Can he get in?"

The doctor seemed to notice the tall thin man standing beside him for the first time. Glancing from Skull to the boy to the corporal, he asked. "You too?"

"Not me," said Skull.

The doctor looked around as if considering before telling the corporal, "Give him a refugee number and send him to the inprocessing center."

"Sure, Doc," answered the corporal. He moved the barricade aside, but stood as far from Skull as he possibly could.

Anson held out his hand with the wound that had already closed. He looked from the soldier to Skull in amazement.

"Find your family," Skull told him. "That's the only thing that matters. You got me, boy?"

Anson nodded and allowed himself to be ushered forward out of sight.

Skull turned to walk back the way he had come, feeling oddly lighter. *That's because I don't have him dragging me down,* he told himself. *Nothing more.* The tight crowd parted like the Red Sea before him, people staring at him like a demon, a holy man, or both.

Chapter 23

It didn't take long for Skull to get tired of walking. The day after leaving the Texas border, he saw a lone soldier on an Army off-road motorcycle and ran out into the road, waving his hands for the man to stop. The soldier tried to swerve around him, but Skull stepped in front of him again, nearly causing the man to turn the bike over.

Once stopped, the soldier pulled his goggles off and threw his helmet to the ground in anger before screaming at Skull, "You could have gotten me killed, you stupid—"

Skull backhanded him in the face with a closed fist containing the hilt of his knife. The soldier fell back on his butt and then lay sprawled on the pavement, unconscious. Checking the road to make sure it was clear, Skull stripped the man of his uniform, and then took off his own clothes, putting them in his pack and reassembling the M4. He then put on the uniform, which was too short and too big around the middle, but would pass at a distance. The regulation military boots were far too small, so Skull kept his own. Hopefully no one would look too closely.

Dragging the soldier to the side of the road, Skull rolled him down into the nearby ditch. He slung the rifle across his chest, put his pack on his back, and donned the helmet and goggles. Mounting the still-running motorcycle, he eased forward, and then turned the bike loose.

It felt good just to go fast with the wind in his face. At first it didn't matter where he went as long as it was generally eastward, but after a few hours he realized he needed to plan his next few moves. After consulting his map, Skull decided to continue back to Calhoun County to recover his cached gear before continuing on. He could probably do without all of it, but he found he couldn't bear to just walk away from his Barrett. Besides, some of the other stuff would be hard to replace and might come in handy.

The motorcycle and the uniform allowed him to blow by other military convoys and slip through checkpoints. Only once did he need to talk to anyone, and it was a brief, friendly exchange.

Refugees still streamed in the opposite direction, but fewer the farther Skull got from the Texas-Arkansas border. Those he did see would not meet his eyes, looking terrified of him.

Signs of violence abounded. Burned houses, shallow graves, dead bodies. Graffiti proclaimed both death to the Edens and down with the oppressors. Tendrils of smoke rose into the sky in every direction he looked, serving to mark devastated settlements or homes.

Skull had read a book years before on the Thirty Year's War in central Europe in the early 1600s. Multiple armies and masses of unemployed mercenaries-turned-brigands ruled the landscape for decades. The description of the horror, devastation and lawlessness had stuck with him. Contemporary historians had claimed that a whole generation of Germans in the war-torn region had never tasted meat other than from human corpses.

The landscape in front of Skull was nowhere close to being that bad yet, but he could see it trending that way. He suspected the various dynamics might even come to resemble each other soon with armed factions fighting originally for idealistic causes, yet eventually breaking down into criminals, murderers, and thieves. The period following the Civil War had been like that as well in some places, with groups of defiant Southern troops declining to lay down arms and instead heading west to form bandit gangs.

Americans take so much for granted, Skull thought. They believed that it was their right to constant contentment and increasing levels of extravagant luxury that they often mislabeled poverty. Skull had seen much of the world dealing with real starvation and brutal tribal wars, so he knew better. America was a dream for most, a rare bright shining light in a field of dark history like few others before it.

Now it rotted from within, falling apart.

He wanted to blame it on Markis, but was honest enough to know that he had only given a push to an already teetering, divided house of water-stained cards. The stumbling had come because of the grasping, selfish and failed "leadership" of the many special interests, everyone trying to protect their turf but none able to unite the fractured power structures. Now, the Unionists were increasingly filling the void and creating a common hatred against Edens exactly as the Nazis had used fear of the Jews to unify Germany.

The real question now was what would happen next. Rome had been a brilliant beacon of civilization for a millennium, but when it fell Europe entered a dark age filled with brutality and ignorance that lasted nearly a thousand years. Would the same happen here? Or would America somehow rise to regain her former place as Germany had managed in the late twentieth century?

Enough woolgathering, he told himself. *Focus on the here and now. What*

you can control. Keep your eyes on the prize, what you've neglected too long.

INS Inc.

He had to stop several times to siphon gasoline from abandoned vehicles. Food was becoming a constant concern, but Skull had always been thin and had long ago learned to ignore hunger, thirst, and pain when necessary. At least he wasn't an Eden; that would have made the hunger impossible, a killing gift.

Skull imagined what was happening in countries around the world where famine and malnutrition were already a problem. Throw in the Eden virus and you might have a catastrophe. *Millions of suddenly healthy people immune from disease and sickness with super-high metabolisms all with the munchies at exactly the same time and not enough to go around.* That was the sort of conundrum that Skull imagined could even drive Edens to war.

He wondered whether the reduction in corruption brought on by the Plague's virtue effect could counter the increased demand for food. He'd read often that the world produced plenty of food. Distribution was the problem, with corrupt government or no government at all making it impossible to bring supplies to the starving.

After several days he made it back to Calhoun County and found his way to his former team's cached gear. It had not been disturbed, so he assumed they were all dead. Skull picked through the food in the other men's gear, preparing a feast with what he knew he couldn't carry with him. He also selected the best of the remaining equipment and any ammunition that fit the calibers he was carrying. After he had consolidated, Skull's pack was full, along with two others now strapped to the handlebars and rear of the motorcycle. Finally, he felt suitably prepared for the road ahead.

Skull made his way back through the county he had become so familiar with during patrols as "Deputy Winslow." Going around all the small settlements, he'd made it nearly out of town and across the county's eastern border when he passed a sheriff's patrol car going the opposite direction. The man in the driver's seat was unmistakable.

Wallace.

Skull looked in the motorcycle's rearview mirror and saw the brake light come on. Before the cruiser even came to a complete stop, it began the complicated maneuver of turning around on the narrow road framed by steep ditches. Once the front of the vehicle faced east, the red and blue lights on top came on and the cruiser's engine screamed as it revved high.

I could outrun him fairly easily, Skull thought. No reason to stop.

Then he slowed and pulled off the side of the road. Concealing the motion, he eased the Glock out of its hiding place and slid it into his pocket, handy.

Wallace's cruiser stopped beside him. A new deputy Skull didn't know sat in the passenger seat.

"Hey there, partner," Skull said. "I bet you didn't miss me half as bad as I missed you. Who's the new guy?"

"I'm George," said the man with a smile.

"Where have you been?" Wallace snarled. "The boss has been getting calls nearly every day asking where Evans is."

Skull shrugged. "He's still there as far as I know. On the news they make it sound like the job is done, but there's still tons of cleanup operations. Could take a while."

Wallace looked at the Army motorcycle. "Why are you in that uniform? More importantly, why are you headed east out of the county?"

"I'm on another special mission," Skull said.

"What kind of mission?" asked the new guy.

"George, I'm glad you asked, my new BFF," said Skull with mock sincerity. "I was just about to tell you all about it, but then I remembered it was none of your damn business."

"Is that what you're going to tell the boss?" Wallace asked.

Skull shrugged. "I wasn't planning on telling him anything. Evans gave me a message for the Eastern Region FEMA Director. I'm supposed to take it to Memphis directly and not stop for anything."

"What does the message say?" Wallace asked.

"I have no idea," Skull answered. "It's sealed and needs to stay that way until I hand it over."

"It's funny anyone uses letters and messages anymore," said George. "You'd think he would use a secure call or email."

Wallace looked at George in surprise. "That is a good point." He turned back to Skull. "Why wouldn't he just do something like that?"

"Phone lines and internet are more than a little dicey right now," said Skull.

"But there's a lot of military down there," said George. "Why couldn't they just use some of the military secure comms?"

"Yeah," said Wallace. "Why not use the military comms?"

"The military happens to be a little busy right now," said Skull, "and the relationship between them and...you know what? Fuck it. This shit is getting

old.”

Skull pulled his Glock and shot Wallace twice in the chest. He then leaned down and shot a surprised George twice in the torso. Wallace went limp, but George scrambled for his sidearm, his face twisted in terror, and Skull realized the rookie wore a protective vest. Skull shifted his aim to George’s head and shot him once, then once more to make sure. “Sorry, George. Wrong place, wrong time, wrong partner.”

Then he put one more round into Wallace for good measure.

Leaning in the windows, Skull pulled out both of their wallets. Taking out all the cash with his gloved hands, he stuffed it in his front pocket and then dropped the billfolds on the ground. Then he disabled the dash-cam and ripped out its hard drive, stomping it to bits on the pavement.

“So long, scumbag,” Skull said to Wallace’s corpse as he stepped back away from the cruiser’s interior. He revved the bike and shot forward.

Chapter 24

At the Mississippi River, it pained Skull to have to abandon the motorcycle, but he'd spotted checkpoints with soldiers on all three bridges he reconned. He might have been able to talk himself through with the uniform and bike, but he decided against the risk.

Skull hid the bike and uniform in the tall grass of a field gone fallow and carefully made his way to an isolated bend in the river several miles south of the I-40 bridge near Memphis. Stepping through thick underbrush hiding clinging mud and water moccasins, he found an area where he hoped to be able to cross at night.

While waiting for the sun to set, Skull placed all his weapons, sensitive gear, identification and electronics in a large waterproof bag with his clothes, packs, and sleeping bag. That made it heavy, but he blew air inside and sealed it to help with buoyancy. Next he found a few small logs that floated and tied them together into a raft. After that, he strapped his pack and all his gear securely on top.

Sitting and watching the currents for a time, he found the water deceptively calm and slow moving, but he sensed great power. In at least two spots he could see dangerous eddies and straight out in front of him a whole tree that had been uprooted and washed downriver had gotten stuck in the soft riverbed. Thankfully the water temperature remained fairly mild, so he felt no danger of hypothermia.

Drowning concerned him, though, and the huge barges that plied the river. If he got caught in the wake of any of these, it would all be over despite the fact Skull was a strong swimmer. Watching the river carefully, he marked a steady flow of barges going north carrying loads of fuel and finished goods. The ones traveling south were filled with coal or grain.

After a few hours, Skull was able to detect a pattern. Whether the barges were going north or south, they liked to keep at least half a mile between them. There seemed to be no correlation between the southern barges and the line of northern barges. That would make it tricky.

Maybe I should just look for a boat, he thought.

A boat might seem convenient, but river folk were notoriously protective of their watercraft. A boat also drew more attention to a man by himself. Despite the physical risks, swimming across seemed the best option.

Almost dark now, Skull took off the rest of his clothes and stowed them in his waterproof bag. He then tied a six-foot length of cord to the bottom of the raft he'd made and the other end to his wrist. If he lost his grip, he wanted to be able to find the raft in the dark. Speaking of finding...he needed a landmark on the other side of the river. It would be easy to get confused and turned around in the dark. There were several lights on the far bank, but Skull wanted something distinctive and to the south since he knew the river's current would carry him a good distance.

There it is, he thought seeing two white lights side by side with a smaller greenish light just below them. After watching for a few minutes to make sure none of them were car lights or something that might move, he was satisfied.

Now came the matter of timing. There was a barge pushing upriver almost directly across from him and one traveling downriver about a quarter of a mile to his left. He would have to time the crossing perfectly to give himself the best chance.

After four hours, he had thought the perfect window wouldn't arrive, but then it happened. A barge going downriver passed him just as another going upriver lined up with him and the other barge. Now both headed away from him, opening an ever-widening gap. Knowing how long it might be before another such opportunity, Skull waded out into the tepid water, pulling the raft behind him.

He swam strongly, directly south behind the barge. There was a large eddy to the south near the center of the river, which he had to reach before he could continue across. Skull used the wake of the barge to pull him along while gradually working out toward the middle of the river, staying far from the propellers.

Finding the two white lights and the green light on the opposite bank, Skull saw he had already gone farther down the river than he had expected and began swimming directly across the brown water toward the lights.

He hadn't counted on the raft hindering his progress. It would have served as a simple helpful flotation device had he been drifting easily down the river, but he needed to travel perpendicular to the current and the raft acted like a sea anchor dragging him downstream. Alternating swimming hard and easily, he gradually made his way out to the center of the river where he could just barely see the three lights.

The forlorn sound of a horn echoed across the river from Skull's right. He looked in that direction and could just make out the nose of a northbound barge.

He would have to swim hard to get across in front of it. Skull didn't want to get caught in the middle waiting for another window. There was no telling how far south he would drift in that amount of time. After taking several deep breaths, he began to swim powerfully and steadily.

Marine Recon were typically divided into Scout Snipers or Scout Swimmers. Most Scout Swimmers were recon guys who failed the psych testing for snipers, and most Scout Snipers couldn't swim very well. Skull was one of the few who could have been very effective in either field, but he liked being a sniper better than infiltrating into enemy territory through the water. Even so, he had spent a significant amount of time swimming during Marine Recon training and live missions in a wide variety of conditions. Day and night. In open sea and in fresh water. With equipment and without. Naked and clothed. Exhausted and fresh.

Still, in his late forties, he wasn't as young and fit as he used to be. His muscles began to shake and cramp. Skull was forced to alter his smooth and practiced stroke to give relief to tired muscles. The pull of the raft kept tugging at his right hand during each overhand reach, dragging him even further south. He had to adjust nearly every few yards to ensure he wasn't being diverted directly into the path of the oncoming barge. He'd lost the three-light marker long ago. Now his only navigational aid was the growing dark bulk of the northbound barge.

I'm not going to make it like this, he thought. The barge would run him over. His only chance was to swim downriver at a diagonal toward the barge. Hopefully he would reach the far bank before the barge reached him. It would take him very far to the south, but he recognized that was irrelevant now. He was swimming for his life.

Skull stopped fighting the raft and let it go, swimming after it. He angled toward the target bank while building up speed. The going was exponentially easier than what he was trying to do before, but Skull knew this was dangerously deceptive. The truth was he was swimming as fast as he could toward his own death.

The barge loomed huge now. It filled the night. Skull kicked hard, giving everything he had as the huge boat bore down on him. Not looking up, he dug deep and focused on the motion of swimming, ignoring the onrushing danger and his screaming lungs.

He looked up just as the barge passed within feet of his back. Skull kicked hard three times to get out of the barge's wake and barely succeeded. Gasping

for air, he began to swim at a more leisurely pace when he felt a strong pull on his right wrist. Skull looked for the raft, but couldn't find it. The cord led down into water under the barge.

Suddenly, he was pulled forcefully back under the water toward the barge. He could feel the heavy bulk of tons of metal over the top of him and the soft mud of the riverbed bare meters below. He could see the raft twisting and spinning in the murky water, pulling him behind it.

Toward the barge's large screws.

He fought and pulled at the cord around his wrist, but was dragged steadily backward. Flailing around in the water, he brushed against something hard that moved beneath his hand. Reaching out again with his left hand, he grasped the limb of the sunken tree resting on the bottom of the river. The cord with the raft pulled painfully on his right wrist as his left slipped on the slime-covered underwater branch.

Skull held on until he thought he would pass out from lack of oxygen before he noticed that the raft wasn't pulling on him as strongly as before. It simply floated above him on the murky water. He let go of the branch and kicked for the surface, his lungs screaming for air. The raft burst through the surface a moment before Skull's head did. Gasping and coughing, he fought tunnel vision from the lack of oxygen. Looking around, he saw the barge receding from him to the north. Resting on the raft, he allowed himself to drift until he had gathered his breath and strength before swimming again toward the east side of the river.

He climbed up the muddy bank and collapsed in the wet reeds, sensing mosquitoes landing on him and drinking his blood, but he didn't care. He wondered idly if mosquitoes could be carriers of the Eden virus the way they were carriers of malaria and yellow fever.

Something the biogeeks will have to work out, he thought. Might make this whole issue of quarantine moot.

He wasn't sure how long he lay there, and might have even slept, but when he felt something slither across the back of his calves in the water he decided it was time to move. Climbing slowly out of the water, he dragged the raft with him. He was too weak to go very far and stopped a few yards into the tree line. Pulling out his sleeping bag, he lay it on a dry patch of ground with his pack nearby, climbed inside and went to sleep.

A loud horn blast awakened Skull and he looked out through the low-hanging trees to see another large barge going upriver. Morning had broken and

the humidity already oppressed him.

Sitting up and climbing out of his sleeping bag, Skull felt like an overstretched rubber band. He cleaned the mud and leaves off his naked body the best he could and then checked his weapons and gear. He was pleased to see that despite everything last night, the interior of the waterproof bag remained dry. He'd been too tired the night before to even notice, much less check. Getting dressed, he made sure his Glock and knife were concealed on his body within easy reach.

Looking up the river, he could no longer see the I-40 bridge leading to Memphis out of sight behind a bend and guessed he'd drifted a significant distance. Turning southward gave him no additional idea of his exact location. He realized it didn't matter; he had almost certainly reached the southern part of Tennessee if not the state of Mississippi and needed to go northeast.

Skull put on his pack and started walking up the slight rise out of the river embankment, climbing into the flood plain that had existed for thousands of years. The only modern difference was a six-foot-tall concrete dike at the edge.

Trudging north he realized he needed a shower and some hot food. The more he looked like a dirty vagabond drunk, the more likely he was to be harassed by the authorities. *Dress like a cop, people think you're a cop. Dress like a bum, people think you're a bum.* Also, his body and morale could use the boost that both would bring.

After a couple of hours walking through fields and down side roads he made his way to Route 61, a major north-south highway bordering the river. Turning north, he continued to move steadily. He could probably try to hitchhike, but he'd never been a fan of that practice. Just too many unknowns. With time and no one chasing him at the moment, he felt he could walk for now.

By noon, Skull saw an exit with signs for gas, food, lodging, and gift shops. Walking wearily up to a cheap motel, he entered the tiny lobby and saw a bored fat man behind the counter.

"Can I help you?" the man asked.

"I need a room for the night."

The man looked at a clock on the wall. "Check-in isn't until three."

"How much are the rooms with breakfast?"

The man quoted him a price that seemed much too high, but Skull wasn't about to argue. He pulled out the money, rounded up, added an extra twenty and slid the bills across the counter. "Any way I can get into a room now? I'm pretty beat."

The fat man looked at the money and then at Skull. Drawing it across the counter toward him, he smiled. "Let me see what I can do."

Five minutes later, Skull deadbolted a cheap, badly fitting door that, even closed, showed outside light through every edge. He dropped his bags on stained carpet, wedged a chair under the doorknob, cranked the AC up to *High*, and then took a long hot shower. After drying off, brushing his teeth and shaving his face and head, he lay down on the lumpy bed and slept soundly, Glock under his pillow.

When Skull awoke it was dark outside. The nightstand clock read nearly eight p.m. Putting on the last of his clean clothes, he stepped outside, and then paused. Then he went back and put his weapons and gear into his smaller go-bag, hefting it over one shoulder before going back out and locking the door. Looking across the parking lot, he saw an all-night diner that obviously catered to truckers craving high-calorie, high-cholesterol, high-cheese entrees.

High-everything sounded heavenly to Skull at that moment. He walked over to the diner and went inside, noticing it was nearly empty.

"Sit wherever you like, honey," said a voice from behind the counter. "I'll be with you in just a minute."

Selecting a booth at the end, Skull put his back to a wall and faced the entrance. No one should be following him, but bad habits are easy to pick up.

A pert waitress with pink hair and a nametag that read "Brenda Lou" came over with a pad of paper and pencil in hand. "What can I get you to drink there, sweetie?"

"Water and hot tea, ma'am," he answered. "Green tea if you got it."

She looked at him uncertainly. "We got Lipton tea bags."

"That's fine," he said. The waitress walked away and he studied the room. Five other men shared the dining room with him. All appeared to be truckers, all were alone, and all looked tired and distant. Except for his slim, fit appearance, Skull blended right in. Nearly all of the truckers watched the TV news in the corner with bored and distant looks on their faces.

"Here you go, hon," said the waitress, coming back with his drinks. "Can I interest you in the Hungry Man's Special?"

Skull was on the verge of declining out of habit, and then asked, "What is it, ma'am?"

Brenda Lou's face lit up, making her fiftyish visage look a decade younger. "Oh, don't you 'ma'am' me. Call me Brenda Lou, just like on my nametag." She tapped it with a long, painted nail.

“Okay, Brenda Lou.”

“There you go. Well, the Hungry Man’s Special’s a sixteen-ounce T-bone steak with two over-easy eggs on top sprinkled with three different types of cheese. Comes with Texas toast, grits, black-eyed peas and your choice of side salad or tomato soup. If you finish it all you get a slice from your choice of six different pies.”

Sounds like a total heart attack, he thought. “I’ll take it. The soup instead of the salad.”

“How would you like your steak?”

“Still mooing on the grill.”

“Comin’ right up,” she replied, her steps a little lighter as she walked away.

Skull noticed the men in the room all looking at him appreciatively. Evidently, even these semi-professional eaters had some respect for the Hungry Man’s Special.

Sipping the hot tea, he picked up an abandoned newspaper from the counter, spreading it out on the table before him. The cleanup of the Arkansas Free State was still the front-page news. In the story, the federal government claimed the area contained several terrorist training facilities. Tensions remained high with Texas. Alaska had followed that state’s example by suspending mandatory Eden testing and allowing easy immigration. There was also a bill proposed in Alaska to secede from the U.S., with the voting set to start before that of Texas in order to take advantage of the summer months.

The U.S. government was evidently not only furious with Alaska, but also Canada, which had publicly encouraged the “defiance” of the states, and had been at odds with the current administration regarding their policies toward Edens.

The inside page contained stories of how the new Soviet Union had massed its military along the borders of the previous Warsaw Pact countries after completing its annexation of Central Asia and the Caucasus Region. NATO was on high alert and strongly condemned the troop movements, but the Alliance lacked teeth with the United States preoccupied with internal matters. Latvia and Bulgaria had already reached separate neutrality agreements with the Soviet Union in return for withdrawing from NATO.

The financial page showed world markets in severe disarray. The price of oil, grain, and gold had shot through the roof while the international trade in manufactured goods, especially luxury items, had decreased dramatically. Inflation was rising steadily in the U.S., and the commercial property and

housing market had crashed in all but a few highly desirable areas. Bankruptcies abounded, and many companies had shut their doors.

Famines in West Africa and India were especially severe and piracy in the Horn of Africa region had reached an all-time high. Israel, Switzerland, Ethiopia, and Turkey had closed their borders indefinitely.

What was strikingly absent, Skull noted, was any news on areas offering sanctuary for large quantities of Edens. Nothing on Colombia, Argentina, South Africa, Australia or the other Free Communities, as Markis had termed them. Propaganda and scare stories abounded about the Eden Plague and the crises sweeping the globe, but nothing positive on Markis or the resistance he was setting up. The only stories that mentioned the man who released the Eden Plague castigated him for causing worldwide chaos and for “crimes against humanity.”

“Here you go, hon,” said Brenda Lou, returning with a giant flat tray that appeared on the verge of snapping several of her vertebrae. She set the serving platter on the edge of the table and offloaded a dizzying array of plates, saucers, bowls, and sides. “Can I get you anything else?” she asked a little breathlessly while blowing a stray hair out of her face.

“No, this will be fine,” Skull answered with a genuine smile.

“Well, I hope you enjoy it,” she said, her own smile lingering. “Good luck,” she threw back over her shoulder as she walked away.

Skull immediately cut off half the steak, put it between two pieces of Texas toast, and wrapped this in several napkins before sneaking it inside his pack. Then he proceeded to eat every other bite. After a half hour of hard work he sat back contentedly.

The waitress approached a little hesitantly, her eyes wide. “Good lord,” she said. “You okay?”

“Just a refill on the tea,” Skull replied with a broad smile.

She nodded with a nervous laugh, and began clearing the multitude of used dishware in front of him before walking away.

“Oh, and Brenda Lou?” he called out after her.

She turned carefully, still holding all the dishware.

“How about that pie?”

Skull slept soundly and deeply until the next morning, when he ate

voraciously of the included motel breakfast, squirreling away some extra fruit and boxed cereal in his pockets. The previous night he had washed all his dirty clothes and even his sleeping bag at the small coin-operated laundry room in the motel, so he was soon ready to check out. At the counter he asked the day cashier, a short fat woman this time, "Is there a used car lot around here?"

She laughed. "Tons of 'em. Famous Ed's is just off the next exit up the road."

"How far is that?"

"Only a couple miles," she said. "Best deals you'll find in the area. I should know. He's my brother-in-law."

"Would he be willing to come pick me up? I'm without transportation right now." Skull said. "My car's transmission went out last night and the mechanic says it will be more to replace it than the car is worth, so I told him to keep it."

She looked at him skeptically.

"Tell him I'm a sure-fire sale," Skull added. "I *have* to buy a car."

The woman overcame her hesitation and made a phone call. Then she turned back to him. "There'll be a car here in about ten minutes to pick you up."

"Thank you very kindly," Skull said, stepping outside.

In about twenty minutes a car pulled up. "You the guy wanting to buy a car?"

"That's me," answered Skull, tossing his bags in the back and climbing in the passenger seat of a vintage red Camaro.

"My name's Tony," the driver said, holding out a hand. "I work for Ed."

"I'm Zach Ulser," Skull said naming one of his three prepared identities. He took the man's hand. "I really appreciate the ride."

"No problem," Tony answered pulling out onto the highway. "It's a slow day so far anyway."

"Nice car," Skull said appreciatively, running his hand over the dash.

"Nothing like the '67 Z28, I'll tell you. 400 horsepower 302 with the dual four-barrels." Tony put the clutch in and revved the engine to a roar.

Skull whistled. "Sweet."

They made their way to a large car lot with brightly colored streamers hanging over an assortment of cars, vans, trucks, and SUVs in various conditions and colors.

"Have a look around," Tony told him after they got out of the Camaro. "I'll go tell Ed you're here."

Skull walked up and down the line of cars. He needed something cheap,

cheap enough that it wouldn't be out of the ordinary to buy outright. His cash was also limited, so he would need to use Zach Ulser's visa card.

He was on the verge of picking a vehicle nearly at random when something in the corner caught his eye. Walking over to a large Honda Gold Wing motorcycle, he saw it was old but in good condition. It wouldn't have the off-road capability or acceleration of his last bike, but it had lots of storage in the three rear carriers and the seat would be comfortable. He would make good time on limited gas and could get through traffic jams far more easily.

"Planning on doing some serious cruising, I see," said a voice behind Skull.

He turned and saw a man in a cheap suit with dark slicked-back hair. He had a smile on his face and his hand out to shake.

Skull took it. "You must be Ed."

"Guilty as charged," Ed answered. "My sister-in-law said you had a bit of tough luck. Hope we can help you out with that."

"I hope so too," said Skull turning back to the bike. "I haven't ridden in years, but this might be just what I'm looking for. How much you asking for her?"

"That will run you eight grand," Ed said, "but I'll throw in a full tank of gas and a wash."

Skull was prepared to pay that much since it would have to be on a throwaway credit card, but not to haggle would be suspicious.

"How about four grand and you forget the wash?"

Ed whistled. "I can see you are a tough customer. Four grand to my eight grand is quite a drop off. Why don't we say seven and I throw in a helmet."

Skull gazed at the bike longingly with a conflicted look on his face. "The wife would kill me if I bought a bike. Maybe I should just get a cheap car. She told me not to spend more than five."

"Has she ever ridden on a Gold Wing?" Ed asked patting the seat behind the driver's. "I bet once she rides on it, you two will be regular weekend travelers. There's nothing like a Gold Wing, and the missus will thank you for this later, believe me. Besides, with gas going up every day, this baby will save you plenty."

"That's a lot of money though," said Skull. "Like I said, my budget is five thousand."

Ed looked around as if afraid someone might hear them. "I'll be losing money, but since you're down on your luck and I'm a God-fearing man, why not

say six and it's yours?"

Appearing to agonize over the decision, Skull finally smiled and stuck out his hand. "Deal."

"Well alrighty then," Ed answered with an oversized grin on his face. "Let's go on over to the office to do some paperwork and then we'll get you on the road."

It took some convincing for Ed to accept a credit card, but once Skull offered to cover the transaction fees and it went through without a hitch, he was happy to oblige. It helped that Skull had a valid Florida driver's license with his picture on the front in the name of Zach Ulser.

Half an hour after closing the deal Skull headed out on the highway, crossing from Mississippi into Tennessee.

Chapter 25

Skull made great time the next few days heading east through Tennessee, the ground slowly starting to rise and become more mountainous.

Stopping at a public library in a small town, Skull checked the secure email drop Vinny had set up what seemed like a hundred years ago. He wasn't surprised to see a coded message for him from Spooky. Entering his personalized pass phrase, he opened the message.

It was short and simple: *Need sign of life - third question, most urgent, more information to follow, S.*

Skull shook his head and almost walked away, but curiosity got the better of him. The third *bona fides* question was the identity of Skull's first pet. He composed a response: *Still alive, a goldfish named Napoleon. S.* After scrubbing the computer's history and registry, he logged out of the anonymizer and rebooted the computer before leaving the library.

The roads east weren't as congested as those going west and Skull made good time on the Gold Wing. It rained on him only one day, though gently. The other days spread sunny and mild around him and Skull could almost forget he was living through...what, Apocalypse Light? He snorted to himself. Things sucked, but this was no End Times.

He'd forgotten how motorcyclists were an informal tribe on the road. Whenever he passed anyone on a bike, whether young, old, black, white, Asian, tattooed, part of a club or gang, on a Harley or a rice-burner, they waved to him and smiled. Any time he stopped for gas, food, or a restroom break, other cyclists nearby would start up a friendly conversation. Their questions usually revolved around the venerable Gold Wing and Skull had developed a half dozen canned clichés about the bike. He had to admit to himself that it was a comfortable, reliable, and smooth riding vehicle, though the Harley riders exhibited a faint air of condescension.

Skull was already driving into High Bluff before he consciously knew that was his destination. Although it had been nearly twenty-five years since the last time he had been there, the small town hadn't changed much since his youth.

Driving down the one real road, he passed the small grocery store where he had bought sodas on hot days as a boy. Beside this stood a combination gas station and repair garage owned by a boyhood friend of his. Up ahead he could

see a church and thrift store. Mixed in among all these resilient structures were simple, rugged houses and dilapidated mobile homes, none of them looking like they had been built or even renovated since Watergate.

Resentment, anxiety, and curiosity all warred within him.

Why the hell am I here? he asked himself.

Turning right off the main road resulted in a powerful sense of *déjà vu*. He had lived and played on this street and the house where he'd grown up at the end was still standing.

Skull stopped in front and shut off the bike. The place was obviously deserted. The front door stood open and part of the roof was falling in. He couldn't decide if he was relieved or disappointed that he didn't have to face anyone.

Sitting there for several minutes, he gazed around the yard and the adjacent houses. He wasn't sure what he was expecting, but this emptiness, this *nothing* wasn't it. His old house was dead as were any feelings he had about it. Best to move on.

He cranked the Honda and turned around, heading back out to the main road, and now saw several suspicious and closed faces watching him from sagging front porches or dirty windows. They didn't wave or smile and neither did Skull. This wasn't his home anymore, and these were not his people.

Turning down a side street, he swung through the parking lot of Saint Alban's, where he'd gone to Mass every Sunday. Father James would be in his eighties by now, or more likely dead. He saw a young man in a clerical collar raise a friendly hand from the church steps. Skull waved back, but kept on riding.

More nothing.

Heading east again on the main road, a sign indicated he needed to turn left to get back to the highway, but instead he turned right onto a narrow gravel road that climbed steeply up wooded hills and hollows.

These treacherous paths had changed even less than the roads and dwellings in town and Skull imagined there wasn't much significant difference between them now and when Tennessee was cut off from North Carolina to become a state in its own right centuries before. The dark woods and large trees muffled sound and light, and this gave the forest a primeval air. The feeling of awe and smallness Skull had felt as a child returned.

Turning down paths each narrower and in worse condition than the last, he finally came to a small cabin set back against the base of a rocky hill. Ancient

oaks and a pecan tree hovered protectively over the structure. This was where the road ended.

Skull had expected to see the cabin falling apart like his childhood home, but instead it seemed in good condition. He even saw what appeared to be a burgeoning vegetable garden out back. An ancient woman sat in a rocking chair on the front porch smoking a cigarette. When Skull pulled up she mashed it out in a saucer beside her and then casually reached over to pick up the pump shotgun nearby and lay it across her lap.

Skull shut off the bike's engine and removed his helmet. He couldn't help but smile at Detta Denham, his grandmother.

She stared at him suspiciously before realization began to dawn on her face. "Alan?" she said tentatively. "Is that you, boy?"

He nodded, smiling, and then walked up to her.

She stood slowly, tears in her eyes, reaching out for him.

Stepping inside her embrace, Skull pulled her close. He tried to remember the last time he'd hugged another human being, but couldn't.

"Oh, Alan," she said. "Why you been gone so long? Why didn't you call or write? Everyone thought you were dead."

Skull stiffened and pulled away. Nearly two decades had passed since he'd talked to anyone in the family. Looking for a reason, he settled upon, "There was a woman."

"There always is." Detta nodded as if this explained everything. "Well, come sit down," she said, pointing to a chair next to her rocker, and then went inside. She emerged with a bottle and two glasses.

"It's a little early for drinking, don't you think?"

"My, you *have* been gone a long time," she responded, pulling the cork out of the bottle of whiskey and pouring three fingers into each glass.

Handing one of the glasses to Skull, she lifted the other herself. "To the return of the prodigal son," she said clinking her glass to his, and then throwing back the brown liquor.

Skull sipped his a little more slowly. "She died."

"I'm sorry."

"It changed me."

"I can see that."

Skull's mouth worked, but no sound came out. Eventually he said, "Her name was Linde. I killed her."

"Surely not."

Pressing the heels of his hands into his deep eye sockets, he could feel something unfamiliar threaten.

Tears.

“Negligent homicide, the court-martial said, and they were right. I was lucky they let me stay in. If it hadn’t been for Zeke...oh, God...” This time the tears did flow, for the first time in at least twenty years. He’d cried for Linde, but never for Zeke, until now.

Still, he’d gotten out of the habit of emotional release and he clamped down now, shutting down the waterworks as he routinely shut down all his other passions.

Detta waited patiently for him to finish and then refilled both of their glasses. This time she corked the bottle and put it on the ground beside her. She looked at the Gold Wing out front. “Nice ride you got there.”

“It gets me around.”

“I’m sure it does.”

“How you been holding out?”

“Same as always,” she answered. “Taking it one day at a time.”

That was as much of the pleasantries as he could stand. “Where is everyone?”

She took another sip of whiskey before answering him. “You mean the family? All gone. Some dead. A couple in jail. More run off to Lord knows where. Just me here now.”

Skull remained silent for a time. Guilt wasn’t a familiar feeling. “For how long?” he finally asked.

Detta cocked her head, figuring. “Well, your grandfather died not too long after you came home for your father’s funeral. Your two younger brothers both went out to Los Angeles a few years ago and that was the last I heard of them. Pretty much the same for uncles, cousins, and the like. Denham men are a wild bunch that don’t typically live very long. The women don’t stick around long without ’em.”

Skull grunted. He wasn’t sure what he had expected, but this wasn’t it.

“All except you,” she said softly. “You were different.”

“How’s that?”

She waved her hand at him. “You were always the quiet, gentle soul. That’s why you didn’t fit in. Why you left, I imagine.”

Skull shook his head and snorted.

“I’m right, boy,” she insisted softly. “You were always more intelligent and

introspective than the rest. More controlled. I imagine that's one reason you're still alive."

Skull thought she may have hit on at least one truth there. "What do you plan on doing now?" he finally asked.

Detta laughed heartily and lit up another cigarette. "What I been doin'. Keep on livin' until the Good Lord decides to take me away. Best damn plan there is, I reckon."

"It's dangerous here all alone."

The old woman nodded. "It is. That's why I carry my shotgun. Already had to put down one poor fool of a thief." She hooked a thumb toward the rear of the house. "He's buried out back now in my vegetable garden. Best crop of tomatoes I've had in thirty years."

Skull took a small sip of the whiskey and looked out at the yard. He realized it was quiet and peaceful. "Have you heard of the Eden virus?" he finally asked.

"You mean the miracle cure that heals you and makes you young? Yeah, I heard about it on the wireless set. Impossible not to."

"What if...what if I could get it for you? Would you take it?"

"No."

"It's real. I've seen it up close."

"I believe you," she said, "but the answer is still no."

"But why?"

She turned to him. "Why haven't you? Heal your pain."

Skull looked away. "It's complicated."

"It always is," she laughed. "You cherish your pain. Just like me."

"I still have work to do."

"Work you can't do if you're one of them Edens?"

Skull nodded.

"Then maybe it's not good work and you should just leave it be."

"I can't." He sighed.

"Neither can I," Detta said. "I'm alone, Alan. My husband and children and grandchildren are either dead or scattered. I don't want to grow young again and start over. I don't want another life. I'm happy with the one I've had and it's about over. When the Good Lord takes me, I'll go joyfully into His arms. Until then, I'll endure and survive."

Skull stood to pace up and down the porch. "But you don't have to die, don't you understand? All the pain will be gone."

“Not all of it,” she said with a smile. “The deepest hurts you wouldn’t want cured even if they could be. They become old friends you can’t be without.”

“What the hell are you even talking about?” Skull shook his head at her.

Detta breathed deeply, and then let out all the air in a sigh. “I’ll make a deal with you, son.”

“What deal?”

“I’ll let you give me this miracle cure.”

“If?”

“If you take it too and agree to stay with me. I don’t want to live so long alone.”

Skull felt stumped. “That doesn’t make any sense,” he finally said.

“Makes perfect sense to me.”

“That’s because you’re a crazy old woman.”

“You’re not wrong,” she laughed, “but my condition stands.”

“I can’t do that. Not right now, anyway. I need my pain.”

Detta’s smile faded. “Because of this work of yours.”

“Without it, I’d just...”

“Be at peace?”

“Run down. Like an unwound clock.”

“Well, don’t expect *me* to do what you want to assuage *your* guilt,” she said, her voice hard. “I didn’t ask you to come back, but now that you have I’d like you to stay. I’ll even do what you ask, but don’t tell me to live forever by myself. I’ve already lived alone long enough and it’s not for me.”

Skull stood on the steps, not meeting her eyes. Instead, he let his gaze wander over the woods. Finally, he said, “I shouldn’t have come here.”

“No, Alan,” she said. “You shouldn’t have waited so long to come here. You’re late. Way too late. That’s where you’ve gone wrong.”

“Nothing I can do about that now.”

“Nope,” she said, taking a long draw from her cigarette and blowing the smoke toward him.

“Good-bye, Grandma,” Skull said, leaning down and kissing the top of her head.

“Good-bye, Alan.” Detta reached up to pat his cheek before he straightened up.

Skull walked back to the Gold Wing and put on his helmet, cranked the bike and drove away.

His pace was deliberately slow and careful, but it still felt like running.

Chapter 26

Skull continued east, weaving his way in and out of the ancient wind- and rain-smoothed Appalachian hills. Occasionally he saw locals and was able to buy gas and food from simple, laconic people. Checkpoints and soldiers seemed a thing of the past, at least here, so deep into the low mountains.

That suited Skull just fine. He'd been in a dark mood since leaving his boyhood home and worried he'd do something rash just to appease his demons, the ones that hungered for blood and oblivion.

Those had been quiescent for some time, but no longer. They whispered in his ears, promising the peace he'd always reaped after sowing deserving death, but to seek an excuse for extermination would be indulgence, plain and simple.

After the things that had diverted him thus far, he now felt the press of his chosen mission.

Skull had just crossed into North Carolina when he rounded a curve and saw a steel cable stretching across the road. He was traveling too fast to turn away from the barrier, so he laid the bike on its side, sliding under the taut metal rope, sparks flying and metal screeching. Holding on tightly, he tried to keep himself atop the bike and off the pavement, but then the rim of the front wheel caught on something and he flew up and over into the air as the entire machine flipped. He pushed himself up and away, trying for a soft landing in the bushes.

Below him the bike tumbled over and over again while Skull flew through the air at perhaps fifty miles per hour toward a distant bramble-covered road bank. Head down and feet in the air, he began to fall toward the surface. Tucking into a ball, he'd just got his feet under him when he hit the landscape and rolled.

All Recon Marines go through Airborne School. It had taken Skull almost two dozen jumps to learn the secret of landing easily, a secret he missed at the parachute course despite all their drill. The secret was to ignore the ground and focus on pressing your feet and knees together as tightly as you could. This kept you from reaching and anticipating an impact that could result in a break. A parachute landing fall, a PLF, was a barely controlled catastrophe, yet one that allowed paratroopers to get out of the sky as fast as possible and land safely, sometimes bruised, but seldom seriously hurt.

While hurtling through the air, Skull kept reciting the same thing he did while approaching the ground on a parachute jump. *Feet and knees together, feet*

and knees together, feet and knees together, feet and—

Hitting the ground with a crash, both knees were forced up and into his face, busting his mouth. Skull flipped headlong and began tumbling head over feet down the steep hill until he came to a painful and sudden stop against the base of a giant maple tree.

Skull lay still for a moment, fearing the worst. He wiggled his toes. *Well at least I'm not paralyzed*, he thought, and then remembered that people who were paralyzed thought they were moving their extremities normally. He sat up and looked at his feet as he moved them.

Spitting blood out of his mouth, he leaned and checked his body over, finding himself bruised and cut, but not badly hurt.

“Holy shit,” said a voice from up the hill, “did you see that guy go flying? It was like Evel fucking Kan-Evel, swear to God.”

Skull stood up, a rage cold as ice flooding through him. His demons gibbered, blessing Skull for setting them free.

The people who did this were about to die. That was as certain as the fact the sun would rise the next day. Skull reached behind his back and found that the Glock and knife were still in place. The rest of his gear should be somewhere near his bike. He climbed obliquely up the hill to flank the original voice, which sounded like it had been joined by others, ignoring his aches and pains. Adrenaline filled him with energy, taking away his hurts and banishing all emotion except the desire to kill.

Drawing his pistol, Skull climbed up from the wooded hill, jumped across the ditch, and stepped onto the road. His mangled motorcycle was twenty yards to his right, half-buried in an earthen bank. Three hillbillies in dirty denim overalls and wool shirts stood around the bike. They turned as one to look at him.

“Holy shit, the sucker is still alive,” said one, smiling and elbowing his buddy in the side.

Skull raised the Glock in a perfect two-handed shooter's grip, giving the men no more than an instant for their eyes to widen and their mouths to fall open before shooting all three, one round into each, center mass. He was already limping toward his bike before the last had flopped like a meat puppet to the ground. The corpse of the one who had spoken earned himself a belated kick in the head as Skull went by.

It took some work to pry open the luggage carriers, which had been damaged in the crash, but he was finally able to get them loose. Pulling out his

larger rucksack, he slung it over his shoulders and then put the smaller go-bag on top of that.

Hearing more voices behind him, he turned to see two men walking down the road. They carried rifles on slings over their shoulders and had the same look and feel of the three he had just killed. They froze when they saw Skull. Their eyes flicked from his to the three bodies.

Skull lifted his pistol to fire several shots in their direction, but too distant for accuracy and they dove to the ground. One of the men got his rifle to his shoulder and sent a round in his direction, but wide.

He heard the squawk of a radio. "We need help! Son of a bitch is still alive and I think he killed Johnny and your two brothers! Come quick!"

Wanting to rush the two men and finish them while they were rattled, Skull realized that wouldn't be a good idea in his condition and with reinforcements coming. It would be best to get some distance and hide himself in the concealing woods.

More rounds came toward him, closer this time. Limping heavily on an ankle that was already starting to swell, Skull headed north toward what looked like the densest part of the forest. He walked steadily, stopping to check his back trail often and listen for anyone moving in front to intercept him. By dusk, he started to believe he had made a clean getaway.

Until he heard the dogs.

He could tell by their baying that they were bloodhounds, and they had his trail.

Crap. Don't you shit-kicking hillbillies know to quit while you're ahead?

But he knew from experience they didn't. These were insular, backward folk who would burn the entire world down in order to avenge a neighbor they didn't even like.

Pride and prestige and not enough fiber in the diet. You're going to make me kill you too.

Skull pulled on his ghillie suit and assembled his lightweight M4, slinging it. The disassembled Barrett in his ruck was not handy, and there was no need of it in the dark. Then he wove and backtracked and made figure-eights to confuse the dogs and buy him some time.

On several occasions the dogs got close, but the multitude of legitimate scent trails saved him. At one point they came upon him unprepared and he had to climb a tree in the dark, clambering as high as he could and then settling into a thick part, unmoving. The dogs circled the area below him, confused, as the half-

drunk hillbillies shone flashlights up to see what the dogs had found. His ghillie suit concealed him as it was meant to, making him seem like just a mass of leaves until those who stalked him had pulled the dogs away and onto another scent.

Eventually, he found what he was looking for and spent his time preparing.

In a steep-sided draw he built a campsite, pitched his tent, and lastly lit a fire after placing most of his gear nearby.

Then he waited.

By morning, the tired pursuers and their drained and ragged dogs came upon the campsite. Skull watched through the Barrett's scope as they sifted through his belongings and clothes. Then he saw them pause and look around. They argued for a moment, and finally realization appeared to dawn upon them as they saw it for what it was. A trap. And there was only one way out. They had walked into a valley like bugs into a bottle.

Skull was the cork.

Only when he was sure they realized their predicament did he pull the trigger.

He took his time and enjoyed himself. There was nowhere for them to go. Feeling creative, Skull tried a few trick shots, such as putting one bullet through two men, or trying to clip someone's knee without blowing his leg clean off with the monster .50 caliber bullets his rifle spat, or skipping a round off a rock to ricochet into the target.

He and his demons enjoyed themselves tremendously.

After forty endless minutes all movement had ceased. Skull confirmed seven dead hillbillies through the rifle scope before packing the Barrett away again. He then walked down to his campsite where five bloodhounds with wagging tails met him. He took some time to pet them affectionately.

He'd always loved dogs.

Skull checked the fallen and found two still alive, if barely. Torturing them seemed attractive, but he mastered himself and put each out of his misery by a quick knife thrust up under his chin through the palate to the brain.

After repairing his tent, he tidied up the rest of the gear and built up the fire again. He searched the bodies of the seven, putting all their cash in his wallet and setting aside food, ammo and batteries. After going through all of their packs, he put some of the non-perishable food in his own rucksack, and then prepared a sumptuous meal.

Relaxing through the day into the late afternoon, Skull had a wonderful

time. He gorged himself, surrounded by grateful and well-fed dogs for companionship, under a clear sky. The hounds would warn him if anyone approached. Between meals, he propped the seven dead bodies up so that it appeared they were enjoying the fire with him.

Now you've gone over the edge, he told himself. Only crazies do shit like this.

Yet he didn't care. He stared at the dead bodies. They were just meat and he wasn't crazy, but he liked to be reminded of what he had done. After all, didn't hunters take trophies? It was important to celebrate successes. He'd earned this one.

That night, relaxing by the fire with a full belly and dogs at his feet, Skull felt as content as he had in a long time.

His seven new buddies didn't bother him in the least.

Chapter 27

While making his way back to the highway, Skull discovered signs leading him to the Appalachian Trail. The road would be quicker, but then again, he might have to deal with more asshole hillbilly ambushers. The trail seemed a safer and less troublesome bet.

The five bloodhounds followed him as their new master and Skull admitted to himself that pleased him. He had always loved dogs, but hadn't owned one since childhood due to his nomadic lifestyle and constant travels. On the verge of naming them, he decided against it, afraid he would get too attached. He decided if they were still with him in a week, then they would get names. Until then he called all of them *hey you* and *dog*.

It had actually always been a lifetime dream of his to hike the entire Appalachian Trail. Before Skull had been recruited away from the Corps and into black ops, he and Zeke had agreed when they were both retired they would do it together. They would start in northern Georgia in April and finish in Maine in October before the heavy snows. Skull had always taken it for granted that this would eventually happen, but had never actually taken the time. There always seemed to be something more pressing.

He thought about Zeke. They could have hiked the trail together, lifelong friends. With Zeke's cheerfulness around to balance Skull's darkness, he might have found someone to love, to have a normal life with, but scumbag contractors working for INS Inc. had ended that dream.

What was worse, Larry Nightingale, acting on Zeke's instructions, had saved the lives of several instead of putting them down like the dogs they were, passing on the Eden Plague. They were somewhere out there, perhaps sorry for what they had done due to the virtue effect, but that didn't bring Zeke back.

Immortality for assholes, death to the righteous. That's what the Eden Plague had turned out to be.

Stop feeling sorry for yourself, he thought, pushing his ruminations away. *You've always wanted to hike the trail. Well, now you're hiking it. Make the best of it.*

Determined to do just that, he focused on holding a steady pace while stopping frequently to enjoy the many amazing sights and panoramic views. Often, he refilled his water bottles from the cool mountain streams and ate small

cold meals. The dogs were oblivious to the sights and activities, but enjoyed the multitude of diverse scents, and they didn't care if their food was cold or warm.

I could live out here, he thought idly. Then more seriously, *I really could live out here. I even have dogs to help. It would be nothing to build a cabin before winter, and game is plentiful. Would be a good place to hide out from the federalists until things either settle down or really come apart at the seams.*

No. You have a job to do, he told himself sternly. *There will be a time to relax, but not yet. Not until the job is done.*

Skull stopped to drink from a spring trickling down the rocks and watched the sun sink below the horizon in the west. He knew he should look for a good place to camp for the night, but gazing around, he realized there really wasn't a bad spot anywhere.

The bloodhounds caught his attention. While they were always sniffing at the ground, it was normally a haphazard affair that was more curiosity than organized. This time, the dogs had a focused purpose about them that seemed different. Their tails were up and they circled around the spring before the first headed off the marked trail and down a wooded slope. One by one the others followed.

"Where you damn dogs off to?" he mumbled after them.

They didn't answer.

Skull shrugged his shoulders, unslung his M4 and followed along behind, mentally marking a high rocky promontory overhead as a landmark in case he had trouble finding the trail again.

After a few minutes the dogs outdistanced him. His sprained ankle was still sore; in his forties, he didn't heal as fast as he once had. He wasn't going to risk a fall down the steep hill just to chase after curious bloodhounds.

Smelling a cooking fire ahead, Skull froze and sank to the ground. Cocking his head, he could faintly hear muffled voices.

Creeping forward, he peered down into a large natural bowl in the terrain with trees along the edges. The interior of the hollow contained a fire in the middle with tents around the edges. He saw about two dozen men and women along with half that many children. The kids clustered around the five bloodhounds, happily wagging their tails, but the men peered here and there, alerted.

A man armed with a rifle sat at each end of the bowl, one to the right and one to the left of Skull. They hadn't seen Skull and he could undoubtedly get away, but despite himself he decided he'd like to know who these people were.

Also, once he'd gone, the bloodhounds might come looking for him, picking up his trail with men following behind. He didn't intend to become the hunted again.

Slinging his M4, Skull climbed slowly over into the bowl and walked down to the base near one of the tents to sit calmly on a fresh fallen log. Everyone was so intent on the dogs and the excitement they were causing that it took several minutes for someone to notice him.

"Are these your dogs?" one of the little girls finally asked after seeing him watching.

"Sort of," he responded with a smile.

All the adults stopped and looked at him, and then each other, nervously. The two sentries shifted their rifles to cover him, but seemed perplexed by his demeanor and did not lift them to aim.

After a pregnant moment, a powerfully built man walked up to look down at Skull. "Welcome. My name is Derrick."

"I'm Zach," Skull answered, smiling as friendly as he could. "This is quite some campout."

Derrick looked around behind him, waving a hand to his nervous sentries. "Joe, Frank, keep your eyes on the woods. You already let one in."

The two men turn away, ashamed.

Skull could see a Colt .45 in the back of Derrick's waistband, but the man seemed at ease. "Best place to get away from the craziness," he said, turning back to Skull. "Things are a little...strained down there right now if you know what I mean."

"I do indeed," Skull responded. He looked pointedly at the armed men and then back at Derrick. "Those two are pogues, but you're not. Let me guess. Greenie beanie?"

Derrick nodded and grinned at the nickname for Green Berets, Special Forces. "Let *me* guess. Jarhead?"

"Yeah. Recon."

"Should have figured by your easy infil. You mean us any harm?"

"Not if you don't mean me any," Skull answered. "If I'd wanted to..." he gestured at the two ineffective sentries and formed a symbolic gun with his hand. "Pop. Pop."

"Yeah. Thanks for that." Derrick shook his head. "Makin' do with what I got."

One of the dogs barked happily, chasing a small child.

“What about those dogs? I don’t see a Recon Marine raising a pack of bloodhounds. I suspect they belonged to someone tracking you. Is anyone tracking you now?”

“Not anymore,” Skull answered, showing his teeth in an expression only distantly related to a smile.

Derrick stared at Skull’s face for a long moment before answering. “Good enough. Come on down. We’re just getting ready for some food.” Then he turned to the group and said loudly, “Everyone, this is Zach. He’s a guest of ours. Please make him feel welcome.”

Skull walked forward, receiving several smiles and *howdys*.

“Why are their ears so long and floppy?” a little boy asked him, rubbing one of the hound’s heads.

He looked down at the open face staring up at him. “Well, they’ve been bred that way. They track through dense thorny brush, and the floppiness keeps them from getting hung up or cut, and protects their hearing.”

“It also prevents ear infections,” Derrick said helpfully.

Skull made a there-you-go gesture and took off his ruck to sit in one of the camp chairs near the fire. His weight pulled him over onto his bad ankle, and he winced as he nearly fell. This seemed to startle the people around him more than his sudden arrival. Many of the smiles vanished.

“Got you a hurt leg there?” Derrick asked.

“Nothing but a sprain,” Skull answered.

“We’ll have food soon enough,” Derrick said. “You hungry?”

Skull gazed around at the happy group: no injuries, no conflict, everyone looking to be under thirty despite a couple teenagers among the kids. “I am, but no, I’m not an Eden.” He spread his hands.

Derrick nodded.

“But all of you are,” Skull said.

“Is that going to be a problem?” the man asked.

“Nope,” Skull answered. “Even less than you might think.”

“Aren’t you afraid we might infect you?”

Skull smiled. “I don’t plan on kissing anyone while I’m here.”

“Don’t be so hasty,” Derrick deadpanned. “I’ve been told I’m an amazing kisser.”

“The first thing I thought when I saw you,” Skull replied in kind.

Derrick laughed. “You seem more relaxed than the average citizen about the Eden virus.”

“Let’s just say I have a little...firsthand knowledge.”

“So you don’t believe all the lies and propaganda?” Derrick asked, sitting beside Skull. Men and women began placing skewers of venison across the fire.

“Not at all,” answered Skull. “I know the truth.”

Derrick remained quiet for a moment. “Mind if I ask you a personal question?”

“Long as it don’t involve kissing.”

Derrick chuckled. “Well, knowing what you know about the Eden virus and the benefits, why haven’t you taken it?”

That question again, Skull thought, stifling a roll of his eyes. “Maybe I just want to keep all my options open. Doesn’t mean I can’t take it later.”

“I see,” Derrick answered lightly. “You’re one of those types who doesn’t like to commit. Bet you never married.”

That barb struck home and Skull’s jaw tightened and his eyes darkened even more than usual with pain and loss.

“Didn’t mean anything,” Derrick said apologetically, “just trying to be funny. It’s been called an acquired taste.”

“No, that’s okay,” Skull said. “There was someone a long time ago, but she’s gone now.” He paused, and then changed the subject. “How long you been here?”

“A few months,” Derrick answered. “My family and two others were run out of our gated community once they realized we were Edens. We lived on the run for a while, collecting more like us until Teddy over there,” he pointed to a small, thin man with a long, oddly gray pony tail, “brought up this idea. Seemed like a good one.”

By the look of him, the little guy knew his way around a cannabis patch, a not-uncommon thing out in these woods. “I would tend to agree,” Skull answered Derrick. “You got everything you need out here now...but I suspect the winter’s going to be tough.”

Derrick nodded. “We’re working on getting ready for that. Might have to go lower to get away from the worst of the snow, but then we run the risk of more attention. Stocking up on food too. It’s not too bad, as long as we don’t exercise much or get anyone hurt.”

Skull nodded, seeing a tough time ahead for the group.

“Whatever we have to endure,” Derrick said, noticing Skull’s look, “it’s a damn sight better than how we were living down there. I’m not going to see my family end up in one of those camps. You heard of them?”

“Seen a couple up close,” Skull answered, his eyes narrowing.

“Then you know what I’m talking about.”

“Derrick, don’t take this wrong, but even *you* don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Bad?”

“All were bad. One was no worse than jail. All were ugly. One was...one was Auschwitz in America.”

“God damn.”

“No doubt, He will.”

“Then I’m glad we ran away.”

“Why not try to get away to one of the sanctuaries?” Skull asked.

“You mean one of the Free Communities down south?”

“And other places.”

Derrick snorted. “I’d love to, but we’re nervous about going into town for supplies. Can you imagine us trying to board a plane or get on a ship? They’d probably test us and then we’d be locked up and...like you said. I thought about it a lot, but believe me, this is the best place for us right now.”

Children around them ate voraciously, moderated by the adults, who imposed some order. Still, one would think they were getting their day’s only meal instead of one of three.

“We’ve seen that the children seem to need even more food than we do,” Derrick said.

“They’re growing. The virus speeds up the metabolism, even in healthy people.”

Derrick nodded. “Now they have incredible appetites, even my little Katie and she’s always been picky. To think I used to try to get her to eat her vegetables.” He chuckled.

A woman handed them each a couple of skewers of meat with a delicious aroma, and a plate with potatoes and a cob of corn on each, baked in the fire’s coals. Bowls of blackberries followed for desert.

“I know where you get the deer meat and berries,” Skull said, “but what about the corn and potatoes?”

“We have lots of mini-gardens spread around in the forest,” Derrick answered. “We plant the way the Native Americans used to, various crops together in clumps, often at the bases of trees.”

Skull had to admit he was impressed. “Seems like you’ve got a pretty good setup here.”

Derrick nodded. "But I know well enough that it could all end tomorrow. We have to be on the alert. We're small potatoes, no pun intended," he said pointing at Skull's plate, "to the government right now, but once they have the big areas, like Texas, locked down again...well..."

"Yeah," Skull said around a mouthful of savory venison.

"Unless we fight. If there are enough of us, maybe we could find another way."

"I think you'll find it difficult to get Edens to fight," Skull told him.

Derrick nodded. "I'd prefer not to harm anyone if I can help it, but if you or someone else gave me no choice, I could kill you without compunction. Believe me, I know."

"That's because you've already killed before, in service. Like me. But from what I know, these guys you have that have never dropped a trigger on someone...they won't be worth much."

"I know. But what can we do?"

"I'd keep that insurgency idea shelved for a while," Skull said. "I've seen rebellion firsthand and it wasn't pretty. The feds are playing hardball and crushing any resistance."

"Were you in Texas?"

Skull nodded. "And Arkansas."

Derrick chewed quietly for a moment. Eventually he seemed to make up his mind. "I've taught insurgency methods all over the world. The odds are always against the insurgents in the short term, but in the long run, it can work. Any movement has to start small. This one will be no different."

"Maybe," Skull admitted. "Just don't get into any rush. Simply keeping this group from freezing or ending up as bear poop might be a challenge."

"You could stay with us," Derrick said. "A man of your background could be lots of help."

"How would your group here feel about a non-Eden in your midst?"

Derrick looked away.

"I see," Skull answered, in many ways relieved. "That would be the condition for joining your group."

"You got to understand—"

"I do understand," answered Skull with a trace of bitterness. "You're already turning into a tribe, a religion of your own. Outsiders can visit, but to stay you have to convert to the state belief system. I appreciate it, I really do, but I can't join you. There's work that needs to be done."

Derrick nodded. “Every insurgency needs an ideology or it will fall apart... and all ideologies are a mixture of the false and true. Regardless, you could stay for the night if you wish.”

Skull realized he had planned on doing that exact thing, but something about having it said out loud galvanized him. Part of him really wanted to stay longer, and he had to quash that temptation. “Thanks,” he said, “but I need to keep moving.”

Derrick nodded.

Skull could see relief in the man’s demeanor despite his courtesy. Finishing his food, Skull accepted their gift of smoked venison, which he placed in his rucksack. Before he left, he took Derrick aside.

“There’s a man I know who works with Daniel Markis, a Green Beret and an Eden, like you. His last name is Nguyen, but they call him Spooky.”

Derrick’s eyebrows flew up in surprise. “Spooky Nguyen? I met him, once. He’s a legend in the community. And he’s with Markis?”

“Yeah, more or less. I think. And if Markis is in Colombia like he says...”

“Get word to Markis and I’d find Spooky.”

Skull nodded. “If I was a betting man, I’d put my next paycheck on Spooky running whatever black ops the Free Communities have.” He snorted. “Whatever Edens can stomach anyway. He used to be a killer. Now?” Skull shrugged.

“I’ll keep that in mind. For the future.”

Skull shook Derrick’s hand and said quick farewells, heading back toward the trail.

The dogs didn’t follow.

That’s for the best, Skull thought. What the hell am I supposed to do with a pack of bloodhounds? Still, it hurt more than he expected. Somehow, animals can reach places in the soul where people never can.

That night when he slept, aloneness wasn’t as comforting as it once had been.

Chapter 28

After nearly a month on the Appalachian Trail, Skull had become even leaner than usual, but he felt good, very fit. He'd walked from the southern border of Virginia nearly up to the West Virginia state line. The solitude, beauty, and exercise had been peaceful, probably lowering his blood pressure significantly.

Departing the Trail at Snicker's Gap, he began hiking east along Old Route 6. Even the highway walking seemed easier, granted it was worse on the eyes and lungs due to the diesel exhaust of trucks. By early afternoon he made it to the town of Purcellville and walked into a truck stop for a shower, shave, and a hot meal.

Seeing a small internet cafe, Skull decided to see if Spooky ever responded. It had been over a month since his sign-of-life email; the little Vietnamese man may have presumed he was dead.

Logging into the site, he noted several messages from Spooky. All said pretty much the same thing, in code: *Where are you? Why don't you write? Are you still alive?* The latest message provided an international number and told Skull to call from a clean phone.

Skull suppressed annoyance that Spooky would feel the need to remind him of such a thing. Skull *only* used clean phones.

A friendly trucker was willing to give Skull a ride into the main part of town and drop him off at the local Wal-Mart. Walking inside, he made his way around cartloads of screaming and frantic shoppers, perhaps a bit more busy than normal, but not surprisingly so. Shelves remained filled with consumer goods, though he did notice the grocery section had some gaps and prices had risen generally.

He bought several burner phones and cards that contained varying numbers of minutes. After paying and exiting the store, he made his way to a nearby park he had spotted on the way into town. Though starting to get late, a few people remained, mainly a bunch of kids playing basketball on the court and one old man feeding pigeons. Skull made his way to an isolated corner of the park where he dropped his rucksack, sat on a bench, and assembled the phone.

Taking a deep breath, he dialed the number from the earlier message he had memorized.

The call picked up at once. Spooky Nguyen's tight, accented voice came

over the line. “Five Four Two.”

“Two One,” Skull completed the code.

“It’s taken you long enough.”

“Nice day to you, too,” Skull answered. “I’ve had some things going on that have kept me away.”

“What things?”

“Oh, this and that. I’ve been to the spa and learned to play the violin really well. I’ve also nearly finished my memoirs.”

“Not funny.”

Skull smiled. “I am. You *gooks* just don’t understand humor.”

“I am not a *gook*, as you well know,” Spooky insisted. “I spent most of my early life killing *gooks*. I am Degar. I am *Thuong*.”

“That’s what every guy tells the ladies.”

Spooky sighed. “Even less funny.”

“It’s great catching up with you and all,” Skull said, “but we’re going to have to wrap this up. I’ve got a pedicure in an hour.”

“Where are you now? No keywords.”

“Tahiti,” Skull answered. “You?”

That long-suffering sigh came again. “Near the boss. I know where you’re going.”

“Oh, do you now?”

“You’re headed to the facility.”

Skull knew Spooky was avoiding speaking its name, or even its location, to foil the NSA computers that might be screening the call. “And if I was?”

“That facility has been brought under federal control,” Spooky continued. “They are working on making a counter-germ that specifically targets Edens by overstimulation of their immune systems. Makes their bodies attack themselves similar to some strains of cancer. Intel tells us they are close to having something.”

“So you want me to take care of it for you?” Skull asked airily. “I can. Won’t be any trouble.”

“Yes it will,” insisted Spooky. “Intel also tells us that security is extremely tight. They are expecting an attack and have taken all precautions. It would be suicide for you to try to hit it alone.”

“Then why don’t you do it? You have money, equipment and manpower. A whole country or two, I hear. I’m just one guy with a gun.”

“We’re working on a plan now,” Spooky responded. “I have a team

prepping. There's a place for you on it, if you want."

"I'm touched that you would do that for me," Skull said, "but no."

"We can have you extracted and safe inside forty-eight hours."

"Count me out."

"Then at least lay low," Spooky said. "Let us handle this. We have the people and we have the resources."

"When will you be ready?"

"We think within a week. Ten days at the most."

"I need an exact date and time."

"It's tentative."

"Just give it to me, and don't be late."

Spooky gave him the information.

Skull ended the call without saying goodbye, and then tore the phone apart with his knife, crushing the various parts under his boot heel and then tossing them into the nearby hedges.

Walking out of the park, he turned onto a main road and spotted a Waffle House. Tasty, cheap, dependable food. He went inside, dropped his gear into a booth, and ordered coffee and pecan waffles.

It would be smarter to wait for backup, he thought. Hell, I could just sit tight and let them handle it. Spooky has the men and resources I don't. The smart move here just so happens to also be the easy move. Those things so rarely line up, so maybe I should take advantage.

His coffee and waffle arrived, and he ate while watching the television on the counter. A news show played, a sappy human interest piece on the victims of the "terrorist" attacks with liberal doses of Eden hatred.

Everyone takes it as a given that Markis and his folks were not only responsible for spreading the virus but also the nuclear attacks. No one seems to be asking how they got nukes. Hell, no one is asking how they got the Eden virus, or why a bunch of infectees would even do such a thing in the face of the virtue effect.

The screen filled with a picture of Jervis Jenkins III, the former CIA spymaster. Very few knew that he had ushered in the genesis of the XHV project that spawned the Eden Plague, or that he had a hand in countless deaths, including the nuclear attacks. The exposé made him the centerpiece of its show. It made him a martyr.

The man who gave the orders that led directly to Zeke's murder. Lies atop falsehoods surrounding deceptions, Skull thought. He was surprised at his own

anger. *The way it's always been and how government keeps control of its people. Other governments, right? Not in America. Not in my country.*

Zeke's face filled his mind again, along with an image of the family his friend left behind – Cassandra, Ricky and Millie Johnstone. Rage and righteous wrath on their behalf overcame him.

Skull put a bill on the table, picked up his gear, and began walking east again.

Chapter 29

The ticking clock had forced Skull to hitchhike. He didn't like it, but now that he was getting close to the objective he preferred it to stealing a vehicle or buying one. Still, there were lots of hitchhikers on the roads now, far more than there used to be. The Unionists were keeping the trains running on time, so to speak, but clearly not everyone could afford a ticket. Truckers especially seemed to have become the unofficial bus drivers of the new, Unionist-dominated America, allowing people to climb onto the backs or even into the cabs of their trucks.

In Skull's experience, hard times either made people kinder or more evil, but seldom anything in between.

Traveling this way, it only took him a few days to make it to the outskirts of Aberdeen, north of Baltimore.

The facility itself was nondescript except for a perimeter of double chain link fence with razor wire on top. Heavily armed guards walked the area, some with leashed dogs, and powerful floodlights illuminated the ground at night for a good fifty yards beyond the perimeter.

Skull lay in a concealed position for two days looking for a way in. Although there were occasional deliveries, the security here was tighter than any facility he had ever seen short of a Supermax penitentiary. The guards even made drivers wait outside while a staff member drove the vehicle in and then returned it empty later. There were at least three shifts of guards, and though he might be able to slip in among them, the uniforms were different from anything he'd ever seen before and not something he'd likely be able to fake, or pick up at a secondhand shop. Killing one of the guards in his home to take his uniform and badge seemed the obvious option, but he had spotted at least one retinal scanner. Maybe there were more.

Why are you doing this? a voice asked in his head. *Don't say it's for Zeke; he's long gone and there is nothing you can do that will change that. Besides, the men who killed him could be anywhere.*

Skull imagined himself getting up and walking away, just dropping the whole thing. He could leave this for Spooky and just go do...what exactly? Take up bridge, or perhaps professional croquet?

You could go back to that group in the mountains, the voice said. Another voice countered, *And become an Eden? I am what I am and don't want to*

change. Shouldn't be forced to change. Won't change.

Skull realized now that nothing of what he was doing was about revenge or about Zeke. It was about who he was and what he did. If there were no INS Inc., he would find someone or something else that deserved his specialist attention. His wrath. He was the man that no one else could be. They wanted him around when evil and horror walked among them, yet they loathed and ostracized him when the illusion of safety and security wrapped in the cloak of civilization prevailed. So be it.

But you could call Spooky, said the voice. They know you and accept you for what you are.

No, they don't, he thought with sudden clarity. They see me as a very useful and very dangerous tool that must be constantly supervised so that it doesn't get out of control. I will not be handled or managed by those too morally superior or idealistically misguided to do the things they want at the time they want for the reasons they hold. I am Skull. I can be no other.

This epiphany, this litany quieted his mind and he returned his attention to the facility. Today, the security seemed even more anal, more fanatical, with doubled guards and extra vehicles parked here and there, weapons manned.

Skull recognized what he had been dancing around for hours, trying to find some other approach. The truth was, there was only one way inside this high-security compound. It would be suicide at best and still might not achieve anything. Worse yet, Skull would have no way of knowing how things would go once he got inside. He would have to trust in his ability to improvise, adapt and overcome.

Skull recognized that spontaneity didn't come easy to him. He preferred to not only meticulously plan any operation, but also to cover dozens of potential contingencies. Yet, he also recognized there was no other realistic option for getting a man into the facility before he ran out of time.

Spooky would hit his mark, Skull was confident, but his intuition told him whatever was going on inside of the lab was coming to a head. He couldn't allow a new, genetically engineered plague that would intentionally kill Edens to get into the world. There were many he knew and some he cared about, but mainly he could not allow a new genocide, a new holocaust to go forward. Not if he could do anything to stop it.

There might be only one chance, and it was a huge gamble, but Skull decided to make it.

An hour later Skull hid all his weapons and gear and walked, empty-

handed, to the front gate of the facility.

Chapter 30

Richard Covington had been the head of security for the unnamed facility for the past few months. He had several decades of experience working for the government and had jumped at this job because of the incredibly high pay. He had believed himself blackballed because he was on the security detail at Watts Island – hell, he hadn't even been on duty the day of the raid fiasco, thank God – but this job offer proved otherwise.

Expecting some giant research facility, he had been surprised by the relatively small size of the fenced-in compound on ten acres housing what he was told were medical research laboratories, most of them underground. He was not, however, underwhelmed by the amount of money spent on security, which was higher per square foot than he'd ever seen.

Covington knew the government always overfunded the latest, hottest research and then underfunded the rest, so even though he had no idea what they were working on here, he knew it was high priority. Something to do with the Eden Plague for sure, the hottest of hot-button issues this past year. That didn't matter anyway; security was his business.

He hadn't been briefed on what type of threat to expect, so he tried to prepare for everything...but so far his impression was that this job was by far the best paying and most boring he had ever had. What was the chance something like Watts Island could ever happen again? A well-planned op had taken down a tiny, surprised security team, but that wouldn't happen here. He had a hundred tough men and a few frighteningly competent women. They were ready this time. Procedures were in place. Policies had been enacted.

Yet, nothing had happened for months.

Not a damn thing.

His phone rang and he paused his game of solitaire on the computer.

"Yes?" he answered.

"Boss, this is Sam down at Gate One. We've apprehended someone."

Sam Elderage was his deputy and if he was calling, then something interesting might actually be going on.

"What do we got?" asked Covington, sitting up.

"You're not going to believe this," Sam said, "but I got a guy here said he was part of the team that took down Watts Island last year."

“Probably a nut job.”

“I thought so too,” Elderage answered carefully, “but he knows things he shouldn’t know. He said you guys were working on the XHV there.”

Covington’s blood ran cold. Only a few people were supposed to know about that, and Sam wasn’t one of them.

Elderage continued. “Said he’s part of a team planning to take down our facility, but wants to cut a deal.”

Covington thought quickly. “Detain him, strip-search him and lock him up somewhere until I can talk to him. Use...use eight guys. That should be enough.”

“Eight guys?”

“Yeah.”

“Will do,” said Elderage.

“I’m hitting the lockdown button in five minutes, so get him inside now.”

“Yes, sir.”

Covington hung up, walked out of his office and down the hall, stepping into a plush room where a secretary sat. “I need to see the Director.”

“He said he’s not to be disturbed,” she said.

“It can’t wait,” Covington replied, pushing open the polished wooden door.

Behind a broad desk sat Director Tripman holding his hand over the mouthpiece of his phone, an annoyed expression on his face. “Yes, Covington. What is it?”

“Sir, sorry to disturb you, but we need to lock down the facility.” He closed the door behind him and told what he knew, quickly and concisely.

Covington stood in front of the thin man handcuffed to a chair in the hastily emptied storage room. *Something is wrong*, he thought. *This guy is too cool, especially in nothing but his boxers*. It looked like his men had roughed the guy up a bit; knuckle-shaped bruises showed on the man’s ribs, but nothing serious.

“What’s your name?” Covington asked.

“He won’t tell us,” said Elderage.

“Alan Denham,” Skull answered.

Elderage started punching buttons on a computer before turning back to his boss. “He’s not in any of the databases or systems.”

“Check the open systems.”

The man tapped at the keyboard again. “Nothing.”

“So you’re playing games with us,” Covington said. “What’s your real name?”

Skull stifled a laugh. “Trust me, that’s my real name. I was never in too many databases, but eventually we had our identifies erased from the system.”

“Who’s *we*?” Covington asked.

Skull looked around and wondered if anyone else was listening in. “I already told you I was at Watts Island with Daniel Markis.”

“*The Daniel Markis who calls himself the Chairman of the Free Communities?*” Elderage asked.

“The same.”

“So why are you here?”

“I’m here to scout out any vulnerable points in your security,” Skull said. “I’ll go back and report what I’ve seen to my team and we’ll come up with a plan to scrag this place.”

Elderage snorted. “Good luck.”

Skull turned his gaze on Covington and smiled. Something about the man’s skin-and-bones face convinced him. “So why are you turning on them now?” asked Covington.

“Because they all turned out to be fanatical Edens, but I’m not. The money was good, but then it became about the ideology and that sort of thing will get you killed.”

“We tested,” said Elderage. “He’s not carrying the XHV.”

“It just feels wrong now,” Skull continued, “to go against my own kind, especially with all that’s happened. I mean, I even had two brothers in Los Angeles and I don’t know if they’re alive or dead.”

“So, you’re a mercenary who works for the highest bidder, but now you’ve had an attack of conscience and want to help the U.S. Government out of the goodness of your heart?”

“Not even close,” Skull laughed. “I just like them even less than I like you.” He shrugged. “I was starting to think we couldn’t do it anyway. Your setup here is too deep. Too many redundancies. It’s a suicide mission.”

“Okay, why don’t you tell us exactly how you think this is going to work?” said Covington.

“Like I said, I want to cut a deal.”

“You’re in no position to negotiate.”

“Actually, I’m in a very good position. I’m offering to work as a mole on the inside for a very dangerous group intent on destroying everything you’re doing. You got anything else like that?”

“We could just keep him locked up, boss,” said Elderage.

Skull nodded. “You could do that, but if I’m not back or at least checked in by tomorrow morning, they’ll know I’ve been blown and you lose your chance to take them down. And when they hit you – and they will – even if you win, you lose, because whoever does the investigation is going to crawl right up your ass and camp there with sharp steel stakes. No way that ends well for either of you.”

“So what do you want?”

“Three things,” Skull said. “First, I want triple what they’re paying me for this job, in cash. Two, I want a new identity. These guys can be a bit...vindictive when double-crossed. And third, I want a private jet to a destination of my choosing.”

A knock came at the door and two men in polo shirts entered. Skull couldn’t keep himself from stiffening, instinctively recognizing fellow black operators.

“This is the guy I told you two about,” said Elderage. “He look familiar?”

The two men stared at him. One spoke. “Yeah. Can’t forget that face. He was on the surveillance tape at the Johnstone place. Him and the Montagnard took out the van and infected our guys.”

Yes, I was there, thought Skull coldly, memorizing every detail of the two men while trying not to let his hatred show. “Oh, can I have my watch back?”

Covington rubbed his hand through his thin hair. “Sam, give the man his watch and his clothes. No belt. I’m going to have to make a call on this one.” He pointed at Skull. “Lock him down tight. Four guards.”

Skull could feel the clock start ticking as he slumped, closed his eyes and rested his head against the back of the chair.

Chapter 31

Skull lay on a cot in a locked storage room. Evidently the facility was not set up to house prisoners. Nevertheless, he searched the room and found no easy way out. He could probably surprise a guard opening the door, but Covington had assigned four men to watch him, a tough row to hoe for any unarmed, handcuffed prisoner.

Except Spooky, Skull thought. If there was one guy who could do it with his bare hands, it was Spooky.

Besides, Skull wanted to give this scenario a little more time to play out before forcing the action.

Hearing someone entering a punch code from outside, Skull expected to see one of the uniformed guards, but instead a small man in a lab coat wearing glasses strode in with a medical kit. The guards remained outside, shutting the door.

The man walked over to Skull and bent close to speak in a low, almost soundless voice. "Spooky sent me. Thought you might need some help."

"What makes you think I need any help?" Skull asked in the same low tone, sitting up and swinging his legs to the floor.

The man backed up, blinking behind his thick glasses, but unafraid.

"Never mind," said Skull. "Who are you?"

"I'm Cyrus Alcroft," the man said. "I'm a researcher here. I knew Elise Markis from her time working on XHV. She thought I was just a consultant, but actually I was on a second team, working up at Plum Island."

"And you want me to believe you're working for Spooky?"

"Him and Cassandra Johnstone," the man said, his eyes shifting left and right. "Elise introduced me to them after I realized I was on the wrong side."

"And what side is that?"

"The side that isn't interested in the truth," he said, glancing at the closed door and back at Skull again. "We really need to go. It won't be long before the guards check on me. I'm supposed to be getting more blood samples."

Skull rattled his handcuffs attached to the aluminum cot. "I can get loose of this if I have to, but what's the plan?"

"There's a freight tunnel beneath the facility that will take us under the fence," Alcroft explained. "There's a seaplane three miles away on the coast that

will take you out of here.”

“How do we get past the guards?”

“I’ll come back in an hour. When I do, I’ll convince them there’s a horrible, virulent plague loose that will scare them silly. You’ll have to be ready.”

“Sounds good,” Skull said, looking at the Patek chronometer on his wrist. “But when you come back, first you’ll take me to the armory.”

“The what?”

“Place where they keep all the weapons,” Skull explained. “I don’t like walking around without any weapons.”

The little man looked at him uncertainly. “I don’t even know where that is.”

“You have one hour to find out.” Skull lay back on the bunk, relaxing. “Go on. I’ll be waiting.”

The small man’s brow furrowed, and then tapped for the guard to open the door and let him out.

I should have known Spooky would have a man inside, Skull thought. He’s not the type to lead a frontal assault with no ace in the hole.

An hour later, Skull had worked his cuffs off the cot, but they still held his hands in front of him. A commotion outside in the corridor, cries and pounding feet, told him that Doctor Alcroft had begun his ploy, whatever it was.

The door swung open and the little man staggered in, his face covered in frightening boils. Skull stepped back instinctively, but Alcroft waved at him as if calming an animal. “Don’t worry, it’s moulage. Fake –”

“I know what moulage is. Let’s go,” said Skull sternly. “Lead the way.”

Beneath red strobes and flashing biohazard symbols they raced down deserted passageways until they reached a metal door with a keypad. Alcroft looked uncertain. “Spooky said they would hack into the system and allow me full access, but I’m not sure if it includes the armory or not.”

“Only one way to find out,” Skull said.

Alcroft punched in numbers to the keypad and the door clicked open.

Skull pushed it wide and looked upon several rows of weapons racks. He picked out a Steyr bullpup machine gun and two HK pistols. While filling a small bag with loaded magazines, he noticed a large cabinet. Opening it, he saw it was filled with thermite grenades.

“What are all of these for?” he asked.

“How would I know?” Alcroft answered. “I’m a biochemist, not security.”

“Never mind,” said Skull filling another small bag with the grenades. “Probably part of their emergency destruct plan. Guess what. The plan is happening.”

“Can we go now?” said the researcher, fidgeting.

“Sure,” said Skull. “Take me to the labs.”

“I’m supposed to take you to the escape tunnel.”

Skull placed the barrel of the HK pistol against the man’s head. “If anyone gives you a hard time, tell them I forced you. It’s even true.”

The researcher took off at a trot down the hall. At an intersection they descended two flights of stairs leading downward. At the bottom, Alcroft opened a door that debouched into a single hallway with many doors.

“These are all the labs,” he said. “That door there is for stimulating tissue growth. The one over there is for –”

Skull ran to the very end of the hall and stopped at the first door. Pushing it open, he saw a small room with tables, lab equipment, and two researchers. He tossed in a thermite grenade and closed the door. Quickly, he turned to the door across the hall and did the same, and then on down the line. He was at the fourth door before he heard screams from behind him and smelled smoke. Working quickly, he finished the rest of the doors and then made his way back to a stunned Alcroft, seeing men and women in lab coats fleeing up the stairway.

“Good,” Skull said. “Now to the specimen storage.”

Alcroft’s mouth opened and then closed soundlessly. Finally he pointed downward.

“Lead on,” said Skull and followed the little man to the next level lower. There he found larger rooms and used Alcroft’s code, which he had now memorized, to enter. More thermite grenades rolled and more screams and fleeing people resulted.

“You have to get out of here,” the little man said.

“Almost there.” Skull smiled as the fire suppression system began to activate. It wouldn’t stop the thermite from igniting everything they touched, but the system would interfere with the total burnout he wanted. “Take me to where the security folks sleep when everything is on lockdown.”

“Why?”

Skull slapped him. “Don’t ask. Just do it.”

The man led him up several flights via a different stairway. On this level, a mixture of people in lab coats, uniforms and various states of undress scurried through the flashing, noisy halls, pushing past them both ways as if they had no

idea where to go. No one gave them a second look in the confusion. Alcroft opened a door that showed a long room filled with bunk beds, all of them empty.

“The alarms got them up,” Skull said. “What about some sort of command center?”

“You mean the control suite?”

“Yes,” said Skull, “take me there.”

Working their way down several long halls until they arrived at sliding glass doors, Skull could see multiple security monitor displays. Covington, Elderage, and four other men crowded the room, all talking frantically on phones, radios, or typing on keyboards. The two black ops men from Zeke’s house were among them.

“Wait here,” Skull told Alcroft, stepping through the doors.

Pulling the Steyr up, he sent a low burst of automatic fire into the guts of the two he hated, leaving them writhing on the floor. Then he worked his way around the room, methodically gunning down Covington, Elderage and the two other security guards before switching off the fire suppression system. Now, the blaze would consume everything.

Once finished with this task, he returned his attention to the wounded men, removing pistols from beneath their nerveless, scrabbling fingers.

“This is for Zeke,” Skull told them. Pulling the pins on two thermite grenades, he stuffed one down the shirt of the man on the left, and then did the same to the one on the right before walking out of the control suite.

“Now we can go,” Skull said as the screams of the incinerated drifted from behind closed doors.

They made their way back down to a lower level by using a smaller stairwell. Skull tossed an incendiary into every room he passed until his bag was empty. By that point they had neared another formidable steel door.

Alcroft punched in his master code and it clicked open. Visibly relieved, the little man turned on hall lights and led them through a narrow, damp tunnel. After about one hundred yards came another door. The code opened it again.

“Three miles to the northeast on the beach there’s a seaplane and a pilot waiting for you,” said Alcroft.

“What, you’re not coming with me?”

“I can’t,” the man answered. “I’ve got a family, a job. I have to stay under cover.”

“They’ll catch you. What if the security video survives?”

“Like you said,” the man insisted. “I’ll tell them you forced me.”

“That will only work so far,” Skull said putting a hand on his shoulder. “Believe me. They’ll make you talk and then you’ll tell them everything you know. I can’t let you stay.”

The man shook his head and pulled back. “I’ve done my part. More than was asked of me, and now I’m done. I’ll go home to my wife and children and that will be the end of it.”

“We can send for them later.”

Alcroft shook his head sadly. “My mother-in-law lives down the street. My wife would never agree to leave her. I’ll never talk. I won’t break. Trust me.”

Skull paused for a moment. “Okay, I guess.” He stuck out his hand. “Thanks for everything.”

Alcroft shook hands with him and smiled. “Glad to help. Now you’d better get out of here.”

“You too,” said Skull turning and walking through the door. He waited several seconds and then reversed course.

Alcroft was walking away.

Skull put one round into the back of his head. “Everyone breaks,” he whispered.

Chapter 32

Skull made his way up to the surface and emerged into the night. The exit wasn't far from where he had stashed his gear, so he raced to it, throwing his ruck on his back and then sprinting to the northeast toward the coast.

With good visibility from a full moon, he didn't have to use his flashlight. He stopped to rest once, looking back at the billowing fire that marked the facility. The thermite grenades burned hot enough to ignite aluminum, and had likely started other chemicals blazing, producing a complete conflagration, especially with the fire suppression system deactivated.

Tied to a pier extending out from the beach, the moonlight revealed the shape of a Brazilian-built twin-turboprop seaplane large enough to hold a dozen men. He raced toward it, seeing the faint glow of the cockpit instruments as he approached without stealth.

A man stood outside the plane with a submachine gun.

Markis.

"Howdy, Skull. Long time no see," said the voice.

Not Daniel; his father David. A veteran combat pilot, which made more sense. With the Eden Plague's rejuvenating effects they could be mistaken for brothers, especially in the dark.

"Thanks for the pickup."

"Any time," David said, shaking Skull's hand with a smile that seemed genuine and looking off to the southwest toward the flickering glow. "Looks like you made a mess over there. We'd best be on our way."

"Aren't we waiting for the team?"

"What team?" David Markis seemed genuinely puzzled.

"Spooky told me he would be hitting the lab in about..." he checked his Patek. "Ninety-five minutes?"

"Don't know nothin' about that. Alls he told me was, you'd trash the lab and I'd fly you away."

Skull chuckled ruefully. "Bastard."

"Now, now. Plenty of time for name-callin' later."

"Let's go, then," said Skull, following the senior Markis into the plane and pulling the door shut.

"Grab the copilot's seat and strap in," David told him, climbing into the

pilot's chair. The rest of the space was taken up by cardboard boxes secured to the floor and wall by cargo netting. "I'm going to push us out of here as fast and low as I can."

The plane moved forward into the sea and began accelerating at full throttle. The twin engines reached a high whine as the plane lifted off the water and made a sharp turn to the right before it started gaining altitude.

The compass showed them heading south, and the lights of the coast off to Skull's right fell farther behind as the minutes passed.

"You look beat, son," David said. "Put your head back. Nothin' gonna happen for a couple of hours."

Skull did as Markis instructed, resolving to just take a cat nap. He was surprised when he woke up at least three hours later. The plane flew level and easy over open water, and the sun had risen above the wide Atlantic to the east, with hardly a cloud in the sky.

"Morning," said David. "Sleep good?"

"Fair. Did we make a clean getaway?"

"Clean as they get," David answered. "If we hadn't, the first we'd hear about it was an F-35 up our ass. This baby's fast, but not that fast." He patted the cockpit dash.

Skull nodded. "So what's the plan?"

"We fly to a particular set of coordinates south of Puerto Rico. We set down on what I hope is a nice flat stretch of water and we meet Spooky. He'll be in a speedboat and have gas with him to refuel the plane. You go with Spooky in the speedboat to Colombia and the boys and I go take these supplies to our people in Antigua."

"Antigua?"

"Don't ask. I already said too much. Need to know."

"Okay," said Skull. "You happen to have a map of the area with you?"

Markis pointed at a folded, laminated chart in a holder next to Skull.

Looking over the chart for several minutes, Skull eventually put a finger on a small airstrip on the southeast tip of Cuba. Ever since Fidel's death, Cuba had slowly begun to become the paradise its natural beauty promised. Skull knew that, and had long planned to visit.

"There," Skull told the pilot. "Put me down there."

David turned and looked at him like he was crazy. "Cuba? We got it all lined up for Puerto Rico. Don't worry, it's part of Spooky's plan. It's fine."

Skull nodded. Without hostility at David's words he unbuckled, crawling

backward out of the seat and into the cargo area. Several minutes later he returned wearing a parachute and carrying his gear, plus an inflatable life raft. He pulled one of his HK pistols and put it against David Markis' head. "Okay, let's try this again. You set me down where I want or I shoot you and bail out of the plane."

David turned his head toward Skull, ignoring the gun. "You ain't gonna shoot me, son, and we both know it."

Skull pressed the muzzle hard into David's temple.

"On the other hand, I'm as flexible as the next man. Semper Gumby and all that. You ain't gotta threaten me." Markis reached for the chart. "What's the name of the airfield?"

Several hours later they made an unauthorized landing on the Cuban coast. Two policemen approached the plane once it had finally stopped, with a couple of bemused beachcombers watching. Generous bribes smoothed everything over, and Skull put on his two packs containing his gear and got off the plane. At the bottom, he turned and looked back to see David peering at him. "Tell Daniel we're even now."

"I'll tell him." David smiled a toothy grin. "But now you owe *me*, boy."

"Fuck off, old man," Skull said with an answering grin and turned south.

According to the map, a little beach resort town rested not far from there. A place where the locals were polite and discreet, Skull wagered. A place where they respected a man's privacy and where he could disappear and relax for a while.

Skull had always wanted to become truly fluent in Spanish, and he realized he could use a little time off near the ocean relaxing in the sun and breeze.

But only for a time.

Then, he'd get back to work.

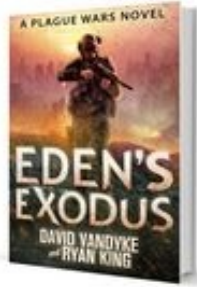
His kind of work.

THE END of *Skull's Shadows*.

* * *

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EDEN'S EXODUS Excerpt

Reaper looked down at the Mendoles compound from the jungle-covered hillside five hundred yards away. An enormous French style chateau surrounded by gardens and walking paths, it included a number of outbuildings to serve as garages, sheds, or additional housing. The entire complex was enclosed by a tall stone wall with concertina wire atop it. Two armed guards watched the front gate and a dozen more roamed the main house and the grounds.

Clearly, the cartel didn't really anticipate imminent direct action; the guards were there to deter their competition and make the occupants feel safe. Undoubtedly they relied on their deep penetration of the Colombian government to give them warning against a law enforcement raid, and they would have spies and informants everywhere.

Rule of thumb calculations told her that about twice as many men loitered off shift as were visible, about half of whom would probably be elsewhere – in town or at separate homes.

Reaper tried not to squirm in the humid heat. Acclimatization to Colombia for nearly half a year had accustomed her to the worst of the humidity, but being under the jungle canopy seemed to only make matters worse. Keeping the bugs away always turned into a losing battle even with industrial strength insect repellent. She wondered idly if the mosquitoes that sucked her blood could become carriers for the Eden virus the way they had for malaria and yellow fever. If so, more power to them.

“Reaper, this is Hawkeye,” said a voice from her miniature earpiece. “Support team in position. All lines of sight clear.”

Reaper looked far to her right and thought she might be able to make out

one of the men, but couldn't be sure. They were well camouflaged and Hawkeye knew his business. The man had quickly taken over as the team's *de facto* second-in-command.

"Roger, Hawkeye," said Reaper. "No unusual activity detected. Go to fifty percent security. Eat and get some sleep. Make sure everyone is ready for kickoff at 0300 hours."

"Wilco," said Hawkeye.

"And Hawkeye... keep a close eye on Blade and Hound Dog."

"Got it. Support team out."

"Pass the word," said Reaper to the team members lying on her left and right. "Fifty percent security with your battle buddy. Everyone gets at least four hours of sleep before 0300." Then she went back to studying the compound.

It's a good thing we're all Edens, she thought. No way we're going in there without taking some casualties. Hitting them early in the morning will grant us the element of surprise, but it's still going to be dicey.

She'd rather not have to rely on Shortfuse, but going through the main gate would be even worse, so she supposed she'd have him blow a breach in the wall.

Speak of the devil. Here's the nutcase now.

"Why don't you get a little rest, boss?" said Shortfuse as he crawled up close to her. "I'll keep watch."

"Thanks, but no thanks," said Reaper. "I never sleep before a mission. Go ahead if you want."

"I can't sleep before a mission either. Too keyed up." He studied the walls and the gate. "That's going to be a tough nut to crack."

Reaper turned and looked at him. "I appreciate you making an effort, I really do, but we're not going to be friends. You're only here because Spooky thinks you might be useful. That may be true, but I don't like people on my team that make me want to watch my own back. You aren't reliable."

"We didn't get off to a good start, but that doesn't mean I'm not reliable."

"What about blowing Sparky's fingers off?" Reaper asked. "He was a damn fine commo guy and we needed him, but after that, he decided not to come back. Can't say I blame him."

The man sighed and looked away. "I didn't actually do it on purpose."

"What?" asked Reaper. "You laughed and made a big deal out of how much you enjoyed it."

"That was all show. Better for everyone to think the demo guy is crazy, not incompetent."

“Are you incompetent?”

“Hell no,” he said fiercely. “I’m the best you’ll find anywhere.”

“So what happened? If you didn’t do it on purpose and you’re not incompetent, how did he lose his fingers on a charge *you* prepared?”

“I don’t know,” said Shortfuse.

“What do you mean, you don’t know?” Reaper asked. “Didn’t you prepare the charges?”

“I don’t *remember*, okay?” the man answered.

“You’re going to have to explain that one.”

He rubbed his hand through his hair. “I get blackouts every now and then. Ever since my last tour in Afghanistan. Doc said it was normal. Part of my mind dealing with cumulative stress.”

“Does Spooky know?”

Shortfuse shook his head.

“How did you get through the screening?”

“You know how it is,” he said. “All the questions rely upon the person being honest regarding the questions. I’ve been through enough PTSD briefings to know which bubbles to darken in and which ones to steer clear of.”

“This info just makes it worse,” said Reaper. “I can’t use you, can I? Look, nothing personal, but you could black out at any time.”

“It’s getting better. That was the first one I’ve had in a long time. I think the virus is fixing things.”

“Why would I take the risk?”

“Because you need me and...I need this,” Shortfuse answered. “Ever since my family left me there’s been nothing else. Do you have any idea what it’s like to lose everything at once?”

“Actually, I do,” said Reaper, turning away.

“I know you don’t trust me over what happened, but the truth is, I’m a good soldier and a better demo man. If you let me stay on the team you won’t have any trouble out of me and I promise you won’t have to watch your back. I’ll do that for you.”

Reaper mulled things over. “Okay. For now. But here’s what’s going to happen. After this job, you’re going to train me on everything you know about demolitions and explosives. I want to know what you know.”

“I can’t teach you everything,” he said. “We’re talking decades of experience. I may not look that old, but they forced me to retire after thirty years of service.”

“Well, then show me what you can. Teach me what’s important. I want to double check everything you do to make sure no one else loses body parts.”

Shortfuse’s jaw got tight and his eyes narrowed.

“I’m not going to endanger the team to soothe your pride,” Reaper said. “I’ll make a show of being an asshole about it in front of the others if you want, but that’s the deal and it’s the best one you’re going to get from me right now. Take it or leave it.”

“Okay. I guess I’ll take it. Not like I have a lot of other options.”

“No, you don’t.”

The man nodded and gently took the binoculars out of her hands. He looked down at the compound.

“What do you think?” Reaper asked. “Can you blow a hole through that wall?”

Shortfuse lowered the binos and smiled at her. “Most definitely.”

* * *

They crept through the jungle wearing night vision goggles. Reaper led the assault team forward slowly and carefully. She saw the edge of the compound wall up ahead through the goggles’ green glow.

“Hawkeye, this is Reaper,” Reaper whispered. “Commo check.”

“Read you Lima Charlie,” Hawkeye responded.

“Same here. We’re nearly in position. Everything still quiet?”

“Roger that. Had a car come in around midnight, but nothing since then. There’s a light in the guard house and one in the north shed, but otherwise looks like everyone’s asleep.”

“Good. I’m putting the assault team in position and we’re moving up to place the charges. I’m pretty sure they don’t have motion sensors around the walls, but just in case, let me know if you notice any activity.”

“Wilco.”

Reaper lined up her ten personnel in a pair of files, ready to charge through the breach. Then she and Shortfuse crept forward slowly; he carried a bag of demo in his arms. They rested at the base of the wall and Shortfuse pulled out a small shovel and began digging.

“What are you doing?” Reaper hissed.

“I have to tamp down the charge, otherwise it’ll dissipate in the air. The farther down I can get it the better.” Shortfuse scooped dirt away from the wall until there was a hole about two feet deep. He pulled a bundle of plastic explosive and wires from the small bag. Placing the package in the hole, he

pulled up a wire and laid it aside on the ground. He then covered up the hole with dirt and patted it firmly in place.

Picking up the wire he'd left above ground, he plugged the end into a small radio receiver, which buried under a thin layer of loose dirt, its antenna protruding. "That's it."

The two crept back to the line of team members waiting in the blackness.

"Listen up," Shortfuse said. "Hug the dirt, cover your ears and turn off your radios. After it blows, turn them back on and be prepared to climb through rubble."

Once she was certain everyone understood, Reaper transmitted, "Hawkeye, this is Reaper. We're ready to blow the charge; stand by."

"Standing by."

Reaper nodded at Shortfuse.

He pulled a small radio transmitter from his bag and got down behind a big tree. "Fire in the hole," he said as he pressed the button.

The wall erupted into a blast of noise and light. The force of the shockwave washed over them. Chunks of concrete and rubble rained down through the branches of the trees above.

"Go!" barked Reaper, rushing forward. She climbed carefully over the pile of smoking rubble at the breach. Sniper and machine gun fire from Hawkeye's team peppered the compound, covering their entry.

"The house first," she said, rushing forward, followed by her assault team.

Lights popped on all over the compound. Racing up the front steps of the mansion, she crouched down beside the door. "Stack up!" she yelled to the first four as they moved into position. "Go!" She pushed the door open.

The four rushed into the room along the right wall in a textbook deployment, weapons covering their sectors, but there was nothing to shoot. Reaper turned to the next two. "Cover the front of the house," she ordered. "That's our way out of here, so keep it clear."

Reaper led the rest of the team into the foyer, inside toward the main staircase that would lead them to their target's second-floor bedroom. "We're in," she radioed. "Snatch team proceeding to second floor."

"Roger," Hawkeye replied. "Copy snatch team moving from first to second floor."

Before they could ascend, two men began firing pistols from the cover of the kitchen doorway, but their weapons and training were no match for Reaper and her team, who responded immediately with a hail of Sam rounds. When the

enemy pulled back, at least one had been hit in the hand.

Reaper immediately rushed the opening, relying on her body armor and healing ability to save her if she was shot, but it was not necessary. Both men lay on the floor, clutching arm injuries. She put another burst into the bellies of each, the safest way to put them out of the fight but allow them to survive. Gut wounds normally took half an hour or more to kill, during which time the infection would take hold and save them.

“Keep moving,” she said as she returned to the foyer. The snatch team filed up the stairs while the others split into pairs and began to secure the ground floor.

A naked woman with wild black hair flew at them suddenly from the top of the staircase. She had a knife in each hand and buried them in the shoulder and neck of Murphy, the first man in line, by luck or skill bypassing his body armor. The two tumbled down the stairs, taking the next man with them.

Reaper stepped back against the wall just in time to avoid getting caught in the mess, and as the blade-woman jerked her weapons free, Reaper put a boot into her head from behind, snapping her neck sideways with an audible *crack*. Then she put a single round into the woman’s leg, hoping the virus contained therein would save her life.

Shortfuse froze and stared at the fallen woman. Reaper struck him on the arm. “Come on; follow me. Need to move fast. Someone check Murphy.”

She raced up the remaining stairs and into the hallway. Reaper would have preferred to check and clear every room, but they didn’t have time. They needed to secure Enrique Mendoles and be gone before all the guards in the compound converged on the house. Hopefully, Hawkeye was keeping them busy outside.

“He should be in the last one,” Reaper said, rushing forward, hitting the final door with her shoulder. She bounced off; even with body armor and gear she weighed barely one-seventy. Turning to the two who’d followed her up, she motioned to Hulk, her biggest man. “Breach!”

Hulk nodded, lowered his weapon and charged the portal. Three hundred fifty pounds at full speed did the trick. The door crashed inward and the man deliberately fell onto his left side as they’d rehearsed.

Reaper followed, dodging to the right, and looked up to see Enrique Mendoles sitting in bed with a shotgun aimed in her direction. He pulled the trigger and she felt the wave of heat as shot spattered over her head and into the wall, one of the pellets stinging her cheek. In return, she put two Sam rounds into him, one in the belly and one into his shoulder.

Enrique fell off the side of the bed onto the floor, the shotgun skidding into a corner.

Hulk powered to his feet and over to Enrique, who was holding his gut wound.

“You’re dead,” the large, fat cartel boss said in Spanish. “All of you are dead. Do you have any idea who you are messing with?”

“Just one more *pendejo*,” Reaper replied in the same language, wrenching his hands behind him to flex-cuff them. After wrapping a strip of duct tape around his head and over his mouth, she yanked him roughly to his feet. “Let’s go.”

She turned to see Shortfuse standing in the doorway. His rifle was pointed directly at her. “What –”

Shortfuse fired and Reaper felt the whistle of the bullet pass by. She turned to see a scantily clad woman with a pistol in one hand and a SAM wound in her chest, lying on the floor gasping, lung-shot.

Reaper picked up her boot and stomped down forcefully on the manicured hand that still tried to lift the pistol to kill her. She heard the crunch of thin bones as the woman screamed in fresh pain. “Don’t worry, *puta*. You’ll soon be as right as rain.”

“I think we better go,” said Shortfuse.

“Definitely,” said Reaper, pushing the bound Enrique toward Hulk. “You take him.” She flipped the selector for all frequencies on her radio. “We have the package. Exiting the building now. Cover our extraction.”

Reaper led her people down the stairs. “Out!” she yelled to the rest that covered the ground floor. “Extract, now!”

They raced across the courtyard with a few bullets striking near them, but heavy covering fire from Hawkeye’s team kept most of the enemy suppressed. Reaching the break in the wall, they began climbing through.

Enrique slumped to the ground at the opening, either passed out or faking. With a grunt, Hulk threw the man over his shoulders. “Shit, he’s heavy,” he said, climbing through the wall.

Reaper waited on the far side until the last of her team was through. “Hawkeye,” she radioed. “We’re out. Call for extraction. Hit anyone that comes after us.”

“You got it,” he replied, and put a bullet into one of the braver thugs trying to climb through the breach behind them.

Reaper could see the light of dawn breaking, so she put her night vision

goggles away as her team hustled toward the extraction point. Footsteps became heavy and slow as the post-adrenaline sluggishness hit them. It was clear that some of the team had been wounded, and everyone desperately needed calories.

Checking her GPS, she said, "We're nearly to the extraction point. Keep pushing. We'll treat and eat there." She then radioed Hawkeye. "We're about seven mikes out from the EP. Extract your team."

"Will do...on our way...soon," came a pained voice.

"You okay?"

"Long story," Hawkeye answered. "See you in ten."

At the extraction point, a large cargo helicopter waited, Flyboy at the controls and the rotors starting to spin up. Team members gave him shit as they climbed into the seats in back.

"Hey, it wasn't all easy with me either," he responded with a grin. "I hit some real turbulence on the way in, and I had to spend the night on these uncomfortable seats, so don't tell me how bad you pussies had it."

Crumpled MRE packages and other small projectiles made Flyboy duck, accompanied by catcalls.

Minutes later, Reaper saw Hawkeye stumble out of the jungle with his team. He had a long bloody gash down the side his cheek. At the end of the line, one of their two females, Bunny, led a flex-cuffed Hound Dog.

"Where's Blade?" Reaper asked.

"Dead," answered Hawkeye, gesturing at his face. "Came at me after you made it through the wall. Lucky I turned to reload my rifle or his knife would have gone into my skull."

"You sure he's dead?" asked Reaper.

"We're sure," said Bunny, a sour look on her too-pretty face. "I put three into his head and then rolled him into an army ant mound. Nobody gets up from that, and his body'll be eaten in a day."

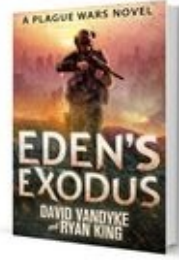
"What's up with him?" asked Reaper, pointing at Hound Dog.

"Don't know for sure, but they were butt-buddies," said Hawkeye. "He tried to run and I wasn't taking any chances. Figured we'll straighten it all out in the rear."

"Speaking of which, maybe we should get out of here," said Shortfuse, pointing at the loaded helicopter with the blades turning.

Reaper nodded, and they raced to board the aircraft. She gave Flyboy the thumbs-up and he lifted.

End of Excerpt. To continue reading click here to purchase [Eden's Exodus from Amazon](#).



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