
THEY CAME FROM THE TREES

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Chapter One:

Inside

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I dropped the wheelbarrow and sauntered over to the fence, next to the barn. I rubbed my fingers across the white chipped paint along the top plank—likely one more job I would have to endure this summer. A light breeze rushed over me, pushing the wildflowers against the rusted plow. A cottonseed floated by, toward the road where Margaret and Bailey stood—two fifth-graders who lived at the end of our private lane. The bus driver pulled away, finishing her school drop-offs for the day.

The two kids pointed out past the fence, behind the barn, talking to each other about something. They didn't move.

What were they looking at?

Behind me, above the trees, the sky filled with more white seed-hairs drifting out from the woods. I had never seen so many lifting up at one time. Was there something in the forest?

I diverted my attention back to the rusted plow. The wildflowers and tall weeds shifted again—too sporadic and choppy to be from the wind. I wondered if whatever was in that brush, might either be hunting something or being hunted. Part of me, though, had a pretty good idea, but I wasn't ready to think it. I needed to see it for myself.

A loud clanking sound echoed out from behind, causing me to whip my body around. My dad's tool box slid off the barn roof and crashed into a pile of concrete bricks beside the front gate. Tools exploded in all directions.

"For Pete's sake!" my dad hollered from above, banging his wrench against the lightning rod. For a rigid, tight-ass of a man, he didn't curse much at all. Words like, 'heavens' or 'crikey' pretty much covered all of the vanilla-slang that came out of his frustrated vocabulary.

"You okay?" I shouted up to him.

"Yeah, yeah, fine. I'll get it." He muttered something to himself and unlatched his harness.

My dad had been working on the roof for two straight days, re-attaching the Golden-horse weathervane that fell off last winter. He had a harness attached from his waist to one of the lightning rods. Ever since he got his eyesight back, he promised himself he would be extra careful with everything—it was kinda annoying at times because it took him twice as long to do things now.

"Hey Dad, do you see it?"

"See what?"

The rodent-like creature scampered out into the middle of the field, taking cover under a baby cottonwood that separated our property line and the main road.

"Dad, there is something out there," I said. "And it ain't no rat."

“It *isn't* a rat...it *isn't* a rat,” my dad replied carefully stepping down the ladder. “You’re starting to sound like Tom Bryer. You’re a fifteen-year-old educated kid. Talk like one.”

I peeled a sliver of paint off the fence and flicked it onto the grass. I dragged my feet over to the cement bricks and helped my dad pick up the scattered tools.

“There’s something out there, Dad, for real. I think you should check it out.” I handed him a hammer and a couple screwdrivers. “I think it might be one of those...things from the winter. Maybe it was lost and didn’t make it back with the rest.”

My dad took off the hideous Tilley hat he wore every day and wiped his forehead. The sweat on his weathered skin reflected the overcast sunlight, bouncing off his giant crooked nose and bony cheeks. He grabbed the tools from me and lifted his head up over the gate, he looked at me for a second before glancing back out to the open field with the one lone cottonwood.

"Nope. Don't see it.

Bailey and Margaret remained still on the road, both of them blocking their eyes from the sun. A giant trophy stood tall between them—likely the result of yet another victory by Margaret at the annual fifth-grade Trivia Challenge—a contest created by our late mayor. He wanted children to appreciate and respect the past and to understand who and what helped shape our planet.

Another rush of wind swirled around us, pulling the cottonseeds through the pasture. A dark, ominous cloud crept over top, bringing with it a cool air. The sun slipped away, immediately bringing a ghostly gray over the farm.

My dad opened his mouth, but no words came out. Instead, his black whiskery Adam's apple lifted as he closed his mouth again and swallowed. He put the tools into the box and then turned the handle on the gate. His eyes narrowed. He inched forward onto the path in front of the barn. The rim of his Tilley hat wavered in the cooling breeze.

His eyes shifted upward, at the snow-like display overhead.

“Sheldon?” he said.

“Yeah, Dad?”

“Call Ernie. Tell him to come here, right now.” His voice had an urgency in it, like he knew something, but didn't want to tell me.

“Okay. I'll be right back.” I spat out the piece of hay and ran along the path up to the house.

We lived at the top of a private community with a dozen homes nestled together at the far end of the road. Our property took up the rest of the acreage with six big fields for raising cattle and growing crops for the local market. Everyone knew each other like the back of their hand.

Except the Bryer's.

They seemed to always keep to themselves, especially Tom. Ever since my dad got steamrolled by Tom's bull, he's been acting strange around us—Tom, that is—around everyone. Word got out that Tom bought a six-gauge and shot Randle square between the eyes one night.

Bullseye.

I remember feeding the chickens one morning and wondering why Randle wasn't in the pasture. For the longest time, I thought it escaped into Hidden Trail forest and fell off the cliff at Morris Point.

At least that was what Margaret and Bailey told me.

I hopped up onto the back porch and slid open the screen door leading into our kitchen. I wiped my boots on the mat, picked up the landline phone and called Ernie, the local police chief of Hidden Trail. Ever since my dad's accident we've had his personal mobile number posted on our message board by the fridge.

I would brag and say Ernie knew me by name whenever I saw him in town, but I think he knew everyone.

I listened for the ring.

Silence.

First ring.

I picked up a pen from the counter and clicked the button on the top with my thumb.

Second ring.

I clicked the pen, again.

Third ring.

I peeked through the sunroom window back down along the path. Dad walked through the field. He held the Tilley hat in his hand and a hammer in the other, or maybe it was the wrench.

Fourth ring.

I scratched in an image of a star on the back of a Direct Energy envelope with the pen.

Fifth ring.

Margaret waved her arms over her head, shouting something at my dad. The winds continued to pick up, drowning out her muffled, high-pitched voice. The branches from the small cedar in our rock garden scratched against the glass in the sunroom.

Sixth ring.

My dad looked behind him, maybe out at the forest, past the cow fields. His shoulders hunched and his knees bent. He darted a few steps toward the house before looking back again at the treeline. He stopped and shouted something to Margaret and Bailey.

I drew another star on the envelope, only bigger this time.

Seventh ring.

The small rodent-like-creature by the cottonwood tree scampered across the field again beelining it toward Margaret and Bailey. The two didn't move - frozen perhaps in shock. The creature appeared to expand its wings or body—sorta like a cobra. It had long wavy tentacles flailing around behind it. Somehow, it tripled in size, growing and expanding. Margaret screamed.

Eighth ring.

"Come on, answer the damn phone."

The branches from the small cedar banged hard against the glass again. Margaret dropped the trophy and eased back. Bailey held her hand. The two watched as the creature lifted its neck and body up over their heads.

Ninth ring.

The phone clicked.

"Win-ston Hickory, long tame no-a talk my good man."
Ernie's loud voice slurred. A screeching guitar riff and heavy drums
blasted in the background.

"Chief?" I said.

"We missed ya at Poker night. Wha happened to ya? D'ya go
blind again or somethin'?"

"Chief?" I repeated.

"Sheldon?" Ernie replied. "Is tha' you?"

"Yes."

"Everythin' okay? What can I do for ya, son?"

"It's my dad, there's something outside in the field. I think it
might be...one of those things from the winter." I dropped the pen
and pointed to the window, out to the Cottonwood, as though Ernie
could see me.

"What's that? Say that again?"

"I think it might be one of...those explorers. It's doing
something really weird."

The loud guitar and drums stopped. The line went silent for a
few seconds. "Sheldon? Can you hear me?"

"Yes, yes, I can. What should I do? My dad is out there. So is
Bailey and Margaret."

"Okay, okay. Sheldon, listen to me. Are you listening?"

"Yes."

"Tell ya dad to stay away from it. Tell him to get inside the
house. Get everyone inside the house."

Chapter Two:

The Explorers

The American government coined the name, 'The Explorers' when over a million aliens visited Earth on February 16th of this year. My dad said they used that name to avoid widespread panic. It's a lot nicer sounding than 'The Invaders.' Somehow their ridiculously large spacecrafts slipped through the world's most advanced security and defense systems dropping space pods along northern Canada, the U.S, Russia, Brazil, China and a few other places I forget. Practically all the locations were remote spots surrounded by a whole lotta trees. They didn't stay long, mainly I think because we were 'hostile' and the military more or less let them know they weren't welcome here. They were seen as a potential terrorist threat on our planet. At least the U.S felt that way.

Since their visit, the media took over everything on TV, the radio, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, you name it—it's on the news every day, every hour, every minute—security in all major cities were heightened right away. It's impossible to fly anywhere now, not that I had anywhere to go.

The interesting twist to their visit, however, came when they returned to space.

They left us a gift.

They healed millions of people who were dying and sick.

They healed my dad.

They gave him his sight back.

They healed Margaret's mom.

They took away her cancer.

To this day, no one knows why they helped us. If you were to ask me, I think they were just trying to be nice. I mean, there is such thing as 'selfless' acts, right?

"Sheldon? Are you there? Get everyone inside the house." Ernie's voice barked through the receiver. It happened again. My dad called it, 'Lazy-Brain,' but for some reason, I just spaced out and got lost in my own thoughts from time to time.

"Yes, Chief. I will get them inside."

"I'll be there as soon as I can. Just make sure you—" His voice faded as I tossed the phone onto the counter.

I slid open the screen door and bounced off the porch and back out onto the path. The alien-like cobra thing remained tall, hovering over top of Bailey and Margaret. My dad inched forward, about twenty feet away from them. His Tilley hat laid on the grass a ways back. I plowed through a patch of wildflowers and slowed down near the cottonwood in the middle of the field.

My dad muttered something to the kids. Maybe coaching them—maybe suggesting they remain still, like when someone is confronted by a bear.

I slid forward, a few feet, close enough for my dad to hear my heavy steel-toed boots rustle over the thick grass—close enough for me to see the whites of his knuckles as he gripped that wrench. He turned back to me and held out his other hand, mouthing the word, ‘stop.’

The creature lowered its head, bringing its face closer to Margaret. Bursts of air pushed from a pair of holes below its giant golfball-like eyes.

As my dad inched forward again, the creature pulled away from Margaret and turned in our direction. Its thick black skin crinkled and chirped with every movement, like sitting on a new leather couch.

The thing eyed my dad, pushing toward him with its tentacles. More air thrust from its nose, jolting the blades of grass out of the way.

Back on the road, Margaret rubbed her eyes and sniffed. Her little body trembled.

Bailey reached for her hand again.

I gripped onto the narrow trunk of the cottonwood tree, letting my nails dig into the bark.

The creature continued to focus on my dad. Like a spider now, it crawled through the grass, lifting and lowering its stringy legs carefully, one at a time.

“Go home,” my dad asserted in a loud whisper. Not taking his eyes off the creature, he pointed to the houses at the end of the lane. “Bailey, Margaret, get out of here, go home now.”

“Yes, Mr. Hickory,” Bailey replied. He pulled on Margaret’s hand and hustled down the road.

“Dad? What are you doing?” I asked.

“I don’t know.” He clenched his fist and raised the wrench up to his face.

“You’re not going to hurt it are you?”

“Maybe. Depends if it tries to hurt me.”

When 'The Explorers' visited in the winter, humanity feared the worst; who wouldn't? But the media found no evidence of any attacks or anyone killed for that matter. Even though they scared the bejesus out of a few billion people, it was considered a peaceful encounter. From what I saw on the TV there were a ton of UFO cults that formed, though. Sorta like that one, Heaven's Gate, from a long time ago. There is one theorist dude who predicts another Jonestown and Heaven's Gate mass suicide will happen, only a hundred times bigger. That would suck.

"It's not going to do anything Dad, it's just curious," I said.

My dad glanced back at me for a second. He had that look again, that belittling, condescending stare. "What did Ernie say?"

I let go of the tree and tucked my hands into my pockets. The creature stopped a few feet in front of my dad and poked it's head up over the grass.

I swallowed. "Nothing. I couldn't get a hold of him."

Mr. Bryer opened the screen door and walked out onto his porch. His house was across the road, about thirty yards away. I hadn't seen him for awhile. I wondered how the 'support group meetings' were going.

"Everything okay, Winston?" He reached back into the entrance of the doorway and pulled a shotgun off the wall—the infamous six-gauge.

"Fine, Tom. Just fine." My dad lowered the wrench in his hand and stood tall.

Mr. Bryer's mouth bulged from one side, likely from a wad of chewing tobacco. He sniffed and spit out a black glob onto the grass. His gray, whiskered face looked pale and thin like he hadn't eaten since the last time I saw him. "What is that thing?" he asked.

My dad rubbed his chin with the wrench. "Might be one of those aliens. Maybe it got left behind."

Mr. Bryer kicked a couple rocks into the ditch, dragging his feet along the road. He placed his finger on the trigger of his gun and stopped a few feet in front of the creature. "That is one ugly S.O.B." He spat again on the grass. "And it smells like tuna."

My dad nodded and awkwardly laughed.

Last summer, Randle the bull, smashed in my dad's face with its hoof, blinding him immediately. The doctors said my dad's chances of ever being able to see again was slim to none. I think he was lucky to be alive. The bull belonged to Mr. Bryer. Rumour had it he felt so bad about the accident, he attempted suicide a couple of times. Last I heard Mr. Bryer goes to a support group twice a week.

Because of the accident my mom had to move into the city to get a better job. I ended up having to drop out of school to help out with the farm. It sucked because I was about to go into my senior year. I skipped a grade when I was eight and would have been the youngest graduate at Hidden Trail High School in all it's eighty-two years. But my dad needed me, so working on the farm became my priority.

"Did you call Ernie?" Mr. Bryer asked. He wore a slightly tight pair of gray track pants and a Pittsburgh Steelers yellow and black football jersey.

My dad turned to me and then back to Mr. Bryer. "Yeah. Apparently, he wasn't picking up, though."

"That's strange," Mr. Bryer replied.

My dad crouched down into the grass and reached his hand out to the creature. One of its tentacles gently wriggled near my dad's fingers, like it wanted to be touched.

"I don't know why you would want to call Ernie, it's not like it's going to do anything. They're friendly, remember?" I knelt down beside my nervous father and rubbed my fingers along the creature's leathery skin. "See? It's just curious like we are."

The creature grunted and twitched its body.

"It looks like an octopus with a turtle's head," Bailey slipped around Mr. Bryer taking a picture with his phone. Margaret stayed on the road looking at her reflection in the giant trophy.

"Bailey, you should go home. Your mom will worry." My dad dropped his knees to the ground and tucked the wrench into his belt buckle.

"But I'm always home late, sir, 'member? I used to always help Sheldon when you were blind and all."

My dad lowered his head and nodded—patches of red surfaced on his face. I guess it just brought back the whole mess between Mr. Bryer and Randle the Bull.

"Okay, just don't make any sudden movements."

"Yes, Mr. Hickory."

Like spectators at a zoo, the four of us observed the strange monster. It used the tips of its string-like arms to pick out wax and dirt from inside its ears. Little house flies buzzed around, licking the sweat from its skin. Despite being smaller, it somehow looked different than the aliens that visited in the winter. I had to admit, Mr. Bryer made a good point, I had never seen something so ugly before—except the eyes—the eyes were mesmerizing—I think that's the word I would use. Somehow, just looking at this thing, watching it scan its surroundings with wonderment made me feel like I wanted to take care of it. I mean, it was alone, perhaps lost.

Who cares if it was an ugly S.O.B?

I tapped my dad on the arm. "Can we keep it in the barn and look after it? Nobody would have to know."

"I don't think so. Something doesn't feel right. We should call Ernie again." My dad stood up, swatting at a couple flies.

"Do you want to use my phone?" Bailey turned it sideways and clicked a few more pictures. "I have his number in my contacts."

"Let's keep it for a bit, Dad. Come on. Bailey and I will look after it. Won't we Bail?" I pulled a few blades of grass up and carefully waved it in front of the creature's mouth.

“We don’t even know what it eats, son. For all we know it hunts other animals.” My dad stepped around the creature and knelt down in front of Bailey. “Pull up his number, will ya? I’ll call him.”

“Sure,” Bailey replied.

“But all Ernie is going to do is hold onto it until some alien investigators pick it up and lock it in some cage for research or something. Dad, we should try to save this thing. I mean, it survived this long, why can’t we just help it go back into the forest? It could live there.”

Bailey tapped a button on his phone and handed it to my dad. He nodded and patted Bailey on the head. My dad didn’t once look at me, clearly tuning me out like he always did.

Why can't he ever pat me on the head?

I watched anxiously as my dad held Bailey’s phone up to his ear. He stepped away from us, circling the cottonwood a few yards away.

A huge flock of mallard ducks squawked out into the moody skies as they flew overhead.

I knew when Ernie had picked up because my dad eyed me for that split second, just long enough to let me know I had lied to him. He turned to the barn with his back to us for a few seconds. "Yeah, Ernie. Sounds good. See you shortly." He lowered the phone and checked the time on his wristwatch.

"In 1996, aliens were captured in Brazil, did you know?"

Margaret picked the ends off the tall grass and meandered over to us. She stopped behind Mr. Bryer and peeked over at the creature—her giant trophy tucked under her arm. "It's true. The armed forces and a bunch of fire people rounded them up after their spaceship crashed." She rubbed her nose with the ends of the grassy tips. "Some died. Some escaped. But the ones that were captured were poked and prodded, experimented on, tortured...it's the truth. You should look it up."

"It doesn't matter," my dad replied, walking back to the group. "This thing is not our responsibility. I'll wait here til Ernie arrives. You kids better head home."

"Yes, Mr. Hickory." Bailey took the phone back and tucked it into his pocket.

"If you were to ask me, I'd say them aliens from 1996 were looking for a nice ripe planet to lay their eggs." She tapped her nose and giggled. "Like fruit flies."

"You're okay then, Winston?" Mr. Bryer pulled his awkwardly tight track pants up to his waist.

"I'm good, thanks, Tom. Ernie will be here any minute."

I knew I couldn't change his mind. I might as well be talking to a wall. My mom even said that every now and then, before she moved into the big city.

Mr. Bryer spat out some more black slime from his mouth and pointed his gun at the creature. "Well, if it gives you any trouble, let me know, and I'll pop some shells into those ugly chops." He chuckled and tapped the thing with the end of the gun.

Like a spider snapping at a trapped fly, the creature pounced up and whipped its tentacles around Mr. Bryer's neck. In less than a second the sound of bones cracking echoed out around us. The creature pulled away, and Mr. Bryer's lifeless body crumpled to the ground.

Chapter Three:

The Cotton-Seeds

My dad used to own an old 1989 five liter mustang—maroon with the word 'Cobra' written along the driver's side door. He kept it in our garage for years covered in an army green customized sheet. Every once and awhile he would take it out for a bath on the front drive. Man, he cleaned that thing like he was giving it a full bodied massage. I think he cared more about that car than his house, his barn, his farm...his family. I laugh now thinking about how he talked about it like it was alive. 'Must tend to the Cobra,' he would say, 'the darling needs some attention.'

I remember one night after baseball practice; Dad picked me up in his 'prized baby.' It was the night my coach told me I should try out for the Double-A Team. I was excited to tell dad about it and couldn't wait for that rare moment when he would look at me with approving eyes, place his hand on my head and mess up my hair. 'I'm proud of you son,' I had imagined him saying.

But nope.

Instead, before I could piece together the proud statement, a raccoon shuffled across the road on our way back to the farm. Its glowing eyes in the twilight of the evening had barely enough time to focus on the cobra's giant headlights powering toward it. The beastly car steamrolled over the helpless creature, jolting the entire Mustang upwards as if we had high-tailed it over a giant speed bump.

My dad immediately slammed on the brakes and pulled over to the side of the road. We both jumped out of the car to check out the carnage. I couldn't help but be worried about the poor raccoon, whereas my dad automatically rushed to the front of the Mustang to make sure the grill was still intact.

He didn't give a rat's ass about that animal.

I don't think he even looked over at it, dead in the middle of Francis Road.

I guess I felt the same way about Mr. Bryer—lying in the grass—dead.

I didn't care.

I didn't react.

All I could think about at that very moment was how Mr. Bryer was the first real dead person I had ever seen.

His head was twisted in an awkward position like he had fallen out of an airplane.

His eyes were still open.

Almost like he was looking up at me.

“Sheldon!”

I wondered if Mrs. Bryer would freak out or simply be happy that the crusty old guy had kicked the bucket. I mean, he wanted to die, didn't he? Maybe, just maybe, now that he was gone, Mrs. Bryer would open her door and put a pumpkin on the porch when the kids go trick-or-treating around the neighborhood.

“Sheldon!”

I felt a pull on my arm.

“Sheldon!”

I turned my head around.

By the pastures, past the fence, hundreds of black objects pushed through the grassy fields. The ground at my feet vibrated, like tiny tremors from the small earthquake we had a couple of years back.

“What’s happening?” I asked.

The cotton seeds filled the sky as though we were being hit by a freak summer blizzard. Snapping wood echoed out over the farm. Through the white haze, tips of the red pines along the treeline swayed wildly from side to side—some toppling completely over.

“Sheldon, snap out of it. Let's go.” My dad yanked on my arm again, this time pulling me toward the truck. In his hand was Mr. Bryer’s shotgun.

A kid’s voice echoed in my head.

"Oh my God, it killed him. He's dead!" Margaret shouted out from behind us; her face, a ghostly white. "We're gonna die! We're all gonna die!"

I turned my head back to Mr. Bryer. The glare from his lifeless eyes seemed to follow me as we bounded across the garden.

The creature had disappeared, somewhere in the tall grass. The cold air dragged the looming clouds over us.

As I pulled Margaret and Bailey into the cab of my dad’s truck, I finally felt my brain register the chaos before me. An alien had just killed my neighbor.

An ugly, freakish alien had just murdered my neighbor.

My neighbor.

Mr. Bryer was dead.

“We gotta get out of here. We gotta get Mom!” I shouted.

“Your mom's fine. Stay here; I need to get the keys from the house. Don't move.” My dad scanned the field behind him before sprinting up to the back porch with the gun.

“Dad!” I shouted. “Don't go. It's too dangerous!”

Bailey and Margaret sat beside me, their little bodies shook. The two of them still had their backpacks strapped over their shoulders.

“Why did it hurt him? Why did it do that to Mr. Bryer?”

Bailey stared straight ahead, over the dashboard out toward my dad.

My jaw clenched—I held my breath, hoping, praying my dad would make it to the house okay.

“I dunno, Bailey,” I said finally. “Maybe it felt threatened. Maybe it thought Mr. Bryer was gonna hurt it.”

“But Mr. Bryer didn't do anything. He wasn't going to hurt it, right Sheldon?”

“That's right Bailey. Mr. Bryer wasn't gonna do anything.”

The cotton seeds rained down on the truck as the blur of black rodents rumbled forward, like a herd of giant spiders. Tentacle-like-tails unfolded from their bodies, lifting over their heads. The gate I had closed earlier was now twisted and broken from its hinges. One of the cows bulldozed through the water troughs, knocking my dad's ladder down onto a pile of stacked bricks. The cow's legs crumpled over, pulling its giant frame to the ground. The creatures slithered through the fence, ripping off the planks like they were popsicle sticks.

They were closing in on us.

“They’re not supposed to hurt anyone. Remember?” Margaret looked up to me, on the other side of Bailey, her little legs dangled over the brown leather truck seat. “They’re supposed to be friendly. They made my mom better. They saved my mom’s life.”

Ever since Margaret's mom beat stage-four cancer, she had become a new kid. With an extra bounce in her step, she'd stop by the farm most afternoons with Bailey and tell me some new trivia fact she had learned at school or from her favorite website, 'Wikipedia.' She absorbed everything like a sponge.

Toy dice hung over the rear-view mirror of the truck swaying from side to side as the creatures continued to shake the earth. They swarmed the barn and storage shed, slapping their tentacles against the wooden panels, pushing through the walls.

“Are they going to eat us, Sheldon?” Bailey asked. He shoved his hands under his legs and closed his eyes.

The barn’s giant structure creaked and moaned.

“No, they won’t eat us. They’re just searching for something,” I replied. My neck felt like it was swelling as the blood pumped through my veins.

My dad burst open the back door and darted across the gravel path with a plastic bag and Mr. Bryer’s gun.

“Hurry Dad,” I mumbled to myself. “Hurry.”

For a fifty-year-old, he ran pretty fast. He didn't really have much fat on him at all. I used to always think he secretly worked out in the basement when I had gone to bed.

He whipped open the driver's side door and bounced up into the truck. A rush of cold air spilled into the cab. He tossed my iPhone onto my lap and dropped the bag on the floor. "Don't waste the battery on that thing; we'll use it only when we need it. Now put the kid's seatbelts on, and hold on to them." He checked to see if there were shells in the chamber and then pulled back on the fore-end. (I learned those names from playing 'Call of Duty' when my dad was sick.)

"Okay," I replied.

The golden horse weathervane tumbled off the steel roof of the barn and crashed onto the fallen ladder.

"Are you going to shoot them?" Margaret pulled on my dad's shirt. "Are you going to kill them all?"

My dad looked at Margaret like she was a tiny bug. He shut the door and shoved the keys into the ignition. "Sheldon, keep an eye on the back of the truck, if any of those bastards jump in, shoot it."

Bastard?

I never heard my dad say that word before.

"Yes, Dad," I replied. I picked up the shotgun and held it like the pool squirter I used to own before Bailey broke it last summer. The only difference was, this gun weighed a ton.

My dad pulled off the handbrake and punched it into drive. The front tires spit up gravel as we accelerated up the driveway and past our farmhouse. Behind us, the barn slowly started to lean, folding over itself before crumbling to the ground. My dad slammed on the brakes, pulled the truck into neutral and whipped his head around. His eyes widened in disbelief—his Adam's apple lifted and dropped down his neck.

Dust exploded up into the air, filling the space where the big red barn stood moments before.

The toy dice bounced around on the end of its string.

These creatures—they weren't like spiders, they weren't like octopuses, they were like...cockroaches—thousands and thousands of giant cockroaches swarming anything in their path. Some moved slowly, while others scampered along the ground like they were gaining strength—like they were just waking up from a long sleep.

This was a dream.

It had to be.

As calm as my body must have seemed, as cool as I tried to act, I was freaking out inside.

“My mom is at home!” Margaret pulled my arm. “We need to get my mom.”

“Mine too,” Bailey said. He twisted around in the seat, still buckled in. “We gotta go back. Tell your dad we gotta go back.”

My dad couldn't take his eyes off the barn, what was left of it. A minute felt like five, as we idled at the end of our drive, leading onto Francis Road. His foot pushed down on the pedal, revving the engine, shaking the truck like a jackhammer. His thick fingers wrapped around the steering wheel. Patches of white and red spread over his skin. The fake leather lining around the back of the passenger side headrest creaked and chirped as my dad squeezed it with his right hand.

“Oh my god,” he whispered.

Chapter Four:

Fruit Flies

Margaret mentioned something a little while back—about the aliens. She compared them to fruit flies. It was a funny thought, but that kid seemed to know everything. I mean, she *was* Hidden Trail’s fifth grade District trivia champion.

Anyway, I wedged the six-gauge between my legs and looked up ‘fruit flies’ on my phone:

The Fruit Fly sometimes referred to as the Vinegar Fly, will lay its eggs in rotting fruit or decaying mushrooms or sap fluxes.

Sap fluxes.

Hmm. I didn't know what fluxes were, but I knew sap came from trees.

Didn’t the little freakish things all appear from the forest just now?

“Sheldon!” My dad punched my arm. The truck cruised down Francis Road vibrating and wavering. The tires hummed as they rocketed over the tar and broken stone. “What did I say about wasting that battery? Focus, son. Will you focus?”

“Yeah Dad,” I replied tucking the phone into my pocket.

“We’re going through the Bryer’s field to pick up their parents.” My dad tilted his head over to Margaret and Bailey, keeping his eyes straight ahead.

“Okay, Dad.”

The truck nudged over to the other side of the road before bounding into Mr. Bryer's cornfield. The truck dropped and then bounced up, tossing us in all directions. Short stalks of corn slapped against the front, grinding and snapping under the rear wells.

"Don't let go of that gun. You got that Sheldon?"

"Yeah, Dad." The roar of the engine filled the cab.

"Those things will be just over that hill. If any jump on..."

"I know, I know. Shoot it. Shoot them. Got it."

We hit another divot, jolting the truck to one side. Margaret gripped the handle on the door; her hair flipped over her face.

"Are you sure you got it?" My dad yelled. "I don't always know if you're on our planet or theirs sometimes." His eyes shuffled about, scanning every inch of the landscape in front of him.

His voice grew louder with every bump.

"I got it!" I shouted back.

The earth rumbled and shook. My brain felt like it was spilling out of my ears. I felt sick.

"I want my mommy!" Margaret shouted. She sat up as straight as she could, trying to see over the dash.

"We're nearly there," my dad replied. His hands pulled on the steering wheel, avoiding the giant rocks that heaved up from the frost last winter. The truck crashed through the Bryer's fence, lifting splinters of wooden planks into the air. Up ahead, along our road, the creatures had doubled in numbers, maybe tripled. There were thousands of them. They swarmed the Bryer's house, ripping it apart like a loaf of bread.

“There’s Mrs. Bryer!” I shouted. “Dad, Mrs. Bryer is up in that tree.”

My dad turned the wheel and revved the engine. “Gun, Sheldon, get the gun out. Point to the middle of that pack.”

I climbed over Bailey and Margaret and opened the window. About ten feet up, Mrs. Bryer clung for her life on the branch of a cottonwood. Although a blur, her face looked lost—maybe defeated. Perhaps she knew she was going to die.

Along the grassy pitch leading up to the driveway, the creepy-crawlers swarmed the tree. Among the herd, some of the creatures looked larger, as though they were doubling in size.

“Shoot them!” My dad floored the gas and pulled the truck up onto the yard. The creatures darted out of the way—some, not in time as the truck tires rolled over them.

My dad wasn’t thinking straight. I wanted to tell him it was stupid to shoot at a thousand and one alien rodents with a six-gauge shotgun. But then again, who was I to ever shed my opinion on my father?

“Shoot!” he shouted again.

I closed my eyes and pulled the trigger. The force of the blast pushed me back inside the truck, knocking me onto Margaret and Bailey. The creatures immediately dispersed like an army of ants just had their dirt hill stepped on. Mrs. Bryer waved her hands frantically at us as my dad found a clear route to the Cottonwood.

“Jump in the back!” he shouted through the window. My dad slowed down just enough for the frightened woman to let go of the branch and lower herself onto the truck bed.

She bounced around for a few seconds before pulling herself upright.

“She’s in.” I pointed the gun back at the herd of creatures, waiting for my dad’s next instruction.

He circled the truck around and cut through the Bryer’s backyard.

We pulled onto the road, heading toward Bailey and Margaret's houses. For a brief moment, the vehicle steadied. I leaned back out the window again, gripping the gun with one hand while holding onto the roof. The creatures seemed cautious around us now, mostly hovering along the grassy fields beside the road. Their dark gray bodies glided quickly over the terrain.

“What do they want? Dad, what do you think they want?” I slipped my head back through the window. “What do you think they’re doing? Why are they destroying everything?”

My dad didn’t look at me. His eyes continued to scan the road and landscape ahead. “Dunno, Sheldon. Just shut up for a second, will ya? Let me concentrate.”

I checked back on Mrs. Bryer. She leaned against the cabin, with her back to us. Her tight hair bun bounced against the window. I could only imagine what was going through her mind.

We pulled up in front of Bailey's house. He perched himself upright and shouted out the window. "Mommy! Come out! Mommy!"

My dad tapped his fingers on the steering wheel and looked back at the herd clamoring over the hill.

Margaret's house was next door. Her mom had spent a whole year laid up in bed, fighting cancer and all the radiation treatments. When that one giant alien healed Mrs. Swift last winter, she hardly spent any time at home. She got a job at the Ultra-Mart in town and apparently planned on going back to school to finish some degree she had started before she got sick.

"Sheldon, go bang on the door. We can't wait here much longer." My dad revved the engine again and laid on the horn. "Go!"

I jumped out of the truck and rushed up to the front step. I rang the doorbell a few times and then cut across the yard to Bailey's house. My dad blasted the horn again. I banged on Bailey's door and bolted back to the truck.

The creatures were moving at a steady pace. Only a matter of seconds now until they reached us.

"Pick up!" Bailey had his phone to his ear. "Mommy, answer, please answer!"

I closed the truck door and stuck my head out the window. "Maybe they went out. Maybe they aren't home. Is it possible they're not home?"

Margaret pointed at the cars in the driveways. "No, they're home. They are always home when we get back from school, right Bail?"

Bailey turned away, pushing the phone against his ear.

My dad blasted the horn again, grinding his teeth together while clenching his jaw. He pulled the truck into gear and drove up over the curb and onto Bailey's front lawn. He steered around the garden and birch tree before ramming the truck into the fence leading to the back. I pulled the gun inside the truck as the side door scraped along the brick wall of the house.

In the back, the porch was ripped apart, practically shredded. The windows shattered—tiny shards of glass spread out in all directions.

A trail of blood trickled out the sliding door and over the grass.

My throat tightened.

Across the yard, at Margaret's house, another trail of blood spilled out over the grass leading into a cabbage field.

"Your parents aren't here," I said.

Bailey pulled the phone from the side of his face and tapped the hang-up button. "How do you know?"

I looked at my dad for a second. For a brief moment, he turned to me—to us. He placed his giant farm hands on Bailey's shoulder, lightly squeezing him. "They saw the emergency broadcast last winter. They knew what to do if there was ever another alien encounter."

Bailey lifted his head up over the dash, barely able to see the tips of the houses ahead of him.

"How do you know?"

My dad swallowed looking out at the cabbage field. The alien creatures spread out around a house a few rows up.

"I just know," my dad replied. "I just know."

Bailey tucked his phone into his pocket and pulled his arms out from the straps of his backpack. He wiped his eyes and looked up at my dad again. "Where are they then?"

Chapter Five:

Lies

The first time I caught my dad in a lie was at the hospital just after the 'Tom Bryer and Randle the Bull incident.' My mom and I were with Dad almost 24-7 while he recovered from his eye injury and busted ribs. I remember his golden brown hairy legs and pasty white feet poking through an extra-small hospital gown as he lay awkwardly on his back. He felt for my hand this one afternoon and wrapped his fingers around mine—his face swollen, and his eyes bandaged shut. He opened his blood-dried lips and swallowed.

"Sheldon," he began as if he was about to die or something. "I care about you more than anything on this earth. You know that right?"

I remember looking at my mom, expecting a heartfelt tear to roll down her cheek. Instead, she folded her arms and sat down in a chair beside the bed. A slight twitch pulsed along her temple.

"Yeah Dad, I know. I care about you too," I said back to him, wondering if the man would ever say he loved me. The smell of broccoli and cheese filled the stuffy room.

He squeezed my hand again and sniffed. "I'm just gonna say it, Son. I don't want to beat around the bush here. You need to know."

I leaned forward in my chair. "What is it, Dad?"

"I want you to know that your mother got an important job in the city and needs to live there in order to keep the position." His face barely moved, like a robot. "This job will be good for her—for us—for the whole family."

The black whiskers poking out of his neck shifted as he swallowed. A drop of pinkish saliva oozed out the side of his mouth.

That was the moment—the moment when my dad no longer held the hero status I had given him so naively over the years.

Sure he was blind at the time, but he could see what he was doing—and I could see right through him—through his words.

"I understand," I replied, curling my toes.

He squeezed my hand again. "I'm so glad. I knew you would understand."

"Yeah, it's okay, Dad. I get it."

"I need you to help me out at the farm. I need you to be my eyes. We need the farm. Do you understand?"

"I understand," I said again.

He let go of my hand and navigated it over to the side table. His fingers felt around for his wallet. "There's a photograph in here." Dad's shaky hands fiddled around with the cards and flaps in his giant brown leather treasure box. He felt each card and piece of paper until he found the photo. "Here it is."

I looked at the picture in his hand, remembering the day I helped him clean his car for the first time. Cheap foaming soap and turtle wax covered the driveway and most of my clothes. The sun beamed down on us as Mom buried herself in some swanky love story with that Fabio dude on the cover. She sat on a lawn chair in the shade under one of the cottonwoods in the garden. I remember thinking that for Dad, the day couldn't be more perfect.

"I look at the picture a lot. When things aren't going so well, I escape into that picture, into that day. It was a good day."

I nodded. "It *was* a good day."

"I'm going to see that picture again, I know it. I just wanted you to know I have it. Okay?"

"K, Dad." I wasn't really sure where he was going with that, but perhaps he was still half sedated or something.

Maybe he wanted to distract me from his lies.

"Your mother cares about you too; you know that?"

My mom sat in that chair, looking up at the mini-tv hanging from the corner of the room. A rerun of 'Saved by the Bell' played with French subtitles as she scratched off the nail polish on one of her fingers.

"Yes, Dad," I said.

My world shifted that day. I did my best to hide any feelings because I wanted my dad to believe everything really *was* okay. I mean, the doctors did tell the guy he would be blind for the rest of this life. What was I supposed to do?

He needed me.

But deep down I knew he lied to me. I knew my parents weren't getting along. It was just an excuse for my selfish mother to ditch us.

And he didn't seem to care.

How was *I* supposed to?

My mom moved out a week later, and I dropped out of school the week after.

Was I mad?

Yeah, who wouldn't be? My parents had just robbed me of my education—and all because they couldn't figure out how to live under the same roof.

I hated them for that.

But for some reason, I hated my dad more. I wanted to find that picture in my dad's wallet and burn it. I wanted to burn down the farm. I couldn't forgive him for lying to me. To me, he wasn't my dad anymore; he was just the world's biggest jerk. He based our whole family morals on respect and honesty, and when it really mattered, the guy couldn't even tell me the truth.

But looking back, especially now, as I sat in that truck with Margaret and Bailey, I wondered if some lies needed to be said.

I wondered if he had no other choice.

Maybe *I* was the one who was the world's biggest jerk.

My dad pulled a blue tarp over the flatbed and tied it to the tailgate. He looked back at me and wiped the sweat from his forehead. Explosions and gunfire rang out below us, echoing up the cliff face. "That whole town is gone."

I tossed a rock over the edge of the escarpment, watching it disappear into the tops of the white pines. "I know. This is messed up. Where are the police? Why aren't they doing anything?"

Margaret and Bailey sat in the truck with Mrs. Bryer. We had managed to drive up through the back roads along Fifth Concession. My dad figured the safest place to be was at Morris Point, high above everything.

There were a couple of cars parked up near a break in the trees a few hundred feet away. We weren't ready to talk to them, at least not until we knew the area was safe.

I picked up the shotgun that leaned against a tree and aimed it out at the valley. I pictured a cluster of aliens creeping up the cliff face below me and downing every last one of them with precision-like shooting. Their creepy tentacles would flail about as they tumbled back down the rock.

But it only took a few seconds for me to remember this wasn't a video game.

This was real.

I tucked the gun under my arm and pulled out my phone.

Forty percent battery and no calls or texts.

I knew Dad thought about Mom just as much as me—even if they barely talked.

"What are we gonna eat?" I asked.

The sun started slipping down below the horizon, leaving trails of red and purple lines across the clouds. The acids in my stomach bubbled and groaned.

"We're gonna camp here tonight, and I'll head down first thing in the morning for food and shells for that gun of yours. You and I need to take turns on watch."

"Okay," I replied. Smoke billowed up over the high school at the far end of town. I wondered if my friends got out safely.

"It gets cold up here at night; we're going to have to build a fire," my dad said. "We're not all going to fit in the truck."

Mrs. Bryer leaned her head against the glass on the passenger side door, perhaps praying she would get out of this mess in one piece. Although I found it strange, she wasn't crying about Mr. Bryer, but part of me wasn't surprised. She reminded me of my mom, not so much the way she looked, but just the way she acted—like there were two of her. She either exuded a bitterness—a scary-bitterness—or the woman was annoyingly happy. Every once and awhile she came by our place to pick up some milk from Dad. She would wave to me sometimes while I worked in the fields and shouted out my name. Other times she would ignore me as if I had descended from a family of potato bugs, or something.

"Sheldon?" My dad tossed a stick at me.

"Yeah?"

"Didn't you hear me? Get some firewood. Stop daydreaming and leave that gun alone, it's empty anyway."

"Okay, okay. I'm going." I slipped the gun on the tailgate under the tarp and dragged my feet toward the woods. Bailey and Margaret stayed huddled in the truck next to Mrs. Bryer. At least they had her—some sort of mother-figure to comfort them as the evening turned to night.

This is crazy. So fricken crazy.

"Sheldon?" Margaret opened the window and poked her head out.

“Yeah?” I replied, glancing back.

“Where are you going?”

“Going for a walk. I won't be long.”

“K.”

I picked up a thin branch and tucked it under my arm.

“Sheldon?”

“Yes?”

“You're not going to get killed or anything, right?”

“No. I'll be fine. I promise.”

“K.” Margaret pressed her mouth against the glass, fogging up the window. She lifted her head back up, wiping off her greasy face print. “Sheldon?”

I stopped and turned to her. “Yes?”

“Guess what the winning question was about?” For a brief moment Margaret appeared to escape from the horror in the town below.

I widened my arms and shrugged my shoulders.

“The winning question was about 'The Explorers!'" She pulled a leaf out from the window frame and twirled it between her fingers. "How crazy is that?"

“That *is* crazy. Good job!” I pointed to her polished trophy on the front dash. “Nice prize!”

She giggled, rubbing the leaf against her nose. "I know, right? Isn't it awesome?"

I nodded, and turned back to the woods.

"I beat Dayna Redfern. She didn't stand a chance." She closed the window and sat back with Bailey in the truck.

Margaret and Bailey looked like they could have been related, with their bright strawberry blonde hair and scattered freckles across their cheeks. If Margaret didn't have all that crazy thick hair, the two could easily be mistaken for twins.

Since my dad's miraculous recovery, the two stopped coming by the farm as often. I had to admit, I missed them.

"Sheldon, we got lots to do, come on, stop yammering to those kids." My dad's voice echoed out from behind the truck. "You're never going to amount to anything if you keep wasting your time. I mean, come on, you're either daydreaming, staring off into space, or you're goofing off with the Strawberry Twins."

I didn't bother looking back, but I pictured him standing by the tarp tapping each finger as he barked his list of all my faults. *You suck at this, you suck at that, here are all the things wrong with you, blah, blah, blah.*

Sometimes I wish he was still blind.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm on it," I muttered under my breath.

The winds picked up, pushing the moaning pines and giant oaks from side to side. Through the thick brush, a coyote hustled over the ground, disappearing behind the other side of a giant rock. I swallowed and let my heart settle to its normal pace. For the first time, since Mr. Bryer dropped dead to the ground like a ragdoll, I felt the emotions rise from inside me. My eyes watered and my lower lip twitched.

I sat down on a fallen tree and rubbed my nose with my sleeve.

Faint screams shot up from the valley, fading away into the cooling air.

I wondered if this was it—I wondered if this was the end of the world.

I don't wanna die. Please, I don't wanna die.

“Sheldon?” my dad shouted from the truck. “Hurry up with that...goddamn wood.”

I didn't respond. Why would I? I was sick of him treating me like...Mom. And since when did he start swearing all of a sudden?

The wind rushed over my face, pushing my hair back. For a brief moment, the chaos below us stopped. A silence slipped through the air—a comforting silence.

I thought about Mom. I hoped she got out okay. She probably knew about the attack before we did and found a safe place to hide out. I was sure of it. Mom was good like that; she always seemed to be one step ahead of Dad and me. Maybe she *was* smart to get out of that farmhouse.

“Are you Sheldon?” a faint voice called out from behind me.

I turned around and stood up.

A girl, about my age, stepped into a clearing, holding onto a giant kitchen knife. Strands of her auburn hair slipped from her ponytail and dangled over her face.

“Yes,” I replied.

Chapter Six:

Just a Girl

I felt my face warm up as I diverted my eyes down to the ground.

“Are you okay?” the girl asked in a soft voice, almost like a whisper.

I knew her from town when I played baseball for the Hidden-Trail Tigers. She used to cheer for a kid named Duschan Becken who played shortstop. I didn't like the guy much, but I

often found myself staring at her as I picked weeds in right field. I always remembered her because my dad would yell at me from the stands, reminding me to focus on the game (whenever he actually found time to come).

“I'm fine,” I said finally. “Just looking for firewood.”

“Me too.” She slipped the knife into her leather backpack and pointed out toward the truck. “Is that your dad?”

I nodded. She obviously heard my conversation with him or lack of.

She rubbed her fingers along the bark of a white birch and stepped over some rocks. She wore a pair of jean shorts, with the pockets dangling down past the frayed ends. Her tanned legs were scratched with a bruise on her left thigh. “He seems stressed.”

I glanced up at her, lifting my brow. “Who? My dad? Who isn't?”

She smiled and picked up some wood in front of me. “No, I know. But he's the adult, right?” She handed me a stick, holding onto it for an extra second as I gripped the other end. Dried flakes of blood clung to the edges of a deep scratch running down the side of her face. Her eyes looked swollen and red. “Isn't he supposed to be the comforting one?” She let go.

“Yeah, but that's just the way he is. That's what he does.” I felt myself staring too long at her scar and quickly turned away.

“I hear ya,” she said. “I think all parents around here musta went to some ‘mom and dad school’ where they learned how to squash us kids with insults and death stares.”

I forced out an awkward laugh and then swallowed. “Yeah. My mom's the same too, but not as bad. She mostly ignores me when she's pissed off. Although, I don't talk to her much anymore.”

Crap, why would I say that to someone I just met?

The girl bobbed her head and picked up another stick, slipping it under her arm. “Isn't that your mom in the truck?”

“No, that's our neighbor. My mom was in town when those things attacked. She's probably at some shelter in the big city or something.”

The reds and purples from the dipping sun slipped through the low hanging branches and filled the girl's face with color. She closed her eyes for a second and stepped back into the shadows.

“What shelter?” She rubbed her hand against the birch again and looked at me in the eyes for the first time.

A sharp bang jolted me out of the curious moment as my dad pounded a stick into the ground near the ledge.

“Pardon?” I asked.

“What shelter did your mom go to? I didn’t hear about no shelter.”

I shrugged and grabbed another stick from the ground. "I dunno. I'm sure the army got everyone outta there, no? I hear sirens down there, and a couple of helicopters flew over earlier."

The girl watched my dad hammer another stake into the ground. He tied a string to it and then pulling it over to the blue tarp. She half smiled and bobbed her head again. “Yeah, you’re probably right. Your mom must have gotten out.”

My dad stood tall and wiped his forehead with his sleeve. He glanced at me, lifted his arms with a ‘quit-wasting-time’ death stare and then shook his head.

“Coming,” I muttered, half caring if he heard me or not. I turned back to the girl and smiled. A warm wave of tingles pushed up into my chest—the same tingles I got when I saw her at the baseball diamond.

“Do you have any food?” She flicked her hair to the side and pulled a leaf off the end of a branch. She twirled it between her fingers and sniffed it.

“No, but my dad is going to get some tomorrow in town,” I said. “I’m starving too.”

She ripped the leaf in half and crumpled it in her hands. “I’m too hungry to be scared anymore, you know?”

“I know,” I replied. “Maybe we can go into town together.”

“Maybe.” She opened her hands, letting the bits of leaf float down to the ground.

“Where did your parents park? Is that your car on the other side of the ridge?”

The girl pulled another leaf off the tree. She tickled her face with it, rubbing the tip against the scar. “My parents are dead.”

“I’m sorry.” I lowered my head and adjusted my hold on the sticks. “I, um, I’m, I’m stupid. I shouldn’t have assumed...I mean, you seem—”

“It’s all good.” She kicked some small twigs along the ground and sniffed. “We gotta keep it together at times like this, right?”

“Yeah.”

A faint staticky voice over a speaker drifted up the from the valley.

Stay away from the trees. This message is to the people at the top of Morris point, stay away from the trees.

My dad jumped up over the rocks and peered down into the town. The girl and I watched him for a moment. He kept still, pulling the side of his face out into the open air.

I repeat this message is to the people at the top of Morris point, stay away—

But the voice soon faded again, and as several minutes passed, I could only assume, whoever tried to communicate with us, was either running for their life or dead.

“What was that all about?” A small drop of blood trickled down the side of the girl’s leg. “What did that person mean?”

“I dunno. Maybe these things are coming from the trees. Like, maybe they are hatching out of them or something.”

“Sheldon!” My dad shouted out from the ledge. “Let’s go, bring that wood.”

“Okay, coming.”

The girl smiled at me and stepped back over the rocks by the birch tree. She peeled some bark back and looked out into the forest again. “I guess I better go.”

The last of the sunlight bounced off the side of her face, highlighting the deep wound digging into her skin.

“What happened to your...you know.” I rubbed my finger along my cheek and jaw.

She touched the gash and winced. “Long story. Maybe tell you about it later?”

“Yeah, sure, of course.”

She pushed her auburn hair out of her face and gently punched my arm. “Nice to meet you, Sheldon.” She turned her back to me and stepped up the slope toward the darkness of the trees.

“Wait,” I whispered loudly. “What’s your name?”

She stopped, not turning around. “Cara. Cara Flanders”

“Nice to meet you too, Cara Flanders.”

She reached behind and pulled the knife back out of her bag. The fading light from the horizon reflected off the tip of the blade as she slipped further into the forest.

I watched her until she disappeared, as the evening sky turned to night.

I didn't know what ‘later’ meant, but I hoped to see her in the morning. Maybe she would travel with us—to the big city if we were going that way.

I hoped to see mom in the morning too.

Standing there, with the load of twigs and branches, I felt a shiver brush over me, like a ghost, had just wrapped its arms around my waist.

I hustled back to the truck and dumped the pile of wood at my dad's feet.

"Who was that?" My dad kicked the sticks aside and dropped to his knees, scraping the earth away with a rock.

"Just a girl," I replied. "I guess she's camping up here too."

He pulled up some loose soil and then pushed it away. His hands gripped tightly onto the rock as he pounded the earth again, vigorously carving out a wide hole. He slapped the rock down after several rounds of digging and then looked up to me.

"Sheldon?" He blew a wad of dirt out of his nose and then checked on Mrs. Bryer and the kids.

"Yes?"

"Did you hear what that man said?"

"Yes."

"Good. Then stay out of the forest. You're going to spend the night in the truck, got it?"

"Okay."

My dad stood up and scratched the hairs on his chin. His hands were black with mud and dirt. "Grab the manual from the glove compartment, will ya? We need it to start the fire."

"Why are we making a fire? Won't that attract the...the things?"

The town below us was completely quiet now. No sirens, no screaming. Flames shot up in some areas by the strip mall and the high school, but for the most part, there was no sign of life.

Everyone was in hiding.

Or dead.

“The fire’s going to keep me warm tonight, and if any of those things get near me, I will burn them.”

Chapter Seven:

Slumber

By the time I stepped into the truck, Margaret and Bailey were already snuggled in the back seat with Mrs. Bryer. I closed the door gently behind me and untied the laces on my boots. A musty odor immediately filled the tiny space, but I didn't care. My feet were killing.

For the first time, since that thing snapped Mr. Bryer's neck, I felt a sense of calm around me—like I had just worked two straight days in the fields and was finally able to jump into my bed.

Mrs. Bryer glanced out at my dad through the back window. Her face looked like it had been chiseled from a pale gray stone. She looked to be maybe a hundred pounds, tops, not an ounce of fat on her whatsoever. Her hair was always pulled back tightly, almost enough to stretch her aging skin across her cheekbones. She didn't acknowledge me as I adjusted myself on the seat, feeling for the most comfortable spot to settle down.

I wondered if Margaret and Bailey really believed they were going to see their moms again. Neither one of them had a sibling or a dad, which always seemed strange, but ever since my parents split, the whole single-parent thing didn't phase me anymore.

"Are they okay?" I whispered to Mrs. Bryer, lifting my head over the front seat. "I heard crying earlier when I was helping my dad with the fire."

Mrs. Bryer tapped her mouth with her finger and nodded. "Yes" Her voice was gentle and quiet. "I think Bailey was having a bad dream. But other than that," she raised her eyebrows and glanced down at the two. "I'm surprised how well they're doing, to be honest."

"Me too. I think I would be freaking out if I were them."
"Maybe they are," she replied.

I don't think any of us had fully digested what happened, especially Dad. He just seemed fixated on making the shelter for himself with that stupid tarp, setting up that fire, and making sure to toss a couple of jabs at me from time to time.

"I wonder if we should put the radio on." I carefully pulled my sweaty socks off, trying not to spread the stench around. "There's gotta be something on the news telling us what to do, or where to go."

"No, leave it for tonight. Let them rest. We all need to sleep." She shifted her weight, trying not to wake the two kids. They looked peaceful as if the world around them was back to normal again.

"Okay." I dropped my head down and propped my legs up on the seat. I leaned against the passenger door and rested my back on the glass. I could see Mrs. Bryer between the belt strap and the back door. She closed her eyes for a moment and slowly rocked her body.

"Are *you* okay?" I asked. "I don't think anyone has asked how *you're* doing."

“Well,” she began, looking up at a spider huddled in the top corner of the closed sunroof. She let in some air and slowly exhaled. “My husband is dead, my house is gone, I’m hungry, thirsty, nauseous and I don’t even know if I’m going to see the sun come up tomorrow.” She took another breath and turned to me as if I had just asked the dumbest question in the world.

I shifted my body into the corner of the seat and door and pressed my nose against the window.

The orange and yellows from the fire outside lit up my dad’s weathered face as he watched the flames dance around the pit.

“Sorry,” I muttered.

“Don’t be. I appreciate you asking me. If it weren’t for you guys, I wouldn’t be here right now.”

She was right; we *did* save her life.

I saved her life.

But I couldn’t help but wonder what happened out there. I didn’t get it. I didn’t understand. These things—these aliens were supposed to be kind.

“Why do you think they helped us? Like, why did they cure all of the sick people last winter, and then come back and kill everybody?”

Mrs. Bryer shrugged and looked out at my dad. “I dunno Sheldon. I really don’t know.”

“Fruit...flies,” Margaret’s eyes opened slightly. “They’re like fruit flies.” She nuzzled her face into Mrs. Bryer’s shoulder and yawned. The light from outside cast a shadow along her eyes and nose. “They came from the trees.”

“Go to sleep,” Mrs. Bryer replied. “It’s getting late.”

“I’m not tired.”

“Yes, you are.” Mrs. Bryer gently pulled Margaret's head close to her again.

Margaret picked some strands of hair out of her mouth and then rubbed her eye. “We get fruit flies in the house all the time. I used to wait for them to land, and then squash them with my fingers. Mommy hated when I did that cus she'd always have to wash my hands afterward.” She licked some dried snot from the end of her nose and then swallowed.

I moved my head between the two front seats and inched closer to Margaret. “Mrs. Bryer is right; it's time—”

“Fruit flies like to lay their eggs on rotten fruit,” Margaret whispered.

“Yes, they do,” I replied.

“Maybe our planet is rotten.”

“Maybe it is.”

“And maybe they laid their eggs in the trees so that they can live here too—with us. That’s why they helped us. That’s why they helped my mommy. That’s why they want to be our friends.”

I wanted to respond to her. I wanted to ask her why they decided to suddenly turn on us, why they decided to rip innocent people out of their homes and murder them in cold blood. But I knew better. Of course, I knew better. I remembered what it was like to believe in Santa and the Easter Bunny. I remembered when the world was a simple and safe place in my mind. I didn't want to rob her of hope. "You're right," I said finally. "That's why they want to be our friends."

We sat in silence for awhile, watching the ashes from the fire climb over the truck, disappearing through the tops of the trees. It didn't take long for Margaret to close her eyes again. Somehow she was able to block out all the evil around us and find peace in her thoughts.

Lucky girl.

Time passed.

Maybe an hour.

Maybe four.

For a brief moment, I started to forget as well. My mind had given up thinking about the horror outside. Even the girl, Cara, from the woods, was just a numb memory.

I let time slip away, allowing my mind to settle and drift into an empty darkness.

The ashes turned into sparkles of light—like the stars in the sky.

My body twitched as the tension in my muscles let go, easing me slowly into a comforting slumber.

Chapter Eight:

Patience

Light filtered through the front window as the sun's rays weaved between the trees. A faint pinkish hue spread out across the sky. A couple of hawks circled over us, their long wings stretched out as they eyed the earth below.

I collected my senses, noticing a stale odor drifting around me—a sweaty, warm odor. Either my socks and boots had overwhelmed the entire truck, or the sleeping bodies in the back had been releasing gas from time to time.

Likely both.

I peered over the seat. Bailey and Margaret lay motionless on the cold leather—their mouths draped open, softly breathing in and out.

Where's Mrs. Bryer?

I checked my phone. 6:43 AM

Saturday, May 28th.

I wiped the condensation off the passenger side window and peered out at the fire pit. Tiny embers glowed through a pile of gray ash and charred wood. A thin trail of smoke climbed into the trees.

I opened the door and stepped out, soaking in the fresh morning air. Beads of water from the dew sat on top of the blue tarp, glistening in the rising sun. The tarp was carefully fastened to the tailgate and stretched out a few feet away from the truck. Both sides were pinned down by rocks and sticks which Dad had hammered into the ground. The far end was held up by a larger stick, raising the tarp up into a triangular tent-like shape.

My dad was pretty handy like that, but considering there were potential man-eating aliens just a few yards away in that forest, he was also pretty stupid.

Mrs. Bryer poked her head out from the far end and stood tall. She stretched her arms up over her head, showing her pale white bellybutton. She wore a wrinkled old yellow t-shirt that looked a few sizes too small and red plaid pajama pants. I hadn't noticed the day before how ridiculous she looked. Her hair was down now, dangling over her ears and face. I had never seen it like that before.

“Where’s Dad?” I whispered, adjusting my twisted jeans. I suddenly felt the need to use the bathroom. “He didn’t wake me up.”

“I took watch, figured you needed the sleep.” She stretched her back and then picked up a stick, poking at the embers in the pit.

“Go back to sleep.” My dad’s raspy morning voice muttered from the tent. “And keep it down.”

“I’m not tired,” I replied.

“Not my problem, Sheldon.”

Asshole.

Mrs. Bryer sat down on a rock beside the pit. She folded her arms as if to escape from the cool air swirling around the camp. She looked towards the tent, probably at my dad who was likely cursing under his breath at me. She whispered something to him and then smiled.

I opened the truck door again and half-stepped in before turning back to the tent. "I can't believe how relaxed you guys are about all of this. Aren't you worried about those things, like sneaking up on you? I mean, Jesus, they could have killed you last night."

My dad coughed and cleared his throat. "Go to sleep, Sheldon."

"It's almost seven."

"So?"

I slammed the truck door and stepped back out to the fire pit. "So? So? You said we were going to get food. It's morning, why aren't we doing anything?"

The end of the tarp dropped, and the long stick holding the entrance flung out over the ledge. My dad pushed the flaps away from him, and he shot up to his feet. "So? I haven't slept. I haven't slept since five-thirty, yesterday morning. I'm tired; I need to rest. We will get food when I'm good and ready to get food."

I shook my head and kicked the ground. "Since when are you ever concerned about sleeping? People died yesterday, there are fucken aliens killing people, and all you care about is sleeping?"

"Watch your language." My dad stepped toward me and pointed. "Don't ever use that word around me again, got that?"

“Winston,” Mrs. Bryer reached for his hand.

“No, my son needs to understand his place.” He turned to her and gently pulled his arm away. He held onto her finger for a couple of seconds before letting go. “Sheldon, I stayed out here all night to make sure you were safe. Do you understand?”

My temples tingled, and my jaw tightened. “Sure, whatever.”

“Out here, I can hear them, I can see them. Best way to know if this place is safe is actually being outside, if they came, we'd take refuge in the truck—if we stayed in the truck and slept, we would be none the wiser.”

“That doesn't make any sense.” I turned back to the truck and marched around to the front.

“Where are you going?” my dad shouted.

“I have to pee.”

My heart a million times a second. I unzipped my dirty farm jeans and relieved myself all over the plastic ram logo on my dad's front grill.

Not my problem Sheldon. Fuck you Dad. We'll get food when I'm good and ready to get food. Fuck you again. Asshole.

I closed my eyes for a second, letting all the leftover liquid inside of me splash about the front of the truck, pelting the metal bumper like a heavy rainstorm. For that short minute in time, I pictured one of the aliens wrapping its tentacles around my father, pulling him toward the edge of the rocky cliff, dragging him as he kicked and screamed, mercifully begging for his life. The monster would smile at me as I raised my thumb up and gave a nod of approval. Drool would spill from its mouth as it tossed my miserable father over the ledge. His dumbstruck face would look at me one last time as he plummeted into the cottonwoods and red pines. The last thing that would enter his mind before being impaled by giant branches would be regret—regret for being such a prick since his Tom Bryer and Randle the Bull incident.

I zipped up my pants, noticing Margaret and Bailey staring at me through the front window. Their faces were blank, with their mouths gaped open.

I suddenly wondered how much of my bathroom escapade they actually witnessed.

A dog's bark echoed up over the cliff, faint but close enough to be from the town. The hawks continued to circle above us, waiting patiently for their breakfast to run out into the open.

Maybe that was what I was doing. Maybe I just had to be patient.

Maybe that was what the aliens were doing.

I stepped back around the side of the truck, prepared to hide away inside until Dad could take us into town. It finally dawned on me that he was probably mad at me for lying to him about the Ernie phone call the day before.

I looked at my reflection in the window of the truck and took a big breath. I wasn't sure what I was going to say to the kids, but it wasn't important, not anymore.

"You shouldn't fight with him." Mrs. Bryer sat on the rock near the pit, picking at a cut on her hand.

The tarp was laid flat on the ground—the sticks piled beside the back tire of the truck.

"Where is he?" I asked, feeling the acids in my stomach eat away at the inner walls.

Mrs. Bryer tilted her head and looked out at the woods. "Bathroom break I guess."

"Oh." I rubbed my hands in the wet grass and dried them on my jeans.

A crow squawked overhead, bursting through the trees and out over the ridge. I jumped back, bashing my shoulder on the side mirror.

"You okay?" Mrs. Bryer asked.

A faint whimper came from inside the truck. Perhaps reality had finally sunk in for Margaret as she curled up on the front seat. She buried her face in Bailey's phone, probably trying to call her dead mother.

I forced out a smile and looked back at Mrs. Bryer. "I'm fine."

Bailey tapped on the glass and waved at me to come inside the truck. I didn't want to go back in; I didn't want those two frightened kids to ask me questions that I didn't have the answers to. I mean, *I* was a kid. *I* had questions.

"Your dad is stressed, we gotta just let him make the decisions. It's the only way we can all get through this." Mrs. Bryer folded her arms and looked out at the woods. "Let him take the lead."

I shook my head, letting a burst of air squeeze out between my lips. "He can be nice about it, can't he?"

"Yeah, I suppose he can be nice about it, but this isn't exactly an everyday occurrence. Give him a break."

There was something dysfunctional about our group. The only ones who shed any sort of human normality were Margaret and Bailey. For all, we knew the world was coming to an end and yet my dad felt compelled to take a washroom break in the woods, the very place he told us to stay away from. Then there was Mrs. Bryer, sitting on that rock.

Just sitting there.

Her husband was just killed, like less than twenty-four hours ago and all she cared about was a scab on her hand and making sure I was nicer to my dad.

I didn't get it.

"Mrs. Bryer?" I took a few steps toward her.

"Yes?"

I lowered my voice to a whisper. "When are we going to tell Margaret and Bailey the truth about their moms?"

She shrugged and looked back out at the woods. “I don’t know. Maybe never?”

“But don’t they have the right to know?”

“Maybe they’re still alive. We never saw the bodies, right? Maybe they got away like we did.”

“Maybe.” I tucked my hands into my pockets, smelling the smoke from the pit drift over me. I hated that smell; it reminded me too much of my life at the farm. At least three times a week, I was burning wood or junk from the fields. My job was endless—I should have been in school.

“What’s on your mind, Sheldon?”

I tapped a rock in front of me with my boot. “I don’t know, just thinking.”

“Thinking about what?”

The air around us was still now. The trees silent. I looked out over the ridge, toward the horizon. A light mist hovered over a gray silhouette of houses and small buildings. The two hawks were no longer circling overhead.

Chapter Nine:

I Couldn't

I don't know how long I stood there with Mrs. Bryer as the sun crept up over the trees, maybe tens minutes. Maybe more. I never did answer her. I didn't want her to know everything I was thinking. I didn't know her, I didn't trust her.

She got up from the rock and threw a stick into the embers, pushing a short cloud of ash into the air. "I'm going to see if Winston's okay." She touched her nose, and half glanced in my direction. "I mean, your dad."

I leaned against the truck and nodded.

She stepped around some rocks and an old fallen tree before disappearing into the shadows.

I dropped my arms and lowered my head.

Bailey opened the door behind me and leaned out. "When are we going to go and find my mom?" He stretched his leg forward and slipped down the side of the front seat and onto the ground. "She's probably worried about me. Can we go and find her now? You peed all over your dad's truck did you know that?"

"I know. I had to go."

"Margaret wants to know when we can eat. I'm hungry too. Can we go to Angel's Diner? That's where my mom takes me on Saturday mornings. It's Saturday today. We should go there; maybe my mom is there already. Maybe she didn't go to the 'mergency meeting spot like your dad said, maybe she's at Angel's."

“Yeah, maybe. We just have to wait for my dad. Can you sit tight a bit longer in there?”

Bailey rubbed his finger through the condensation on the window, making a happy face. “Um, okay, but I have to go to the bathroom. Margaret does too. And it smells like cauliflower in there.”

I checked back to the woods for Dad, but there was no one—just silence—like the trees had just swallowed him up. Margaret stepped over the middle console and hopped onto the front seat. Strands of bright red hair shot up in all directions. “I need to go bad.”

I tapped my fingers on my chin, feeling the thick stubby hairs pushing through the peach-fuzz. “Yeah, okay. You guys can go around the other side of the truck.”

Margaret jumped out and pushed past Bailey. “Me first.” She yanked on her zipper and rushed over to the driver-side. Her head dropped past the mirror as she pulled down her pink pants. Scraggly bits of her red hair peeked up over the window, glowing in the sun.

“My phone doesn’t work anymore.” Bailey tugged on my arm. Bits of yellow goop clung to his blonde eyelashes. His nails were gnawed down past the tips of his fingers.

A white seed from a cottonwood floated up over me, landing on Bailey's shoulder. I flicked it off and pulled out my phone.

7:14 AM.

Still Forty percent battery.

No bars.

Crap.

I hoped Mom was okay.

"Your phone doesn't work because you were on it all night," I said.

"No, I wasn't. I was sleeping."

I covered one of my nostrils and blew out some mucus. "Well, mine works. Just no service. There are no towers around here anyway."

"Done!" Margaret hopped back over to us, wiping her hands in the grass.

"My turn." Bailey scampered over to the other side of the truck. His face appeared through the driver-side window. "Ew, I can see where you went. It's all foamy still." He jumped back and scooted around near the tailgate.

Margaret looked at me, her lips puckered and her brow furrowed. "It's just urine. We all pee and poo you know. The foam is just the acids and ammonia."

"Okay, okay. Thanks for pointing that out." I rubbed my hand over her tangled hair.

She watched my mouth slip into a smile and then returned the gesture. "You're welcome." She stepped past me and wandered over to the fire pit.

What's taking Dad so long?

I followed Margaret and peered over the ledge into the valley. Dark clouds of smoke wafted up from the town. The fires were still burning from the night before. Cars and vans and trucks covered the sides of the roads; some turned upside-down completely. It looked like a hurricane had whipped through. A small black dog wobbled up and down the streets, sniffing the gutters and debris strewn along the sidewalks.

"I hope my trophy is okay." Margaret picked up one of the stakes my dad had used for his tent. She scratched some lines in the dirt and then tossed it over the ledge. She watched it bounce off the tip of a red-pine and spin through the branches. "I worked extra-hard to win that trophy. Did you see how shiny it was Sheldon?"

I nodded. "Yeah, it was shiny."

"Done!" Bailey jumped off a rock and landed in front of me. "So, can we go now?" His green shirt poked through the zipper of his shorts.

"Yeah, soon."

"Angel's Diner right?" He knelt down and tied his lace. "I like my eggs over easy. How do you like yours?"

Margaret pulled on my shirt. "I like omelets with spinach and onions."

"Eww, that's gross Margaret." Bailey scrunched up his nose. "Spinach is like puke."

I grabbed Bailey's hand and crouched down.

Past the first row of baby trees and pines, the thick limbs from a maple swayed heavily from side to side. Small twigs and chunks of bark exploded into the air before drifting down into the tangles of branches and leaves. Seconds later, the forest was still, yet again. I tapped Margaret's leg and pulled the two of them down with me. "Quiet a sec."

The two lowered themselves behind the old fallen tree. Margaret gripped my shirt as she studied my face. "What are we doing?"

"We're hiding," I replied.

"Why are we hiding?"

"Quiet," I whispered. I wondered if she really had forgotten about the chaos that happened the day before. I wondered if both of them had. "There's something in the trees."

"What is it?" Margaret tugged on my arm again.

"Quiet, you need to be quiet, okay?"

She let go of my sleeve and folded her arms. "I will be quiet if I know why I have to be quiet."

Bailey lifted his head up beside me and peered over the log. "The monsters are back. Aren't they Sheldon?" He picked off a piece of bark and sniffed it. Tiny ants scattered around the freshly exposed surface. "They're going to hurt us. Right? The monsters are going to get us."

I shook my head. "No, we're safe. We just need to be quiet."

"Okay, Sheldon," Bailey whispered. "We'll both be quiet."

A stale odor hovered around me, like the compost piles at the farm. The sun reached higher up over the mist-covered buildings along the horizon, warming the right side of my face.

A bead of sweat rolled down my forehead.

I focused on the trees again—the spot where the sunlight gave way to the darkness.

Another drop trickled down the side of my face.

Dad, where are you?

Movement caught my eye again in the shadows. My stomach ached like I had swallowed a bag of nails and each pointed-end scratched at my insides.

What's out there?

Dad?

Monsters?

Maybe my dad was sick, or dizzy or something. He used to complain about having headaches after the accident. I wondered if he still had them. It could explain why he seemed pissed at life half the time. It was hard to like him most days, but he was my dad. I mean, at least he took care of me, unlike Mom. She focused so much on her career that she didn't have time for us. And I didn't even know what she did for a job. Maybe my dad wanted me to drop out of school because he needed someone.

Who knows?

A deafening scream sliced through the silent air causing my entire body to flinch.

“What was that?” Margaret whispered.

Tingles spread around my face and head. My heart raced. I placed my finger over my lips and swallowed.

Then.

Stillness...again.

I waited.

We waited.

Bailey watched an ant crawl along his finger, stopping at the tip before turning around and scurrying across his palm. He slowly closed his hand, squeezing it shut. He paused for a moment before opening it again, letting the crumpled ant fall to the ground.

"Sheldon!" The silence abruptly ended. A man's voice from the trees screamed out. "Sheldon, get out of there!"

I shot up and stood on the log. "Dad!? Dad? Where are you?"

A deep moan forced its way out of the darkness. A large maple tree snapped in half, teetering to one side before collapsing into the mix of green and black.

"Dad!" I shouted again.

"Sheldon!" His voice was distant now. "Listen to me; you need to run!"

"What's happening? Where are you?" I jumped back, reaching out for Margaret and Bailey.

"Meet us at UltraMart. Get out of there now...get..." His voice faded away down the hillside.

"Dad!"

Ash from the fire ballooned up as the ground vibrated. Margaret and Bailey darted to the truck and jumped inside. Their little bodies clamored over the front seat and into the back. I checked the ignition and the console for the keys. My hands shook, feeling around under the steering wheel and floor mats.

"Close the door, Sheldon. Close the door." Bailey flicked the locks by the window, clicking them over and over again.

Behind us, a large pine wavered and then shuddered, like its bark had been violently stripped from its trunk—like, like it was gutted.

"Let's go, Sheldon. Drive. Drive. They're coming again, aren't they?"

The shadows from the trees suddenly grew—a black giant ball pushed past the dwarfed branches, shifting out into the clearing. Gangly vine-like arms swept downward from the core of a leathered monster, sweeping the ground in front of it. It heaved forward with a series of bony legs, like a centipede. Pointed fangs hung from a flap of dark flesh near the center of its face.

I whipped my hand back to Margaret and Bailey, still eyeing the creature in the clearing. "Don't move. Don't move an inch."

A faint whimper spilled out from Margaret as she slipped down to the floor.

The tentacles, thick like the trunk of an elephant, slapped the earth, pushing the ashes from the fire pit into a cloud of charred dust. The monster's face peered down through the back window, pushing hot air onto the glass.

With a quick tap from one of its gangly arms, the window shattered into a million pieces. Grains of glass splashed over me, some digging into my skin. In that second, a tight force wrapped around my body, ripping me out of the truck and into the air. A murmur of screams and twisting metal filled my ears. The air rushed out of my lungs.

This is it. This is it.

A massive force squeezed my chest, pushing the blood to my head and feet.

I couldn't scream. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't fight.

Chapter Ten:

Blur

A white haze blurred my sight. I rubbed my eyes, trying to focus on the dark images in front of me.

A hand gripped my arm, shaking it several times before letting go again.

I pushed out some sounds from my mouth, feeling a sharp tear in my ribs. A numbness that seemed to have spread throughout my body now gave way to a burning pain.

A girl appeared to my left; her lips moved as she focused on something ahead of her. She glanced down at me, shaking my arm again.

I know you.

She sat forward, turning her attention away once more. Her fingers now wrapped around a steering wheel. Behind her, trees rushed past.

Is this her car? Am I alive?

The back rattled as the engine sputtered and popped. The hatchback clanked open and shut with every bump on the beat-up road pulling stacks of paper and envelopes out into the dust clouds behind us.

I tried to speak again, but no words came out—just mutters and short bursts of air.

Behind me, Margaret and Bailey sat in the back seat of the car. Their faces were red; tears rolled down their eyes.

I lifted my hand up to the dash, pulling myself upright. Dried blood covered my knuckles and fingers, chipping and splitting along the lines of my skin.

Through the front window, the landscape seemed to shake and spin.

“Hey, can you hear me?” Her voice was raspy and hoarse.

“Ca...ra Flan...ders,” I replied, feeling a gurgle of liquid in my throat.

“We’re gonna get you some help. Do you feel alright?”

“Yeah, no...yeah, I’m fine. What the hell just happened?”

Bailey poked his head between the two seats and pulled on my sleeve. “You almost died. I thought you were gonna die.” His face contorted as more tears squeezed out.

Cara glanced quickly back to me, picking up a blood-soaked rag from the seat. She lifted it up to my forehead. “Hold this, keep it there.”

“Okay,” I replied.

We swerved around some abandoned cars along the bridge leading back into town. The white haze slipped over my vision again—my eyelids felt heavy.

“Sheldon?”

I heard Cara’s voice.

But I couldn’t reply.

I woke up on a cold floor with a cushion under my head. A tight bandage was wrapped around my right eye and tied behind my neck. I tried to sit up but felt a sudden twitch in my chest followed by a burning pain.

A giant poster of two kids on top of a whale framed the wall in front of me. The words ‘Make a Splash with Reading’ in blue bubble letters hovered above a fountain of water coming out of the whale. There was a chart stand beside me, with some single-digit addition questions written neatly with a red marker.

I tried sitting up again, rolling my body to one side before pushing myself with my hands. I winced as I leaned against some shelves and lifted the bandage up from my eye. Little white spots danced around, like flickering stars shining and then burning out. The floor shifted a few times before settling.

I wanted to throw up, but there was nothing inside of me.

I wasn’t dreaming, that was for sure.

The sun pushed through the windows, shedding light on a long bright rainbow carpet about the size of a pool table. On the door to the left, a small sign read, ‘Welcome to Mrs. Flanders’ Grade One Classroom.’

Above it, a big round clock read eight forty-five.

Is it morning or evening?

A gust of wind lifted the faded green curtains along the back end of the room. One of the windows was shattered—shards of glass spread out around a stack of blue bins filled with puzzles and stuffed animals. A green frog puppet on strings hung from a hook screwed into an overhanging shelf. It twirled slowly in a circle, twisting in the wind before unwinding in the opposite direction.

By my side, were a couple of 'minute maid' juice boxes on a tray with a slice of moldy white bread.

“Did you know there is a fungus in Brazil that invades ant’s brains?”

In the opposite corner of the room, sitting at the teacher's desk, was Margaret. Her head rested on her arms as she tried to balance a pencil on its end. She stuck out her tongue and licked her top teeth.

I pulled myself more upright. “What?”

“Yup, it’s true.” She moved her fingers away from the pencil, watching it wobble for a moment before gripping it again. She placed it down and took a bite from a half-eaten apple. “You probably didn’t think ants had brains, right?” She didn’t move—her gaze shifted over to me.

“Um, yeah, I guess.”

“They have nerves, yup. And there is a creepy fungus that is growing out there, attacking them. Don’t you think it’s strange that it’s in the same place those aliens were captured? Weird? Coincidence? Hmmm? Have you been to Brazil?”

I shook my head. Even my neck ached.

“Me neither,” she said.

My mind was muddled and numb, but for some reason, I decided to humor her. "So, how does this fungus invade their brains?"

"It's called the zombie fungus."

"Okay. How does this zombie fungus invade their brains?"

Margaret placed the pencil down and took another bite from the apple. She slid the wooden chair closer to the desk, letting it drag and squeak across the floor. "It waits til they're asleep—or like not paying attention." She pulled her hands away from each other, ready to clap.

"Okay," I replied.

"And then it finds a way to get inside it, and...and...then change you...I mean, the ant." She tossed the apple in the garbage; it clanked against the bottom of the can.

The second hand on the clock clicked—I hadn't noticed the sound until now.

Margaret smacked her hands together, echoing around the room. "Zap. Next thing you know, the ant is brainwashed."

I nodded and picked up one of the juice boxes.

"I got those for you. Cara said I was allowed to look after you while you slept."

I stabbed the tiny silver covered hole with the juice straw and sucked it dry. "Mmm, thanks."

She opened one of the desk drawers and pulled out another box. "I have more if you want some."

I nodded, tossing the empty box at the garbage bin across the room. I licked my lips, feeling the cracks along the skin.

Margaret pushed her chair out and skipped over to me. She still had her bright pink pants on but wore a baggy blue sweater with the words, 'Hidden Trail Coyotes' on the front in white text.

"Here you go. This is another apple juice. I have apple juice, pear, grape and fruit berry delight." Her face looked alive with energy. Despite some gray under her eyes, she looked like she always did, like the bubble she lived in had not yet burst.

How does she do it?

"Margaret?" Cara's face appeared around the door. Her soft pale skin glowed in the sunlight.

"Ya?"

"Go see if Bailey is hungry, he should have something to eat before you two go to bed."

Margaret pulled the back of her sweatshirt tight and tied it in a knot. She smiled at me and pointed to the desk. "The juice is in the second drawer from the bottom."

"Okay, thanks, Margaret."

She gave me a high-five and skipped out of the room. Her little feet pitter-pattered down the hall.

Cara hovered at the door for a second or two before sliding her flip flops across the floor to an old white rocking chair. The scar on her face was now pink and red. Her hair dangled over it like she wanted to cover it up. She wore a blue shirt, like Margaret's, with the sleeves rolled up, exposing her shoulders. A white pair of gym shorts clung to her waist, fitting loosely, dangling down her thigh. She picked up a stuffed giraffe from the floor beside her and held it like a baby. "This was my mom's classroom."

I pulled myself up to my feet and leaned back against the whiteboard.

I bit my lip and lowered my head, unsure what to say.

The frog puppet at the other end of the room lightly tapped the side of the shelf as it unwound again.

“You live on a farm, right?” Cara pushed on the floor, slowly rocking herself in the chair. “Your dad owns the Hickory place?”

“Yeah,” I replied, opening the other juice box.

“I know the spot. Lots of cows and pigs, right?”

“Yeah.”

Cara pointed at my feet. “Those are some crazy big farmer boots.”

I half smiled, lifting my right leg. My feet felt heavy and tingly. My stomach ached again. An odor from my armpits wafted up to my nose.

Cara sat in that chair, watching me like I was made of gold—like she was surprised to see me alive.

Is she waiting for me to say something?

“My dad is a farmer. I work for him. Well, I used to.”

She picked at the ears on the toy giraffe. “Do you still play baseball?”

“Nope. Not since...well, not since last year.”

Cara looked down at the giraffe again and then nodded. The end of her nose glimmered in the sun. She sniffed and wiped it with the back of her hand. Her toes tapped on the floor, stopping the chair in mid-rock. She turned to me. “Do you know what day it is?”

I looked at the clock and then out the window. “It’s Saturday, right?” I scratched my lip and wriggled my toes. “Did that thing knock me out or something?”

Cara nodded. “Kinda.”

Images of glass shattering and a blur of trees flashed through my memory. I touched the bandage on my eye, carefully feeling sharp ends sticking out of my skin. My fingers dropped down the side of my face. The hairs on my upper lip and chin felt long and prickly. “I need to find my dad. I’m supposed to meet him at the UltraMart.”

“Sheldon?”

“Is there a car or a bike or something? Your car...that car. Does it still work?”

“Sheldon.”

“What?” My knees wobbled. White stars appeared through my vision again.

“It’s not Saturday.”

I limped over to the windows, scanning the street signs at the end of the playground. The sun appeared to be setting; the day was turning into night.

I touched my forehead again. “Did that thing take a bite out of me?”

“Sorta,” Cara replied. She stood up and placed the stuffed toy on the chair.

I remembered the blood on my hand—the trees rushing by. “Who stitched me up?”

Purples and deep reds seeped past the curtains, filling the walls and room.

Cara tucked her hands into her pockets. “I did.”

I touched the stitches again, feeling the rough skin and thread run over my forehead and above my eye. “I've been asleep for awhile I guess, huh?”

Cara stepped closer to me, placing her hand on my arm. Her touch was gentle, like my mom’s used to be when I was a kid.

“Yes,” she replied in a whisper. “You've been asleep for seventeen days.”

Chapter Eleven:

The Staff Room

When Cara told me I had been in some sort of coma for more than two weeks, I tried to act like it was no big deal. I didn't know why, but part of me wasn't surprised like I knew all along. Maybe my subconscious could hear her talking to me, feeding me, making sure I was hydrated.

After my muscles finally recognized I was alive, I spent the next twenty-odd minutes in the teacher's lounge washroom, letting go of everything I had inside me.

Which wasn't much.

I flushed the toilet and stood at the mirror that hung above the sink. I barely recognized myself. The stitches poked out of my skin like the thick hairs on my dad's face. My eyebrow stretched into a 's' shape, with a wide gap cutting through it. She wasn't a surgeon, but Cara did a half decent job, considering.

"Are you hungry?" Cara knocked on the door.

"Yeah." I slipped out as she pulled a box of Kellogg's Corn Flakes from a cupboard next to a fridge.

"Can I make it for him?" Margaret sat at a table, kicking her feet under the chair.

Despite being dimly lit, the teacher's lounge looked just like how I imagined any staff room would appear. A fancy kitchen took up almost half the space, with a stainless steel fridge and a state of the art oven and range. Around a corner, four dining tables filled the second area with a couple of couches and leather foot rests. Large bay windows framed the outer walls, spilling in the darkness from outside.

If only our classrooms were like that.

I sat down beside Bailey who looked like he had lost about ten pounds. His face was gaunt, and his hair lacked the luster and shine it had in the past.

I nudged him in the elbow as he shoveled an overloaded spoonful of cornflakes into his mouth.

“Have you guys been outside since...you know?” I asked.

Bailey shook his head, glancing over at me quickly before focusing on his bowl. Milk dripped down the side of his mouth.

“Bailey doesn’t talk anymore. Here you go.” Margaret placed a coffee mug filled with corn flakes and milk onto the table in front of me. ‘Number One Teacher,’ was printed along the side. “I poured it. Did you see me pour it for you?”

I nodded.

“We've been inside this school since you were attacked.” Cara pulled up a chair and sat across from me—her hands wrapped around a cup of hot chocolate. “I went out once. You kept talking about UltraMart before you passed out, but there was no one there. That was a couple of weeks ago. I'm not risking it anymore, not with these two.”

“Have you seen anyone, or at least talked to someone?”

She took a sip and shook her head. “Just...just...”

“A dead man. Like Mr. Bryer.” Margaret reached her hand out and pointed at my cup. “Want more?”

“I just started, silly.” I wiped the side of my mouth on my shoulder and turned to Cara. “A dead man?”

“Let me know when you want more because I can get it for you.” Margaret skipped back to the kitchen counter.

“Okay, Margaret. Thank you.”

Cara blew on her hot chocolate. “It's bedtime in five, Kay?”

Bailey shoveled another spoonful in his mouth and grunted.

Margaret folded her arms and turned away.

“Yeah, like she said. I saw a dead man. I guess one of those things got it, but for some reason, it didn't take him away.”

I finished chewing and swallowed. “What do you mean?”

“Those things don't just kill people; they take ‘em.”

“Where?”

Cara shrugged and eased the mug to her lips. Her fingernails were gnawed down below the tips. “I don't know. Like I said, I haven' gone out there since anda ain't interested in finding out.”

Bailey's spoon clanked against his bowl as he dug around for his final bites. He dropped his face down and slurped the last of the milk.

“They don't want a messy planet when they take it over.”

Margaret stood on a footstool and opened one of the cupboards.

“Sheldon, do you want more now? The box is right up here.”

“No, I'm good Margaret.”

“Kay.” She sighed and hopped back to the floor.

“They don’t want a messy planet when they take over it?” I repeated.

“Ignore her; she’s got verbal diarrhea.” Cara snickered and then smiled at me.

“That’s what Mr. Plymouth used to say, ‘member? I told you, Sheldon; I told you that a while ago. It was really funny when he said it to me. The whole class was like...ew, grody.”

“Yeah, I remember,” I replied.

“It was really funny.” Margaret opened the drawers along the counter, closing each one and then opening them again.

“Where’s the dead body?” I asked, finally. If I slipped out one day, I knew I would need to be prepared to see another corpse. The images of Tom Bryer slipped back into my memory. His lifeless body—his eyes wide open. I wasn’t sure I could handle seeing another dead person for a long time.

Bailey pushed his bowl aside and pointed at the window behind Cara. The reflection of our faces in the window looked back at us, nervously peering out into the darkness.

Cara touched the side of her head, slipping her finger along the healing scar. “He’s at the edge of the river, just on the other side of the fence.”

Margaret slid her feet along the floor and flopped against the table, blowing hot air onto the polished surface. I wanted to be in her head. I wanted to feel nothing—no worry, no pain. I didn’t understand how she wasn’t thinking about her mom. Who was going to finally tell her she was dead? Was it up to me?

“It smells when you open the window there, see?” Margaret scurried over to the other side of the table, smearing her fingers along the glass. “If you open it, you can smell his rotting body. It’s really gross.”

“Go get ready for bed; I’ll come check on you guys in a bit.” Cara took the last sip and slid her chair back. She rubbed Bailey’s head as she walked past and dumped the rest of her hot chocolate in the sink. Her legs glowed from the lamp on the counter—smooth like she had just put cream on them.

“Can I get a book from the library?” Margaret yanked on Bailey’s arm. She turned back to Cara as she dragged him to the door.

“Yeah, but use the office light this time, not the main ones,” said Cara.

“MmKay,” Margaret pulled Bailey out into the hall, letting the door close behind her.

I looked up at the lights, flickering and humming. The refrigerator purred behind me.

“We have electricity,” I said.

“No shit.” Cara rinsed out her mug. “And running water. Are you surprised?”

I shoveled a couple of bites into my mouth and shrugged. She dried off the cup with a tea towel and placed it back in the top cupboard.

“I figured this was the end of the world, or close to it. Didn't think there would be power.” I reached down and felt my pockets, wondering if I still had my phone. I pulled it out and checked its status.

9:42 PM

Tuesday, June 14th.

Eighty-three percent battery.

What?

“I charged it for you the other day. Thought you'd like to have it working when you woke up.” Cara pulled herself onto the counter, sitting to face me. Behind her head was a row of brown cupboard doors. Taped to the fake wooden panels were crayon drawings of trees and colorful skies. On each page was Margaret's name printed in giant black letters.

Cara's shoulders lifted as her arms locked in place by her sides. Her toenails brandished a bright crimson red paint. Little short blonde hairs caught the light along her thighs.

I glanced back down at my phone, feeling my face blush.

“Thanks.”

“No problem. My phone has been the one thing that keeps me going.”

“How so?”

“Pictures. I have a ton of pictures on it. I go through each photo before closing my eyes at night. I dunno, somehow it calms me, they take me away from this shithole. Ya know?”

I nodded, opening up the photo album on my phone. A ‘selfie’ picture of Margaret sticking out her tongue appeared. I remembered leaving my plaid sweater on one of the fence posts a few months back before my dad made me keep it in my room. She and Bailey were hovering around it while I was taking a wheelbarrow full of manure into the next field. My phone was in that sweater.

My sweater.

My house.

I wanna go home.

“This might be it. Like this might be the end of the world.”

Cara wiggled her toes inside her flip flops.

I slid my finger across the screen—another selfie of Margaret.

I opened my mouth, but like so many times since the aliens took the farm—took our town, I had nothing to say.

Cara pointed her left foot, letting the flip-flop dangle from her big toe. She rotated her heel, watching the shoe sway back and forth.

We hung out there, in the empty teacher’s lounge for some time, listening to the wind push the trees around outside—listening to the creaks and moans from the pipes and vents.

Perhaps through empathy or maybe as a means of escape as well, I flipped through the photos on *my* phone. But as I sat there, now propped up on a table opposite Cara, all I could think about was what it would be like to kiss her.

Chapter Twelve:

Smoke and Gin

I didn't realize it at the time, but when I awoke from my mini-coma earlier that evening, I was lying in a bed that Cara had assembled. It wasn't much—just a thin rubber puzzle mat surrounded by a bunch of old plaid pillows, but it was nice—nice because she cared enough to make sure I was okay. Besides, it was better than sleeping on the cold tiled floor.

I rolled over onto my back and stared up at the ceiling.

A red light flickered through the darkness along the panels, bouncing from one side of the room to another—probably some flashy sign from across the street.

I turned over and checked my phone.

2:34 am.

Fuck.

There was no way I was going to fall asleep. How was I supposed to anyway? I had been in a deep slumber for like half a month.

The muscles in my legs and back ached as though they were learning how to work again—not to mention my head throbbed.

I shifted to my side and tucked one of the pillows under my arm. The fabric smelled like mothballs and old cheddar.

Come on Sheldon, sleep. Just close your eyes and think of nothing.

But thinking of nothing seemed virtually impossible that night. For some reason, my brain was swamped with thoughts of Cara—her legs, her face, her eyes, her lips.

Why am I not worried about Dad? Why am I not worried it might be the end of the goddamn world?

“Hey.” A soft voice whispered from the doorway behind me. “You awake?”

My heart fluttered.

“Yeah, I can’t sleep” I replied.

Cara slipped in and carefully closed the door behind her. She wore a man’s sports jacket over top of her gym clothes and sat down beside me. She placed a bottle of gin on the cold floor and pulled out a pack of smokes and a cheap plastic lighter. “Me neither. I hate the night. Bailey and Margaret fall asleep like they are in their own beds, and I...I just stare at the ceiling all night long.”

I sat up and wrapped my arms around one of the pillows. “Yeah. I dunno if I’ll be sleeping much knowing what’s going on around here.”

She nodded, tucking her head down as she lit a cigarette. A white haze of smoke fanned out around her. “Do you want one?”

“Um, sure.” I never had a cigarette before. My friend Todd from school used to steal them from the golf carts when he worked at the Hidden Trail Country Club. He’d offer them to me every now and then, but I knew my dad would somehow find out and rip me a new ass.

He was good at doing that.

Cara handed me one before placing a small flame in front of my face. I placed it between my lips and sucked back until the cigarette was lit. My throat heated up like an oven—the choking fumes filled my lungs. I swallowed and coughed at the same time, spilling out the leftover smoke from my nose.

“First time?” Cara flicked an ash into a tub of crayons.

“Um, yeah.”

“It gets better.”

“Okay.” I put the cigarette up to my mouth and tried again. This time I inhaled just a little bit, letting the smoke sit inside me for a second or two before gently letting go.

She took a drag and glanced out the window. "I only started smoking a couple weeks ago myself. Ever since that giant thing ripped you out of the truck, I had these uncontrollable shakes. Ended up finding a carton of camels and this bottle of Beefeater in one of the science labs upstairs. I was like, jackpot. I needed somethin'. I couldn't get the image of that...that monster out of my head. Never seen anything like that before in all my life." She lifted up one of her hands, trying to keep it steady. "See? Not shaking now."

I reached for the crayon box and tapped a bit of ash into it. "How did they get so big? They were like the size of rats on that Friday."

The red light appeared again through the window, aiming above our heads across the back wall.

“Dunno. I thought you were a goner, but it just played with you as though you were a new toy and then dropped you like a sack of potatoes.”

"I honestly don't remember much," I said. "I remember broken glass and then seeing you in the car." I attempted another haul from the camel again, this time having more success. "How did you get me in the front seat? Come to think of it, how did you get me in the school?"

Cara propped her cigarette between her lips and unscrewed the bottle of gin. She blew out some smoke and then took a swig. Her eyes closed as she winced. She took another quick drag and then turned to me. "You walked."

"I walked? How the hell?"

"Don't ask," she muttered. "You were like a zombie or something. You followed me into the school, waiting for me to layout these pillows and put the mat out and you then just...collapsed."

I shook my head, playing with the hairs on my chin. "That doesn't make any sense."

Cara poured a drop of gin into the lid and handed it to me. "Nothing makes sense. At least not anymore."

I sniffed the lid and shot the small drink back, feeling it burn as it made its way into my stomach.

She took the cap from me and poured another drop into it.

"Are we celebrating something?" I asked, half joking. Part of me figured she was happy because she was finally able to talk to someone her own age.

"It's my birthday," she replied. "Today is my birthday."

Chapter Thirteen:

Megan

I lifted up my cap of gin, ready to cheers Cara and wish her a happy birthday, but who was I kidding? Was there anything to be happy about? Was there ever going to be? “How old are you?” I asked finally.

“Sixteen.” She raised the bottle and clinked my lid. “Cheers.”

“Cheers,” I said.

We both took a sip. To me, it tasted like gasoline and pine needles, but I liked it. Maybe because she had the same drink.

Maybe because there was nothing much else to like.

“I would have been getting my learner’s permit today.” Cara took another quick sip, letting the liquid bounce around in the glass bottle, slapping against the sides. She sucked back on her cigarette again—the orange light from the ash brightened her face for a moment.

For a moment.

For a moment she was all I could see in the darkness of night.

I mirrored her actions and took another haul myself.

“I was supposed to be having a surprise party today too.

Everyone was gonna come, like everyone. Emma, Allyssa, Nikki, Paige, Megan.” A thick cloud of smoke pushed out of her mouth and nose. “I mean, I wasn’t supposed to know about it, but I knew. Megan told me. She’s such a dork—she was—” Cara tapped more ash into the crayon bin. “She was my best friend.”

I placed the lid on the floor in front of her and crossed my legs, leaning back against the bookshelf and whiteboard. It didn't feel real, sitting there with her. It felt as though I was still dreaming, and Cara Flanders, the auburn beauty, was just visiting me in some sort of curious fantasy.

"Is your friend Megan Foster?" I asked.

Cara nodded. "Yeah, her brother was on your baseball team, right?"

"Right."

"She was coming over to my house that day." Cara picked at the label on the bottle. "We were walking home from volleyball practice. That was when she told me about the surprise party. I mean, who plans a surprise party with the person you're supposed to be surprising?"

She smiled to herself, twirling her cigarette between her fingers. "What a goofball. Gotta love her."

I half laughed, hoping it was appropriate. "She sounds like a great friend, though."

"Yeah," Cara whispered. "Yeah, she was."

The fans kicked in along the ceiling, blowing in some cool air from the ducts. For a minute or two we sat in silence, listening to the hum around the room—letting the tiny flames inside our cigarettes burn away to our fingers.

The auburn beauty picked away at the label again, before finally nudging the bottle up to her lips, letting the potent drink slide into her throat and trickle down her chin. “It happened so fast, you know. They came from the trees. Did you notice? It was like they had been there all along, waiting for us. Waiting for everyone.”

I swallowed, feeling the chemicals from my cancer stick seep into my throat. “Yeah, like they were hatching from the bark or something.”

Cara nodded. “We were like laughing and joking and, you know, just having fun. I keep seeing her face, before it all happened, thinking how she didn’t have a clue she was about to die.”

I took another drag.

“She was so pretty,” Cara continued. “Like really pretty. She was telling me how she liked this one boy named Todd. I think she was going to invite him to the surprise party.” She shook her head. “Fuck. We were just like strolling down the sidewalk, ya know? The sun was tanning our faces. The sprinklers were all on, cooling the lawns. It was like a perfect day.”

“I know, it *was* a perfect day.”

Cara twirled the cigarette between her fingers again. “They just came from the trees—like some outta control flood. They were so small, and there were so many of them. It looked like a crap-load of dirty sewage water spilling out from the woods.” She pushed the end of the cigarette onto the floor, twisting and turning it until the embers were out. “And when they got closer, we saw their eyes, damn—their little weasley eyes, fucken staring us down. And that noise, did you notice? Their little annoying high-pitched grunts? Holy shit, it scared the bejesus out of me. But not Megan. Nope. She just stood there, like she was either ready to take them all on, or frozen in shock.”

“Did she try to attack them?” I asked.

“Attack them? Fuck no, but she didn't want to run away either. She pulled out her stupid phone and starting filming the things. She should have just run. Why didn't she just run away?”

I squished my cigarette on the floor beside Cara's. I picked the two butts up and tossed them in the crayon box. She continued to stare at the bottle of gin, ripping off tiny pieces of paper from the label. My mom told me once that sometimes people just like to talk, and they don't always need answers. They just want to be heard.

I was pretty sure Cara just needed me to listen.

She picked up the bottle again, pouring a drop into the lid. “This one fucker, maybe twice the size of the others, wrapped its arms around Megan and—and she dropped her phone—and broke her.”

“Broke her?”

Cara handed me the lid and nodded. “Yeah. Like in a split second she was dead. She dropped—she just dropped to the ground. I didn’t go back to her. I knew she was gone. Her body was all twisted like, so I just ran.”

I sipped the gin from the lid, once again feeling the burn trickle down my throat and into my stomach. I pictured Mr. Bryer, lying in the grass out front of our barn that day—his blank stare looking out at me—empty. Gone.

Cara’s eyes glistened in the faint light from outside. Her lips quivered.

“Did those things go after you as well?” My voice was soft and sullen.

She bobbed her head turning the bottle around in her hand. “Yeah, that was where it got even weirder.”

My back cracked as I leaned forward. “Whaddya mean?”

“The big one, the one that killed Megan—it followed me, but for some reason, it wasn’t trying to get me. At least it didn’t seem like it. The rest of those things all scattered, chasing after some old people getting off the city bus. They fucken—” She shook her head and then lit a second smoke. “They fucken mauled those old people and dragged them into some alleyway. Don’t know where they took ‘em after that.”

The paper on the tip of Cara’s camel crackled and glowed as she sucked on the other end. Her lips, still quivering, puckered and relaxed as she exhaled.

I waited for her to continue.

The room once again filled with a staining odor. I wondered if the alarms were going to set off.

Cara closed her eyes, letting strands of hair fall over her face. “When I stopped running, I found myself catching my breath on the corner of Brant and Upper-Middle. People were hauling ass in all directions, running onto the street, jumping over fences, smashing through windows. This one guy got creamed by a dump truck carrying a boat-load of people on the back—his body just disintegrated under the giant wheels.”

“Holy shit,” I mumbled.

“Holy shit is right. It was a fucken mess.”

“Was that bigger one still following you?”

“Yeah,” Cara replied, looking over to me now. “It’s neck shot up over everyone. It crept along behind me, almost like it was curious or something.”

“That is weird.”

“It *was* weird.”

I leaned back on the shelf again, feeling my body relax. The throbbing pain in my head seemed to numb. Maybe it was the gin or the rush from my first cigarette, but I was starting to listen to Cara like she was merely telling a story—like this wasn't real. I pictured the creature, gray and leathery—it's snake-like neck stretching up over a sea of terrified locals. "Do you think it was like some sort of leader? Like maybe the mother or father of all of these things?"

Cara shrugged. “Maybe.” She pulled her bangs back and tucked them behind her ears. She cleared her throat. “Or maybe it was learning.”

Chapter Fourteen:

Mr. Love

Cara's comment sat with me for a bit. The idea these things had some sort of intelligence, perhaps some sort of purpose, added another frightening layer to this whole alien invasion. Maybe there was some long calculated plan, and this whole mess wasn't just a random infestation.

What confused me, though, was how quickly they changed, like they were adapting to the new environment or something. Margaret compared them to fruit flies, but maybe they were more like chameleons.

“Sheldon?” Cara tapped me on the arm.

I looked over to her, noticing another cigarette butt pressed into the floor tiles. The red light from outside beamed back into the room. “Yeah?”

“Where did you go? You spaced out for a little bit.”

She sounded like Dad—only she wasn't ripping into me about it.

I looked at my phone.

2:46 am.

“Sorry, just thinking about shit.” The throbbing along my temple returned. I was still weak—still getting used to being awake—alive.

Plus, I think I was drunk.

"I hear ya." Cara bobbed her head up and down. She played with a thread on the sleeve of her sports jacket, wrapping it around her finger. Her knees were tucked up into her chest. "Well, as I was saying, things got even more messed up after that."

I nodded, not really sure what she was talking about now.

I glanced back at my phone, curious why the battery percent had shot up to ninety-two.

She continued.

"I headed up Brant, to this school. I told you my mom worked here right?"

"Yeah," I replied.

"I thought so. Anyway, I figured Mom was here and could take cover with her. Brando would have been getting out of class and was probably waiting in her room. He always did that, he didn't care to hang with his friends—he just always wanted to be with Mom."

"Who's Brando?"

"My brother. Brandon. Sorry. He was in the fifth grade here."

"Oh."

"Yeah, so I bolted up Brant and got here around...I dunno, maybe four? Those things hadn't reached the school yet. No one knew what was going on just a few blocks down. I remember screaming something when I rushed inside. Something like, 'get the fuck out of here,' you know? Kids were staring at me like I was some schizo or something."

The skin on Cara's chin folded as it pressed against her knee. Her nostrils flared and the whites of her eyes glossed over. "They didn't know," she continued in a whisper. "They didn't know that in a few minutes their lives were about to change."

"That's crazy," I said.

"Yeah. Brando was in here. He was right there." Cara tilted her head and eyed the front corner by the broken window. "Those goddamn things ripped him and my mom right out through the glass. They never saw it coming."

"Holy shit," I muttered. I wanted to touch her on the arm, I wanted to rub her back.

"I saw it. I saw it happen. I...I..." Cara closed her eyes for a second, squeezing out a tear. The red light from outside filtered into the tiny drop as it glided down her smooth, perfect skin. "They took them. They took my family."

"I'm so sorry Cara." I swallowed and picked at a hangnail. I waited until her eyes lowered before glancing over to the smashed window. I didn't understand how we were in the same room—how she was okay with us being here.

"Maybe my dad's out there, who knows?" She rubbed her forehead. "Who fucken knows."

"I thought you said...I thought—"

"My dad is dead to me. I said my parents were dead because he's dead to me."

I shifted my weight under the puzzle mat and pillows, trying to get the blood flowing in my legs again. "I'm sorry."

"Stop saying you're sorry. It's fine. I'm fine."

“How did you get to Morris Point?” I asked, pulling from the last memory I had of our conversation before blanking out. A vision of a large, gangly mutant rodent returned to my thoughts. It was following her, perhaps it chased her out of the school. “How did you get away from that thing?”

Cara pulled on the thread letting the fiber tear away from her sleeve. She bit it off and spit the thin string onto the floor. “The postman. The dude found me in the back of his car. The hatchback was open, so I just climbed in and buried myself in all the boxes of mail.”

“The postman? Seriously?”

“Yeah, I had nowhere to hide. After seeing one of those things take my ma and Brando, I wasn’t going to stick around here. Those things were relentless. The postman’s car was still idling, just up the way. He must have been in the middle of doing some delivery a few houses down when those things came. Do ya wanna ‘nother smoke?”

I shook my head. “Na, I'm good. Do you mean Mr. Love? The postman?”

“Mr. Love. Yeah. That's him.”

There was only one postman in Hidden Trail. I knew that because he would announce to anyone who would listen how our taxes should go towards hiring another mail courier. I don't know why he was complaining seeing that he was the most popular guy in town.

Him and Ernie the cop.

Before I dropped out of school to help my dad out at the farm, I often saw Mr. Love leaving our house just as the school bus pulled up to the drive. He had these ridiculously tight brown shorts on every time, and a blue button-up collared shirt that hugged his heaving chest muscles and biceps. He'd rub my head as he walked by me on the way to his red hatchback and tell me I was a 'beautiful love child.'

I remember asking Mom one day why he was always stopping by the house. She told me he was delivering packages that were for her new job in the city and they didn't fit in the mailbox at the end of the road.

It made sense, and I never questioned it after that.

He seemed like a nice enough guy anyway. I always thought it was funny how everyone called him Mr. Love—everyone except my dad who referred to him as the town's home wrecker.

I guess he was notorious for making special deliveries to houses when the husband was conveniently at work or out of the city.

Cara touched the scar on her face, gently following the pink tissue along her eye and cheek.

"So he drove you up to Morris Point?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"So that was who you were with when I saw you that night? In the woods?"

She bobbed her head again and lit her fourth or fifth smoke. The orange flare from the lighter splashed out over her perfect face. She blew out another white cloud and rested her chin on her folded knees. "His real name is Duncan Getti. Or I guess I should say his real name *was* Duncan Getti."

"Those things got him too, huh?" I couldn't help but think about Mom and Dad again. They must have gotten out. They must have made it to a safe zone.

If there actually was one.

Cara touched her scar, caressing every bump and crevice.

"Those things didn't touch him."

"What do ya mean?"

"I mean, those things didn't go near him." A small piece of ash slipped off the end of her butt. "Duncan Getti is a fucken artist Sheldon. I know that my mom knew that. Shit, even my brother knew that. Everyone in Hidden Trail knew it." She stretched her pinky out and pointed at me. "*You* should have known that."

"I don't get it."

Cara dropped her legs to the floor and placed her hand on my knee. "Let's just say the man liked to make special deliveries." A scowl spilled over her face. Her brow furrowed.

"What happened to him?" My mind was fixated on the punchline. I didn't understand.

Cara glanced out the window and then back at me. "He came on to me. The man tried to kiss me. So, I pushed him away. I mean, I just saw my mom and brother get killed, and this guy tries to console me by kissing me? Who the hell did he think he was?"

My back muscles twitched.

Cara grazed my jeans as she tucked her hands under her knees.

“But where is he? What happened to him?” I knew I should have been more empathetic, more interested in her feelings, but I couldn't help but get wrapped up in the facts.

The tension in her body seemed to let go as she smiled, rubbing her thumb across her bottom lip.

“What is it?” I asked. “Why are you smiling?”

She exhaled. “The look on his face. You should've seen the look on his face.”

I swallowed and shook my head. “I don't understand.”

Cara flicked off some ashes into the crayon box and pushed herself up to her feet. The flip-flops slapped against her skin as she wandered across the room toward the broken window. The oversized sports jacket draped over her long shiny legs. Bits of glass snapped and crumbled as she stepped across the tiles. She lifted her hand up, carefully touching the edges of glass that clung to the frame in the corner of the room—the very spot where her brother and mom were attacked. The moonlight pushed through the darkness, painting a white glow over her face. A light breeze pushed her hair back as she kissed the end of her cigarette.

“Cara?” My voice grazed the silent air.

She tossed the smoke through the window, watching the little explosion of light splash over the concrete outside. The dull haze filtered out of her nostrils and mouth, lifting out through the wooden splinters and jagged mess. She chuckled, shaking her head as she touched the glass one last time.

I pulled myself up along the bookshelf, feeling a sharp pain stretch along my back. My knees shook, my hands trembled.

“Cara?”

The long shadow from her body spread out across the room. She turned to the front, mumbling quietly to herself. The flip-flops slapped her feet again as she wandered back over the tiles.

Flap.

Flap.

Flap.

She stopped at the door and turned to me. Her hair drooped over her face—her eyes glowed in the light of the moon, highlighting the vertical line that ripped down the poor girl’s eye and cheek. “Some people can’t wait for anarchy—it allows them to shed their true nature. But I wasn’t gonna let that happen. The look on his face. You should have seen the look on his face when I pushed him.”

“Pushed him?”

Cara touched the side of the door, stroking it like it was her own hair. “When he tried to kiss me, I pushed him. Before he fell, he reached out and sliced my skin open with his hands—I think it was from his ring—he was desperate I guess. But you should have seen the look on his face.”

“Why? What was so special about his...look.”

“He knew he was going to die.”

“How?” I cleared my throat. “How did he know?”

Cara reached for the handle on the door and turned the knob. “He knew because he was about to fall sixty feet to his death, he knew because I had just pushed him over the edge of Morris Point.” She quietly slipped into the hall and smiled. “Goodnight Sheldon Hickory. Thanks for the company.”

Chapter Fifteen:

A Man

My first dream in nearly a month started off with images of my mom and dad. We were all sitting around a coffee table in our living room, talking about who-knows-what. The room was bright and warm like I had always remembered it to be. My parents seemed younger and happier - perhaps a time before the incident with Randle the Bull—before my mom cut her hair all short—before my dad had that stern, military glare molded to his face. They had a look about them in this dream, something that suggested they were in love. I don't know specifically what they were saying or doing, but I found myself in a happy place—a place I hadn't been in a long time. I wanted to hold on to that moment—I wanted to laugh and share stories with them about baseball and my friends at school. But Tom Bryer appeared, lying across the coffee table in a Pittsburgh Steelers shirt. His eyes looked out to me, blood trickled from one of his ears. My parents seemed oblivious, as though it was okay for our neighbor to be sprawled out on our fancy Stoney Creek glass table.

I tried to tell my parents an important story—about a home run I had hit that day, how I had won the game for my team, how we had made it to the playoffs because of me—but I couldn't. I couldn't because Tom Bryer was in my way. I couldn't see mom and dad anymore, their faces—their happy, loving faces were now a blur in a white haze of darkness. I couldn't hear them, I couldn't hear them laughing and telling me how proud they were of me. The warm colors, the bright lights from our living room had faded.

Tom Bryer was all I could see—his lifeless, blank stare, lying still on that coffee table. I wanted to go to them, my parents, I wanted to tell them how much I missed them, how much I wanted everything to be how it was.

But instead, Tom Bryer rose up from the table, letting the red streaks of blood flow down the side of his face and drip onto our white carpet. A beetle crawled from his mouth—pausing for a moment on his lip as it cleaned its wiry legs—then slipped up through his nostril. The whites of Mr. Bryer's eyes glowed in the darkness.

He reached out his dirty tanned-leather hand and gripped my arm, digging into my muscle. Blood continued to pour from his ear. The tentacles from the beetle appeared through the flaps of his eyelid. “Sheldon,” he muttered. A drum banged inside of me.

Thump.

Thump.

“Sheldon,” he said again, this time his voice was deeper, louder.

“Yes?” I replied.

His nostrils flared open—his eyes narrowed. “You are going to die.”

A horrifying, ghostly shriek jarred me out of my disturbing slumber. My body ceased like a hundred volts were being sent through me.

The moon still filtered into the room, revealing a stale mist from all the cigarette smoke.

Another scream.

What the?

I pulled out my phone and dragged my feet forward.

4:23 am

I opened the classroom door and peeked out into the corridor. A light flickered near the far end of the school. My headache returned like my brain was trying to squeeze out of my skull. For a second, I wondered if I was still dreaming.

The muscles pulled my frame toward the light, lifting one leg at a time, sloppily dropping each limb onto the floor, bringing me that one step closer.

I came to the end of the long dark hallway—a door slowly opened, spilling a single beam of light out toward me. A tiny girl poked her head around and waved in my direction.

“Sheldon?” she whispered. “Is that you?”

“Margaret?” I flicked on the light from my phone and shined it at her. “Yeah, it’s me. You okay?”

She disappeared into the room, letting the door close behind her.

I slipped in moments later to find her cowering behind a fake tree-plant. She put her finger over her mouth and pointed at the window.

“What is it?” I lowered down to the floor. She reached out to me, wrapping her cold hands around my back. “What's out there?”

Margaret curled her legs up onto my lap—her little body tucked into my chest. “There’s someone out there.” She spoke slowly.

“Is it one of those monsters?” I peered around the artificial tree and out of the window. Along the ledge were piles of picture books and wilted potted plants. The room was large, with bookshelves and tables lined up in perfect rows throughout the floor space. To my right was a long counter, stretching out to the far end of the room.

“It’s a man,” Margaret replied. “There's a man at the window.”

The reflection from the power switch on a computer monitor painted a tiny spot on a large black pane of glass.

“I don't see him. I don’t see anything out there. Are you sure you're not just imagining it?”

Margaret moved her hand away from me and pointed to someone curled up under a table a few feet away. “Did you see him Bailey?” she asked in a loud whisper.

Bailey’s head stuck out from a thick blanket. He extended out his hand and gave me a thumbs up.

“Where’s Cara?” I asked.

“Dunno, she sleeps in a different room.” Margaret wrapped her hands back into my chest. “Just tell that man to go away. He’s scaring us.”

“Okay,” I replied. “I’ll make him go away.”

I got up and pried Margaret's fingers away from me. She ducked back down behind the tree and closed her eyes. The fans along the ceiling kicked in. A gentle waft of air swirled around the room. For some reason, I wasn't scared, maybe because I still had a quarter of a bottle of gin inside me. I crept toward the window and dumped one of the dead plants onto the floor, gripping onto the clay pot. Lifting it by my head, I pushed my nose up against the window—looking out into the darkness.

“I don't see anything,” I whispered back. “There's no one out there.” The window looked out to a parking lot with a couple cars and minivans lined up along a wooden fence and large dumpster. One of the cars—a small mini-cooper had the driver's side door still open. A flickering street light sent a glimmer of orange glow out to an empty road to my left. To the right, which I assumed was north, there were a couple portable classrooms perched upon a gravelly hill.

I turned back to Margaret, hoping she could guide me—hoping she would admit that this whole ‘man-sighting’ was truly her mind playing tricks on her—hoping she had simply convinced Bailey to go along with her anxious illusion and that the two were satisfied with my brave act of kindness.

“Do you see him?” Margaret whispered.

“No.”

Margaret opened her eyes. Her mouth dropped open spilling out an airy gasp. She pointed to the window again behind me. “Then who's that?”

Chapter Sixteen:

Lawrence

I recognized Lawrence right away. He was a couple grades ahead of me when I was at Hidden Trail Elementary. I heard he got a wrestling scholarship but busted his leg in a motorcycle accident. The last time I saw him, he was pounding the shit out of some guy for stealing smokes at the 7-11 on Wakefield and Durand.

He stood at the window, his dark skin contrasted against the whites of his eyes. He tapped on the glass and pointed to one of the side doors.

“Okay, hold on,” I mouthed, giving him a thumbs up.

I unfastened a tangled mess of skipping ropes that Cara must have used to secure the doors around the school and finally let Lawrence inside.

He side-hugged me and pushed past me into the hall, leaving a trail of mud on the floor. He smelled of alcohol and B.O. "Thanks, man. You guys got water?"

“Yeah, I’ll get you some. Come with me.”

Lawrence followed me to the kitchen in the staff room and threw his head under the tap. He chugged back some water and then plopped down on one of the lounge chairs in the corner. He rocked back and forth on it a few times while scanning his new surroundings. His shoes were coated in dirt and the laces frayed at the ends. He wore a dark brown T-shirt that blended in with the color of his skin. His chest muscles flexed a couple times as he looked up at me. "Spent the last six hours or so hiding in a trash bin over on Trafalgar. Fucken ogres were crawling around everywhere."

"They're still out there?" I asked, pulling down an old coffee mug from the cupboard. I threw on the tap and chugged down a cup of water as well.

Lawrence leaned forward, brushing off bits of grass from his dirt-stained track pants. "What the fuck? Where you been dude? Yeah, they still out there. They're like patrolling the town snatching up any survivors." He flopped back in the chair and pulled off his shoes. The odor immediately filtered up to me—like sour milk.

I filled my mug again. "I've been in here since it all happened—some sorta coma."

"You shitting me, seriously?"

"Seriously." I pointed at the scar along my eye and head.

Lawrence rubbed his eyes and studied me for a second. "That's nasty man. You're lucky you're still alive." He stood up and threw open the fridge. The light from the door spilled out onto his face. He was a tall guy, well over six feet. His hair looked like puffy black pete moss—clearly, he hadn't cut it in ions. He pulled out a jar of pickles and propped himself up on the counter—the same place Cara sat earlier that night. "Who's here with you. Who were the people in that room?"

"They're my neighbors. They're just kids." I stepped over to the fridge and closed the door. "What did you mean when you said they are taking people? What's going on out there?"

Lawrence fished around for a pickle, digging his fingers into the yellowy juice. He sniffed and wiped his nose with his wrist. "It's messed up out there. I been hiding in the hills for the last few weeks but a few of us came back to get food." He picked out a big pickle and took a bite. The crunch echoed around the kitchen. "Austin Carsley and Peter Strong came back down with me." He licked his finger and pointed the half bitten pickle at me. "I think you know Peter's brother, Todd, right?"

"Yeah, Todd. Did you see him? Is he okay?"

"No dude, sorry." Lawrence threw the rest of the pickle in his mouth. "They took 'im. Don't know where, but they took 'im. It's fucked, man. Those ogres will kill some and snatch up the others. I don't get it."

Holy shit, Todd.

The door opened in the staff room. Lawrence jumped off the counter and yanked on one of the drawers. He pulled out a knife and held it out in front of him.

“What the hell man!” Cara threw herself back against the wall and held up her hands. “Chill buddy. Chill.”

Lawrence lowered the knife and tossed it on the counter. “Sorry.”

“What’s your problem?” Cara stomped over to him and punched his chest. “Who the hell do you think you are? This is our place. Don’t go throwing some knife in my face, got it?”

“Relax chicky. I didn’t know who it was.”

“We’re in a goddamn school, who the hell did you think it was going to be?”

Lawrence puffed out his chest and lowered his face to Cara. “A goddam ogre. Are you as blind as this guy?” He pointed at me and shook his head. “You guys have no fucken clue, do ya?”

I jumped forward and stood in between the two. “Relax. It’s all good. Just relax. Grab a seat, we can talk.” I looked at Cara. “We will both sit down and talk.”

Cara pulled her hair back and tied it with an elastic band from her sports coat. She looked around the room for a second and then slapped me on the arm. “Where’s Margaret and Bailey?”

“They’re in the library. They’re fine.”

Cara hit me again and slipped back out into the hall. “They’re not fine. Nobody is fine.”

“We need to start a resistance.” Lawrence sat with his feet up on a recycling bin as he leaned back in the comfy lounge chair again. He played with the door on a mini bar fridge beside him, opening and closing it. The jar of pickles was on the floor by his feet. “We can get guns from my old man’s cellar. He has a shit-load down there. He used them for hunting deer up on the escarpment.”

I sat with Cara at one of the teacher tables across from him. I couldn't help but think this Lawrence guy had played too many war games on his X-Box or something. The blackness outside started shifting into dark blues and purples, shedding a faint light into the room. Margaret and Bailey were nestled again in the library on a fancy cushion mattress Cara had concocted while I was in my seventeen-day slumber.

I checked my phone.

4:56 am.

95 percent battery.

What the?

“What are guns going to do? Wouldn’t the police or the army have tried that already?” Cara wrapped her hands around a steaming mug of coffee. She was like a sponge. I had no idea how she could drink so much and never go to the washroom.

“Guns kill. My pop’s guns will kill those things. Trust me. I’ve seen it done.”

I played with the prickly patches of hair on my chin. "Cara makes a good point, though. What happened to the police? Before I was attacked a few weeks back, the only gunshot sounds I heard was from my neighbor's hunting rifle, and all it seemed to do was scare the little things."

Lawrence pushed the fridge door shut. "Little? Have you seen those things now? They're giants, kid. They're fucken giants." He reached back to the floor and scooped up a pickle from the jar. "Every couple days, they shed their coats...or skin, or whatever, and they grow and change. It's hard to explain, but they're evolving man. It's like they are..."

"Chameleons?" I said.

Lawrence bit down on the pickle and nodded. "Yeah, sorta. But they don't just change color man, they change their bodies." He flexed his chest muscles again and licked his fingers. "So, do you guys have any decent food in this joint?"

Cara blew on her coffee and then shook her head. She eyed me for a second. "No, sorry. We're nearly out. We gotta hit the Ultra-Mart in the next day or so."

"Ultra-Mart is a dead zone. That's where I lost my boys. Ogres snatched them right up and dragged them down an alley and into the woods. I'm telling ya, it's brutal out there. We need to get the guns from my dad's place, find some food and get back up to the hills." Lawrence sniffed one of the pickles and then tossed it at me. "Sheldon. You in?"

I snatched the dilled soaked cucumber out of the air and dropped it on the table. I didn't know what to think. I didn't have the fight in me, let alone any interest in risking my life. But maybe this was it, maybe we were the last people standing, and the only way to save ourselves was to fight back.

“We got two kids with us, we can't risk it.” Cara picked up the pickle, eyed it for a second and then placed it beside her drink.

“Please don't waste our food, um, what was your name again?”

“Lawrence.”

“Right, Lawrence. Well, Lawrence, it looks like you've found the wrong people to help you. You're welcome to stick here for a bit, maybe clean yourself up, but we can't afford to have any stragglers from the street coming in here and eating our food. It's all about survival, right?”

Lawrence picked at his teeth, passing glances between Cara and me. He leaned forward and tapped his dirty shoes on the floor—a toothy grin stretched along his face. “Right.”

I lowered my eyes, feeling a sense of guilt pour over me. It didn't feel right, it didn't feel human to just kick the guy back out there to be fed to the wolves. The school was just as much his as it was ours.

What would Dad do?

“Sheldon, are you going to hang with him and make sure he leaves? I need ta sleep. This coffee ain't working.” Cara pushed her chair back and trudged over to the sink. She poured the drink down the drain and carelessly slid the mug off to the side along the counter.

“Sure,” I said.

“Nice to meet you, Lawrence.”

“Yeah, whatever.” Lawrence breathed heavily through his nose. He dipped his hand into the jar of pickles again and then licked his finger. “I love pickles. Haven’t had these things since I worked in the kitchen at my dad’s bar.” He screwed the lid back on the jar.

“Mind if I take these with me?”

I swallowed. “No, I don’t mind.”

Lawrence nodded and pulled himself up. He strutted over to the sink and shoved his head under the tap again, swigging back on another bucket-load of water. Drops fell from his mouth as he stood upright. “Gotta fuel up, ya know?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

Lawrence looked around the room. Streaks of dark red stretched along the brick buildings behind the school yard. “Those things don’t sleep you know. They just roam around, hunting for human blood.” He rolled the jar around in his hands. “We could use someone like you. A big kid, someone who might put up a fight.”

I rubbed my chin. “Cara said...”

“Fuck Cara. You ain’t her property.” He flexed his chest. “Or are ya?”

“No man. I’m not.”

“Then fucken come with me.”

“I can’t man. Those kids need me.”

“Do they? Didn’t you say you were in some coma?”

I tucked my hands into my pockets and paced back and forth by the windows. “So?”

I could see Lawrence's reflection behind me. He opened the cupboards in the kitchen, letting the doors bang against the frame each time. The guy must have been starving, perhaps scared. I know I was.

"Your last name is Hickory right?" He opened up the last cupboard and took out a box of corn flakes. He tilted it upside down, letting the last bits fall into his mouth and onto the floor.

"Yeah, why?"

"Sheldon Hickory?"

"Yeah."

Lawrence tossed the box on the counter and kneeled to the floor. He dabbed the crumbs on the tiles and licked them off his finger. "Yo' pop is Winston, right?"

My face heated up and my stomach turned.

"Yes."

Please don't be dead, please don't be dead.

"Owned the farm up on the escarpment?"

"Yes."

Oh, God.

Lawrence unzipped one of the side pockets on his track pants and pulled out a small piece of paper. "Tall guy, big nose, don't like bad grammar."

"How do you know him? Have you seen him? Is he alive?" I pushed the chairs away and marched over to the kitchen. "How do you know my dad?"

I snatched the piece of paper out of his hand.

On the sheet was a picture.

It was a photograph—a photograph I hadn't seen in a long time.

A really long time.

Chapter Seventeen:

Alive

The photograph was of me, washing my dad's car, with my mom in the background reading a book under the cottonwood tree—the photograph my dad promised to keep until he got his sight back. And all this time I thought he was just full of shit.

“Your pop gave that to me,” Lawrence folded his arms and leaned back against the counter.

My fingers trembled as I held onto the picture. The edges were bent and creased but it was the same photo, that was for damn sure.

“He's alive?” My vision blurred. My nose dripped.

“Yeah, dude. He's alive.”

I wasn't sure if it was happiness or relief or both, but my body seemed to let go. My emotions just spilled out from me. I hugged Lawrence like he was my own brother. “My dad is alive.”

“Yeah man. He's all good.” Lawrence patted my shoulder, probably taken back by my sudden shift in behavior.

Sure I was pissed at Dad from time to time, and he sometimes treated me like garbage, but he *was* my father.

“How? Why did he give this to you?” I rubbed my eyes and turned away for a second suddenly feeling like the world's biggest wimp.

“When he heard I was hitting the town with my boys he wanted to come but didn’t want to leave his lady friend. Asked me to look out for ya. He gave me that there picture and said if I find you to meet him up on the hills.”

“Mrs. Bryer?”

“Yeah, maybe. I take it she ain’t your mom.”

I shook my head. “No. I don’t know where my mom is.”

I held onto the picture, looking at the blurred image of my mother in the background. Despite her face being unclear, I could tell she was happy. I wondered if she was still alive.

I wondered if she was scared.

“Why you?” I asked finally.

“Whaddya mean?” Lawrence dabbed some more crumbs from the counter and licked them off his finger.

“Why did my dad ask you to give me the photo? Why you?”

“Cuz he knows me. He came to Rusty’s Tavern all the time. Everyone knows your pop man.”

“What are you talking about?” I pulled out my phone and tucked the photo into the back of the protector case. “My dad doesn’t go out. The only thing he ever did was go to the Farm Show on Friday nights when my mom stayed late at the office a while back. Sorta became a routine, but that was it. He never went out—wouldn’t even get himself a coffee. Too cheap.”

Lawrence zipped up the pocket on his track pants and folded his arms again. “Cheap? You shitting me? He’d buy everyone rounds every time he stopped in. He was one tough dude, gotta give him creds for that. He took one hell of a beating that night—just let the guy lay him out.”

“You’re not making any sense. You sure you got the right guy?”

“Yeah, dude. The guy who gave that picture to me is Winston Hickory. He came to my pop’s bar like all the time—he stopped coming after that big guy pounded him.”

“What big guy?”

“Tom. You know, the guy who kicked your pop in the face and blinded him.”

Maybe I was spacing out again.

Maybe this conversation was just in my head.

The blood rushed up into my temples, building up pressure in my brain. My ears heated up.

“Tom Bryer?” I asked.

Lawrence shook his finger at me. “Yeah, that’s him.” He rubbed his chin. “Aw snap, he must be married to that lady who is with your pop up in the hills.”

I cracked my knuckles and marched over to the windows. Through the trees, over the buildings, the morning sun peaked up, filling the sky with warm colors.

The hills.

The hills were in the east.

I had never been to the hills before.

“Why would my dad be going to your bar?”

“It’s my old man’s bar.”

“Right. Why would my dad go there?”

Lawrence opened up the drawers in the kitchen—his reflection once again appeared in the window. He shrugged. “Dunno dude. Took that lady friend of his there for drinks. Showed up every Friday night at the same time—like clockwork.”

“That’s impossible. He was at the Farm Show.”

Lawrence made the quotation sign with his fingers. “Farm Show.”

Fuck.

I rubbed my chin. “And Tom Bryer showed up one night, you said?”

“Yeah man.”

“And he attacked my dad and beat him up?”

“No man. Your pop let him. Fucken nuts. He stood there in the middle of the bar, by the pool table and just let Tom pound on him. I’m telling ya, your pop is one tough dude. He just didn’t expect Tom to go ape-shit and start kicking him in the face. Got pretty ugly.”

“Holy shit,” I muttered.

“Last my pop heard from your old man was when he called the bar the next night. Strangest call too. We had just closed up, I was about to take out the trash to the back. My pops was tallying up the cash and the phone rings. I hear my dad nodding and saying shit like, ‘are you sure?’ and ‘that’s not my job,’ kinda stuff, you know?”

I shook my head. “No, I don’t know.”

Lawrence opened a tin of sugar and sniffed it. He looked at me. “Your old man wanted my pops to shoot some bull. Randle. Randle the bull.”

“Why?”

“Said he needed an explanation for his face.”

I pulled up a chair and sat down. My heart raced. “Are you saying my dad went blind because of Tom Bryer?”

Lawrence dipped his finger into the sugar and licked it. “No man. I’m saying your dad went blind because he was fucking Tom’s wife.”

Chapter Eighteen:

Peter

I sat at the table in the staffroom for some time—in disbelief—filled with frustration and confusion. A small rat scampered across the floor along the back wall. It's tiny hairs vibrated along its body as it paused for a moment, sniffing the floor and table legs. The rat's tail rested limply behind it, fat at the base, narrowing toward the tip. It shuffled forward again, finally disappearing under the door leading into the main office.

Lawrence continued to forage through the cupboards searching for anything to fill the void in his stomach.

Were we turning into rats ourselves?

I knew Cara didn't want him to eat our food.

But I didn't care.

The rats had probably got at it already anyway.

The sun had climbed up over the treeline and buildings, bringing a warmth to the room.

"Peter." Lawrence dropped a cereal box on the floor. Hundreds of tiny wheat-loops rolled around in all directions as he pushed through the door and out into the hall.

Through the window, crawling along the weed-stricken cracked pavement was Peter Strong.

Todd's brother.

My best friend's brother.

He barely moved, dragging his own limp body across the concrete. His arms were chewed up, red and flakey. Dried blood was smeared over his face and neck. His legs slid along behind him as he pulled himself closer to the side entrance of the school.

He looked like I felt and for some reason, I didn't search for the energy to help the guy.

Instead, I checked my phone.

6:47 am.

One Hundred Percent Battery.

Was I already numb to the idea of death?

“Sheldon!” Lawrence’s voice echoed through the school.

I looked outside again.

No Peter.

Just a trail of blood scattered along the concrete.

“Sheldon!”

I pushed the table away and lifted myself upright. White speckles of light flashed around my line of sight. My legs were heavy.

“Fucken help me, would ya?” Lawrence burst through the door, dragging Peter over his shoulder. The boy’s head drooped awkwardly, his legs bounced around the floor like they were made of rubber.

I pulled one of the cushions off the lounge chair and tossed it on the ground. I placed my hands under Peter’s head and helped Lawrence guide him to the floor.

“My legs, careful of my legs.” Peter's face strained. His thin, mousy hair jetted up like an overgrown farm field. Globes of blood clung to his eyebrows. “I can't feel my legs. I can't feel them.”

His feet were twisted in unnatural positions—his torn blue jeans covered most of his contorted lower half.

Lawrence slipped his hand behind Peter's head, pushing mine out of the way. “Get him some water.”

I hustled over to the sink and poured Peter a cup. We sat him up and raised his legs on a couple pillows and the recycling bin. His lips were blue and his skin pasty white.

Drips of water trickled down the side of his face as he tilted back the plastic cup with his scratched-up hand. He dropped his arm down to his lap and let go of the drink, letting it roll off his leg and onto the floor.

“What can we do?” I asked. “What do you need?”

Peter took a couple short breaths and looked up to me. His face was bony and his eyes set back. “Sheldon. No way.”

“Yeah, it's me.”

“I was with your dad.” Peter looked at Lawrence. “Did Lawr tell you that your old man is still alive?”

“Yeah. He told me.”

Peter shook his head. “That man is tough as nails.” Peter closed his eyes again and moaned. “It hurts. It really hurts.”

“Where? Where does it hurt?” I asked. “What can we do?”

Images of Peter's brother Todd and me playing video games in their basement flashed back into my memory. I remembered Peter was always at the bench press in the back of the room lifting weights in his sweaty Metallica tank top. On the walls were hundreds of baseball trophies and MVP plaques. He'd pump old eighties heavy metal tunes on his iPod, and yell at us to keep the TV down. 'I need to focus,' he'd say. 'Gotta get ready for training camp in the spring.'

Looking at him now, was like seeing a completely different person.

"Hide me. You wanna help? Hide me," Peter's pupils bounced from side to side, as he passed glances at Lawrence and me. He coughed and then winced, likely feeling an overwhelming pain around his busted up body.

"Where?" I asked.

He opened his mouth—his lips dried and cracked. "Away from those windows. Those drones are everywhere."

"Drones?" I leaned into him.

His voice was soft and shaky. "Yeah, drones. They're everywhere."

Lawrence slipped around the corner of the kitchen, by the staff bathroom and grabbed a broomstick. He snapped it in half with his knee and dropped it in front of us. "Sheldon's been in some coma since it all went down. He doesn't know what's going on." Lawrence carefully placed the wooden pieces on Peter's jeans. "Gonna make a brace for your legs dude. They don't look so good."

"Forget it Lawr. I'm busted bad. Just get outta here."

"What drones are you talking about?" I asked.

Peter tightened up his muscles and groaned—his mouth stretched out exposing his yellow-stained teeth.

“Drones. You seen those red lights at dark?”

“Yeah,” I replied. “There was a red light shining in one of the rooms earlier—last night. Thought it was a street light or something.”

“Drones, man. Those red lights are drones. They’re everywhere. Those ogres are controlling them. Jesus Christ it hurts! Jesus, Jesus, Jesus!”

Margaret pushed through the door behind us. Her hair was tangled, like a lion’s mane. “What is that religious boy doing on the floor?”

“Go back to bed.” I pointed at the door, my tone was stern and loud. “Stay in there until I come get ya.”

“Where’s Cara?”

“She’s still sleeping. Go back to bed.”

“K.” Margaret nodded and slipped away into the hall.

Peter slapped his hands to the floor and pulled himself upright. His legs dropped off the recycling bin and slapped the tiles. He grimaced again—liquid bubbled about inside his chest. “They are killing us, taking us, or following us.”

Lawrence tossed the broomstick pieces to the side and nodded.

“Yeah, I thought that too.”

“They are quickly evolving as a race man,” Peter added.

Lawrence tapped me on the arm. “Peter is seriously smart.”

I already knew. So was his brother. Peter and Todd were both the valedictorians in their respective eighth-grade years at Hidden Trail. If they weren't in the paper for baseball, it was because they had won the annual District Invention Fair competition in the big city—yet another initiative created by our late mayor.

I wonder if the mayor really *was* dead. Maybe the guy knew about the invasion when the Explorers visited in the winter, faked a heart attack and got out of Dodge while it was still safe.

‘Never trust a politician,’ my dad would say.

“Do you know where Todd is?” I asked.

Peter lifted one of his fingers and glanced at the window. "My guess is he's at Morris Point with all the others." Peter tilted his head, using it to push against the wall behind him. He shifted more upright, trying to find a comfortable position. "There aren't too many dead bodies lying around out there. Most of them are being taken for something." He looked up at Lawrence. "I think Austin is still alive—they got him, and a couple kids from the back of the Shoeless Joe's Bowling. My brother's probably with them all too. We gotta find them, man."

“We need to get food.” Lawrence took a breath and sat down beside Peter. “That’s our first priority. Besides, who’s to say Austin and your brother aren’t already infected?”

Lawrence eyed Peter for a second and then swallowed. He picked at the dry skin on his knuckles.

“Infected?” I asked.

“Are you talking about that kid at the hills?” Peter moaned and flexed his arms.

“Yeah. Maybe those things messed with their heads too.”

Lawrence tapped his temples.

“What are you talking about?” I asked. “What kid?”

Lawrence picked up the cup from the floor and shuffled over to the sink again. He wiped off the blood stains from the plastic and then filled it up with more water. He glanced back at me for a second and then swigged down the whole cup. He filled it up again and brought it back over to Peter. “Some big kid up at the hills smashed a man’s skull in with a rock. We was all sitting by a fire—a fire your pops built actually, and this kid, really tall, like six-five or six-six—didn’t recognize him from a hole in the ground, just came out of the dark and smashed in this man’s head. Mr. Lawinski, I think. Destroyed him. People were screaming like. Said something about the man being a waste and not worth exploring. The kid then grabbed your pops and pinned him to the ground. Was gonna do the same but then dropped the rock to the side and started crying, just sobbing. When your pops rolled away, the kid picked up the rock again, but before he could attack, Ernie the Policeman shot him. Kid toppled over like a fucken oak.”

A rush of warm energy pushed around inside me. I didn't know what to say. I didn't know how to feel. I loved my dad, but part of me couldn't help but be happy that someone had scared the shit out of him. The kid, however, sounded like Riley from my baseball team. He was like fourteen but the size of a sumo-wrestler.

“That’s crazy,” I mumbled.

“He was infected.” Lawrence tapped his temples again.

“That kid was a freak,” Peter chortled. “You’re talking out of your ass Lawr. We don’t know ...what happened to him.” He took a couple short breaths and dropped the cup again on the floor. “The kid could have been a psychopath all his life.”

Lawrence shook his head. “Nah man, I don’t believe it. Those ogres brainwashed him, that’s what happened to him.”

Margaret’s story about the zombie fungus crept back into my thoughts. “Is my dad okay?” I already knew he was, but somehow felt compelled to change the subject, maybe because I didn’t want to hear more crap, more bad news, more indications that this world really was falling apart.

“Yeah man,” Peter replied. “Your dad is a machine.”

I shook my head. Obviously Peter knew about the attack at the bar as well. I guess the whole town knew about it.

“Yeah, I guess he is.” I played with the hairs on my chin again. “If we’re to go looking for Todd and those guys, or head back up to the hills, how do we get around those drones?”

Peter shook his head. "Fuck if I know. Those drones are just toying with us—those ogres are toying with us. They're evolving, growing, adapting—hatching from the trees—their cells and DNA change, alter, form...maybe even clone. They're becoming human-like."

Peter coughed. Splashes of blood sprayed from his nose. He wiped it with his hand and smeared it on his jeans.

Lawrence grabbed the cup again from the floor and rolled it around in his hands. “I ain’t going back to them hills til we get some food. We told ‘em we’d bring them back food and water.” Lawrence tapped Peter on the arm and then pointed to the cupboard. “These guys have been hoarding some food and water in those cupboards. There’s some cereal and canned soup and some mac and cheese. I say we get a couple bags, some jugs from the back room there and head out when the sun is at it’s highest. Those things don’t seem to like the heat.”

“That’s not enough. That’ll last one day,” Peter replied. “And I’m not going anywhere. If you plan on going to the hills, you’re gonna have to leave me here.”

The morning light from outside shifted suddenly to an eerie darkness. A giant arm swept past the window pane, swiping across the glass. A horrifying scream through the corridors punctured the dooming stillness in the room.

The ground vibrated, rumbling like distant thunder.

A thick leathery limb wavered over the concrete, slapping apart the wooden fence that separated the parking lot and the school playground.

Another scream echoed out into the halls—stretching my ear drums, tightening my chest.

Chapter Nineteen:

Ogre

They weren't the same. Not even close. Peter was right, they've changed, they've evolved. They weren't rat-like rodents with gangly tentacles—repticalic—insect-like.

No.

They were giant goddamn Ogres.

Like in the movies.

“Get that guy outta here. Follow me.” Cara pushed the door open and hovered at the entrance, clapping her hands. Her over-sized sports jacket still sat loosely on her shoulders. “Get him up, let's go, let's go.”

A thunderous explosion erupted around us. Tiny shards of glass showered down, splashing around the room.

Long, thick fingers, each the size of my leg, wrapped around the edge of the wall and window frame, pulling it apart like it was made of cardboard. Bricks crumbled to the floor, banging off the tiles.

My gaze fixated on the giant human-like features of the dark monster—its hands, the thick hairs stretching out along its arms. A blur of debris crashed around me, but all I could see, all I could really see was the ‘ogre.’

“Sheldon, help me.” Lawrence slapped my shoulder.

We reached under Peter’s armpits and yanked him up, dragging his limp body to the hallway.

He moaned, closing his eyes and tensing whatever muscles he could move.

“This way,” Cara stood halfway down the corridor, holding onto Margaret and Bailey like they were her own children. “Follow me.”

A cloud of white dust pushed out into the hall, floating over a single beam of light from the staffroom.

I stopped for a moment, letting Lawrence take all the weight of Peter’s body.

I let go.

Cara’s voice rang out over me, bouncing off the cold dark walls, fading away into the lost compartments of my brain.

The beam of light, striking through the powdery mist, reminded me of home—of the mornings at the farm when the sun peaked through the clouds. The smell of hay, of the damp grass, lifted into my senses.

But the beam of light quickly disappeared—blocked by the presence of anger, of evil. The ogre's immense body heaved through the small door frame, splitting the concrete and wood apart. The ceiling toppled down, covering the monster with a grainy white coat.

“Hurry Sheldon, get out of there!” Cara’s cries returned to me.

I skipped backward a moment before sprinting to the gym doors. A light flicked on at the far end by the folding bleachers. A heavy door pushed open.

“In here. Let's go, let's go.” Cara reached out to me as I glided across the floor and into the tiny room. Hockey nets hung from some hooks on the wall. I pushed a basketball rack on wheels to the side and maneuvered over some crash mats and orange pylons. Cara held my hand and guided me to a hole behind a large metal shelving unit at the far end of the storage closet. I ducked down and crawled into the small space.

“Where’s Peter and Lawrence?” I whispered.

Cara put her finger to her mouth and shushed me. She scooted over a box of badminton rackets and pointed to an open section of shelving to her left. She bent down and pushed Peter’s mangled legs behind a couple boxes and then grabbed an old wooden hockey stick from the rack above. She wedged it between the door handles, pulled on it to see if it was secure and then turned off the light.

“We gotta be still.” Peter’s voice muttered through the metal racks and boxes.

Cara’s body squeezed down beside me. She pushed past and huddled against the back wall. “You okay?”

“I’m scared,” Margaret replied.

She and Bailey sat behind me. I hadn't noticed their tiny bodies tucked away under the shelves.

“They don’t have the drones to rely on,” Peter added from a few feet away. “If they can’t see us, they won’t find us.”

The ground vibrated again, followed by furious grunts and heavy bellows.

I rubbed my eyes, trying to adjust to the now pitch black room. Only a thin light appeared at the end of the narrow storage space—a crack under the now locked, metal door.

I stared out at that light—like it was the holder of my life—of my future.

Every startling crash, every thunderous explosion that shook the floor, the thin light grew brighter.

What is that thing doing? What does it want?

The sharp pain along my back returned, radiating up into my neck and head.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” Margaret whispered. “And so does Bailey.”

I closed my eyes, hoping the noises would stop, hoping that thing would move past us.

“Hold it,” Cara whispered. “It won’t be long now.”

I reached back, searching for Margaret’s hand. She needed someone, they both did. I had to stop thinking about myself all the time.

As I felt around the floor, Cara’s hand brushed past. She wrapped her fingers around mine and gripped tightly. The pain in my back immediately left me, like she was a drug I had been needing all this time. I felt Margaret crawl around the left side—she reached out and held onto my other hand. The beam from the door let in more light, giving shape and size to the cramped space we were in.

I listened for a minute.

Maybe two.

The deafening blows and cumbersome vibrations from outside, from the gym, had stopped.

Cara's hand eased up a bit, loosening its grip.

I turned to her, her gaze was drawn to the light as well.

Margaret too.

And Bailey.

Like a giant sixty-inch flat screen TV, we all stared blankly at the light—like the pig-roast rotating on the spit at Todd's fourteenth birthday party—like the meteor shower I watched with my dad from the backfield a couple summers back.

I couldn't take my eyes off the door.

Every now and then, a soft moan eased out of Peter's mouth. Perhaps the adrenaline was fading, and the other pains around his busted body were starting to kick in.

"I really need to go," Margaret whispered finally. "I can't hold it."

I looked over at the shadows of Peter's disfigured feet, hoping he would advise.

But he didn't respond. Instead, another gurgled moan bubbled from his direction.

"Just go. It's okay. It's just us. Just go in your pants." I squeezed Margaret's hand. "We'll get you some more clothes from the lost and found, right Cara?"

"That's right." Cara let go of my hand and touched Margaret's face.

I closed my eyes again, listening to Margaret whimper as she wet herself.

Bailey, who hadn't said a word since this whole thing began, also let go. He sniffled, as the trickling of urine absorbed into their pants and dripped onto the floor.

We sat in silence for some time after that, unsure of what to do next—unsure if the ogre was actually gone.

My mind slipped back to the farm, back to my mom and dad. I wanted to make sense of the photograph Lawrence had shown me, of the incident with Randle the bull.

Was my dad really having an affair? Did my mom leave him because she found out?

If it was all true, it meant they shot that poor bull for no good reason—to cover up a mistake made by my idiot father.

What an ass.

And what about mom? Why didn't she do anything about it? Why would she just leave me like that?

I felt betrayed.

I felt more lost and confused than ever before.

Fuck you Dad.

It must have been a few minutes before I realized Cara was rubbing her fingers through my hair. I leaned back on her, letting her chest take the weight of my back—the weight of the mess inside my head. The side of my face gently touched her neck. Her chest lifted and relaxed with every gentle breath she took. A slight burst of air pushed from her nostrils and onto my shoulder, again...and again.

She really was a drug, or perhaps an angel. The girl somehow knew how to take care of me.

“Listen.” Lawrence’s voice, or maybe Peter’s, whispered out through the silence.

I held my breath.

A faint hum—a distant purr, came from outside.

“What it is?” I asked.

“Don’t move. Don’t talk.” Peter’s mangled legs shifted and disappeared behind the shelves.

The hum grew louder, like the air vents from the classroom.

A shadow appeared under the door, shifting from side to side. It moved at the same pace as the beat of my own heart.

I sat upright, tucking myself in closer to Cara. Bailey and Margaret climbed over us, their damp little bodies trembled.

The double doors moved inward, straining the wooden hockey stick. The pressure eased off a moment before something pushed them forward again, this time snapping the hockey stick in half.

I held my breath.

A red light beamed into the darkness, surveying the shelves and sporting equipment. It buzzed and beeped, before stopping at Peter's shoes. It followed his legs up to his face, now appearing through the racks, the light painting him with red.

Peter didn't move. He just stared up at the light shining in from outside, scanning him up and down. The machine, the drone, whatever was out there, continued to hum.

Peter's eyes glowed, spilling a tear out onto the side of his cheek.

He knew something.

He knew something terrible was about to happen.

His mouth opened, his jaw quivered.

In seconds, a colossal hand reached into the room and pulled Peter's battered body through the door, smashing his head against the frame. His screams were quickly choked away as the sound of bones snapping echoed out around us.

I peered over to Lawrence, folded over, two shelving units away—his head was ducked under his arms.

The red light returned, directing its beam at Lawrence.

The machine hummed and beeped.

I wanted to go to him, I wanted to pull him over to us and hold on.

But no action was taken, no words were spoken.

The ogre's arm pushed through what was left of the doors and yanked Lawrence out from behind the boxes.

A heavy boom shook the floor, followed by another deafening blast.

Lawrence's doomed, blank face splashed into my head—another vision I would keep with me forever.

A shot of air wheezed out from the other side of the busted wall—from the gym. The ogre was out there, likely finishing off the two teenagers—two kids I knew through school, through my friend Todd Strong.

The red light soon pulled away and once again there was silence.

A deathly, sickening silence.

Chapter Twenty:

Why?

Why did they hunt them, capture them, keep them alive, only to kill them later on?

We sat under that shelving unit for several hours that morning, not risking the chance of the drone or the ogre returning.

A hundred and one questions buzzed through my brain—some about the creatures, about the motive of this invasion, some about the integrity of my own stupid family.

“I’m hungry.” Margaret rolled overtop of Cara and onto my lap. “Can we eat now?”

Somehow the kid had forgotten about the horror, once again, that took place hours earlier. Somehow she had the strength to block out the nightmare we were all living.

“Yeah, we can eat,” I replied. “What do ya want?”

“Pizza,” Margaret replied. “With pineapple.”

“Sure. Sounds great.”

“And mushrooms. You like mushrooms eh Bailey?”

Bailey yawned and nodded. He crawled around us and slipped under the shelving unit. His floppy red hair fell over his pale face.

The heat from the late morning sun spilled out through the busted door and into the storage room. Tiny dust particles hovered over the sunlight, sporadically shifting directions as an incoming breeze swept through.

Bailey hopped over a green crash mat covered in chipped brick and peered out the doorway.

The silhouette of his small frame frozen at the moment reminded me once again of the farm.

I was very young, maybe younger than Bailey and Margaret. I had crept down the stairs one summer morning, earlier than usual. I wasn't yet old enough to have too many farming responsibilities except to put out food for the cats and collect eggs. I remember hustling across the yard to the barn so that I could get the jobs done in time to catch some cartoons back in the house before my parents woke up.

However, when I pushed through the side door, I caught my dad breaking the neck of a Calder Ranger chicken. The sounds of bones splintering and cracking—the sounds of a life snapped in two—like Lawrence and Peter that morning—haunted me.

I wondered what Bailey was thinking, what was running through his scarred mind.

“Oh yeah, and Ice Cream. I love mint-chocolate-chip. Love, love, love it.” Margaret pushed past me and jumped over the crash mat. She peeked into the light. “Where’s the school?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“There’s no school. The school is gone.”

Through the doorway of the storage room, where the gym used to be, there was nothing but rubble—thin metal poles reaching up over the crumbled walls. A cloud of dust floated over the tangled mess like a low lying fog.

The four of us had no words, no comments, as we climbed through the debris.

How could one creature cause so much devastation?

Was it angry? Was there purpose behind this destruction?

We managed to find the fridge and a couple of food boxes where the staffroom used to be. From where we were, it appeared as though the back end of the school was destroyed, leaving the front a sloppy mess of rubble and choking dust.

“We can’t stay here,” Cara said finally. “We gotta find somewhere else to go.”

She was right, but the question was, where?

“But what about the monsters?” Margaret inched closer to me and walked by my side. “Won’t they see us if we go out there?”

We had nothing, nothing but a box and a couple of bags of dried food. I had no idea how we were going to carry them. I had no idea what to do. I shoved some cans in my jeans and stuffed my shirt with packs of crackers and tea biscuits.

“I guess we gotta just avoid those drones. If those drones see us, then so will the ogres,” Cara said. Her flip-flops smacked the bottom of her feet as we stepped out onto the school playground.

“But we saw one last night,” I added. “Why didn’t it do anything then?”

Cara shrugged, looking out at the empty streets ahead of us. “I have no idea. I just don’t wanna stick around here anymore.”

We stepped out onto Baylor Road, the main road leading up to the woods. The sun was high enough in the sky to warm our faces. I lifted my head, feeling a slight breeze whisk over my skin.

A hawk circled overhead.

I checked my phone again.

10:34 am.

“Why is my battery at 100 percent?” I asked finally. “I haven’t charged it.” I swiped through the settings and then pulled off the protective case. “What’s with my phone? Is your phone all weird like?”

Cara shrugged, dragging her feet ahead of me along the pavement, like a zombie, drained of life. She stopped for a second, adjusting her grip on the bags of food.

Margaret tugged on my arm. “If we can’t get pizza, I’ll have a croissant with egg and cheese. I love croissants. Eh Bailey? Aren’t they delish?”

Bailey nodded, eyeing the ground as he avoided dark red stains on the center of the faded gray pavement.

We walked as far as the next street where the fence line ended, opening up to a rocky path leading into Cottonwood Park.

We didn’t go far when we were halted by a large object, maybe the size of an elephant, at the top of the grassy hill, about thirty yards away. Thousands of flies buzzed around its furry, leathery surface. A crow perched itself on the top, pecking away at an exposed chunk of pink flesh.

“Is that one of those monsters?” Margaret tugged on my arm again.

I didn’t respond. I didn’t know for sure. It didn’t look like that ogre we saw.

Cara put down the bags of food and stretched her neck. "What the hell is that?" she asked.

"Cara, you said 'hell.'" Margaret picked up a stone from the path and tossed it at the giant mound of skin. "'Hell' is a bad word. It's a bad place."

The stone clanked off the side of the giant carcass like it was some hollow shell. The crow squawked, launching up into the air with a piece of flesh still trapped in its beak.

We inched closer, curious but cautious.

The smell of mold and fungus escaped into the air. Fat, clumsy house flies whizzed around us. "Whatever that is, it's dead. Let's keep moving." Cara picked up the bags again and trudged forward up the hill. She glanced at the carcass and continued past.

"It could be sleeping, right Sheldon?" Margaret picked up a stick and crept closer to it.

"I don't think so," I replied.

She poked it and stepped back nervously. Her tangled red hair flopped about. Her dirty pink pants she wore on the first day of the attack inched down her now bony hips. She yanked them back up again and poked the shell.

Cara stopped at the top of the hill and turned to us. "Are you coming?"

I rubbed my hand along its rough exterior, feeling the hairs brush between my fingers.

"Do you think they're shedding their outer skin or something?"

Cara shrugged again and flopped down on the grass. She rummaged through one of the bags and pulled out a cracker. Bailey hustled up the hill to join her clearly excited at the sight of food.

Margaret tapped my arm.

“Yes?” I asked.

She tapped my arm again and waved her hand for me to bend down to her. I leaned in as she put her mouth to my ear. “It invaded a human’s head. It doesn’t need its body anymore.”

“What?” I laughed. “Where did you get that crazy idea from?”

Margaret stepped back and pouted. She tossed the stick to the ground and folded her arms. “The ogre told me.”

Chapter Twenty-One:

Autumn in the Spring

The crow pushed off an overhanging wire and perched itself back on top of the alien shell. It jabbed its beak into the fleshy hole at the top and slipped bits of raw skin down its throat.

“What do you mean the ogre told you?” I asked.

Margaret looked up the hill to Cara and Bailey. She sighed and glanced at the ground in my direction. "You laughed at me."

I took a big breath and lowered myself to her again. “Sorry. It’s been a long day. I didn’t mean to laugh. But I need to know what you meant.”

Margaret picked up a dandelion and plucked off the top. “They scan us, and then if they like you, they’ll upload their data into you.”

I shook my head and placed my hand on her shoulder. "How do you know this? Where did you get that crazy idea from?"

Margaret dropped the dandelion stem to the ground and folded her arms again. “It’s not crazy. It’s true.”

“But how do you know?”

“I said it already.”

I took a big breath and forced out a smile. “Right, an ogre told you. When did this ‘ogre’ tell you?”

Margaret pointed back along the path and out to the street. “One of them visited me the other night when everyone was sleeping. Can we get croissants? I love croissants.”

A faint buzz tickled my senses. I stood tall, eyeing our immediate surroundings. Cara put the box of crackers in the bag and stood up as well.

She waved her hands and pointed up to the forest at the other end of the park.

I nodded and grabbed Margaret's hand. "Come on; we gotta keep moving."

As the hum from behind us grew louder, we ran through Cottonwood Park and into the small forest. There was a ravine about twenty yards into the thick brush. The four of us slid down the earthy side and into the shallow, murky water below.

"We need to stay low and quiet," Cara said. "I think it's one of those drones."

I nodded and shushed Margaret and Bailey.

10:56am.

A red maple leaf floated down and landed on my arm.

"Why do you keep looking at your phone?" Margaret asked.

I placed my finger on my lips and then pointed up to the trees with my other hand.

The sound of moans and beeps echoed out into the sky.

"I don't feel very good," Margaret whispered. "I feel funny."

"Quiet," Cara reached over me and gripped Margaret's leg.

"Don't talk."

Her face pressed against my chest as she slowly eased her hold on Margaret's pink pants. Cara glanced at me, before resting her head back against the side of the river bank. The sun's rays beamed down through the maze of stretched out lumber and leaves.

Along the mossy floor were fragments of bark and wood chips.

Over the hissing and buzzing of the nearby drone, the sound of cracking and snapping wood reverberated around the trees.

Bailey sat quietly on the other side of Cara—his head tilted up, looking out at the patches of blue sky.

Perhaps this was going to be the routine for awhile—the waiting game. Survival was going to mean being smart, being alert, and being quiet.

I remembered Mr. Palmer's science class in the seventh-grade where we talked about food chains and how every ecosystem had a balance of producers, consumers, and decomposers. During our research, we looked at animals in our local area, studying which ones were at the top and those who foraged for food, walking around on eggshells with the understanding a predator might snatch them up at any moment. From a human perspective, it was safe to say we were no longer at the top of our food chain.

I turned my head to Margaret burying her face into her knees. I wanted to ask her about the ogre, about her whole crazy notion that they invaded our minds. She's not the type to lie to me, or to anyone for that matter. She wasn't the type to make up stories either. Sure the kid exaggerated from time to time, but she was smart—'crazy smart'.

A chunk of wood splashed into the ravine to our left, spraying us with mud and foul water. Bailey pointed at a black animal pushing through a large splinter of wood halfway up the trunk of a giant oak. I knew what it was.

We all did.

“They're hatching from the trees,” I said. “I knew it. They really are coming from the trees.”

Cara pointed further down the ravine and stood up. “Let’s go this way. I think this leads to the high school. Maybe we can camp out there for a bit.”

“What about the hills? I need to find my dad.”

Cara picked up the bags of food and half turned to me. “Yeah, I hear ya. But that might take a few days. We gotta find a place to sleep first.”

She was right.

Beautiful and smart.

We headed north along the edge of the ravine, dodging falling wood chunks and small branches. The forest was alive, spitting out more alien rodents—rodents that would soon turn into giant ogres.

The ravine opened up to a residential area, a small bridge and a path leading to another street.

“Margaret, you okay?” I stopped at a set of stairs and waited for her to catch up.

“I’m hungry.” She held her stomach and spit on the ground. “I don’t feel too good.”

“I know, none of us do. But we gotta keep moving.” I hustled over to her and knelt down, letting her crawl on my back and wrap her arms around my shoulders. She was as light as the backpack I used to carry to school each day.

“I really want a croissant,” she whispered in my ear.

Cara and Bailey walked up ahead following the path to the road, disappearing past an old wooden fence.

“I know you do. But there aren’t any croissants.” The pain returned in my back as I took the first few steps up the bank. “I will do my best to find you some. I promise.”

Margaret flicked my ear and tucked her face near my neck. “That’s okay. I like them fresh, and there aren’t any bakers to make them anymore, at least not until it’s all over.”

I took a big breath and pushed up a few more steps along the slope. “Maybe, maybe not. There might be a bakery in the next town. You never know.”

“Did you know the croissant is named after its crescent shape and the moon was a crescent on the night I talked to that ogre?” Margaret lifted up her hand and pulled a leaf off an overhanging branch. It reminded me of when I first met Cara; sometimes I felt like they were sisters.

I stopped at the top of the hill and dropped Margaret down my back. I lowered myself and turned to her. “What did this ogre say? Are you sure you weren’t dreaming?”

Margaret looked over my shoulder and tore the leaf into small pieces. She sighed, letting her nostrils flare. “Do you like Cara?”

“What?”

She scratched her eye and wiggled her nose. “I think she likes you. Have you kissed her on the mouth before?”

“Margaret, focus for a second, I really need to know. This is important.”

Margaret tried to look into my eyes, but her gaze kept shifting over my shoulder and above my head. “I’ll try, but I don’t feel very good.”

“I know, you’re hungry. We’ll have some crackers and cookies the next time we stop.” I held out my hand. “Come on, follow me, let’s walk and talk.”

“K,” Margaret replied, trying not to step on my shadow.

At the top, we reached a court where the road twisted north toward a boarded-up apartment building—to the east, a row of red brick houses stood tall, perfectly aligned with a small tree perched in the front of every yard. Cara and Bailey stood on the sidewalk, about four houses down from us, fixated on the front of one of the homes. On the other side of the street was a yellow school bus with the words ‘No Vacancy’ written through the dust on the back window.

“Tell me more about this ogre that you met,” I said feeling her fingers grip onto my hand.

“I’m not sure if I’m allowed to say too much.”

“What do you mean? What did it say?”

Margaret continued to step on the sunny patches along the sidewalk. “I used to sneak out at night, through that broken window in your classroom.” She pulled me over to a grassy patch and picked up another dandelion. “There was an old busted-up apple tree on the other side of the fence. I crawled out most nights to steal some from the low hanging branches.”

I stopped on the sidewalk and looked out at Cara and Bailey again.

They stood beside a baby maple tree—a green-leaved baby maple. However, back along the path, down the sloping trail leading into the forest, the trees were filled with oranges, yellows, and reds.

How did I not see this before?

“Apples aren’t ripe until the fall,” I mumbled.

Margaret picked off the top of the dandelion and tossed it to the ground. "That's what I was thinking. They tasted great, though. Best apples I ever ate."

Out past the houses, north—up towards Morris Point, patches of red and yellow scattered out among the greens. To the east, beyond the street—beyond the row of red brick houses, towards the hills, the oranges, and reds...the yellows, spread out over the horizon.

“Interesting,” I whispered to myself.

“Don't tell Cara and Bailey about the apples, okay? I didn't share them; I didn't want to share them."

“I won’t say anything.”

“Promise?”

I squeezed her hand. “Promise.”

She hopped over a crack on the sidewalk and stretched out a toothy grin. "Any-who, every time I snuck out to get those delicious apples I would see one of them flying red things pointing its annoying light at me. But the last night—" Margaret raised her finger and looked up at the overhanging wires. "The last night I got a visit from one of them big monsters. It told me not to be scared. But it didn't work. I was scared, real scared."

“What did it want?” I asked.

Margaret shrugged. “It just wanted to know if I was enjoying the apples.”

“But what up with that whole invading our minds crap?”

“You said ‘crap.’”

“‘Crap’ isn’t a bad word.”

“Yes, it is.”

I rubbed my brow and sighed. “Sorry. Did it actually say they were trying to get inside our heads?”

Margaret nodded. “Uh huh. Don't know how, though. Wouldn't that be cool if we had an alien in our heads?”

“No,” I replied. “That would not be cool.”

Chapter Twenty-Two:

Name

“What are you looking at?” I stopped in front of the house where Cara and Bailey waited.

Cara opened her mouth as if to speak but no words came out. She pointed at the front window shadowed by two white pillars and a fungus-infected overhanging roof. The door was green with strips of paint peeling off. The front path was overwhelmed with weeds and giant dandelions.

“Are those people?” Margaret asked. She pulled on my arm. “Maybe they have croissants.”

Dark shadowy figures moved sporadically through the first floor, disappearing and reappearing around the main room.

“What are they doing?” I asked.

Cara glanced back at the bus and then up the street. “They’re probably looking for food. That’s what I’d be doing.”

Bailey picked out a cracker from the box at his feet and offered it to Margaret. She took a bite, dropping some crumbs on the sidewalk. The two smiled at each other and inched closer to Cara and me.

Up the street, a few houses along, a girl pulled through the front door and stopped on the porch. A large blue duffle bag hung over her shoulder. From where I stood, she looked to be our age, maybe even sixteen or seventeen. Her hair was a beautiful blonde, glowing in the stretch of sunlight that reached out between the houses. She cautiously stepped down to the front path and onto the sidewalk.

The girl dropped the bag and carefully bent down, unzipping a pocket in the side. "Who are you?" She pulled out a small swiss-army-knife and stopped about twenty yards away. "I said, who are you?"

"Sheldon," I replied. "This is Cara, and uh, Margaret and Bailey."

The girl inched closer.

The green door squeaked open, and three boys jumped out. They were big kids, bigger than me for sure, more like men. The tallest boy had thick patches of black whiskers sprouting around his face and neck. His hair was shaggy and tangled around a gray winter hat. He hustled down the steps and stopped at the bottom, glancing at the girl with the blonde hair.

"What are you doing here?" The girl eyed the other two boys on the porch and gestured for them to move forward.

"We're looking for food," Cara replied. "And shelter."

"We're also looking for a ride to the hills. Is that your bus?" I asked raising my hands up by my head.

"What's in there?" The girl nudged her head up and pointed to our cardboard crates with her knife.

"It's food, but it's all the food we have." Cara tapped one of the boxes with her foot—her feet covered in dried mud. "Can you please put that knife away?"

The tall guy with the black patches of hair on his face pulled up his loose jeans and eyed the scraps at our feet. "What are your names?"

Cara turned quickly to him. "Like he said, I'm Cara, this is Margaret, Bailey, and Sheldon, now can you please tell that bitch to put the knife away?" "Excuse me?" The blonde girl took a few more steps forward. Like Cara, her legs glowed in the sun. She wore a yellow tank-top and a blue plaid shirt tied around her waist.

"I said, put the fucken knife away." Cara's jaw clenched, her voice was shaky.

Margaret wrapped her arm around my waist.

"I'll put the knife away when I feel good and ready to put the knife away." The girl switched hands with the minuscule blade and whipped her hair back.

I stepped in front of Cara, dragging Margaret along with me. "Hey, relax, we're on your side. We're just looking for food, that's it. We'll get out of your way. No biggie guys."

The girl didn't budge, her stern gaze locked in on Cara and me.

"Tell me your names again." A warm breeze swirled down on us, pushing the girl's hair around her face. She pulled some strands from her mouth and shook the knife. "Tell me your names again."

"Why?" Cara folded her arms.

"Sheldon, Cara, Margaret, and Bailey." I kept my hands up and turned to Cara. "Just do what she says."

The tall kid waved his long boney finger at Margaret. “Get her to say it now.”

“Ask the little kid to say your names,” demanded the girl.

Cara threw up her hands. “What the fuck is this? Mother Goose Club?”

I tapped Margaret on the head—her hair felt like straw. “Can you say all of our names?”

Margaret looked up at me, her brow furrowed. “Why?”

“I dunno, but you should do it,” I replied.

“But I don’t feel good.”

“Just do it, please,” I asked.

Margaret let go of my leg and dropped her arms by her side like she was preparing to answer one of her trivia questions at a competition. “Our names are,” she took a big breath and looked up to me. “Sheldon Hickory, he’s my neighbor who lived up the road from me before the monsters ate our homes. He’s like a big brother to me. He’s a great friend too, and I think he’s in love with Cara.” Margaret swallowed and took another big breath. “And this is Cara. She is really pretty, and I think she’s in love with Sheldon as well. She took care of me at Hidden Trail Public School for seventeen days.” Margaret tapped Bailey on the shoulder. “And this is Bailey Lipengetti, my best friend in the whole wide world. But he doesn’t talk anymore.”

Margaret stepped back to me and wrapped a couple of fingers around my thumb.

“I’m in love with Cara?” I whispered to her.

“Yes, didn’t you know?” Margaret replied.

The blonde girl stood tall, lowering her shoulders.

She studied us as we waited on the sidewalk like she was worried we were going to jump out of our skin and attack.

For some reason they didn't question Bailey—maybe because he looked like a stiff breeze could blow him over, or maybe because they realized that three weeks on the run might be turning them all into paranoid psychopaths.

A gray squirrel caught my eye, scurrying across the road behind the girl. It darted up one of the maples, leaning over a thin branch before covering back to the trunk.

The two boys at the green door finally shuffled back inside, only to return seconds later with a couple of large bags and a suitcase. They dragged the heavy loads down the steps and onto the path.

“Are we good now? Are we just gonna stand here all day?”
Cara's hands thrust down onto her hips.

“Maybe,” the girl replied.

“Orillia, will you chill? They're not gonna do anything. Let's go. We got everything we need.” A muscular boy, maybe about eighteen or so, dragged a black suitcase across the stone slabs and stopped in front of the tall guy. He nodded at Cara and me and pushed past us onto the road. He glanced back over to the girl named Orillia as he dropped the suitcase at the side of the bus. “Are you gonna do this with everyone you meet?”

“Yeah, you got a problem with that?” Orillia lowered her arm with the knife and reached back to grab her duffle bag. She eyed us again before stepping onto the road.

The muscular boy unlatched a compartment below the bus and shoved the suitcase inside.

“Does that thing run?” I asked.

The tall boy stepped around us and nodded. “Yup. Fixed it up myself. I had to make my own battery, but it works. Those aliens ain’t controlling everything on this planet.” He whistled up to the third boy with a maroon McMaster ‘U’ hoodie who was still on the front porch. “You coming or what? These guys don’t bite dude.”

“Yeah man, just getting my gear.” The boy with the hoodie burrowed through one of the bags for a second or two before tucking what looked like a gun into his pants. He heaved his arm onto the porch railing and strained to stand up. He brushed his long mousey hair out of his face and grimaced. Sweat dripped down the side of his face—his armpits were soaked through his sweatshirt.

“Come on, brother, let’s go,” the tall guy muttered.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m coming, I’m coming.”

I played with the bristles above my lip. “Where are you going?”

The boy with the gun stopped on the sidewalk. He squinted in the bright sun, trying to look at me. “The water, dude. Them aliens don’t like the water.”

Margaret raised her hand like she was in class. “Can we come? I like the water. Besides, I’m really thirsty. I can hold my breath for forty-three seconds. Ask Bailey.” She flicked his ear. “Right Bail?”

“You'll have to ask the boss.” The boy with the gun hobbled off the curb and onto the road. He dragged the bag behind him and tossed it at the muscular guy. “Yo, Orillia, can these guys come with us?”

Orillia shouted from the other side of the bus. “Shut up.”

“What?” The muscular boy closed the compartment door. “What did you say?”

“Shut up!” She appeared around the front bumper and pointed up the road in the direction of the hills. “Listen.”

The humming—the clicks and the beeps had returned.

Orillia waved her hands at us and gestured for everyone to follow her onto the bus.

Cara ducked down immediately and scooted across the road with the food. She turned around trying to get a better grip on the boxes. “Let’s go, let’s go,” she whispered loudly.

I followed, blocking out the sun, trying to see where the sounds were coming from.

The tall guy scooted around the front and pushed me up the steps.

We all slipped into the aisles and ducked down below the seats.

“Keep it quiet, make sure that little girl doesn’t talk.” Orillia looked over to me as she army-crawled along the floor to the back.

I nodded and gave her a thumbs up, sliding my legs under the torn vinyl seats. Margaret squeezed in beside me and covered her eyes.

We then waited and listened.

Through the metal poles which held up the ugly brown bus seats, Cara's exhausted face rested on her arms. Her eyes were blank, staring mindlessly at the tiny stones trapped in the rubber flooring.

"I don't feel good." Margaret lifted up her head; the color drained from her face.

I placed my finger over my mouth. "Not now."

"But it hurts." Margaret closed her eyes tight, leaking saliva from her mouth.

The sounds from the drone hovered about outside the window, shaking the thin walls and floor. I didn't understand how a bunch of mindless ogres could control these things. Why didn't that drone just kill me the other night?

I rubbed Margaret's back, hoping she might relax—hoping the hunger-pains would slip away again.

Hunger-pains.

I missed food. I already forgot what it was like to feel full.

Maybe that was what the drones were set out to do. Maybe their job was to find food for the ogres.

Beep.

Click.

The drone was just outside the window above my head. It moaned and hissed like it was hungry for its prey.

The sounds groaned louder as the machine brushed against the window.

White foam continued to ooze from Margaret's mouth.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

I held my breath. The sound of my heart reverberated through my body and into the drums of my ears.

I wanted to swallow.

My legs itched like tiny ants were shuffling through my sweat-damp jeans. I pictured them crawling through my hairs, burrowing into my skin.

The muscles in Margaret's body appeared to let go. Her head drooped to the floor.

Her eyes rolled back.

Chapter Twenty-Three:

Sick

I poked Margaret's shoulder a couple of times. The color in her face returned as her eyes slowly opened. She lay on her stomach, staring blankly at the floor just inches away. She winced and coughed before shedding a couple of tears.

The sounds from the drone soon faded, but no one dared move.

We hovered along the floor of the bus for several minutes, waiting for someone to find the courage to look outside.

“It’ll be over soon,” I whispered to Margaret. “I’ll get you a big croissant and a giant glass of ice cold lemonade.”

Margaret’s throat clicked. She winced again before forcing out a smile.

Orillia peeked over the back window and stood up. “It’s gone. We gotta keep moving. I guess you’re all coming with us.” She marched down the aisle to the front of the bus, stepping over us like we were roadkill. “Sab, start it up.”

“Where specifically are we going?” I asked.

“Bronte Harbor,” she said, lowering her head to see out the windows. “Like it or leave.”

I knew the place—never went, but Dad used to talk about taking Mom and me sailing one summer. Told me he’d like to own a boat or yacht—or something ridiculous.

“Are you okay to stand up?” Cara asked, tapping Margaret on the head.

She nodded and shuffled her legs from under the seat.

I checked on Bailey who was making himself comfortable next to an open window. He played with a toy army figure he must have found back at the school.

Cara and I helped Margaret to one of the seats near the back. We propped her legs up and used a soft bag for her head.

Cara leaned over to me and whispered in my ear. “This isn’t good. We gotta get this kid medicine or something. We should find a doctor.”

“She’s just hungry,” I said. “That’s all it is. Other than that cracker, she hasn’t had anything.”

Margaret’s eyes closed again. She trembled for a second and then relaxed.

It hadn’t dawned on me until that moment that there was no one older than twenty on this bus. In fact, since being with my dad and Mrs. Bryer, there hadn’t been an adult around at all.

“Does anyone know first aid?” I asked. “Margaret’s not feeling so good.”

The door heaved shut at the front of the bus.

The windshield wipers flicked on and off, squeaking a couple of times.

The engine choked and strained as the tall guy turned the ignition key. Orillia sat up with him, pointing to the gears and the lights on the dash. The floor and windows rattled before the bus finally kicked into a steady rhythm and stuttered forward along the road.

“Is there any medicine on this bus?” I asked.

“Not that I know of. What's up? Is she diabetic?” The boy with the hoodie unzipped one of the bags a few seats over. The gun was perched loosely at the side of his belt. “My dad was a doctor. Dunno where he is now, though.”

“Did you guys not think of grabbing medicine while you were breaking into those houses?” Cara placed her hand on Margaret’s forehead.

“No,” the boy with the hoodie replied.

Margaret shook her head, eyeing the boy. “Are you sick?” she asked in a soft voice. The smell of dried urine wafted up from her pants.

The boy adjusted the gun and looked over the seat. “Yes. I am.”

“Why?” Margaret asked.

“What do you mean ‘why?’” replied the boy.

“Why are you sick?” She licked her dry lips.

“I have diabetes,” he replied.

Margaret swallowed. She sniffed and then rubbed her tiny nose. “That’s impossible. There's no more diseases on earth. There's no such thing as diabetes anymore. Right Sheldon?”

“Yeah, I guess.” I toppled forward trying to keep my balance as the bus followed a windy road past an old church.

“I *was* cured,” the boy continued. “but when those things arrived, it all started coming back. Don’t feel good right now actually. You got food right?”

I nodded, pointing to the box a few seats down.

Cara grabbed my arm. “We need that food,” she whispered.

“We need their bus,” I replied.

“Those ogres won’t like knowing you’re sick,” Margaret muttered, resting her head back on the bag.

“Fuck those ogres,” the boy replied.

Margaret looked at me. “He said ‘fuck.’”

I eyed the goofy looking kid and shook my head. “Careful what you say, eh bud?”

The boy nodded. “Sorry.”

“Is that a gun?” Margaret lifted her hand and pointed at the boy’s waist.

The kid reached back and lifted it out of his pants. “Yup. It’s an M9 Beretta. Isn’t it a beaut?” He held it out, wrapping his hands around the handle. “It’s my uncles. He was in the military. He taught me how to use it before he got captured. See? You unlock it here. This is the safety. You can change it from single action to double action.” The boy pushed the barrel at the end with his thumb. “See? Single action” He pulled on the gun again. “Double action. Single action. Double action. When you pull back on this slide, you gotta be careful not to engage the safety, see?” The boy pulled back on the barrel again and pointed to a switch near the top. “Fifteen rounds too.”

I pushed the boy’s hand down and stepped in front of him.

“Chill man. She’s a kid. She doesn’t need to know this crap. Take some cookies from our box, and get lost.”

The boy looked up at my forehead—his eyelids shuttered. “Yeah. Okay.” He strained to gather his balance before dropping the gun on the seat beside him. He turned around and wandered over to the box of crackers and stale cookies.

The bus swerved around another tight corner, jostling some of the bags into the aisle. “Don’t talk anymore Margaret; you need to relax, okay?”

“He said ‘fuck.’”

“I know,” I whispered. “Please just relax. Okay?”

She nodded and closed her eyes.

I gripped the back of the bus seats and guided my way up to the front. The bus was a mess, with bags and boxes scattered under the seats and up above in the racks. Cans of soup rolled around, banging against the metal poles and siding. Bailey looked up at me as I passed him. He nodded and glanced back out the window again, balancing his toy soldier on the ledge.

It wasn’t that long ago I was his age—Margaret’s age—I wondered how I would be feeling right now. Would I be calm like the two? Would I be freaking out and crying for my daddy and mommy? I guess they were used to ‘hurt’—they were used to not having a dad in their lives, not having money to go to the movies, or camping or to go on a vacation. They were used to being disappointed.

Shit, who wasn’t in this town? I guess I was in the same boat.

Parents were separated—check.

Dad was cheating on Mom—check.

I was a high-school dropout—check.

Oh, and the world was coming to an end—double check.

What was there to be happy about?

I pulled out my phone again.

11:34am.

Still one hundred percent battery.

“Is that a phone?” Orillia stood up at the front and snatched it out of my hand. “This is a fucken phone. What are you doing with a phone?”

I was too exhausted to snap back. I flopped down in the seat behind her and shook my head. “It’s mine. Why?”

The tall guy who I assumed was named ‘Sab’ glanced back at me and then at the phone in Orillia’s hand. “Can’t have a phone dude. Don’t want them things tracking us.”

“They control everything, didn’t you figure that out by now?” Orillia reached over and tossed it out an open window. It shattered on the road. She tightened the shirt around her waist and faced the back. “Who else has a phone? Who else has a phone?”

Cara looked at me before shaking her head. “Don’t have one, and neither do the kids.”

Orillia sat back down, glancing out the window on either side of the bus. “Everything is being controlled by them. They’re watching us. Somehow those things have taken over every working machine.” She bent one of her fingers back. “Cars.” Then another finger. “Phones, computers, satellites...”

“Internet,” added Sab.

Orillia nodded. “Everything.”

“Electricity.” Sab glanced back at me. The dark greasy hair under his hat flopped up and down with every bump on the road. “The fucken army.”

The image of my phone shattering on the road popped back in my head. I had photos on there, memories of my home, of my baseball team. I had notes I had written to myself—saved messages from my friends before I dropped out.

The phone case! Shit. The picture of my dad and mom!

I didn’t like these new people. Who did they think they were?

“I’d like to get off this bus,” I said. “My friends and I would like to get off right now.”

Orillia didn’t respond. She leaned forward with her legs out in the aisle, staring at the road and landscape ahead.

We reached an open space, with farm fields and wild grass. About a hundred yards in, another giant alien shell rotted in the heat of the day. Through the haze, we could see the water in the distance.

“You can get out when we get to the water dude.” Sab popped the clutch and let the bus coast through a stop sign. Ahead, beyond the trees and power lines was Bronte Harbor. “Another ten minutes.”

“I want out now. I need to find my parents.” I stood up. The pain in my head ripped down my spine.

Orillia propped herself up and faced me. She gripped the side bars that supported the bag racks along the roof. “Ten minutes.”

“My dad is at the hills. Maybe my mom is there now. I know they’re alive. I’m not ready to run yet. I gotta find them.”

“It’s not safe.” Orillia swallowed.

“I don’t care.”

For a second, a hint of vulnerability spilled over Orillia's face. Her eyes diverted to the windows as she bit her lip. "Your parents are probably dead. We need to get to the water. Danny lives by the Bronte Harbor. He said them creatures weren't anywhere near the shore." Orillia glanced over my shoulder at the muscular boy. He sat in the middle seats, flicking a cigarette lighter.

"You gotta let me off," I said.

"They came from the trees." Orillia swallowed again. She looked at my lips and then up to my eyes. She paused for a moment before sitting down—turning her attention to the front window. "Those drones are going out at night, scanning people with them red lights—scanning them for mind invasion. That's what they're doing. You know that right?"

Cara watched me from the other end of the bus. If Orillia was right then maybe this was the time to let go of my family. This group of people could be the future. Maybe Cara was in my future.

But I had to know. I had to know if my dad was alive.

And my mom.

Call it stupidity or simply being human.

I mean, that's who we were right?

Human.

"Please stop the bus," I said.

"Them creatures don't hang by the water, right Danny?"

The muscular boy hovered the lighter over the seat in front of him. The flame singed a thread on one of the seams.

"Danny?" Orillia repeated.

“Yeah, that's right,” he said finally. “Don't ever see any at the lake. Probably can't swim.”

I could only assume they were numb to the idea of helping others. Despite being a few weeks since it all started this group had likely seen and experienced more than I could imagine.

I had been awake for less than a day. What did I know?

I wanted to ask them about their families. I wanted to know what was driving them away.

“I don't know what happened to you,” I began, finally sitting down opposite Orillia. “I don't know what you've lost, and whatever it was, I'm really sorry, but I know my dad is alive, maybe even my mom. Maybe my best friend. Please don't take this away from me. I need to find them.”

Her sun-weathered hand gripped the bar behind Sab. Her fingernails were chewed below the tips. “We need to survive. We are only interested in moving forward. Worrying about others will only get you killed.”

“That's bullshit,” I said.

“If you think that's bullshit then maybe you should get off.”

“Works for me,” I replied.

“Great, then get off.” I thrust my hands up. “Thank you!”

Orillia pointed to the door. “Jump anytime you like. Be my guest.”

The diabetic boy maneuvered through the aisle to the front. His thin, mousy hair clung to his forehead. His skin was white, ghost-like. “I need sugar,” he slurred. “I don't feel good. I can't find the bag with the juice.”

You kidding me? Didn't you just take our stash of cookies?

Orillia whipped out a bag from under her seat and unzipped it. "It's here you nob. It's been here for the past three days. You put it here." She pulled out a juice box and tossed it at him.

The boy looked blankly at Orillia as it bounced off his chest and into his hands.

"Stop the bus," I said again, not giving two shits about this kid's sugar problems. They obviously had painted the picture that it was about survival of the fittest.

So fuck them.

"Stop the goddamn bus." My voice was low and stern.

Sab punched the steering wheel and then drifted over to the side of the road. Dust and gravel spit up as we slowed to a stop.

"Get out," Sab asserted.

"Gladly," I replied. I turned to Cara, assuming she heard the conversation from the back, but all I could see was the diabetic boy.

He fumbled with the juice box straw before dropping it to the floor. As he lowered to pick it up, I noticed Margaret standing behind him.

In her hand was a gun—an M9 Beretta.

Her eyes glazed over. Her little hands gripped tightly around the weapon as she struggled to raise it upwards—she strained as she unlocked the end of the barrel with her thumb.

Danny, the muscular boy, jumped up from the middle seats and scampered up the aisle. "Holy shit, she's got a gun."

Cara shot up at the back and followed.

“He's rotten,” Margaret muttered, pointing the Beretta at the diabetic boy—her dwarfed fingers barely reached the trigger. “This boy is rotten.”

The diabetic boy picked up the juice box and turned to Margaret, his hands trembled.

A hollow explosion ripped from the gun, throwing Margaret's hands back into her face. She stumbled and fell into one of the seats in front of Danny.

The boy—the diabetic boy with the hoodie, dropped to the floor—his face bounced off the vinyl seat and slammed against the aisle. Bright, clean blood poured out the back of his head like lava from an active volcano.

The juice box slipped out from his limp fingers and toppled down the steps at the front of the bus.

Chapter Twenty-Four:

Ladybug

Tiny spots of blood filled the front windshield like a Jackson Pollack splash painting I did in ninth-grade art. Along the left window pane, just above the steering wheel, a large explosion of red and yellow spilled down to the dash.

We all stood silent for what seemed like minutes, but was likely only a brief pause in time—time for our ears to absorb the powerful blast—time for our eyes to filter the insides of a human head spilled over the front half of a school bus—time for our brains to digest the gruesome death of a teenage boy at the hands of a small child.

Faint pitchy sounds murmured around me.

The gunshot echoed over and over until it finally died off somewhere in my mind.

Patches of white rolled over my vision.

It didn't seem real.

Nothing seemed real.

There he was, the diabetic boy, lying on the bus floor, his eyes rolled back—the top part of his head...gone.

Orillia snatched up the Berretta and pointed it at Margaret—her face—her neck coated in blood.

A loud scream spilled out from Bailey as he jumped over the seats. His face was red, his eyes wide with fear. Like a siren, he released all the energy from inside his lungs. He leaped past Danny and shielded Margaret from the gun with his body.

“Move out of the way kid,” Orillia commanded. “Danny, move that little boy outta the way.”

My muscles twitched, jolting myself out of my curious paralysis.

Danny stretched his hand out and wrenched Bailey back by his collar. “Move it, move it, move it!”

Bailey pulled loose, clawing at Danny’s arm. His face grimaced as he forced himself in front of Margaret again.

“Get this little brat out of the way. She’s infected.” Orillia stepped over the dead boy on the floor. “If you don’t move kid, I’ll shoot you both. That girl is infected.” She pointed over Danny’s shoulder at Cara. “You, back of the bus. Don’t even think about coming up here. Go to the back of the bus now.”

Cara nodded and eased herself to the far end.

“Don't shoot!” I shouted. I leaned into the aisle and slapped Orillia's arm down. With my other hand, I reached for her wrist and pulled her entire body forward. "What the hell are you doing?" She's just a kid."

Orillia’s hair slapped against my face as she yanked back on the gun. She opened her mouth, sinking her teeth into my arm. I ripped myself away before she could dig into my flesh.

"She has to die," Orillia replied. "I have to kill that little girl." She lifted the gun back up and clumsily pointed it at Margaret—fumbling with the trigger. "I have to do this. She's infected; she's fucken infected." Orillia closed her eyes and fired, launching the bullet into the vinyl cushions to Margaret's right.

We all ducked down for a second, expecting a second bullet to fly out of the gun.

Nothing.

I lifted up again and slapped at Orillia's arm, clawing at her shirt and skin.

From my left, over the seats, the blur of a giant fist crashed over me—the violent blow hammered into the side of my head spilling flashes of white through my eyes.

Then darkness.

Danny's face appeared, perhaps ten or twenty seconds later.

He slammed his fist into me a second time.

The sounds faded around me.

There was nothing.

When I came to, Danny appeared again—his focus was now on Bailey. His muscular frame thrust Bailey's frail body into the window, a few rows over. Bailey rolled forward, disappearing into the seat below. The blows to my head stunned me, leaving me with muffled sounds, with blurred visions, but with nothing more. Danny's right arm pulled back and once again slammed down into the seat where Bailey's now defensive body lay.

I watched with a numbed horror as Danny powered his fist into Bailey a third time.

A sharp buzzing took over my brain. My arms hung loosely at my sides.

I wasn't moving; I wasn't registering.

Cara remained at the back; her hands were raised up over her head.

I think she was screaming.

Sab pushed up behind me in the aisle, nudging me into one of the seats. He held a gun as well, a small handgun—nothing I had recognized from any of my war video games I used to play at home.

“Don’t fucken move,” he muttered in my ear, stepping over the dead boy. “You move, I’ll kill you.”

Margaret was about five feet away from me now—her face emotionless, her eyes glazed over.

“Kill her,” Orillia said, pulling back on the barrel of the Beretta. “Sab, kill her now.”

“Step aside.” Sab’s tall frame towered over Margaret. He wrapped both hands around the pistol and aimed it at her.

Danny slipped to the right side of the bus, licking his knuckles, watching his partners with a crazed excitement.

“Shoot her. Shoot her!” Orillia shouted. She leaned back against the window, tucking her shoulders up to her ears, waiting for the blast from Sab’s weapon.

Sab held the gun firm, focusing his energy on Margaret’s tiny face.

I tried to stand tall, hoping the clarity would return—but the weight of the earlier blows pulled me down to the seat. Sparkles of white continued to splash around me.

“What are you waiting for?” Orillia lowered her gun, repeatedly pulling the trigger—*click, click, click* — “Shoot her Sab. Mine doesn’t work. You know what happened to us last week. Just do it.”

I could only see the back of Sab and a bit of his right profile. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down several times along his throat. He shook his head a few times and re-gripped the gun.

A few rows up, pained moans escaped from where Bailey was last attacked.

Orillia’s fingers nervously flicked and scratched at the back of her gun. She reached her finger to the trigger again and suddenly fired, ripping a hole into the floor.

Shards of metal ricocheted onto the road below, splashing back up under the bus.

Orillia swallowed.

She slowly lifted the gun to Margaret’s head again. “Mine’s working now.”

“Are you going to do it?” Sab asked, rubbing his chin with his shoulder. He licked his lips, still holding his gun out at Margaret. “Or am I doing it?”

“Yeah, I’ll do it,” Orillia replied, passing a quick glance at him. “Just give me a second to catch my breath.”

Sab lifted his brow and nodded. “Then do it.”

“I said, just give me a second.”

Behind us, spots of blood slipped off the front dash into the trash can beside the driver’s seat. The drips lightly slapped the crinkled pages on an old magazine, in a slow rhythmic fashion.

It echoed in my ear, bouncing around the numbness of my marred brain.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

Through the open window to my right, a small fly piloted itself past me, fluttering about Sab's hairy face. It circled him a few times before attempting to land on his outstretched arms. A faint hum eased from its wings as it avoided the clumsy swats from Sab's lanky fingers. It launched upward to the ceiling, smacking against the tin frame above our heads before finally taking refuge on the end of Orillia's fifteen round, double action M9 Beretta.

As the fog lifted slightly from my head, I could see the orangey-red shell of the small bug.

“Lady-Bird,” Margaret whispered, pointing at Orillia. “Look. There’s a Lady-Bird on the end of that gun.”

“Ladybug,” I replied. “It’s called a Ladybug.” I was instantly reminded of the times my father continually checked my grammar.

“It means good luck. Did you know that?” Margaret leaned her finger to the Beretta and pushed the bug onto the tip of her fingernail.

Orillia didn’t move. Her brow lifted.

“That’s great,” I said.

Margaret brought the new good-luck charm up to her face and carefully pointed at the dots. “It’s four! The dots mean that it is four.”

“Four years old,” I said.

“No, four months. It means I’ll have four months of true happiness.”

Orillia switched her grip on the gun and rested her knee on the seat beside her. She took a big breath and hovered her finger over the trigger.

Margaret turned her palm up as the ladybug crawled to the other side of her hand. "Did you know ladybugs take away sickness and diseases? It's true. People say it's just a fairytale, but it's not. They're just like the explorers. Aren't they? They took away all the diseases. My teacher was sick once, and she said a ladybird...ladybug, landed on her hand when she was in her bed, and the next day she was all better."

“Ask her what her teacher’s name is.” Orillia tightened her grip on the gun.

The drops of blood echoed in my ear behind me.

“What’s your teacher’s name?” I asked.

Margaret shrugged. "Beats me." She turned her finger back around as the ladybug crawled onto her nail again. She smiled to herself. "Hi, Ladybird." She looked at me. "My mom calls them ladybirds. I like calling them ladybirds."

“Okay,” I replied.

“I’m waiting for it to fly away. In case you’re wondering. The direction it flies is where my good luck and happiness will come from. It’s true.”

I nodded. “That’s great, Margaret.”

“Maybe it will help me find my mom.”

“Maybe.”

I shuffled closer to the aisle next to Sab—his head nearly touched the top of the bus. “Don’t do this,” I whispered.

“Stay put,” Sab replied, keeping his eyes on Margaret.

“Ask her what your name is.” Orillia’s jaw clenched. Strands of blonde hair slipped across her forehead. The spots of blood from the dead boy’s head hardened on her face.

“Don’t do this. Please don’t do this.” My neck pulsated.

Orillia looked down the barrel of the gun at Margaret and closed her left eye. “My cousin got pulled from our camp a couple weeks back.” She wiggled her nose and opened her eye again.

“Those drones found our hide-out up by Bingaman's Landing, next to the old Bridge. Didn't think anything of it at first but then those monsters came. They weren't human-like yet—just rubbery black things with those, those tentacles. Took Roen in the night—my cousin. Thought he was gone.” “But he wasn’t—eh Lia?” Danny flicked his lighter again as he leaned against the windows.

Orillia shook her head slightly, keeping the gun on Margaret. “Fuck no. He came back a couple days later—he found us on the move near the High School. That was when we snagged this bus. Anyway, I couldn’t believe it was him. I was like—shit—Roen, you’re alive, you know?”

“I figured it out first—didn't I Lia?” Danny lowered the flame to the vinyl at the top of the seat.

“Shud-up,” Orillia replied. She pushed some strands of hair back with her hand and re-gripped the gun. “Anyway, I thought he was fine, like I was so happy to see him and all, you know? Until he started forgetting my name. Figured he was banged up in the head or something, but it got worse. He didn’t know any of us. Then...”

“Then he killed Ryan.”

“Shud-up, will you shut the fuck up?”

“Sorry.”

Orillia gathered herself and sighed. “A couple days went by; we were camping out at the Walmart on Highway Five. Ryan was looking for an inhaler down one of the aisles and out of nowhere my cousin turns on him. Said something about Ryan being no good because of his asthma and then slammed his head against the wall.” “Crushed his skull.” Danny pulled the flame away from the seat. “Echoed through the whole store.”

“That was when I knew,” Orillia continued. “Roan was himself at times, but then other times he wasn’t. I knew he was brainwashed—infected. You know what I think? I think these—these, whatever they are—didn’t cure the world of diseases—no. I think they borrowed them, to study, to understand our flaws—then they come back here killing the old and the weak, leaving the rest of us healthy ones to—”

“Invade.” Danny picked at the burnt vinyl.

"To move in." Orillia nudged the Beretta forward, focusing in on Margaret's head. "They want to repopulate earth as humans, in the human form—invading the minds of young and the healthy—they are settling inside us, leaving their empty shells to rot. The transition is almost flawless. I mean think about it. If you're gonna take over a planet, you might as well take over the bodies of the most dominant species on that planet, right? But—" Orillia waved the end of the gun like it was her finger. "But, as they slowly take over our brains, there's that moment—that moment where our memories fade, our thoughts slip away. We start to forget simple things, things we should know."

"Like someone's name," Danny added.

Orillia nodded. "Like someone's name."

"That's horse-shit," I said, feeling some clarity return. "Like, I'm sorry about Roen and all, but come on, you can't assume all of this because your cousin went mad. We're all going mad. It's the end of the world, who isn't losing their minds?"

"Roen was infected," Orillia asserted.

"What happened to him then?" I asked. "Did you kill him? Did you kill him because he attacked some kid named Ryan? Did you kill him because he forgot your fucken name? I sometimes forget people's names. I forget shit all the time; it doesn't mean I'm infected."

"My cousin forgot who I was. My cousin killed a person for no good reason. He was infected."

“So? Maybe this kid, Ryan had mental problems before or something. How do you know? Maybe this Ryan guy attacked your cousin first. How do you know your cousin wasn’t just defending himself. I mean, people are doing all kinds of crazy shit out there. You can’t just kill someone because they forget your name. How much did you actually know this Ryan guy?”

Orillia laughed. “This Ryan guy was my brother. My cousin didn’t know who we were. My cousin killed my brother because my cousin was infected. So, like I said, ask Margaret what your fucken name is.”

The sun’s light now reflected off the white apartment buildings along the north end of the street, pushing the glow through the windows behind Danny and Orillia. Margaret’s hair lit up with oranges and reds, fluttering out like a giant sunflower. Her freckled face, with smudges of dirt along her cheeks, beamed with excitement. Her eyes focused studiously on the ladybug. Somehow she had dismissed us—somehow she had dismissed the gun pointed at her skull.

“What’s my name?” I asked her, pulling myself up.

Margaret looked at me and then back at the ladybug. “What?”

I leaned my stomach against the top of the seat, propping my knees up on the base of the chair.

“What my name?” I asked her again.

The red shell of the ladybug divided, allowing its transparent leaf-like wings to unfold. A second later, it lifted, scooting around Margaret’s tangled mane before following the rays of light out the north window of the bus.

Margaret giggled and turned to me, pointing out to the light.
“That’s where it will be. That’s where my happiness will be.”

I forced out a smile, feeling my throat tighten at the same time.
“Margaret, can you please answer my question. You know who I am right? What’s my name?”

Margaret lowered her hand and tucked it into her pink pants. She looked at the end of Sab’s gun and then over to Orillia’s.
“Dunno,” she whispered. “I dunno.”

My eyes welled up. My body shook.

“You know who I am, though right? You just forgot, right?” I lowered myself—meeting my eyes with hers.

“Did you see that ladybird?” Margaret asked.

“I did,” I replied. “What’s my name?”

Margaret rubbed her nose and pointed at the dead boy on the floor. “What happened to him?”

I closed my eyes, praying this wasn’t real. It didn’t make any sense to me. What happened to her, how did this happen? “What’s my name?”

Margaret picked at the dirt on her face. “I dunno, I dunno your name.”

Orillia lowered her eye to the barrel of the gun.

“Please don’t do this,” I said. My voice cracked.

“I’m sorry,” Orillia replied. “I’m really sorry.”

“What’s happening?” Margaret asked. “Why is this lady pointing a gun at me?”

Something inside of me bought into the possibility. Maybe my dad had engrained a logic into me—maybe it was an instinct for survival. Whatever it was, I felt I couldn't do anything else. Yeah, I needed to fight the idea that we should save my innocent neighbor, but deep down, I knew it was the right thing. Orillia was right. I hated to admit it, of course, I hated to admit it, but it made sense.

“This lady is pointing the gun at you because she’s helping you find your happiness,” I said, feeling the connection I had made with this little girl slip away.

Orillia looked at me and nodded. She closed her eyes—gently inhaled—and then pulled the trigger.

Chapter Twenty-Five:

Wait

I buried Margaret on June 12th, sometime in the early evening, just outside of Hidden Trail. Orillia helped me carry her body off the bus, and together with Danny, we dug a shallow hole in the soft earth next to the road.

The engine battery had stopped working again, so we had to sit tight for a few hours while Sab played around with the different levels of sulphuric acids and the rusted wires.

Cara watched from inside the bus, tending to Bailey's injuries from Danny's brutal beating. She stayed with him for pretty much the entire afternoon—her face—her gaze was gone, somewhere else. I wondered if she had given up.

For some reason, I didn't cry. I guess it was because of the cold reality that was starting to sink in. I loved Margaret, she was like a little sister, but I was quickly learning that crying only pulled you back—it made you vulnerable and weak.

Besides, Margaret was in a better place. She didn't need to spend the rest of her life exposed to the horror that we were sure to endure. This place, this town was no longer suitable for children. Shit, it wasn't suitable for anyone.

Danny placed a cross he fashioned out of sticks into the ground next to Margaret and the diabetic boy's final resting place. He lowered his head for a moment before flicking his lighter again inside his pocket.

Sab sat up in the driver's seat and turned the ignition on the engine for the hundredth time—this time, with success.

"Bingo!" he shouted. "I'm a genius. I'm a battery God."

Orillia jumped up onto the bumper and slammed the hood down. "Come on; we gotta get moving. We're lucky those drones didn't come around." She scooted down and wiped the dirt off her hands in the grass.

"I'm not coming," I said, blocking the sun with my hands.

"I'm heading north. I told you that already."

Orillia rubbed off the last bits of dirt with her shirt and stepped up onto the bus. "Your call. It's suicide. You know that right?"

"Don't care. My dad is up there. Maybe my mom. I can't leave them, not knowing that they could still be alive."

I noticed there was blood in my fingernails mixed in with the dirt. I knew it was Margaret's. I was the one who held her head as she collapsed to the floor on the bus. She didn't feel any pain—only the release of the potential darkness that was growing inside her.

Part of me wondered if I should cry—to at least show some compassion—to show Cara I was actually human—a human with feelings. But I didn't even cry that much as a kid, especially when it was forged from grief. That part of me left a long time ago.

I had to thank my parents for that.

"You're interesting." Orillia stepped back down to the road.

"Why would you say that?" I asked.

She looked out toward the hills, pulling her shoulders up to her chin. "You just are. You really wanna go back there, huh?"

"I do."

Orillia's hair fell over her face, dangling past her eyes. She tilted her head and pulled an elastic from her wrist to tie it back.

The wind picked up for a moment, swirling around us, pulling up the dried dust from the road.

The stick-cross swayed and shook in the raised mound on the other side of the ditch.

"Come with us to the harbor. I'll give you the bus when we get there." She lowered her head as the dirt and sand danced around at our feet. "You can go find your dad. It might take Sab a few days to fix that boat."

"You're going to wait for me?"

The wind blew her blood-stained yellow tank top up over her stomach, revealing a silver stud in her belly button. She didn't flinch as if she'd bared everything to the world already. "Maybe. Maybe not. I mean, we might be down there awhile. Sab has to build another battery. He can't use the one in this tin-can cuz it's a whole different type. Something about voltage, acid, lithium, yadda, yadda. Anyway, he says it might take him a bit to get it going." Orillia slammed her hand on the side of the bus. "Eh, Sab?"

Sab played with the radio and then leaned out to us. "What?"

"It's gonna take awhile to get the boat working. I was telling Sheldon it's going to take awhile to get the boat going because you have to make another battery."

"Yeah. Something like that. Are we going or what?"

"In a second. Will ya chill?"

"Will-ya-chill?" Sab squeezed out a baby voice and rolled his eyes.

Orillia lifted up her middle finger to him and then turned to me. “Whaddya say?”

I guess death brings out a bag of feelings. For a time, earlier in the day, I was positive Orillia was going to shoot me as well. She had a look about her, a blinded focus that said, ‘don’t mess with me.’ But now, as I looked at her standing on the gravel road, pulling bits of sand from her lips, I saw a warmer side—the same side Cara showed me back at the school.

“Why would you wait for me?” I asked, finally.

Orillia pulled off the plaid shirt from her waist and re-tied it. Her cheeks twitched and stretched her mouth out into a slight smile. “Simple answer, or complicated one?”

“Simple,” I replied.

“I like you, Sheldon.”

She leaned into me and touched my arm. My muscles instantly tightened. Goosebumps danced around my body. Like Cara, the pain in my head lifted again. All I could see was her—her perfectly shaped nose, her perfectly tanned face, sprinkled with specks of dried, blackened blood. A strand of hair fluttered over her eyes before she steered it away with the turn of her head.

“Is Cara your girlfriend?” Orillia asked.

I lifted my shoulders, feeling the touch of her fingers again on my skin. “No. I mean, I don't really know her that well. I used to see her at baseball all the time when we played the Bandits, but that was it. So, um no. She's not my girlfriend.”

“Have you ever kissed a girl before?” she asked.

Her words slipped smoothly in my head, soothing the chaos that spilled around my brain.

“No,” I said. “I mean, it's not like I didn't have my chances, you know. Just never got around to it—her. A girl.”

Orillia carefully brought her mouth to my ear. “Sheldon?” she whispered. Her breath warmed my face.

“Yes?” I replied. The hairs on my neck stood up. In that moment, I was weak at the knees. This heartless brute of a girl—this beautiful blonde tomboy with dirty fingernails and blood-stained clothes was giving me butterflies.

“Do you like me?” Her nose touched my cheek as she gently faced me again.

“Yes,” I said again.

She looked at my mouth and then back up to me. Her long dark lashes framed her crystal blue eyes.

“Good,” she said in a soft whisper.

She eyed my lips again and kissed me, gently caressing my tongue with hers.

She pulled back and touched my face.

“Now get on the fucken bus.”

Chapter Twenty-Six:

The Barn

I sat up at the front in a daze. An emotional daze. I didn't dare look at Cara at the back. For some reason, I felt like I had just cheated on her—as though we were boyfriend and girlfriend and we were in the middle of a lover's quarrel.

I didn't know what she thought of me. I hoped she understood why I had finally accepted Margaret's death. I hope she understood the little girl was already dying inside.

Maybe Cara didn't like me—maybe she never did. I mean, was it safe to say we were all just using each other?

Isn't that what we're all like anyway?

How often are people really selfless?

I'm a teenager, and I'm curious. That's what my dad always said. If Cara wasn't interested in me, and Orillia was, then forget Cara.

Right?

Orillia pulled out a water bottle and sucked back half of it.

"Want some?" She shoved it onto my lap.

I nodded and took a swig. "Thanks."

She leaned forward and tapped Sab on the shoulder. "Ready?"

Sab played with the gear box and pushed it into first. He revved the engine and moaned forward.

I glanced back over to the mound of dirt on the side of the road where we had left Margaret to rest. Her little smile—her giant red hair would be forever imprinted in my memories.

Goodbye Margaret Swift.

The bus hadn't moved a few feet when we saw a large ominous figure step out onto the road ahead of us.

"Where the hell did that come from?" Orillia muttered. "Turn around, turn around."

Behind its body, a dark leathery shell clung to one of its legs and back.

It was my first time seeing an ogre full on—in its human-like form. It pushed down with its arms onto the black object and pulled its leg free.

"Is it shedding its skin?" I said.

"Looks like it," Sab replied.

It stood still for a minute on the road, wobbling from side to side. It swiveled its shoulders and studied the mound of skin it had left behind.

From where we were, perhaps two-hundred yards away, I could finally understand its colossal size. The trees along the side of the road towered over our bus. Those same trees appeared dwarfed next to the ogre.

"Turn around Sab." Orillia tapped his shoulder again. "Get us the hell out of here."

"On it." Sab threw the gear into reverse and heaved all of his weight onto the gas. The bus clanked and rattled as it pulled backward along the road.

“Turn it around, can’t you turn it around?” Orillia jumped over the dried blood stains along the aisle and rushed to the back of the bus. Her blue plaid shirt flopped up and down behind her. “Keep it straight. Just keep it straight. I’ll tell you when to turn.” She plastered her hands on the back window, watching the road.

I remained in my seat at the front, fixated on the monster as it turned back to us. Its chest expanded before taking its first steps—free of its alien shell. Naked.

Although, there were no visible reproductive parts.

In seconds, it bounded over the ground—snorting, and grunting.

Was this thing going to hurt us?

“Talk to me, Lia? I can't see the road." Sab swapped glances at the ogre through the window and then up to Lia in the rearview mirror.

“There’s a spot up here—you can turn around there. Where’s the gun?” Orillia threw her hands up, looking along the rows of seats.

Danny pulled the Beretta out of his pants and opened the window. “I go it.”

Orillia turned back to the rear window. “Shoot it if it gets close.”

“I’ll shoot the fucker if it’s *not* close,” he replied.

Orillia slammed her hands onto the glass. “Stop. Stop! Sab, stop. Turn into that road.”

The bus veered wildly to the right, bounding over the ditch and onto an old farm path. It then skidded to a stop before Sab ground the gears back into first. Sab yanked on the wheel and powered the giant yellow tin can onto the main road again, ripping up rocks and dirt behind it. Duffle Bags and soup cans flung about the aisle and seats. An old brown suitcase slid off the top racks and burst open onto the floor, spilling out a carton of Marlboros and a box of Mr. Big chocolate bars.

A gunshot rang out behind me. I turned to see Danny leaning out the window, aiming the Beretta at the giant.

A second shot.

“I hit it!” Danny hollered back inside the window. “Did you see that? Ripped off a piece of its arm!”

I stood up and looked out the back. The ogre was losing steam, maybe four hundred yards away now. I couldn't see any marks where the bullet hit—to me it looked like a bazooka wouldn't even make a dent.

Orillia scooted up to the front again, hopping over the chaotic mess on the floor.

Hints of color appeared on the horizon, looking over the deserted town of Hidden Trail.

I checked back on the ogre.

Six hundred yards.

Danny pulled himself back inside and moved to a window on the other side. He sniffed the barrel before sticking it outside again. “Do you think I could hit it from here?” He whipped his head inside. “Do you think I can hit it from here?”

No one responded. We focused on the terrain, looking out for any more giants that might jump out from the woods—not that we should miss them. Their size was ridiculous.

Orillia stood up. “What’s that?” She pointed straight ahead. “Do you see that?”

“Yeah, I see it,” I said. “It’s a drone.”

“Get off the road Sab,” Orillia said with urgency in her voice. “Pull off.”

“Where?” Sab gripped the wheel tightly, looking up at the rearview mirror. “Do you see the giant? Danny? Do you see the giant?”

Danny slipped back inside the window again. “What?”

“Do you see the fucken giant?” Sab repeated.

Danny shook his head.

“Pull off!” Orillia demanded.

“Where Lia? Where? There’s nowhere to pull off!”

“Anywhere, just get off the road.”

Sab whipped his head around to Orillia. “Do you wanna drive?”

Orillia’s nostrils flared. She shook her head and scanned the area around us.

The windows rattled as Sab pushed the bus up to sixty. Pink streamers tied to the driver side mirror flapped about in the wind.

A second drone appeared ahead of us.

Sab pulled the wheel to the right and slammed the bus into an open field. The impact catapulted everyone and everything upward, smashing us against the ceiling and back down hard against the seats and floor. More bags tumbled off the racks. An old map unfolded from behind the sun-visor, spreading out over Sab. He swung his arm out and pushed it down the steps to the door.

I tried to get my balance again—peering back out the front window.

The ground—the landscape—everything shuddered violently.

Wooden planks from a white fence split into pieces as the bus steamrolled into a second field. Up ahead, a barn appeared around a cluster of trees. To the right, there was a white house with a red roof.

In seconds we crossed the field, heading straight toward the barn. Sab held onto the wheel as though his life depended on it—maybe it did.

I closed my eyes anticipating the impact of the barn, just yards away from us.

An explosion of timber and glass sprayed out in all directions. I covered my head with my arms and tucked myself into my knees. The bus stopped suddenly, pushing the weight of everything inside toward the front. Heavy objects bounced off my arms and lower back.

Screams of terror, of pain, rang out.

And then stopped.

Around every joint, every limb, the blood pumped fiercely through my veins.

The engine from the bus sputtered and clicked before whining and hissing into stillness.

Sorta like me.

I didn't want to open my eyes.

I didn't want to see any more death.

Not now.

Not ever.

Chapter Twenty-Seven:

Flip-Flops

I had never thought of silence as a haunting reminder of death. I used to think it was simply a pause in time—a moment where lives were simply waiting to start again. I used to love silence. For me, it meant my parents weren't fighting and that perhaps they were happy, in each other's arms, in each other's hearts.

What did I know?

Years of silence at home began turning into time apart. It meant my dad was alone in the fields working too many hours keeping his farm running. Silence meant my mother wasn't home—it meant she was separating herself from him—from us.

But I was part of them, despite my sadness, despite my anger. They were my parents, and there was a natural pull for me to find them.

Silence now meant loss—and I needed to fill that void.

“Are you okay?”

I felt a tap on my shoulder.

I lifted my head to find the dark outlines of Orillia hovering over me.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Anything broken?”

I unfolded my body and stretched my head up over the seat. Through the window, slits of white light streamed through four walls of wooden planks—planks that made up the inside of the barn.

“I'm fine,” I said finally.

Clouds of dust filled the bus, glistening in the lines of light.

Sab sat in the driver's chair, pulling bits of glass from his face.

“There's a drone outside,” he whispered. “Nobody move.”

Silence.

Yet again we waited—waited for the opportunity to start life again. Maybe silence didn't mean death or separation; maybe it meant survival.

I couldn't tell you how long we crouched down in that bus, inside that barn. I wanted my phone. I wanted to sleep. I think exhaustion was finally hitting me. I mean, I hadn't closed my eyes for nearly two days. Looking at the lights slipping through the barn, I guessed it was about eight-thirty. My dad used to say that knowing the exact time wasn't all that important; it was simply knowing the path of the sun as it moved across the sky.

Cara's flip-flops slapped against her feet as she marched to the front of the bus. She had the sports coat she found at the school tied around her waist.

“Open the door.” She held Bailey's hand. His eyes were puffy and yellow. “Drone or no drone, we're leaving.”

Sab tightened some torn cloth around his bloodied left hand and fastened it into a knot. He leaned forward and pulled on the handle of the door, letting it open.

“Wait,” I said. “Where are you going?”

Cara took a breath and glanced over at me. “Screw you, Sheldon.” She pulled on Bailey's hand kicking away the old road map on the steps. She grunted and skipped off the bus.

Orillia eyed me as I jumped up and followed the two into the barn. The physical pain—the headaches, the strain in my lower back—the cuts and bruises from two days of running was nothing—nothing compared to what was going on inside my head. I didn't want this—I didn't need this. I couldn't have Cara angry with me—who was I kidding? I *did* care. The girl looked after me—shit, she saved my fucken life.

“Can you please wait?” I kicked up hay and rotted bits of wood as I hustled over to the two. “Cara, please stop.”

She turned around at the back of the bus where it had crashed through the barn. Loose boards hung from a beam above us.

“I don't know you.” She spoke robotically, letting go of Bailey's hand. “Please leave us alone.”

“Where will you go? It's not safe out there,” I asked.

She opened her mouth as if to speak, only to exhale another lengthened grunt. She whipped her hair around and pushed through the hole in the wall.

“Cara, please.” I reached for her arm.

“Don't touch me!” Cara ripped her hand away. “Don't ever touch me.” Her cheeks flushed out red and white patches.

“Please, Cara. Don't me mad. I had to.” I glanced back at the bus, half expecting Orillia to be watching us. “She had to.”

Cara's nostrils flared again as she pulled Bailey out onto the field.

The sun pressed against the treeline, past the white house with the red roof. A trail of tire tracks zig-zagged across the field to the main road. Cara's legs lifted up over the tall grass and scraggly weeds. "Come on Bailey. He's no good for us."

Danny stuck his head out of one of the windows and snorted back some phlegm. He spat out into the barn, watching it explode against a rusted wheelbarrow. "Let her go, dude. Those drones will see us and then it's gonzos."

"Shut up," I replied. "Those drones know we're here. Everyone knows we're here."

"Gonzos man. Didn't you hear me?"

"Danny? It's Danny right?"

"Yup," he nodded.

"Danny. Shut the fuck up."

The goofy teenager tucked his head back in the bus and closed the window.

I pushed through the hole in the barn behind the bus and followed Cara and Bailey over the grass and onto a gravelly path. "I'm sorry, Cara. I'm really sorry. Please stop and let me talk to you."

Cara whipped her hair around and looked at me again. "What is there to talk about? You're a murderer."

"I didn't kill her. I didn't pull the trigger."

"You might as well have." Like Bailey, her face—her eyes were also swollen, only hers were from tears, from hours of pain. But she didn't get it. I felt that pain too.

"I loved her like a sister; you know that right?" I pointed to Bailey, still holding her hand. "Bailey? You know that right? She was my friend."

Bailey nodded and lowered his head. His orange hair, like Margaret's, glowed in the twilight.

Cara stood frozen, catching her breath. Her white t-shirt with the Hidden Trail school Bandits logo on it clung to her skin. The outline of her dark bra filtered through.

I stepped closer to her again. The little blonde hairs on her arms glowed.

"Please don't go," I whispered. "Please don't leave me."

I reached my hand out to her again, hoping she would see who I really was. She had to know me—she had to trust me. I was just as scared as her.

I touched her arm.

"Get away from me!" she shouted, slapping my chest. "Stay the hell away from me!"

Only she didn't move. She dropped her arms again, reaching out for Bailey's hand.

I took a big breath and looked out past the trees. The air was warm and clean, filling my lungs with energy. So many words jumped around in my thoughts, frantically searching for the right thing to say—the smart thing to say.

But nothing came to mind.

Cara's hair drooped down over her face now. She turned around and pulled Bailey along the path.

Flip.

Flop.

Flip.

Flop.

“I picked you flowers once,” I said, feeling my words spill out before my brain could process them. “Well, they were wild flowers, but still, they were flowers.” My insides quivered and turned. “I used to watch you from the outfield when I played baseball.”

Cara stopped at a small walking bridge leading up to the red and white house.

“I used to pick weeds out there,” I continued. “Waiting for anyone to hit a ball out to me. It got pretty boring at times, especially when Kit Mooney was on the mound. But this one day, you were sitting in the stands, cheering on your boyfriend—Dushan and—and I couldn’t take my eyes off of you.” I swallowed, feeling my face heat up. “There were flowers growing in the grass, beautiful blue and white flowers. I picked them and kept them in my glove. I pictured myself giving them to you; I imagined you hugging me and kissing me on the cheek—or—or something like that. Stupid, I know.”

A butterfly circled me, settling its elegant structure on a rock next to the path. Cara remained still on the bridge, rubbing her fingers over the white paint-chipped railing.

I stepped closer yet again.

“I sat in the dug-out during the next inning, making sure the flowers didn't fold or tear. Our team was watching Dushan at bat. Everyone's eyes glued to him—mine, though, mine were glued to you. You watched the guy with such—love. Man, was I jealous. I didn't have the guts to give those flowers to you; you seemed so into him.” I dragged my feet along the gravel. “When the game ended—when your boyfriend hit the gaming winning homerun, you remember that? You rushed the field to hug him—barefoot—in your orange sundress. You looked like you should have been on the cover of a beauty magazine or something. Anyway—anyway.”

The butterfly stretched its wings and lifted up into the darkening sky again.

“I left the flowers—I left them—”

Cara turned around and let go of Bailey's hand.

“You left them in my flip-flops,” she said.

I nodded. “I left them in your flip-flops.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight:

Bad Apples

Cara's face melted, her eyes squeezed shut, pushing out giant tears. I stood on the bridge next to her now, desperately wanting for her to understand. She had to know I cared, and that I wasn't a murderer.

Her hand rested on the rail of the bridge, her fingers scratching the paint.

"I'm sorry," I whispered to her.

She wiped her eyes and sniffed. A shimmering glow bordered the rim of her nostril. "She was just a little girl."

"I know," I replied. "I know she was." I leaned into her, placing my hands on her shoulders.

She pushed away and stepped off the bridge onto the other side. "No, I'm still upset with you. I'm still pissed off."

"I know you are; I get it." I reached out to her again.

"No," she muttered, slapping my arm.

"Cara, please."

She punched my chest and stepped away from me, shuffling up toward the house. "She was just a little girl. She was just a little girl."

"I know," I said. "She was a perfect little girl too."

Cara nodded and dabbed the corner of her eye with her knuckle. "You should've stopped it. You didn't know for sure."

“She killed a boy, Cara. She was sick. She wasn't getting better.”

“How do you know that? You don't know that.”

Cara's lips trembled, her shoulders pushed up to her ears. “You don't know that.” Little bursts of air slipped out as she gripped the railing. She couldn't hold the sobs back any longer.

I reached out to her once again, only this time she embraced me. She squeezed me with every bit of energy she had left inside. The weeks of fear, the terror and sadness that was trapped in her strong shell, finally spilled out.

Cara was finally letting go—perhaps saying goodbye, perhaps accepting the cold hard truth.

She had only known Margaret for a short time, but the little kid entered her heart.

Margaret had entered my heart a long time ago.

It had only been a few hours, and I missed her too—like crazy.

“The Ladybird showed her the way,” Bailey said, pointing at the fading colors along the horizon. “She's in a better place, right Sheldon?”

Cara and I pulled away; our eyes met for that one extra moment, that moment that said we were okay. The two of us looked down at Bailey. His face beamed with energy.

I reached down and pulled his body next to mine, squeezing him with the same love I felt for little Margaret. Hearing his voice was like a new beginning like everything was going to work out.

I felt my face contort. I felt the rush of tears flow from my eyes.

I too, let go.

I held onto Cara and Bailey for as long as I could. I didn't want to step away. I was afraid the cold hard reality would sink back into me like a long sharp knife.

But who was I kidding?

This was it. I couldn't block it out.

This was the beginning of the end of the world.

Wasn't it?

At least I had her back. At least Cara was starting to understand.

We all settled down in the bus with the intention of getting some rest and heading out to the water in the morning. I managed to concoct a fairly comfy bed under the back seats with some old jackets and a duffle bag filled with blankets. Sab agreed to take first watch, with me taking second, and Orillia third.

Cara and Bailey nestled in on the seats above me while the rest of the gang made their beds at the front.

I couldn't remember closing my eyes—the sheer exhaustion had simply taken over.

After two painfully long days, I was finally asleep.

Bliss.

The faint chirping of birds perched up in the rafters of the barn alerted me that it was morning. For some reason, Sab didn't wake me to keep an eye out. The light from the blue sky beamed in through the hole in the barn behind me, shining down through the back window of the bus.

I pulled myself upright, feeling the pain in my head and back return.

"Hi, Sheldon." Bailey sat in the seat next to me, his knees propped up against the back of the rest in front of him.

"So, you're talking again now, eh?" I smiled and stretched my neck.

Bailey nodded and glanced out the window.

"Where is everyone?" I asked.

Bailey touched the glass and pointed. "They're making breakfast."

I peered out the window to see Cara and Orillia sitting together on some old plastic lawn chairs with a Coleman stove propped up on a wooden cable reel. Cara was wearing a different top, a bright red thin strapped one she probably got from one of the duffle bags. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail. Danny stood over them, flicking his lighter and smoking a cigarette.

I reached for my pocket, forgetting that my phone was gone.

"What time is it?" I asked, feeling less like a farmer who can read the sky and more like a confused kid.

Bailey shrugged.

I watched through the window for a while, seeing Cara and Orillia smile with each other, talking about something simple and carefree. They looked like they could have been best friends—perhaps even sisters. I don't know what was said to each other earlier, but I guess the two realized there were bigger fish to fry.

No wonder I liked them.

Damn, they were hot.

“Are we going to die?” Bailey folded his arms; his knees were still tucked up against the back of the chair in front of him.

“No, of course not. We’re going to be fine.”

“But Margaret died.”

I sat down next to him and tucked my legs up against the back seat as well. “Margaret got sick. She got infected.” I folded my arms like him.

“How?” Bailey asked. “How did she get sick? Are we gonna get sick?”

I sniffed my armpit, smelling the stale sweat from my body. I needed a shower, badly. “No. We’re not gonna get sick. Margaret got bit or something. It won't happen to you.”

“How do you know?”

“Because we will make sure nothing comes near you. You won't get bit.”

Bailey dropped his head, tucking his chin into his chest. He looked out the window at the girls who were making something on the camp stove.

We listened through the window to their muffled conversations about school and friends and family. Danny paced around them, distant and lost in his thoughts—the Beretta tucked into the back of his jeans. I didn't know where Sab was but figured he was probably asleep at the front of the bus.

“Maybe she ate something.” Bailey tilted his head toward me. “Maybe she didn't get bit.”

A warm rush of energy shifted through my body and into my face.

I dropped my legs and sat up. I couldn't believe I didn't think of it before. “She ate the apples. Holy shit, she ate those apples from that tree. Didn't she?”

Bailey nodded. “She did.”

“She told me she took apples from a busted up apple tree. The same tree that one of those aliens came out of.”

“Margaret liked apples. I think it was her seventh favorite food.” Bailey counted to himself with his fingers.

I rubbed my forehead, feeling the sweat and grease slip off onto my hand. “I remember thinking it was weird an apple tree would have ripe apples so early in the year.”

Bailey stuck out his tongue and licked the tip of his nose. “She told me once that apples were her number two fruit. Kiwi was her favorite, though. She loved kiwi. Personally, I think kiwi tastes like rotten strawberries.”

I felt my stomach turn. “Crap. I can't believe it. Those things got into her through a goddamn apple.”

Bailey counted with his fingers again “You swore twice now this morning.”

“Yeah, sorry. We gotta be careful what we put in our bodies man. I should talk to the others.”

Bailey bobbed his head again. “She hid the apple cores in the desk drawer in that classroom. Did you know that? She tried to keep it a secret, but I knew she was sneaking them from somewhere. There were always fruit flies buzzing around each morning when we checked on you—while you were in that long sleep.”

“Did you eat any?” I asked.

Bailey tapped his finger against the window. “Whaddya mean?”

“I mean, did you eat the apples?”

He rubbed his finger along the glass, the condensation from our heated bodies left a mist along the pane. “I don’t remember.”

“What do you mean you don’t remember? Do you remember seeing Margaret’s apples, and taking any?” My voice deepened.

“You’re scaring me.” Bailey rubbed out the lines he made on the window and dropped his feet to the floor.

“Sorry Bail. It’s just really important that I know.”

“Why?”

I swallowed, feeling my chest tighten. “Because those apples might have been bad.”

“Bad how? Like poisonous? Did she eat a poisonous apple? Is that why that girl shot Margaret?”

I stood up and folded up the sheets strewn over the aisle. "No, no. Forget I said anything. I'm going to check on the breakfast and find a place to go to the washroom. Do you need to go?"

Bailey nodded.

"Okay," I continued. "Come on. Let's go find a washroom. Don't worry about the apples. We're fine. We're all fine."

Bailey smiled and followed me off the bus.

Chapter Twenty-Nine:

Dandelions

Cara's face blushed when I stepped off the bus. At least it looked like it. She lowered her head and tucked her arms into her chest.

"Hey," I said.

The small propane canister hummed as a blue flame shot up from the base of the stove. She pulled up the collar of her shirt and looked over to Bailey. I didn't notice on the bus, but his eyes were swollen, much more than the night before. Black and yellow bruises formed along the bridge of his nose.

"Hey," Orillia said. She sat in the rusted lawn chair poking at the pot on the stove with a spoon. "You slept okay?"

I rubbed my head, feeling the stiff strands of hair ruffle between my fingers. "Yeah, what happened last night? I thought I was going to do second watch?"

"I did it," Cara replied. She brushed a fly off her arm and crossed her legs. "You were out like a light. Figured you needed the sleep." She glanced up at me for a second and smiled.

My heart fluttered. Seeing her face, seeing those lips, was all I needed. She was my fuel.

"Tha...thanks," I said, struggling to find better words.

Cara lifted her arms up for Bailey to come. He sat down on her lap as she checked his face.

“You hungry?” Orillia asked. She scooped up some corn and sniffed it.

I wondered for a moment how long I had slept. Somehow, in just one night, the tension between Orillia and Cara seemed to change. Not that I was complaining.

“Yeah, I’m starving,” I said. “But I gotta hit the little boy’s room first. Bailey and I are going to check out the farmhouse. Anyone wanna come?”

Orillia dropped the spoon in the pot and stood up. “I’ll come.”

I looked at Cara and back to Orillia. “Sure. Where’s Sab?”

Danny pulled out the Beretta behind us and pointed it at the birds in the rafters. His cigarette still clung to his lips. “Looking for a battery. Looking for another fricken battery.” He closed one eye and tucked his face close to his shoulder, aiming the gun carefully to the top of the barn. “Pow, pow. You’re dead tweety-bird.”

“Danny, will you stop with the Rambo shit?” Orillia poured the last bits of corn from a can into the pot and placed it on the floor.

“Yes, ma'am," he muttered, tucking the gun back into his pants. "Whatever you say, ma'am."

Orillia rolled her eyes and shook her head. She turned to me. "The bus isn't working again. Something came loose, not enough acid, yadda yadda." She handed Cara the spoon. "Not sure how long it'll be, but we might be stuck here for a bit."

“How long is ‘a bit’?” I asked.

Orillia tightened the shirt around her waist and pushed her hair back. “Dunno. A day or two at least.”

My thoughts flooded with images of my dad, trapped up at the hills, wondering if I was still alive. I tried my best not to worry, but I felt the urgency to go to him—to find him and let him know I was okay. In a way, I wanted to prove to him that I was already the man he wanted me to grow into. I wanted to be the one who rescued him and to know I wasn't just a goofy smart-ass kid with mediocre grades and a terrible batting average. I was not the pathetic insecure kid who hid in his room whenever his parents fought; I was not that coward anymore.

“Sheldon, I really need to go.” Bailey tugged on my hand and hopped on the spot a couple of times.

“Okay, bud. We’ll be right back,” I said to Cara.

She bit her lip and patted Bailey on the head. Her toes tucked into her flip-flops. “Hope you like canned corn and mushroom soup. That’s all we got. Should be ready in a few minutes. See if there are any bowls and cups.”

“Okay,” I said.

“And see if there is chocolate,” Cara added, lifting the spoon up.

“For sure.”

“And gin.” She winked at me and stuck the spoon back in the pot.

Orillia led Bailey and me through a small rickety door on the other side of the barn. The sun was fairly high in the sky. I could only guess it was late morning, maybe eleven.

On the way up, Bailey held my hand, and for a brief moment, I felt like my dad.

I felt important.

Bailey stopped for a second and picked up a dandelion, filled with white seeds.

“Do you think if I blow on this, and make a wish, it will come true?”

Orillia kicked at the tall grass, almost pretending not to hear him.

“Sure,” I replied.

Bailey held it up to his mouth and blew as hard as he could. The seeds scattered wildly in the air, before settling on the warming breeze.

He closed his eyes for a second and then reached for my hand again.

When we got to the house, the front door was already open, as if the family who once lived there left in a hurry. I wondered how the word spread about the invasion, whether everyone was caught off guard like my dad and me, or if they all knew already—that the world was coming to an end. Still, it didn't make sense how those monsters took over so quickly, leaving us so vulnerable—so confused.

What did they do with everyone?

It was like the entire planet just got up and left.

“It smells funny.” Bailey tucked in beside me as we stepped into the house. He pushed the first door open and peeked in. “Found it. Can I go first?”

“Yeah bud, take your time.”

He checked behind the door and then closed it behind him.
“Don't go anywhere,” he said.

“I won't.”

Orillia kept walking through the main corridor. The faint sounds of Michael Jackson's *Thriller* played over a speaker in another room.

Orillia stopped at the end, holding herself as if escaping a chill. She looked to her right and then to her left. Her gaze shifted upward like her eyes were following the stairs to the second floor. She pointed and nodded to me. "Gonna go check it out," she said.

Seeing that the power never shut down, that somehow the invaders managed to take control over the whole grid system, it didn't surprise me that electronics would still be running. It wasn't like we had time to pack up and move to grandma's house or something. I wonder if the whole world was surprised at the same time, I mean I wonder if these things all came from the trees in one calculated movement.

“Be careful,” I said.

Orillia raised her brow with a ‘come-on-please’ face. She lifted her shirt and pointed to a gun in her shorts.

I smiled and shook my head.

She put her finger over her mouth and gestured for me to be quiet. She stuck up the middle finger, smiled back and then disappeared around the corner.

The house did have a funny smell, like mothballs and fried food. Black stains soaked into the yellowy-brown hardwood. Cobwebs coated the corners of the walls. There were old gold painted picture frames on the walls with paintings of horses running along a beach, and grazing in a meadow.

The toilet flushed, and the tap turned on.

“Finished?” I asked.

“Yup got myself a drink too,” Bailey replied. He opened the door and dried his hands on his shirt. I hadn't noticed before, but his shirt had the Bandits logo on the front. I forgot he used to play a couple of years back in the midget diamond on the other side of Hidden Trail Park. I think he stopped playing because his mom couldn't afford it.

“Why don't you head back to the bus. I'll see what's here for a minute or two and then I'll come join you for breakfast.”

Bailey nodded and checked the fly on his pants. “Okay.”

He looked out to the field for a second and glanced back at me. The shrill from a grasshopper's legs rubbing together pierced the summer air.

“It's okay. You're safe, bud,” I said.

“I know. Just making sure there are no monsters.”

“Good idea.”

Bailey took a big breath and brushed the hair out of his eyes. He stepped onto the front walk and then stopped.

“Do you know what I wished for?” he asked.

“What?”

“When I blew on the dandelion. Do you know what I wished for?”

I lifted my shoulders and shook my head. “No idea.”

Bailey bent down and re-tied his shoes. He carefully configured both laces into double bows. He stood up and looked out at the sky. “I wished for Margaret to come back.”

The Michael Jackson song still played softly through the corridor of the house.

“That’s a great wish,” I said.

Bailey tucked his arms into his sleeves and stretched out his shirt. “I know. Do you think it’ll come true?”

It dawned on me—in that moment—that being ten years old might possibly be the perfect age for the end of the world. Truths are so vague and gray. Knowledge is but a distant place, and ignorance—ignorance is the key to happiness.

Like I said before, I used to love living vicariously through these kids. Maybe I needed to think that way again.

“I think it’ll come true,” I said to him. “Keep making wishes buddy. I think they’ll all come true.”

Bailey untucked his arms from his shirt and twirled about on the front walk. He skipped backward a couple of times before turning and scurrying down toward the barn. The white seeds from the dandelions splashed up into the air as he plowed through the tall grass.

Chapter Thirty:

Upstairs

I stared at the face looking back at me in the bathroom mirror. I saw my dad, in my eyes—in my jaw. I struggled to see my mom.

Maybe I didn't want to.

My eyes were a dark blue, almost washed out—more like a gray. It was like the life or energy had been sucked out of me.

Drained.

My hair looked like shit—like an oversized bird's nest.

I turned on the tap and splashed water on my face. I picked at the dirt and blood in my fingernails and scrubbed my arms with a cloth.

I checked under the sink for any medicine or stuff we could use on the bus.

Nothing.

I emptied out the garbage can onto the floor and filled it with leftover toilet paper, the cloth and a half filled soap dispenser.

I peeked into the living room and snagged a couple of candles from the mantel and put them into the can as well. On the wall next to the serving table was a picture of an older man dressed in a tacky green sweater standing beside a woman and a teenaged boy.

They appeared to be happy.

I looked at the picture again, this time more closely at the boy. The curly brown hair, the weasely eyes, and thick jawline looked familiar. I was pretty sure he was on Todd's brother's baseball team.

A mouse scurried across the floor and disappeared under a glass shelving unit. In the kitchen, the cupboard doors were still open—the sink still dripping.

I pulled a couple plastic plates and cups from one of the shelves and added them to my collection. The fridge was pretty much empty—nothing but an open box of sour milk and a black piece of fruit that looked like an orange.

There were a couple of boxes of cake mix, sugar, flour and some cans of beans left in one of the cupboards.

I took the beans.

Not sure anyone was up to doing any baking.

I could only assume this family had heard about the attack and packed up the place as quickly as possible.

I wandered through the kitchen and followed the sound of the music up the stairs.

Another Michael Jackson song kicked in, this time it was, ‘The Man in the Mirror.’

“Orillia?” I shouted. “Where are you?”

Piles of clothes covered the second floor, strewn across the carpet. A half-filled black leather suitcase leaned against the railing.

“Orillia?” I called out again.

An iPod with a dock and speakers was plugged in on top of an old office desk.

A foul smell wafted over to me—much stronger than downstairs. I gagged, tasting a bit of ‘bile’ punch up into my throat. I dropped the garbage can and covered my nose with my shirt.

“They're dead.” Orillia stepped out of one of the rooms at the front of the house and tossed me a wine bottle. She sprayed the room with a yellow perfume container and closed the door behind her.

“Who’s dead?” I asked.

“I dunno. The people who lived here.” She wandered over to the desk next to a wilted plant and flopped onto the chair. She turned up the volume on the iPod and leaned back. The sun beamed in through a small window next to her, casting a light across the cream-colored carpet. “Open it.”

“Open what?”

“The wine you goof.”

I looked at the bottle and shook my head. “You wanna drink this now?”

“Absa-fucken-lutley,” she replied. She kicked her long tanned legs up onto the desk and wiggled her shoes off, letting them drop to the floor. “What’s the rush, right? Got somewhere to go?”

“Yeah, I do.”

Orillia played with the split ends in her hair. “Whatever, you’re stuck here for now. Take a load off.”

“Fine.”

It wasn't because she had a gun on her or because she shot Margaret, but for some reason, I was sorta intimidated by Orillia.

Somehow, in her voice, in her tone, she managed to blend a kinda friendliness with an assertive command. It was a talent, something that my dad was very good at.

The perfume spray finally started to mask the stench from the closed room, making it somewhat bearable to breathe again.

“Is there really someone dead in there?” I rummaged through the desk drawer and pulled out a letter opener.

“Yeah. A man and a woman, deader than doornails.”

“What? Like suicide or something?” I pushed the cork through the neck of the bottle with the opener. “Ta-da.”

“Nice. Now give me a sip.” Orillia reached her hand out and took the bottle from me. She chugged back a couple of swigs and wiped her mouth. “Yeah, like suicide, I think. Kinda freaky how their bodies are laid out, though.”

“Freaky, like how? Is there just two of them?”

Orillia eyed the room with the closed door and slurped back another sip. She tapped the iPod and turned it off. “See for yourself. Or are you one of those sensitive pansy boys?”

I picked at the dirt under my nails again and wandered over to the door. My heart skipped, sending a funny pulse out to the rest of my body. I knew if I walked into the room, I would be plagued with another lasting image, something that would probably visit me in my dreams. But I couldn’t avoid this kinda stuff forever.

Right?

Images of Mr. Bryer, lying dead in the grass returned to me. His eyes—his wide open eyes—I couldn’t escape it. I couldn’t control it. It was only a matter of time until Margaret would invade my thoughts. My dad would probably tell me that her death was too fresh, too recent to be slipping deeply into my mind—like I hadn’t accepted it yet.

But I knew she would visit me soon enough.

“You okay?” Orillia asked.

I nodded and reached for the door.

I snatched the bottle from her and sucked back half of it, feeling the warm reds drizzle down the side of my mouth and neck. I handed the bottle to her and closed my eyes for a second.

I can do this.

I held my breath and pushed into the bedroom, feeling the wine warm the lining of my stomach.

The room was dark—the blinds closed. It took me a few seconds to adjust—to notice the bodies in the dim of light.

On the bed, a woman lay peacefully on her side, tucked warmly under a thin duvet—her eyes still closed as if she never woke. In her neck, the handle of a long blade jettied straight up, likely a kitchen knife from downstairs. A pool of dried blood soaked the sheets and the carpet where her slippers were carefully left, side by side.

The man's body—his back—arched inward between a footrest and an old floral armchair at the opposite end of the room. Streaks of blood-stained hand prints coated the wall next to him. His feet dangled in the air as though he had fallen and wedged his dying body into the awkward space.

Next to him, was the end of a busted lamp with the cord zig-zagging like a snake across the carpet.

The foul odor slipped through my short breaths. I quickly stepped back into the loft, closing the door behind me. “Jesus, what the hell happened to them?”

Orillia stretched out her arm again and handed me the bottle. “See why I wanted to drink this now?”

I nodded and took another swig.

And then another.

“That was insane. Someone killed them; it wasn't suicide.”

“No?” Orillia played around with the iPod, browsing through an old eighties music playlist.

“No, I think someone tried to kill them in their sleep. I can't believe I just saw that. Holy shit.”

We sat in the loft for a while, sharing sips from the Jackson Triggs Pinot Grigio.

I had never drunk wine before that day. I used to think it was just rotten grape juice so I never really bothered, even though my parents had bottles all over the house. Despite the much needed numbing of my brain, it didn't change my opinion.

It still tasted like shit.

“I'm gonna have a sh—shower.” Orillia stumbled to her feet and untied the shirt around her waist. Her lips were dark red and her teeth stained. She paraded across the floor with the gun still tucked into her shorts and tossed the shirt over the rail, watching it float to the main floor.

“Alright,” I mumbled, feeling a heaviness in my limbs.

“Did you know my dad was an alcoholic?” Orillia rubbed her feet along the carpet and stopped at the bathroom door. She turned to me and leaned against the doorframe. “Drank all the time.” She pulled her shirt off over her head, revealing a black bra. “Like all the time.”

I diverted my eyes, quickly playing with the playlists on the iPod. “Oh yeah?”

“Yup, h’even drank at work.”

“What did he do?” Her black bra—her shoulders, her stomach with a silver stud in her belly button, remained in my thoughts.

“He was a cop. Big bad—cop.”

I nodded, feeling the urge to turn around. She was beautiful, like gorgeous beautiful. “A policeman. Very cool.”

“Yeah. I guess. I gotta pee, be right back,” she added.

“Okay.”

I scrolled down to ‘Rio,’ by ‘Duran Duran’ and pressed play. I turned up the volume trying to drown out the sounds of Orillia on the toilet. I dropped my head onto the desk and tapped my thumb on the end of the letter opener. My skin pressed deeply over the sharp metal tip. A tiny ball of blood poked up, sitting on the end of my thumb.

I didn’t feel anything.

I was pretty sure I was drunk.

“Finished.” Orillia stood at the door again, this time just in her bra and undies.

Pink undies.

I turned away again, licking the blood from my finger.

“Why d’ya keep looking the oder way?” Orillia asked. Her voice slurred. “Are you being a gennleman, or—or a pansy again?”

“A gentleman,” I replied, carefully articulating my words.

She disappeared into the bathroom and turned on the shower.

"I think yer bean a pansy."

She stepped around to the door and tilted her head, letting her long hair dangle over the one side of her face. “Are you gonna si- there the whole time I’m in the shower?”

I sat up and sipped back the last drops of the wine. "I dunno. Should I?"

"No, you pansy, come here."

"Okay."

She giggled and disappeared into the bathroom again. "Good. Now, don't go doing anything funny, I don-know ya very well. Yer not some kinda perv, are you?"

I shook my head and walked over to the bathroom. She leaned against the counter next to the tub and looked at her teeth in the mirror. "Red wine sucks."

"Yup. Tastes like rotten grapes." I sat down on the toilet lid and leafed through a Farmer's Almanac, bathroom reader. "I'm a milk and cookies kinda guy, to be honest."

Orillia snickered and looked at me through the mirror. "I can tell. Pansy." She reached around the shower curtain and felt the water. The warm steam started to rise over the ceiling.

"Hot water. Holy shit, we have hot water." She slipped off her bra and undies, tucked behind the curtain and stepped into the shower. "Oh my god, this is so good."

I flipped through a couple more pages, glancing up at her blurred naked body through the curtain.

"Is there a razor? Check for a razor?"

"Mm-k." I looked under the sink and in the medicine cabinet above the mirror. I found one and handed it to her through the curtain, trying my best to look away.

I couldn't help but feel like a grown-up, though, like a real man. All the shows I had watched on tv with young couples in relationships, living together, having real responsibilities—seeing each other naked, kissing, having sex.

That could have been me now.

Only I didn't get the whole 'love' thing yet—unless that was what I was feeling for Cara and Orillia.

Was it possible to love two people at the same time?

Is that what the funny flutters in my chest and stomach were all about?

My mom used to watch some reality show a few years back when my dad worked in the field, about a bachelor living in a house with a bunch of girls. I think I remember the dude falling for more than one of them.

I guess it *was* possible.

I stood up and looked at myself in the mirror, feeling the room spin around me. I picked at a couple of the hairs on my chin. My foot kicked a heavy object on the floor, covered with Orillia's pink underwear and her shorts.

I carefully held onto the sink and lowered myself, pulling a gun out from under her clothes.

Her gun.

I gripped it in my hand, feeling its weight and size. I pointed it at the mirror, clumsily looking through the rear sight.

“Did you say your dad was a policeman?” I asked, looking at my reflection.

“What?”

“Is your dad a policeman?”

Orillia pulled the curtain back and laughed. "Nice gun Pansy. But you hold it like a dork."

I quickly lowered it to the counter and sat back down on the toilet seat, flipping again through the almanac. “Is your dad a policeman?”

“Yup.” Water dripped onto the tiled floor as she stroked her hair. She looked at the gun and then smiled at me. She closed the curtain again and turned off the shower. “Can you pass me a towel?”

“Sure. Hold on.” I checked the back of the door and pulled a red one from the rack, flinging it over the curtain rod. If I had been sober, I would be thinking how creepy it was that we were using the bathroom of a dead couple whose bodies were in the next room.

"Here you go."

Her blurred figure shifted about through the thin white plastic sheet, as she wrapped the red towel around herself. She pulled the curtain back and stepped onto the mat, tapping the water out of her ears.

“Didn’t I already tell you my dad was a cop? Wern you listening?”

I picked up the almanac again, whipping it open to a random page. “Yeah, but I just wanted to make sure I heard you right.”

Orillia pulled the hand-towel from the wall by the sink and wrapped her hair into it. “You heard me right. My drunken dad was a cop.”

I closed the book and filed it with the other bathroom readers in the basket beside me. “Was his name Ernie?”

Orillia dropped her towel to the floor, exposing her glistening clean naked frame. “Yes,” she said in a clear sobering voice. “How did you know?”

Distractions

Constable Ernie Greylin was an alcoholic. I knew it. My dad knew it, the whole town knew it. The funny thing was, no one said or did anything about it. I guess because he was good at his job. He supported us last year when my dad was laid up after being attacked by Tom Bryer. Of course, at the time, I thought it was because of Randle the bull. Regardless, Ernie visited us as often as he could, assuring my mom and me that my old man would be okay. That was just who he was. He cared about the people in his town.

I wondered, though, whether or not Ernie knew about the affair all along, and whether he was part of the cover-up. He must have been, I mean, he was one of my dad's only friends.

“I figured he was dead.” Orillia sat naked on the toilet seat and dried her hair. “When he didn’t answer his phone on the day of the attacks, I just put it in my head that he was gone.”

“Last I heard he was at the hills. Probably helped everyone up there escape too.” I took off my shirt and dunked my head under the shower tap. The warm water rushed over me, pulling off a month’s worth of oil and dirt.

I felt Orillia’s hand touch my neck, then sliding her fingers up into my hair. “This changes everything. This totally changes everything.” She squeezed out some shampoo and rubbed it in, massaging my scalp and lower back.

I didn’t wanna sober up.

Maybe drinking eased the pain of living—especially when living sucked.

Orillia washed my hair and rinsed it, confidently moving her hands over my skin like she had done this a million times.

I couldn't get the idea of her naked body out of my mind either, rubbing up against me, leaning onto my back. She felt smooth, like a pillow, like a warm, soft pillow.

She slipped on her bra and underwear while I washed the rest of my body in the shower. I didn't have the courage to strip down completely, but she didn't tease me about it.

I think the idea her father still being alive began seeping in.

"I'm gonna steal some clothes and snag some more wine. I'll meet you back at the barn. I gotta talk to Danny and Sab." She tied back her hair and pulled the curtain to the side. She stepped up into the tub and kissed me on the cheek. "Thanks for the company. That was fun."

I watched her leave the room as I stood dripping wet in my underwear. Soap suds tickled my feet and toes.

"And maybe you're right." Orillia poked her head back into the room.

"Right about what?"

"People." She bit at the already chewed nail on her finger and then closed the door behind her.

I turned the water back on and let it rush over my face, hoping to hold onto this feeling for a little while longer.

Of Orillia.

Of Cara.

Maybe it wasn't the alcohol that was numbing the pain of losing my family, the pain of Margaret's death—of the town turning upside-down.

Maybe it was a distraction.

Maybe it was love.

I spent the next ten minutes or so rummaging through the house trying to find anything worth bringing back to the bus. I used the suitcase by the banister and filled it with some clothes, plus the toilet paper and candles. I picked up two new tubes of toothpaste, a half eaten box of chocolates and the letter opener from the loft. The clock on the microwave in the kitchen read 12:23 pm.

The acids in my stomach burned away at my insides. I hoped Cara still had some of the breakfast left over because I was considering eating the black orange in the fridge.

Or the chocolates I promised her.

I zipped up the suitcase and lugged it outside onto the front step. A dandelion seed floated past, bringing Margaret's smile along with it. I could hear her voice whispering out in the wind, sharing some profound fact about the deflating world around us.

I walked through the field toward the barn, soaking in the clean, fresh air. Despite the alcohol seeping out of my pores, I felt good. Real good—like the days I wandered about the outfield during baseball, catching glimpses at Cara Flanders on the bleachers.

In a clear patch of dirt beside a fence post, a cluster of blue flowers danced lightly in the breeze.

I picked them from the ground and smiled to myself, carefully tucking them into the suitcase.

When I got back to the barn, Sab and Danny were packing up a couple bags from the bus and filling up some water bottles with extra soup.

“What’s going on?” I asked, dropping the suitcase onto the steps of the bus.

Danny kicked one of the lawn chairs, knocking over the Coleman stove. He clenched his fists and spit in the hay. “Princess here says we gotta go to the hills.”

“Hey, watch it!” Orillia bent down and picked up the pot, still half filled with slushy mushroom and corn. She pulled out bits of hay from inside it and glared at Danny. “Take it easy will ya? We need this thing.”

“We won’t be needing it when we’re dead.” Danny ripped a plank off the busted up wall and slammed it against the side of the bus. “See you bitches in hell.”

Sab dropped his bag and hustled over to Danny, grabbing him by the cuff. “Chill dude. Will ya just chill? We’re going to the hills, love it or leave it. You don’t like it, then take a walk. We’re not here to babysit you, man. Take a fucken walk.”

Danny’s muscular arms flexed as he slashed at Sab’s hand. He pushed away and spit on the ground again. “Alright, alright. I’m chilling. I’m chilling.”

Sab walked back to the bus and picked up his bag. He zipped it with an aggressive thrust and then poked his finger onto my shoulder as he walked by. “Look after her.” He lifted his brow and pushed past me. “I trust you more than that fuck-up out there.”

“Sure,” I said. “But where are you going now?”

Danny stood in the field a few yards away from the barn and peed onto the trunk of an apple tree.

Sab turned around, stepped backward through the hole in the wall. "Still looking for a battery," he said to me. "See you when we see you."

"See you bitches in hell!" Danny shouted again. He zipped up his pants and waited for Sab. The two glanced back at us one last time and disappeared over the hill.

"Are they going back into town?" I asked, standing at the hole in the wall.

"Yeah. They're gonna get a new battery from the bus depot near the school. Best case scenario, Sab will fix another bus and pick us up. Worst case, they don't make it back."

"And who's to say they'll actually come back for us?"

Orillia cleaned off the spoon with her fingers and handed me the leftover pot of soup. "They'll come back. Sab will come back."

She glanced at me for a second before checking back on the stove again. She wore a new red pair of shorts and a blue and white striped t-shirt, tied at the back to fit her thin physique. I could only assume the clothes belonged to the dead woman from the farmhouse.

"Where's Cara?"

Orillia pointed to the bus. "Taking a nap." She turned around and slapped my butt. "I'll be out back on the grass."

"Okay," I replied, slurping back the lukewarm soup. I watched her as she pushed through the side door of the barn and flopped down on the hill.

The burning in my stomach finally stopped as I licked the spoon and tossed the pot back on the stove. I was still hungry, but comfortable enough to have a nap as well.

I stepped up onto the bus to check on Cara, hoping she might be still awake after the whole ‘Danny episode.’

“You asleep?” I whispered as I nestled into the seat across from her. A fresh breeze swirled in from the open windows and cooled the air around us. Her legs were curled into her chest, her head cozily rested on a folded cushion. I lugged the suitcase along with me and tucked it under the seat.

“Hey,” she whispered back. She opened her eyes slightly and shifted her gaze to me, not moving her head. “There you are.”

“Here I am,” I said. “I found some chocolates.”

“Awesome,” she replied.

I reached over the seat behind me and grabbed the blanket I had used the night before. I noticed Bailey sitting quietly a few seats over counting something in a book he must have found in one of the bags.

“What took you so long?” Cara mumbled. Her flip-flops were placed neatly on the floor below her.

I wasn't sure what to say. I didn't want her to know what happened between Orillia and me, even though I really didn't do anything. But, if she found out about the kiss or Orillia's shower parade, she'd probably see me differently. I didn't want to risk that.

“There's a dead couple in the house,” I said. “An older man and woman. I think they were...” I looked back at Bailey and leaned into Cara. “Murdered.”

“By who?”

“I dunno,” I replied.

Cara shook her head and shifted her gaze out the window. The birds flapped about in the rafters, singing to each other like nothing was wrong. I guess for them, their world was just like it had always been. It was humans that were being invaded, not the planet. In a way, I could say it was the end of the human race, as opposed to the end of the world.

I don't know why I allowed myself to think that, though. Maybe it wasn't the end of the world or the end of the human race. Maybe it was just another glitch in our development as a species.

“I miss them,” Cara whispered re-fluffing the folded pillow. “I miss them a lot.”

I knew she was talking about her family. I couldn't imagine what she was going through. She had no one. It baffled how she had the energy to keep moving, to keep waking up each morning and preparing herself for another day of ‘life.’

What did she have to live for?

“I know you do,” I said.

She swallowed and crossed her arms onto her chest. “When it's quiet like this, I can't help but think about them. It makes me so sad. I really miss them.” She rubbed a tear away from her eye.

“I'm sorry about your family. I'm sorry about your mom and little brother.”

Cara didn't reply. Another tear pooled at the corner of her eye before trickling down along her cheek.

“I miss Margaret,” I said. The thin strips of light from between the wooden planks of the barn beamed into the bus, emitting a pattern of shadowy lines and sunlight over the seats.

“Sometimes I wonder if it’s worth it, you know?” Cara sniffed and looked out at the birds. Her lashes clung together as the tears pooled again in her eyes. “What’s the point? They’re all gone.”

“I’m here,” I said, shuffling my legs into the aisle. “You can wake up each morning with me.” I felt my face turn red. “And Bailey. What I mean is—we’re here. Bailey and me.”

Cara’s eyes closed tight as more tears streamed down her face. She lowered her head and covered her face. Her body trembled.

“I got you something,” I said, unzipping the suitcase under the seat. I pulled out the blue wildflowers from the field and placed them carefully inside her flip flops.

Chapter Thirty-Two:

Strangers

I awoke to the sound of Bailey counting to himself in the row of seats behind me. The inside of the bus was dark with only the light from the moon peaking through the cracks in the barn. I had a slight headache, different from the ones I had before.

I slipped quietly off the seat and reached into one of Orillia's duffle bags where she kept some bottles she had taken from one of the houses the other day.

I chugged one back and dropped into my seat again, feeling the water spread throughout my insides.

Bailey muttered something to himself before gurgling and breaking into a soft rhythmic snore.

The dark outline of Cara's body was still in the seat next to me, and at the front of the bus, Orillia's legs were laid out across the aisle.

A faint flicker of light caught my eye along the other side of the bus, through the walls—outside.

My stomach turned.

I sat still in my seat, following the movement as it shifted along the side of the barn and over to the hole in the wall. I eased myself into believing it was Danny and Sab returning with the battery, prepared to sneak onto the bus and get some sleep with the rest of the group.

I lowered myself, cowardly disappearing from the dark figures creeping by the windows.

Their whispers jabbed into my ears like they were right beside me. I wanted to wake Cara, perhaps warn her that potential strangers were busting into our temporary hide-out.

I waited in my seat as a couple flashlights beamed around the interior of the barn.

What would Dad do?

I lifted my head slightly and squinted my eyes, trying to gauge the faces hovering around the Coleman stove and lawn chairs.

A deep reddish hue slipped through the cracks to the east, giving me a sense of the early morning hour. I had no idea why I was so obsessed with the time, but I figured part of it was because it reminded me of being alive.

About being normal.

The whispery murmurs from the strangers pricked my ears again as they settled onto the hay. If I had felt the ownership of this bus—of this barn, then perhaps I would feel compelled to investigate, but who was I to tell them to leave? I couldn't just assume they were going to do anything. But maybe that was my problem. Maybe I was too trusting. I hated that about myself sometimes. As a kid, I was known for being gullible, which could be seen as no big deal, but doesn't being gullible mean you believe in people? Maybe too much?

I must've drifted back off to sleep again because when I felt a tap on my shoulder from Cara, the light from outside was now blasting into my eyes.

“We have visitors,” Cara said. She sat back in her seat and brushed the knots out of her hair.

“Who?” I asked.

Cara glanced out the window. “Danny, Sab, a man and two teenagers.”

I stretched my legs and stood up, pausing for a second to allow my eyes to adjust to the light. “I heard them sneak in earlier. Figured it was them.” I reached into the bag in the next seat in front of me and chugged back another bottle of water.

“Who do you think those strangers are?” Cara placed her brush into a little bag and pulled out a stick of deodorant—likely another donation from Orillia’s collection of stolen goods. She stroked her armpits and gestured for me to turn around so she could slip on a white blouse.

“Dunno, I guess people they met in town.”

“Okay. Done,” Cara said.

I leaned over to her side of the bus and looked at the three new guests.

The man was older, maybe in his fifties with a short, patchy gray beard. He wore a dirty yellow baseball hat and a white undershirt with a pack of smokes sticking out of a small pocket on his chest. Black and gray curly hairs poked up around his neck. He sat in the lawn chair smoking a cigarette, talking with Orillia, Sab, and Danny.

I couldn’t see the two boys, as they were still laid out in the hay at the back corner of the barn.

“This is Sheldon,” Orillia said as I stepped off the bus. She fiddled with the propane on the Coleman stove.

The man stood up and shook my hand, giving me a nod and a toothy smile. His grip was firm. He smelled like sweat and oil. “Hey kid, nice to meet you. I’m Charlie.”

“Hi,” I said, diverting my attention to Sab. “Did you guys get the battery?”

Charlie let go of my hand and sat back down in the chair. He flicked off some ash onto the hay and stomped it out with his heavy work boot.

“Yeah, we did.” Sab shoved a granola bar into his mouth and tossed the wrapper on the ground. “We should be ready to go later today. I’m gonna have a nap up at the farmhouse for a few hours. Maybe wash up and get all smelling nice like Lia here.” Sab nudged Orillia and unwrapped another granola bar.

“Help yourself to some snacks kid,” Charlie said. He pointed at his bag. “I got sweet and salty almond bars or figs.”

For the first time, possibly ever, I didn’t trust someone. Everything that was happening around me, the bullshit my parents spoonfed me all these years was finally catching up.

I guess.

I figured I would need to remind myself, especially now that we were all so vulnerable and desperate. But this stranger, this man named Charlie seemed fake like there was something behind his kindness.

“Thanks,” I said, reaching into the bag anyway. I pulled out a fig bar and opened it, too hungry to worry about my conscience. “Do you mind if I grab a couple more for Cara and Bailey?”

Charlie opened up his hand and gestured to the bag. “Please.” A grin widened along his face, pushing dozens of creases and lines around his eyes.

Danny paced about behind us, kicking at the hay and dirt on the floor. He gripped his gun, tapping it gently on the busted up planks, still attached to the wall where the bus plowed through. He sniffed up some phlegm and spit on the grass outside. “Can I talk to you’s for a sec?” He waved his gun to Orillia and Sab.

“What is it?” Orillia asked.

“Can I talk to you’s privately?”

“What’s his problem now?” Orillia poured some water into the pot.

“You might want to hear him out.” Sab walked past Charlie’s bag and snagged another granola bar. He ripped open the wrapper and tossed it at me. “Wait here, Sheldon.”

Sab and Orillia ambled over to Danny by the hole in the wall and then stepped out onto the grass.

I waited for a minute with Charlie, lacking anything civil to say. I used to take pride in my ‘adult-small-talk’ at school, but lately, my brain had too many other things occupying my thoughts. I crumpled up Sab’s wrapper and shoved it into my pocket.

“You’re buddy there is quite talented,” Charlie said. “Being able to fix up that bus, make it work an all. Pretty impressive if you ask me. Them alien things managed to send some sort of energy out, seizing everything.” He rubbed his beard and shook his head. “Baffling.”

“Yeah,” I replied. “This bus is like gold.”

It hadn’t dawned on me until now why Sab was so important—why Orillia treated him differently. He was the key to our survival. Without him, we’d be on foot, exposing ourselves to the drones—to the creatures.

“How old are you kid?” Charlie asked.

“Fifteen. Nearly sixteen.”

“Where are your parents?”

“My dad is at the hills, and I’m hoping my mom is there too.”

Charlie nodded, sucking back his cigarette. He leaned forward, letting the smoke balloon out around his dirty face and hat. “They ain’t there kid. I’ll tell you that.”

I nibbled on the last bit of fig. “How do you know?”

“Trust me, I know kid.” He flopped back again in the chair.

“Your friends Danny and Sab over there, they told me you guys are going to the hills.”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“No. That ain’t right. Your buddies are having a conversation with that girl right now. They’re telling her the exact same thing I’m telling you.”

“And what exactly are you telling me?” I asked.

“I’m telling you, you’re not going to the hills.”

Cara stepped off the bus and stood beside me. "Hi," she said. The smell of her deodorant wafted over to me.

Charlie took another drag and squinted his eyes. He touched the tip of his baseball hat and smiled. "Hey, sweetie."

"Do you have an extra smoke?" she asked.

"I do." Charlie pulled out a lighter from his pant pocket and then reached into the pocket of his shirt. He opened the cigarette pack and handed her one. Cara placed it in her mouth and leaned forward as Charlie lit the end.

"And what's your name?" he asked.

"Cara." She pulled away and inhaled.

"That's a pretty name," he said.

"Thanks."

Charlie eyed Cara for a minute, pushing out rings of smoke with his mouth. He placed the cigarette pack in his shirt pocket. "That scar on your face. I just wanna say, it doesn't take away your beauty. If anything, it makes you that much more becoming."

Becoming? Who the fuck says that?

Cara touched her face and lowered her head. "Thanks." She rubbed her feet along the floor, wiggling her toes in her flip flops. It had only been a short time, but I had forgotten about her scar. For me, it was a part of her now, like she was meant to have this reminder that her life was different. Despite the creepiness of the comment from the old man, he was actually right. If possible, she was prettier than I remembered her to be.

Charlie giggled to himself and shook his head. "Pardon me. I'm sorry. I've been told I speak my mind without thought sometimes. I hope I haven't made you feel uncomfortable."

"No, no. It's all good," Cara replied. "I never thought my scar would earn a compliment."

"Well, there you go." Charlie lifted up his right arm and folded it behind his head. Yellow sweat-marks stained his armpit.

Funny how no one ever says anything about my scar.

"So, what's going on?" Cara asked, taking another drag. "What are we talking about?"

Charlie coughed up some phlegm and turned his head, letting the saliva ooze slowly from his mouth and onto the floor. "We're talking about travel."

Cara held the smoke in her lungs for a minute before turning her head and exhaling. She pulled up the lawn chair and sat down, rubbing the scar on her face. "Oh yeah? Travel huh? What about it?"

"Well," Charlie began, letting his cigarette burn behind his head. "You guys need food, right? I mean, if you plan on escaping, you're gonna need to stock up." He scratched his chest and waited for us to respond.

"Yeah. Yes, we will." I folded my arms and sat down on the steps of the bus a few yards away from them.

"Well. I know a place. A place with enough food to last you a year, maybe more."

"Where? The stores are empty," I said.

“I built a fallout shelter, well, I started one. It’s not quite done yet, but It’s fully stocked. Started putting it together when those things dropped in to visit us the first time. Didn’t trust them. Figured they were gonna nuke us.”

“And you want to give us your food? Why?” I asked.

“Yes. I wanna give you half. You can stock this bus, and then stock your boat when you make it to the harbor.”

I sat up straight, feeling my stomach rumble. Images of Cara and me on a beautiful yacht, spending the rest of our lives floating out to sea ran through my head. “That’s fantastic.”

“What’s the catch?” Cara crossed her legs, letting her flip-flop dangle on the end of her toe.

Charlie bobbed his head and smiled. He pointed at Cara and waved his finger. “Smart girl. I like you.” He took a deep breath, flaring his nostrils. He twisted his back, letting it crack several times along his spine. He eyed the two teenage kids still sleeping on the hay behind him. “You drive these boys and me to Morris Point.”

“No fucken way.” Orillia marched back from outside and stopped at the stove. She grabbed a can of soup from a box on the floor. “We don’t need your food. We can raid all the houses in town. We’ll stock up. We don’t need your help.”

Charlie shook his head. "You don't get it, kid, do ya?"

Orillia attached the can opener to the can and spun the handle vigorously. "Yeah, I get it. You wanna give us food so you can drag us to Morris point. It's a death trap. I ain't going up there. Do you know what's up there?"

“My wife,” replied Charlie.

Orillia tossed the top of the can behind her and poured mushy tomatoes into the pot. "Then your wife must be dead. Morris point is out of bounds."

"How so?" I asked. "Cara and I were there a few weeks back."

"But that was where you got attacked, Sheldon. Remember?"

Cara stroked her hair, over and over.

Orillia dipped a spoon into the pot and stirred it. "It's too risky. If we expose ourselves out there, driving around, we're upping the chances of getting attacked. The second we relax, we're screwed. Remember what happened at Bingaman's Landing? That's how my cousin got infected. That's why my fucken brother is dead. I'm not going there."

"We don't have to stay," Sab said. "We can drop them off, get the food and pick your dad up at the hills. We have guns. We can make it."

"We're not going." Orillia slammed the spoon onto the pot.

"Who died and made her boss?" Danny paced behind us, twirling his gun between his fingers.

"Shut it." Sab turned and pointed at Danny. "We talked about this. You don't say a fucken word."

Danny shook his head and punched the side of the bus. He kicked up some hay and marched through the hole in the wall. "And just how do you expect to raid all the houses in town without being seen?" Charlie tilted his head again and let some more phlegm fall from his mouth. "You're better off dropping these boys and me to Morris point, getting your free food and getting out of dodge."

“He’s right Orillia,” I said. “We’re better off this way. Just think, we’ll have a year’s worth of food. Maybe more. We can be out on the water for a year. This whole mess could be over by then.”

“And since when was it discussed that we were going door-to-door scavenging for food?” Cara uncrossed her legs and sat up straight. “That’s a recipe for disaster right there.”

Orillia stirred the tomatoes in the pot and glanced over to me. Her lips puckered and her brow furrowed.

“I say we vote on it.” Sab stepped beside me, eyeing us for approval.

Danny stopped pacing and turned to face us. He tucked his gun into his pants and wandered over to the group.

I was never good with conflict, hence why I hid in my room as a kid whenever my parents fought. Seeing Orillia ganged up on didn’t feel right. In away, I felt like we were suddenly betraying her. She had led us out of danger and provided us with food. It wasn’t right that we turned on her now.

“I don’t know who this old man is.” Orillia let go of the spoon and folded her arms. She stepped around the group and faced Charlie, still sitting relaxed in the lawn chair. She turned to the rest of us and threw her hands up. “And what about you guys? What’s up, huh? This man, who for all we know is some criminal who broke out of prison, is brainwashing you into going to Morris Point? What happened to our plan?”

“Our plan changed when you decided to go to the hills!” Danny pointed at Orillia. His fingers trembled.

“Danny.” Sab stepped in front of him. “Easy man.”

“No, you take it easy.” Danny pushed Sab back hard, causing him to tumble to the ground. “I’m sick of this shit. You two are constantly on me like I’m some sorta kid. Just because I ain’t smart like you’s, it doesn’t mean you can make decisions for me. This is my life too, you know.”

Sab stood up and brushed off his pants. He marched over to Danny and grabbed him by the throat. His hands squeezed tight, thrusting Danny against the side of the bus. "We treat you like this because you're a fucken idiot. Shut the fuck up, or you'll get us all killed."

Danny planted his feet and drove his forehead into Sab’s nose, bursting it open into an explosive mess. Blood splattered along the side of the bus and onto Danny. He stepped back as Sab crumpled to the floor.

“Oh shit,” Danny mumbled, assessing the blood spots on his arms and shirt.

Orillia hustled over and knelt down in front of Sab. “You okay? Sab? Are you okay?”

Danny inched back, muttering to himself. “He shouldn’t have grabbed me. He shouldn’t have grabbed me.”

I hustled over and helped Orillia lift Sab up to his feet. The tall ‘drink-of-water’ weighed more than I thought, probably because he was nothing but lean muscle. We dragged him to the steps on the bus and blocked his nose with an old rag. The whole time we held his head back, he didn't say a word, as though it was too painful to talk. When we finished cleaning him up, and the blood had stopped pouring from the gash on the bridge of his nose, I noticed the two teenagers standing beside Charlie, next to the pile of hay.

They watched as we raised our hands up over our heads.

They watched Sab rise to his feet and stand next to Danny, Cara, Orillia and me.

They watched as little Bailey stepped off the bus and join our confused and weary group—wondering, praying this wasn't the last moments of our lives.

“We’re going,” Charlie said as he pointed a gun at us. “We’re going to Morris Point.”

Chapter Thirty-Three:

Morris Point

A sick, nauseating pain twisted in the pit of my stomach as I sat alone near the back of the bus. I hadn't eaten much all day and was desperate to use the washroom.

Three rows down from me was Danny. His feet rested upon the seat with his back to the window. He tapped his fingers impatiently, watching the world pass by him as the old bus surged up a steep hill toward Morris Point.

We were instructed not to talk, not to move—to just remain in our assigned seats until Charlie found his wife.

Despite the gaping hole in his nose, Sab managed to install the new battery and tamper with it so it could run. Charlie seemed to worship the kid like he was some sort of engineering god.

Near the middle of the bus was Orillia. She faced forward, nervously keeping her eye on the strangers at the front. I liked that about her—it came naturally for her to watch over us. Although, I wondered what was going through her mind, whether she felt comfortable, or even safe within her own group, knowing we had stabbed her in the back.

Three seats up from Orillia was Bailey. He checked back on me from time to time, likely scared about what lay ahead at our soon-to-be destination. Every now and then he buried his head into the series of science magazines he found in one of the duffle bags, busily counting the words on each page. His face was still black and blue from Danny's beating. What impressed me though was he didn't once complain about it.

Cara sat a few seats ahead of him, trying her best to close her eyes—to perhaps escape from this distressing shift in leadership.

Leadership.

The skill to survival was leadership or at least knowing when to step back and let others take over. However, with Charlie now holding on to the reigns, our clumsy democratic ways had suddenly shifted to dictatorship.

I remembered Dad wanted me to run for class president when I was in the fifth grade. He convinced me I had a natural gift and would one day make a great mayor, or at least get into politics. Personally, I felt my skill was knowing when to step up and when to step back.

I knew this was the time to make some sort of move. The problem was, I had no experience with guns being the deciding factor on who runs the show.

Plus, Charlie was more clever than my first impression. As he held us at gunpoint earlier in the day, he informed everyone he had emptied our weapons while we had all slept. In fact, the gun he used to enforce his plan—the one gun he couldn't find during the night—the gun he jabbed into the back of Sab's head while he drove us all to Morris Point, was Orillia's. He managed to slip it right out from under her nose while she fumbled with our boiled canned tomatoes that morning.

Part of the nausea also came with the idea we might not see the end of the day. Maybe I had seen too many low-budget horror movies, but it didn't make sense why someone like Charlie would keep us alive now. His kindness quickly wore off, and his plan to provide us with a year's supply of food was likely thrown right out the window. I wondered, though, if he valued Sab enough. The smart thing to do would be to keep him alive and shoot the rest of us. Or, at least dump us off somewhere.

The more I thought about it, another key to survival was to understand your enemy.

Charlie.

The Drones.

And those butt-ugly giant ogres.

At this point, I was zero for three.

I recognized the landscape as Sheldon pulled the bus up another winding pass toward the point. The engine revved and sputtered as it struggled up the steep incline.

Through the trees, to my left, I could see the town below. Trails of black smoke still stretched up into the sky, a sign that the fire department was no longer in existence—an indication that the place was nothing but a wasteland.

I missed being able to check my phone—to get access to the happenings around the world. I wouldn't say I was a big follower of worldly events, but being completely cut off, seemed so strange.

I felt naked.

As we reached the top of the escarpment, the two teenaged boys stood up from the front and marched down the aisle. The first guy was quite stocky in stature, maybe about sixteen or seventeen. His skin was dark, maybe a Latin background, or perhaps first nations. He wore a bright red tracksuit and clean white Nike shoes with a few grass stains near the soles. He sat down opposite Orillia and faced her, almost robotic-like. The other boy, maybe about eighteen or nineteen had long curly brown hair and a scruffy beard. His eyes were tiny, beady-like. He clumsily slid into one of the seats between Danny and me and pulled out a gun.

“Whad-up Homie-G?” Danny tapped his fingers on the top of the seat and shifted his chin up.

“Don't talk,” the boy replied, nibbling on something.

“Fuck that. Are you really gonna shoot me if I do?”

The boy pulled back on the lock and pointed the gun at Danny. “De you really wanna find out?”

Danny shook his head and scratched at the vinyl on the seat. His jaw clenched. "Who are you? Like, you're my age dude. What are you doing pointing a gun at me? We're not the enemy here. We invited you to join us, man. And then you go and do this?"

The boy turned to the front. "Charlie!"

Charlie stood up and faced us, scratching his beard with the barrel of his gun. "What is it?"

The teenager gestured to Danny, spitting out tiny sunflower seeds from his mouth. "This guy is talking. Do you want me to shoot him?"

Charlie turned back to the front window and pointed to the side of the road. Sab geared down and gripped the wheel. The bus veered over and ground to a stop, pulling up a cloud of dust. Charlie muttered something to himself and then paraded down the aisle, tapping each seat with his gun. The engine sputtered and shook as the creepy old man eased himself into the row next to Danny. He licked the end of his finger and wiped a spot on the handle of the gun.

"What was his question again?" Charlie asked, glancing back at the weasely-beady-eyed kid.

"He wanted to know if I would shoot him if he talked," the boy replied. He scooped his hand into his pocket and tossed more sunflower seeds into his mouth.

Charlie shifted his attention back to Danny and adjusted his baseball hat. “Great question.” He smiled and picked some mucus from his nose, smearing it on the window behind Danny. “What a great question.” He stood up and turned to the rest of the group. “Did everyone hear Danny’s question?”

Bailey peered up from his book and shook his head.

Charlie scratched his beard again waiting for the rest of us to acknowledge him—to shake our heads or simply respect his presence.

He pulled the gun away from his face and pointed it at Danny, pushing it onto his forehead. "This fuck-up here wants to know if we would shoot him for talking. What do Y'all think?"

The engine sputtered.

A fly shot in through one of the windows and buzzed around Charlie’s head.

I couldn't hold it in anymore, my muscles were giving up on me, twitching and shaking. My bladder let go, releasing a half day's worth of urine down my left leg and into my sock.

“Anybody? Anyone? Bueller? Bueller?” Charlie spun around, eyeing each one of us, flinging his gun about like it was a toy. “No one huh?” He nodded and wandered down to Orillia, still facing the front of the bus. “What about you? You’re very quiet now. Are you being a good little girl? He leaned down and sniffed her hair. “You’re the smart one, aren't ya? You’re the one these jerk-offs all listen to, am I right?”

In the back of my mind, I frantically tossed around an escape plan, digging up ideas about how we can jump these guys. But like I said, I wasn't any good at dealing with leadership opportunities when guns were involved.

Charlie leaned in and smelled Orillia's hair again. She remained still, clearly not letting his actions get the best of her. He closed his eyes for a moment and shivered, sucking in the air from around her. "Damn. You smell good." He tapped his gun against the top of the seat and stepped forward, meandering up the aisle toward Danny. Each step he took, each cocky movement he made, my heart echoed—stuttering to the awkward rhythm of his gait. He flopped down next to him and carefully pushed the nozzle onto Danny's forehead again. "So, your friends don't seem to know whether my partner here would shoot you or not."

Danny focused on Charlie, still tapping his fingers on the seat. "Fuck you old man."

The fly buzzed around the two alpha-males, slapping its body a few times against the window. It stopped suddenly and rested on the glass.

Charlie pulled his gun back and patted Danny gently on the top of his head. "Okay," he said in a soft voice. "I hear ya. I hear ya."

The fly buzzed again, head-butting the windowpane.

Charlie stood up and stretched his back, sending a series of pops up his spine. He yawned and turned to the front. "Thanks for your time. I'll let you know." He eyed me for a second and then ambled back down the aisle, whistling a discordant tune to himself.

The man was clearly sick—maybe infected. I didn't want to move. He stood at the front next to Sab and stared blankly out the window.

Or maybe deep in thought.

A second fly blindly entered the bus, escaping from the sun's rays. It stammered about for a few seconds before resting on the knuckle of my right hand. It dabbed the stale sweat on my skin before inching down my forefinger.

I wondered—I wondered if I was going to live longer than that fly.

I nervously turned my attention back up to Charlie—to the rest of the horrified people on that bus.

I prayed.

I wasn't religious or anything, but I prayed for my life.

I didn't have to believe in a God to do that right?

As the fly left my hand, Charlie whipped his gun around and pointed it to the seat where Danny anxiously waited. Darkness crept over the old man's face—over his eyes. He pulled the trigger, lifting an explosive blast through the inside of the bus.

Chapter Thirty-Four:

The Briefcase

The bullet sliced through four seats and embedded itself into the steel frame behind me. I dropped to the floor, and curled up into a ball, cowardly lying in my own urine.

I'm better than this.

Every part of my body wanted to smash Charlie's head through the window and toss him out onto the road. I wasn't a violent person, but man would it be nice to see his bony frame bounce off the gravelly surface and then conveniently get run over.

But, I wasn't a ninja or the incredible hulk.

The engine revved and the bus stuttered forward again. As Charlie faced the front and shifted his attention to the road, a wave of relief swept over me. I eased up from under the seat and cautiously sat back down feeling every muscle in my body tremble.

I could only assume Charlie was simply letting us know who exactly was in charge.

We passed by my dad's truck on the right side of the bus, about fifty yards away. It was covered in sap and dead leaves—a reminder of my attack that knocked me out for seventeen days. This was where Dad left me—screaming at me to meet him at the Ultra-Mart in town.

Why didn't he fight for me? Why didn't he risk it all to get me out of there?

A fluffy beige dog darted out from under the truck and scurried away into the bushes. The poor thing was probably still looking for its owner.

I poked my finger through the bullet hole in the seat and shuffled next to the window. I knew it was a waste of my energy trying to think of a way out of this. I couldn't risk the lives of the rest of these good people—of Bailey, of Orillia.

Of Cara.

Was it my fault that Margaret died?

We traveled for about fifteen minutes through winding roads that zig-zagged through the dense woods. Many of the trees were split in half—branches littered the ground. Every now and then, movement in the leaves caught my attention as another small rodent-like creature hatched from the bark.

The road widened as we turned into a gated passage. I recognized the place as a kid when Todd and I used to ride our bikes up here in the summer after baseball practice. A massive sign stood twenty feet high with the words, *Danger, Hidden Trail Quarry* and *This is not a play area* posted in bold letters. I never dared enter, despite the curiosity.

“Stop!” Charlie gripped the pole beside the driver's seat and then pointed out through the front windshield. “Stop the bus.”

Sab slammed on the brakes, dragging the tires about twenty yards over the gravel. Rolled up sleeping bags and Rubbermaid boxes slid off the racks, bouncing off the seats and onto the floor.

In seconds, the bus was still, simply idling in front of the gate at Hidden Trail Quarry.

A can of soup rolled under the seats, clanking against one of the chair legs and finally stopping near the front.

Charlie waved for the two boys to join him. “Hurry up guys, there’s one coming.”

Through the gate, a large dark figure pushed up through the trees and wobbled onto the road. The creature still had its shell attached, still in the process of—of evolution. It grunted and pushed the front of the bus like a giant bear playing with its cubs. It lowered its face and peered inside the front window.

I remained still, glued to my seat, counting the beats of my own heart.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

The people—my friends, didn't dare move.

The creature grunted, exhaling its heavy breath over the dust-coated windshield.

Eight.

Nine.

Ten.

A small x-shaped drone hovered past, circling the monster, spitting out beeps and signals. It scanned the bus with its red light, shining it onto each of us and finally the two boys at the front. It beeped again and then disappeared past the gate. The creature poked at the right front tire with its long fingers before lifting its head and stretching its body upright. Its face disappeared above the trees, higher than the Golden-horse weathervane that used to sit at the top of our barn. Its human-like feet shuffled back as the monster quietly returned to the woods.

Sab dropped his head onto the steering wheel. He took a breath and slipped the gear into first.

We moved forward again in silence, past the gate, gradually descending into the quarry pit. I once googled the location using satellite images on my phone, but the pictures didn't do the place justice.

Is Charlie's wife in the quarry?

Thick layers of rock surrounded the vast perimeter. There were hundreds of steel staircases leading up and down the great walls, zig-zagging and disappearing into small holes and tunnels.

The bus followed a narrow road that hugged the edge of the quarry. Below us, a dozen dump trucks, maybe more, lined the north side of the rock face, half covered in jagged boulders and small stones. The doors were missing on a few, the windshields shattered.

I stood up and gazed out the other side of the bus, forgetting about the threats from Charlie—forgetting for a brief moment that I was nearly shot.

At the bottom, several roads broke out in different directions bordered by giant square slabs. A rusty crane stood tall near the middle of the pit with thick chains dangling from the top.

Along one of the roads, leading into a wide tunnel, were a group of kids pointing up to us. They seemed surprised at the site of our yellow school bus creeping down the exposed rock. They wore dress pants and ties—the girls in formal red dresses.

What are they doing here? Why the hell aren't they in hiding?

As we reached the base of the pit, Charlie pointed to his right, directing Sab to drive us along a twisting road that veered around a rock wall. Several drones buzzed past us, lifting up over the steep ledge. Another circled the bus and then dropped into a tunnel to our right. I sat back down and gripped the top of the seat in front of me, feeling my jeans stick to my inner thighs.

Past a row of stone slabs, a hydraulic arm was tipped on its side. Next to it, laid the body of a dead woman, her clothes shredded, with fresh blood scattered along the stones.

We all turned our heads, curious perhaps if she was someone we knew.

Up ahead, at the farthest point in the quarry, one of the monsters marched across the flat ground toward what appeared to be another hole in the earth, bordered by slabs of rock. It stopped and tossed some small objects into it. It turned to us, pausing for a moment before scaling up a series of jagged shelves to the main ground.

What the hell?

Charlie pointed to a tunnel to the right of the pit where a young black man was standing with a red book in his hand. His head was bald and shiny—his gray suit and tie, clean and pressed.

“That’s him, that’s the guy.” Charlie stood up and grabbed the pole again. “Stop here. I’m getting off.”

Sab pulled over to the side, easing on the brakes this time until we came to a gentle stop. The black man covered his face as the dust carried forward. He fixed his tie and then held onto the book with both hands.

Charlie muttered something to the boys and then stepped off the bus.

The arteries in my neck pulsated, fuck, even my fingers were pulsating.

The two boys pointed to the back, gesturing for Sab to get up from the driver’s seat and join the rest of us.

“Right there,” said the curly-haired one. “Don’t talk.”

It suddenly dawned on me that the kid looked like the boy in that family picture from the farmhouse. Sure he had shaggier hair and looked a bit older, but I was almost positive. That thick jaw, and those beady eyes. It had to be him. I watched him play baseball before. He had a horrible batting stance and threw sidearm.

Sab sat down in the row between Orillia and Danny. He looked at me as if to communicate something with his eyes, but I had no idea what he was hinting at. If he was thinking of an escape plan, I wanted no part of it. Not unless we had guns.

Charlie stood outside with the man in the suit, flailing his arms about and pointing up to us on the bus. The sweat stains under his arms matched his dirty baseball hat. The man—cleanly shaven—simply held onto his little red book and listened.

Behind us, another monster entered the pit—its steps shook the windows on the bus. I shuffled across the seat and peered out as clouds of dust shot up with each heavy stride. It leaned over a row of slabs and dropped something into the hole.

Like the other one, it eyed our bus for a moment before climbing up the rock face and into the woods.

I slid back across the seat, smearing my face on the glass like a little kid. Gusts of wind swirled around the two men. I held my breath, trying to piece together any words from their conversation. Behind them, an older woman stepped out, escorted by a young girl. The older woman's face was bloodied, her clothes half pulled off her body. She ran to Charlie, embracing him—kissing him on the mouth.

The young girl, pretty, with a short red dress, turned back to the tunnel and disappeared.

Charlie held onto the battered woman as he continued to talk to the man with the red book.

I could only assume he had found his wife. Somehow Charlie knew where she was all along—somehow this man with the suit was keeping her alive.

They continued to talk for several minutes as Charlie shook the man's hand over and over again.

He was thankful, clearly, and obviously loved his wife enough to risk everything to find her. But the asshole gave up his dignity in the process. Charlie wasn't a man. He was a fucken coward, selfishly putting our lives at risk so he could get what he wanted.

His wife.

But then again. Maybe that was what it took now. Maybe survival wasn't about leadership or patience, maybe it was about greed.

The girl in the red dress returned from the tunnel carrying a black briefcase. She stepped carefully over the small stones in her high heels. Her straight auburn hair sat perfectly on her head like she had just come from a salon. Her legs were long, smooth and shiny. She unlocked the briefcase and held it open for the man in the suit. Inside was a handgun neatly snug between a foam template.

“What the hell is going on?” Danny’s face leaned up against the window—his breath fogging up the glass.

The man in the suit carefully picked up the gun and nodded to the young girl in the red dress. She smiled, closed the briefcase and returned to the tunnel.

The man in the suit held the gun in his hand as Charlie and his wife dropped to their knees.

Their faces contorted, their eyes squeezed tight.

The man in the suit unlocked the gun and pointed it at the woman.

He fired.

She folded over and flopped to the ground.

Blood poured from her face.

Charlie, the arrogant, cowardly prick, the dirty old man with yellow-stained teeth, covered his face and begged for his life. His body trembled as he sobbed uncontrollably.

His whimpers, his screams echoed out around the quarry.

The man in the suit then pointed the gun at Charlie's head and fired.

The old man crumpled to the ground, rolling on top of his dead wife.

Yeah, I was confused, maybe even scared, but I couldn't help but smile.

Karma's a bitch.

Chapter Thirty-Five:

Rennick

The young girl in the red dress returned from the tunnel with the briefcase in her hand. She stopped in front of the two dead bodies and opened the case. The man in the suit nodded and neatly placed the gun back into the foam template. She eyed him, closed the briefcase and then elegantly walked back across the stones to the tunnel, carefully trying not to trip in her high-heels.

The man in the suit opened his red book and leafed through the pages for a minute. He adjusted his tie and then stepped up onto the bus. The two boys at the front conversed with him for a minute before stepping off. They paced around the front of the bus, keeping their guns drawn and ready.

The man in the suit cleared his throat and looked out to us. "Hello, everyone. My name is Rennick." His voice was deep and his words carefully pronounced. "Welcome to phase two of our project. Could you all please kindly exit this automobile and join me outside." He awkwardly smiled, and turned back to the door, almost robotic-like. He stepped onto the stones and folded his hands around the book as he waited. The two boys shuffled over beside him and eyed us through the windows.

"What the fuck?" Danny stood up. "Is this guy for real?"

"Phase two of what project?" Orillia asked. She stretched her arms up, scanning the bags on the racks above our heads. "Sab, do you have your gun?"

“Yup, but no bullets.”

“Shit, we’re screwed.” Orillia dropped her arms down to her side. “Does anyone have anything? This isn’t good. We can’t be here.”

“No shit,” Danny replied. He cracked his knuckles and shifted into the aisle. “Why don’t we start up the bus and get outta here then?”

A drone scooted through one of the tunnels and looped around the other side of the bus. It beamed it’s red light over the windows, watching us, observing us.

“There’s nothing we can do guys,” I said. “We should just go out there and do as the man says.”

“Are you insane?” Danny turned to me. “Did you not just see what happened to that old man?”

“Yeah, I did, and if we don’t get off this bus, those two kids are gonna shoot us as well.”

Danny whipped his head around to Orillia. “Come on, we gotta put up a fight man. I ain’t leaving this world with my hands tied behind my back.”

“Maybe you’re right,” I said. “But it pays to be smart, right? Whatever Charlie did, like whatever his deal was with this bald dude in the suit, he clearly didn’t think it through. Let’s just wait this one out. When we feel our hands getting tied, that is when we pounce.”

Sab turned to Orillia. Orillia then turned to Cara. The three looked back to Danny.

We stood in silence. The feeling of control had been robbed from us—replaced with a helpless fear of uncertainty. But we had each other, we had strength and the will to live.

We all filed off the bus, once again putting our lives in the hands of a stranger. Bailey held onto Cara's hand as we stood before the two boys and the man named Rennick.

A gust of wind swirled around us, pulling Charlie's yellow baseball hat off his mangled head. It tumbled over the rocks like it was finally being set free.

"I'm going to present you all with some expectations. If you follow these expectations, there will be no need for consequences. Is that clear?" Rennick opened his red book. He lifted his shoulders and puffed out his chest. "All strong, healthy humans are expected to refrain from littering, polluting and harming the environment in any way. All strong, healthy humans are to refrain from acts that cause or have the potential to cause destruction to any strong, healthy living form on this planet."

Rennick closed the book and tucked it under his arm. "Follow me."

The dark skinned boy with the red track suit bent down and pulled the dead woman up and over his shoulder. The other boy, the kid I recognized, picked up Charlie.

We followed them, and Rennick toward the big slabs of rock.
No one spoke.

As I watched the blood drip from the hole in Charlie's head, dangling over the shoulders of the boy, I quick-stepped over to Bailey. What this kid had seen, what he had gone through was mind boggling. I wanted to protect him, and I knew Cara felt the same.

I put my hand on his shoulder as I walked beside him. He looked up to me, gripping tightly onto Cara's hand.

The two boys stopped at the edge of the massive hole—maybe the size of a football field—maybe more. They dropped the bodies to the ground and shoved them over the ledge with their feet like they were just bags of garbage.

Rennick opened his arm out and gestured for us to look. “Please, folks, be my guest.”

I leaned over, immediately feeling my insides escape from my stomach. I turned away and threw up on the stones by my feet.

I pulled on Bailey's arm and guided him to me as I hunched over the ground. “You've seen too much already bud. Please don't look down there.”

“Okay, Sheldon,” he replied.

At the bottom of the pit, hundreds of bodies were piled on top of each other, left to rot in the hot sun—most of them human, some alien, some still alive.

I held my breath, hearing the faint moans from below.

My stomach turned again. I didn't understand. I leaned over the rocks as my insides erupted once more.

“Jesus Christ. Why the hell are you doing this?” Orillia covered her mouth and gagged. “What do you want from us?”

The group took turns looking into the hole, disgusted and confused.

“Please, feel free to share questions,” Rennick began. “But I ask that you refrain from using inappropriate words.”

“Fuck you, sir,” Danny spat into the hole and held up the middle-finger to Rennick.

The two teenaged boys jumped through the group and pointed their guns at Danny’s face.

“Hold up, hold up,” Cara said, stepping in front of Danny. “We’re all just scared right now. We’ll do what you want, just don’t hurt us.”

“Who decided you could speak for all of us? Go back and hide behind your boyfriend, Princess.” Danny pushed Cara aside and leaned into the two guns, just inches from his face.

“Danny, what are you doing?” Orillia shouted.

“These pricks are fucken traitors, just like this fancy man in the suit. If they wanted to kill me, they would have done it by now.” Danny gritted his teeth and eyed the two boys. “So, put your fucken guns down now, and tell us what the hell we’re doing here.” Sab pulled on Danny’s shirt. “Relax man.”

Danny pushed away and leaned his head into the nozzle of one of the guns, pushing it into his forehead. The boy, the one with the red tracksuit stepped back, looking to Rennick. “Sir? What do I do here? Do I shoot him?”

“Okay, drop your guns gentlemen. I think these fine people are ready.” Rennick flipped through a couple pages in his red book and then pointed out to the tunnels. “Please, if you will, I’d like to show you around.”

The two boys lowered their guns.

“Ready for what?” Orillia asked.

Bailey raised his hand. “Are you going to kill us?”

Rennick closed the book and casually wandered over to Bailey. He lowered himself, placing his dark hands onto Bailey’s pale face. His fingers pushed on Bailey’s chin, turning the boy’s head gently from side to side. “You are a tough one. I like that. We need boys like you. And that’s why you’re here.” Rennick stood up and shook his head with a smile. “And no, we don’t have any intention of killing you.”

Sab raised his hand, joining in on the teacher/student discussion. “So, if you’re not going to kill us, then why can’t we get back on the bus and leave?”

Rennick stood up and waved his finger from side to side. “No, no, my friend. If you get on that automobile, we would have to kill you. You see, that would be the consequence of breaking my expectations I put forth to you all earlier. With that primitive automobile, you’d be breaking my first expectation, which was, ‘All strong, healthy humans are expected to refrain from littering, polluting and harming the environment in any way.’”

Cara looked at me, rubbing her fingers over her scar. “This is messed up.”

“Got that right,” I said.

We followed Rennick toward one of the tunnels while the teenaged boys guarded us from the back.

The moans from the pit drifted out through the wind, sending chills down my spine.

“Human beings are being organized into three categories.” Rennick continued. He sauntered like he was taking a leisurely stroll through a park. “That pit is for our human waste. Those who carry your awful diseases, ailments, mental and physical problems, and spread them around like fire, are the ones who are decaying your potential. It's your potential we like. And it's important we rid this planet of those who lack it.”

“Get your fucken gun off me.” Danny pushed the curly-haired boy to the ground and kicked him in the ribs. “This punk-ass keeps pointing his gun at me.”

“Danny, chill, will ya?” Sab pulled him back again, tugging on his arms.

“I ain't gonna go on that bus, so if he ain't gonna shoot me, tell the mother-fucker to leave me alone.” Danny powered himself away from Sab and spit on the boy. “Bitch.”

Rennick calmly turned around and opened the book. He skimmed through a couple pages and then nodded to himself. “Right. He's right. Thomas? Lennox? Please put your guns away.” He closed the book and folded his hands in front of him. “You must excuse us. We are still adjusting to this unique collaboration of the minds. It amazes me how little of your brains you actually used, it's about time we shared it.”

The curly-haired boy staggered up to his feet, brushing the dust off his pants and shirt. "Mr. Rennick, sir?" the boy called out.

"Yes, Thomas?" Rennick replied.

"Permission to clean up, sir? If I'm not needed, I'd like to get back into my formal wear."

Rennick smiled, displaying his bright, perfect teeth. "Not quite yet, Thomas. I'd like you to observe, take mental notes. Besides, you may be needed to retrieve more healthy guests soon. I sense there is one on its way."

"Yes, Rennick," Thomas replied.

"Great. Now, where were we?" Rennick tapped his chin. "Ah yes, the three categories. We are organizing humans into three categories. The first one, as I mentioned before is solely human waste." He held two fingers up and then continued his leisurely stroll toward the tunnel. "Our second category is human invasion. That is those who we see fit for—invading. Like you fine folks. Now, 'invasion' is such a harsh term, but we use it because it is an honest word. You see, we are finding ways to break into your mind, and in a sense, we have to be creative. Yes, there is resistance, and as a result, we must invade. Make sense?"

Rennick stopped at the entrance of the tunnel and turned to us, tilting his head slightly to one side. Behind him, the young girl in the red dress waited in the darkness.

"What if we don't want to be invaded? I mean, don't we have a choice?" Cara inched closer to me, still holding onto Bailey's hand. Her arm rubbed against mine. Her face was pale, her lips dry.

Just feeling her skin, relaxed me again. My shoulders lowered, and my teeth stopped grinding. *What was going to happen to us? If my mind was invaded, would my feelings change?*

“I’m afraid I can’t answer your question at this time, young lady,” Rennick replied. “It appears we have another guest arriving.”

By the great rock wall, leading into this section of the pit, an ogre appeared about half the size of the others. Its shell was still attached, long tentacles flailed behind.

Beside it, a teenaged boy struggled to keep up, choked around his neck by one of the tentacles.

“I would like to pass you on to Alexia now, who will continue the tour with you fine folks inside. I will, of course, catch up with you momentarily.”

I felt my shoulders tighten again—my teeth grinding against each other. I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe he was alive.

“Are you okay?” Cara asked. “Do you know that guy?”

“Yeah,” I replied, following the group into the tunnel. “I think that’s my friend Todd.”

Chapter Thirty-Six:

Sorry

My eyes adjusted to the darkness in the tunnel as the woman in the red dress waited for us to all gather in close. The rock walls were framed in by wooden planks, the floor, a cold, smooth concrete. Deeper into the tunnel, a faint red light shined above a large metal door.

“Hi everyone,” The young woman began. Her voice was soft, almost in a whisper. “If you could kindly wait with me a moment, I would be truly grateful.”

Thomas stood with us as the boy in the track suit stayed out in the quarry pit with Rennick.

I checked back to see if Todd was okay if the ogre was going to free him from that choke hold—if Rennick was going to give him ‘the talk’ and guide him into the tunnel to join our group.

But I had doubts.

My heart pounded against my chest. What if he was just waste? What if that thing was going to just drop him in that hole?

“My name is Alexia,” the girl continued. “Thank you for your patience. Rennick will not be long.”

As we wait for phase three to commence it is expected we will have glitches in our system.” She picked up the briefcase from a white marble table and strutted out into the light. She paused at the entrance, standing like she had when we first arrived on the bus. Her figure was perfectly shaped, perfectly curved. She flicked her hair and glanced back at me. “Sheldon?”

“Yes?” I said.

“This boy here, do you know him?”

I pointed to the entrance and raised my brow.

Alexia nodded. “Yes, you may approach.”

I stepped away from the group and joined Alexia at the front of the tunnel.

“You are Sheldon Hickory, yes?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I replied.

“I’m excited you’re here,” she said.

“You are? How so?”

“We’re excited to meet all of our subjects.”

“Subjects?” I asked.

“We consider all of our guests, subjects. I am excited.

Although I use the word ‘excited’ loosely as my feelings are gradually evolving. Regardless, I’ve heard about you. We’ve already learned a great deal from your survival techniques and how you cope with change and with loss. You’re remarkable Sheldon Hickory.”

I swallowed, feeling my throat tighten. “I’m scared,” I replied.

“I used to be scared.” Alexia looked out into the pit. To our left, the giant rock face curved inward, jetting up at least a hundred feet. Straight ahead, the sun reflected off the windows on the bus. It’s bright yellow paint stood out against the dull colors of the quarry. Through a row of rock slabs, the ogre appeared with the boy, with my friend. It dragged him across the dusty ground with its tentacles and finally stopped near Rennick and the teenager with the red track suit. I blocked my eyes from the sun and focused on Todd. He looked distressed, panicked, but it was him.

“Do you know that boy?” Alexia asked.

“Yes,” I said. “I know that boy.”

“Can you please identify him?” Alexia asked.

“You mean, like his name?”

“Yes,” she replied.

“Todd. His name is Todd Strong.”

Alexia turned to me and nodded. “Thank you. And I just want to say that I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what?” I asked.

“For how this will feel.”

She stepped out into the pit and graciously walked out to Rennick, who waited for her near the bus.

“Wait!” I shouted. “What are you going to do to him?”

From a hole in the rock wall about ten feet up, a small drone glided out. It clicked and beeped, piloting itself around the entrance of the tunnel.

Thomas approached me, his large boots dragged along the concrete floor. He tapped my shoulder, glancing back at my group. "Hey. Don't go out there," he said. "There's nothing you can do."

"Why? What's happening? Why is she sorry?"

"Because he violated the expectations." Thomas folded his arms and watched Alexia. He shook his head and smiled to himself. "Man, this world is going to be so much better. Just look at that fine figure."

"What?"

Thomas pointed at Alexia with his gun. "Look at her. This is what you're going to be looking forward to from now on my friend. Perfection. Just don't mess up."

"I don't give a shit about that. What's going to happen to my friend?"

The ogre unwrapped its tentacle from Todd's neck, dropping him to his knees. A crow squawked on the ledge above us, before swooping down into the giant hole about fifty yards away.

Thomas picked off bits of stone wedged in his hand and elbow. He rubbed his chin and then folded his arms again. "Please avoid the swearing Sheldon. It's not permitted here."

"Why? I don't get it. What is this place? Why did you put those people in that hole? Is my friend going to go in that hole?"

"Perhaps," Thomas replied.

"Did he try to escape?" I asked. "Did Todd try to escape?"

"Yes," Thomas replied. "In a way."

"So, that's it then. Is Rennick going to kill him?"

“Perhaps. He didn’t meet the expectations presented to him upon his arrival.”

“Shit.”

“Language please.”

I marched over to the side of the tunnel and slammed my hands against the wooden frame that bordered the rock. The group stood a few yards away from me, watching me, with worry in their eyes.

I leaned my head on the cold wood and held my breath.

Keep it together, you gotta keep it together.

I inhaled slowly.

Then exhaled again.

“What are you?” I asked finally. I turned around and faced Thomas. “Like, are you human? I know you. I mean, I used to know you.”

Thomas smiled. “I know you too. My name is Thomas. I no longer have a last name. The system is my family now.”

My chest tightened.

“Why did you kill your parents?”

Thomas lowered his head and touched his gun, fitted now loosely along the side of his jeans. “You ask a lot of questions. Rennick is going to like you.” Thomas wandered over to the other side of the entrance wall and leaned against the wooden frame. He looked at his elbow and then out toward Rennick. “I am human. But I’m also something else. I’m a merger, if you will, of two minds. I met Thomas at his farmhouse not long ago. It didn’t take long for me to find the space inside his brain. My brain. Our brain.”

“Sheldon? Are you okay?” Cara called out to me.

I placed my hand out to her, trying to catch a full breath.

“Yeah, I’m good. I think.”

“Young lady, please stay with the group.”

Cara rubbed her arms and slipped back with the others.

“My alien shell is with the crows,” Thomas continued, pointing out to the hole. “I no longer need it. Along our physical evolutionary journey, we will find strong, healthy humans, to breach. Once we have entered your mind, our alien bodies are simply rendered useless. It is those bodies you saw in that hole. There is just enough brain energy to guide the bodies back here. Or, where ever they happen to be stationed.”

“But, you killed your parents,” I said.

“My dad was an alcoholic. Drank wine every night. My mom, bipolar.”

“So?”

“They don’t fit into our vision, Sheldon.”

The taste of bile crept up into my throat. I turned back to the wooden frame, letting it take most of my weight. I wanted to collapse to the ground, I wanted to give up.

I looked out to Todd again. He was still on his knees, pleading with Rennick about something, perhaps begging for his life.

“Can I go out there? Can I talk to Rennick? Can I talk to Todd?”

“I’m afraid you can not.”

“But I’ve known Todd practically my entire life. He’s my best friend.” I had never felt more helpless. Maybe this was the time to pounce. Thomas wasn’t even paying attention to his gun. How could he fight all of us off? What kind of system was this anyway?

“If you try to take my gun, I will shoot you.” Thomas looked out at the pit as another crow swooped down into the hole.

I swallowed.

Danny stepped out from the darkness behind us, his fists were clenched.

I looked to the group. This time, no one tried to stop him.

“Fuck you, Thomas. Let us go, or I’ll crush your skull.”

Thomas whipped around and pointed the gun at Danny.

“Please refrain from using that word.”

“What word?” Danny opened up his arms and stopped in front of Thomas. “Fuck? You don’t like the word, fuck?”

“That is correct,” Thomas replied.

“I’m sorry, but I like that word. It’s a human word, and the last time I checked, I was a fucken human.”

“Please refrain from using that word.”

“And why are you pointing that gun at me? Didn’t you listen to your boss? I ain’t trying to escape, and I ain’t polluting, I ain’t littering, and I ain’t harming the environment, am I?”

Thomas lowered his gun and fired at Danny’s foot, blasting a hole in his shoe, spraying globs of blood out onto the concrete flooring.

“Fuck!” Danny shouted, dropping to the ground. He grabbed at his leg and rolled around from side to side. “My foot. You shot my foot.”

“All strong, healthy humans are to refrain from acts that cause or have the potential to cause destruction to any strong, healthy living form on this planet,” Thomas announced. “Now please forgo the use of ruinous slang, and kindly return to the location where Alexia asked you to wait.”

“Jesus Christ, you shot me.” Danny staggered to his feet, grimacing in pain. He punched the wood-framed wall and hobbled back, leaving a trail of blood behind him.

I could only assume Orillia, Sab, Cara, and Bailey were terrified, like a deer in headlights. Not one of them spoke, as they tended to Danny's injury.

“You’re a fucken asshole!” Danny shouted.

“May I point out that you are now crippled, and if deemed to be no longer strong or healthy, we will consider you waste.” Thomas waved his gun and then returned his gaze back out at the pit.

Danny cowered against the wall next to the marble table as Sab propped up the wounded foot and wrapped it with his sock. Danny’s moans echoed through the tunnel, deep into the darkness.

A gust of wind circled about in front of me, pulling up a cloud of dust. Despite being in the shade, I could feel the beads of sweat push out of my pores, soaking into my shirt.

Outside, Alexia opened the briefcase as Rennick carefully reached into it. He unlocked the gun and looked back to me.

Alexia turned around with the briefcase and confidently returned to the tunnel. Her thigh muscles flexed with every step.

The wind pushed her hair about as she angled away from the swirling air and dust.

She stepped into the shade and stood next to me, once again facing the pit. She fixed her misplaced strands of hair and blinked several times.

“We saw potential in your friend,” Alexia said in a soft whisper. “We had hoped to use him in phase three.”

I looked at her blankly, feeling my heart race. There were no words anymore. I didn’t know what to say.

“He was like you,” Alexia continued. “He had your strength, physically and intellectually. We breached him pretty early on too. We were able to learn how he thought and how he felt. He was one of the first in this zone. It was extremely impressive. Having access to his brain, to the human brain, in general, is incredibly valuable to us. You are a beautiful species, Sheldon.”

“I don’t understand. I honestly don’t know what you’re saying.”

“But you do,” Alexia replied. “You’re just having trouble accepting it. But we are confident you will. I believe in you.”

I looked out again at my friend.

Todd covered his face with his hands. His shoulders dropped.

“Is Todd going to die?” I asked.

“Your friend, Todd, has merged with us. He is sharing his brain with our ‘system.’ But he refused to accept change. He tried to escape. He wouldn’t take part in disposing of the weak and the sick and the diseased. He no longer fits into the vision. To answer your question Sheldon, yes. Todd is going to die.”

The drone shifted away from the tunnel entrance and hovered near Rennick and the boy in the tracksuit. The two looked down at my best friend—the valedictorian from my eighth-grade year—my teammate on the Hidden Trail Tigers.

“Please don’t do this,” I said.

“I’m sorry,” Alexia replied. “We value your feelings. We are interested in how you handle them.”

Rennick closed the red book and pointed the gun at Todd’s head.

“You are strong and healthy, Sheldon,” Alexia said.

Rennick fired the gun into Todd’s face.

My best friend toppled forward and then rolled onto his side.

I didn’t move.

I couldn’t.

My mind, my body had no time to process.

“What the fuck was that?” Danny called out from the darkness of the tunnel.

I didn’t answer. I didn’t turn around.

I was done asking questions, I was done trying to answer them. There was no point trying to understand.

Chapter Thirty-Seven:

Promise and Opportunity

The boy in the track suit dragged Todd's raggedy body to the giant hole and pushed him over the ledge. The weighted clattering sounds of him landing on top of the rotten corpses below sickened me.

Again.

Todd was gone. My best friend was dead. And there was nothing I could do about it.

I watched Alexia step back out into the pit with the briefcase like she had done this routine a hundred times—like this was her only job.

She walked with purpose as if her life was gratifying, filled with promise and potential. I had no doubt she believed it too.

Thomas.

Rennick.

The boy in the track suit.

They all believed in a better world.

A vision.

And in order for their system to strive, they had to kill off the weak and brainwash the strong.

I get that.

And I was strong.

Very strong. At least I felt that way. I mean, shit, I had to, right?

“Sheldon, are you okay?” Cara wrapped her arms around me as I returned to the group. “They killed him, didn't they?”

“Yeah,” I replied. “But that doesn't matter. I don't have time to cry. Not now.” I touched Cara's face and forced out a smile.

“What do they want from us?” Cara asked. “Why did they shoot him?”

I rubbed my hands along her shoulders and down her arms. She looked up at me with her beautiful blue eyes. I just wanted to escape from this nightmare and wake up again with her beside me.

“They want our bodies and our brains,” I said. It wasn't like it was a surprise to any of us, but it had never felt more real.

Ludicrous, but real.

“Like what happened to Margaret. Right Sheldon?” Bailey tugged on my arm. “They took Margaret's body and brain.”

“Yeah, that's right buddy,” I replied. “And if we don't meet their criteria, they'll kill us.”

“All strong, healthy humans, yadda, yadda, yadda, right?” Sab finished tying his other sock around Danny's foot.

“Exactly,” I said. “But listen. We gotta stick together. They know our thoughts guys. Thomas knew what I was thinking, like as if it was him inside my head. I don't think it was a coincidence either. We gotta be open to this.”

“What?” Orillia sat upon the marble table and crossed her legs. “Open to what?”

I pointed out to the pit, to Alexia and Thomas. “Open to them. To their vision. It's the only way we can stay alive. Trust me.”

“Fuck that noise,” Danny muttered. He gripped the wooden planks along the wall and pulled himself upright. “I say we pounce. And we do it now.”

“My friends. My friends.” Rennick stepped into the tunnel with the boy in the track suit. He tapped Thomas on the shoulder and whispered something to him. Thomas nodded and walked out to the pit with the other boy.

Rennick then turned to us. "Again, my apologies for our minor interruption. Can I offer anyone some water?" He dabbed the sweat off his face with a white cloth and then tucked it back into his pocket. "Anyone? No? Okay. Sorry, there aren't any comfortable chairs to sit on. My intentions were not for you to wait this long. Let's continue the tour, shall we?" He awkwardly kissed Alexia on the mouth and handed her the gun. He tucked his red book under his arm and smiled.

“Nice to meet you all,” Alexia said as she placed the gun back in the suitcase. “Enjoy the tour. Thanks for taking part in our vision. I hope some of you will join our family one day.”

“What the fuck?” Danny muttered, trying to keep himself balanced on one foot.

Rennick stretched out his arm and powered his hand into Danny's throat, pushing him up against the wooden siding. His fingers gripped tightly around Danny's neck, digging into his skin. "You are this close Mr. Steadman. Mr. Daniel James Steadman. I have scanned you, and you are still strong enough for our testing. You are healthy enough for our phase three observations. But if you continue to violate our simple expectations, I will end you. Do you understand?"

Danny's face turned red. Bursts of air slipped from his mouth as he tried to speak. "Fu..fuck you."

Rennick clenched his jaw and leaned into Danny, dropping the red book on the ground. "I have a strength that you will not understand, not until we decide if you fit into our system and into our vision. For now, you will do as I say, you will take part in our initiative as we learn about the human ways. Do I make myself clear?"

Danny pushed air out of his nose and lowered his face. "No."

Rennick let go, dropping Danny back to the hard concrete. He straightened his suit and adjusted his tie. "Okay. Okay. I see." Rennick rubbed his chin and looked out to Alexia.

She held up the briefcase and stepped forward. Her high heels echoed as they tapped the floor. "Do you need me, Rennick?"

“No. It's fine.” Rennick took a big breath and picked up the red book. He stroked his eyebrows and cleared his throat. “I'm afraid my human ways are interfering with my motive. My apologies for my aggression folks. Let me try to paint a picture for you, perhaps that will help. Please follow me. We will continue the tour.” Rennick opened his arms and pointed to the door at the end of the tunnel. “This way, please. And can somebody please pick up our injured guest.” He marched ahead of us, wiping his forehead again with the white cloth.

Sab and I grabbed Danny's hand and pulled him up to his feet. We walked in silence, deeper into the tunnel toward the door with the red glowing light, curious about what was on the other side. Danny grimaced with every step, trying his best to hold back the pain.

Orillia veered off to the side as if to separate herself from our group. Her arms folded as she stared blankly ahead.

Behind us, Alexia was now just a distant silhouette, standing in the center of a small circle of light. I wondered who she was before this attack, whether she was a student at a nearby school, whether she too killed her family or the weak.

She seemed so friendly. So—real.

Maybe this life *was* going to be better.

“Alright friends. Through this door, you're going to find promise. You're going to find progress and change. Please understand, since your arrival to our lab, we have been carefully monitoring you. I am excited about your potential.” Rennick leaned over and patted Bailey on the head like the kid was a dog.

Bailey tried to smile as he inched closer to Cara.

The group watched with fear, with confusion and worry as Rennick stood tall and wrapped his fingers around the handle of the steel door. I half expected little Margaret to reach up and grab my hand, only to remember she was no longer with us.

And Todd.

Damn, Todd.

The hinges ground and squeaked as Rennick heaved the door open. He stepped through and waited for us to enter. "Please, come inside."

Fluorescent lights spilled out over a massive stone room with towering pillars leading up to a perfectly carved out ceiling. It was like stepping into an ancient temple, buried under the earth for a thousand years. The air was damp and cold, bringing an instant chill to my skin.

A young African-American girl, maybe sixteen, greeted us at the first pillar. She wore a red dress like Alexia's and held onto a briefcase.

Behind her, in a cage, a crowd of kids flocked to the steel bars that separated them from the rest of the room. Their curious gaze followed us as we moved past them.

Not one of them spoke.

"Kaya, how is everything?" Rennick asked, kissing her on the mouth.

"Permission to take one of the subjects to the hole?" she asked, formally standing with her feet together and her chin tilted upward.

"Who?" Rennick asked.

“Oliver. He isn't strong Rennick. You need to see for yourself.”

We followed Kaya to another section of the room past several cages; all marked with a letter. Inside each one, the people seemed reserved and calm, as if their life depended on good behavior.

Or they had simply given up.

I glanced at them as we walked past, curious about my dad, hoping he was still out there, on the hills.

The blood rushed to my head as familiar faces appeared through the helpless crowds of prisoners. Perhaps they had accepted their fate and were only waiting for their bodies to be taken over by these monsters. It sickened me to see them—classmates, kids from baseball, the cute girl who worked the cash at the bowling alley in town.

They blankly looked at me like I was nothing but another lab rat being guided to my new prison cell.

Maybe I was.

I adjusted my grip on Danny's arm as we approached the second last cage in the room. Soft whimpers echoed out over the hum from the air vents above us. Kaya pointed to a boy sitting alone at the back, leaning up against the steel bars with his head tucked into his knees; his back shook with each stuttering cry.

“He's been like this for over an hour,” Kaya said. “If he were out on the streets, we would have killed him on the spot.”

Rennick nodded and wandered over to the side of the cage. He lowered himself and tapped the boy on the head through the steel bars. "Oliver. We had such high hopes for you. You were our forty-third clean captive. We wanted you to take part of in our phase three controlled environment."

The boy didn't respond; his whimpers grew louder as his body trembled. "I wanna go home."

Rennick nodded again and stood up. "Yes. He's waste. Thank you, Kaya. See to it that Clarence takes him to Alexia, Thomas, and Lennox for proper disposal."

"Yes, Rennick."

A door opened behind the row of cages, and a large muscular boy in a suit stepped out with keys linked to his belt. He unlocked the second last cage and pulled Oliver up to his feet. The crowd of kids shifted to the side, allowing the muscular boy to drag him out. He tossed Oliver to the floor as Kaya opened up her briefcase and held her gun out at him.

The boy cried out, flailing his arms about, like a baby. He punched the concrete flooring over and over until his knuckles bled.

Rennick summoned for us to follow him into the next section of rooms. He continued to hold his head up high and share his pathetic smile with us. "As you can see, these are our holding tanks. You may note our subjects are compliant and content, a perfect example of the acceptance and conformity we are receiving regarding our vision."

The boy from the last room screamed out again as Clarence carried him across the floor.

Rennick paused, as Clarence struggled to control the boy. He pulled him through the tunnel door and slammed it shut behind him.

“Again, my apologies. Not all of us see our vision as promise and opportunity,” Rennick said.

“Can you define ‘promise’ and ‘opportunity,’” I replied.

“Of course, Sheldon. Let me explain.” Rennick pointed to some leather couches and a marble coffee table with a bowl of apples on top. “Please, my friends. Have a seat. Are you sure you don’t want anything to drink? What about to eat? Perhaps an apple?”

“No, thanks,” Cara replied flopping down onto the couch. She picked up one of the flowery cushions and placed it on her lap.

Danny let go of my arm and spat on the floor. He sat down next to Cara.

We all tried to make ourselves comfortable as Rennick slid one of the ottomans to the front and sat down. Placing the red book on the table he reached over to the bowl and picked up an apple.

"Through hyper-scanning a form of high-speed uploading, I can determine if a human is a healthy specimen for research or simply waste material." He weaved his fingers together and leaned forward. "Clearly none of you belong in the hole." He looked at each one of us before pausing at Danny. "Right?"

Danny cracked his knuckles and propped his bloodied foot up on the table.

“Right,” I said, hoping Rennick would see we were willing to cooperate.

At least for now.

“Like I said, these are our holding tanks while we wait for phase three. Our resources will be arriving soon, once, of course, all eighty-two thousand target zones have been cleared around your planet.” Rennick took a bite from the red apple. He chewed it for a moment before swallowing, shaking his head and smiling. “Wow, I love these things. Such rich flavors. Your taste buds are so much more advanced than what we had. Anyway, it is an incredible undertaking, and unfortunately, it means we have to be patient. In the meantime, we can do informal behavioral studies, as we get accustomed to your bodies, emotionally, psychologically and intellectually. Does anyone have any questions at this point?”

We sat on the couches like a bunch of spoiled, complacent teenagers, numbing ourselves from the arrogant salesman. I picked at the hangnail on my thumb. “You still haven’t answered my first question.”

Rennick took another bite and bobbed his head a few times. Bits of apple dropped from his mouth. He picked up the pieces from his lap and placed them neatly on the corner of the marble table. “Yes. Of course. Promise and opportunity. I’m hoping a member of our family will answer that question for you. Bare with me, will you?” He snapped his fingers, signally for a young man to step forward from one of the pillars. I didn’t see him, nor did I notice the other formally dressed teenaged kids standing at attention along the row of pillars leading into several other rooms. The boys wore suits, the girls, red dresses, each one holding a briefcase. “Sanjay, will you open that door for us? Also, could you be so kind as to pick up these bits of apple from the table and give it a thorough wipe?”

“Yes, Rennick.” Sanjay robotically walked over to us and picked up the pieces of apple. He cupped them in his hand and then opened the door behind the couches. He disappeared for a second before stepping back out with a cloth. He wiped the sticky remnants from the apple and then dabbed the blood off the table next to Danny’s foot.

Not one of us acknowledged him like he was just a servant and we were royalty.

“Thank you, Sanjay. And can you please get subject J-32 for me?”

“Yes, Rennick,” Sanjay replied.

Danny shifted in his seat and leaned forward, grabbing an apple from the bowl. As he lifted it to his mouth, Orillia jumped forward and slapped it out of his hand.

The apple dropped to the floor and rolled under the table.

“You’re not hungry,” Orillia said, eyeing Danny like he was a child.

Danny flopped back against the couch. He folded his arms and looked up at the lights. “Yes, your highness,” he muttered.

The fans hummed around us as we watched Rennick chew on his apple, careful not to spill any more bits from his mouth. He nibbled around the core, trying to get every last bit. When he finished, he placed it neatly on the corner of the table making sure it didn't tip over. "Inside that room there, is where we hold the newest members of our family." Rennick pointed to the door behind us. "Often there is confusion and disorientation as the merge reaches the cerebral cortex of the brain. Sometimes there is memory loss. For those who experience this out in the target zones, we can only hope they adapt quickly and move forward in supporting our vision. I am sorry about your friend Margaret. She had so much potential. For those, like subject J-32, we house them in here, allowing for the merge to fully complete its course. This merge may take several days or in some cases several weeks. From injections into the head to the transfer of DNA and brain matter through the apples in your orchards, or the water in your wells, we have found ways to get inside the strong." Rennick jumped up and hustled over to the door. He peered into the room with excitement in his eyes.

"She's ready for you, Rennick." Sanjay walked through the door and returned to the pillar.

"Thank you, Sanjay." Rennick held the door open as a woman stepped out into the room. She wore a red dress like the others—her eyes looked blankly out to us.

I immediately jumped up from my seat, feeling my youthful innocence return to me. My lips quivered as tears welled up in my eyes.

“Sheldon, I would like subject J-32 here to help you understand what I mean by promise and opportunity.”

Chapter Thirty-Eight:

What's it like?

I rushed over to my mom and hugged her, escaping into my childhood, letting go of the bravado I held so proudly.

She still had the same smell—of face creams and shampoo. I didn't want to let go.

Cara sat on the couch in front of me; tears rolled down her face. I knew that holding my mom only reminded her of her loss and that she could never have that submissive feeling again.

Even Sab and Danny seemed a little teary-eyed as I finally collected myself.

“Sheldon, you're here.” She pulled away and wiped my eyes with her fingers. “I was worried you would be too stubborn.”

I sniffed and rubbed away the rest of my tears with the top of my wrist. “Are you okay?” I asked. “Did they hurt you?”

“Of course not, dear. As long as you cooperate, you'll never feel pain again.” Her voice was soft, and monotone, like the emotions had been stripped from her mind.

“Are you—are you, I mean, have they—”

“Merged,” Rennick coached. “Your mother has merged with us.”

I dropped my hands down to my side and stepped away from her. “What?” My eyes welled up again.

“Your mother is a strong and healthy woman. We're excited she is joining our family.” Rennick stood up and kissed her on the mouth.

A dark cloud of hot air rushed over me. A heated energy took control of my insides as I clenched my fist and punched Rennick square in the nose.

The impact sent a pulsating shock through my arm and spine before returning once again to my hand. Like time had slowed, Rennick's contorted face whipped backward, pulling the rest of his body down to the concrete floor.

In that brief moment, just around the time Rennick's head made impact with the cement, I realized I had lost my mom—lost her to an alien species who were brainwashing the strong—the strong and healthy—only I realized, as I looked around me, at the emotionless souls in the cages, at the 'conformity' of teenagers in suits and red dresses, that they were not the strong.

No.

They were the ones who were weak.

I felt an arm grab me from behind and pull me back onto the couch. Another surge of rage fired up inside me. I wanted to rip my body away from the hold and crush Rennick's skull.

"You fucken asshole!" I screamed, feeling my lungs burn.
"You fucken goddamn asshole!"

This time, it was Danny who was holding me down, pushing his weight onto my shoulders and legs. "Not the right time," he muttered to me, staring hard into my eyes. "Look at me; it's not the right time. Not yet."

I wriggled and squirmed, trying to force my way out of his hold. Sab jumped in beside Danny, and the two held me down.

I had been holding it in for too long. I was just a kid.

I was just a goddamn kid.

“Talk to him,” Rennick said, pulling himself up to his feet.

“Talk to your son, will you?”

I kicked the table, feeling the impact on my shin, but I didn’t care. The physical pain was better than the reality sinking in.

“Sheldon, my dear, please calm yourself. You need to listen to me.”

I couldn't see my mom, but her voice eased into my ears like she was the only sounds I could hear.

“You let them in, Mom, You let them in,” I shouted.

“I had to,” my mom replied. “And you have to as well.”

I shook my head and closed my eyes. The pressure on my shoulders, on my wrists and legs only added fuel to my rage. "I will never give in to this. Never. Why did you do it? Why did you do it, mom!?" I pushed on the table again with my feet, tipping it up and knocking the bowl of apples and the red book onto the floor. The logic and the calculated thoughts I had so carefully learned and developed were suddenly gone.

“You want to know why she did it?” A large hand gripped my throat, cutting my air off. I opened my eyes, seeing Rennick’s bloodied face glaring down at me.

“Y—yes,” I gasped.

Footsteps echoed through the room. The teenaged guards had drawn their guns on us.

"It's this planet, Sheldon, haven't you figured it out yet?" Rennick's tone was different with me now like he was when he spoke with Danny. "We're here to help you kid. We're here to make you into better people."

"It's true sweetheart," my mom added. Her face blankly looked at me, absent of emotion entirely.

"Look at me." Rennick pushed on my throat; blood pooled over the gouge along the bridge of his nose. "We are joining you in the fight to save this planet before you all nuke each other one day and turn it into a wasteland."

Sab and Danny stepped away from me as the guards pushed them back to the wall by the door.

"N—uke?" I asked.

Rennick eased off on his grip and sat down next to me while Sanjay and another boy in a suit directed their guns toward my head. I coughed, tasting warm blood.

"Yes, nuclear war," Rennick replied. "Your species are but months away from destroying this spectacular world. Charlie had it all right. He did have a fallout shelter, and for the most part, he was a smart man, but he was still part of the problem, not part of the solution." Rennick shook his head. "Don't be like Charlie."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Charlie was a cancer waiting to happen. He was no good to us. He was assigned to pick up the strong, to lead them to our camp, but despite the merger, there were parts of his brain we couldn't control. Some habits are difficult to break, but we are learning. The man was a walking disease."

“So you killed him? Like my friend Todd? Are you going to kill my mom too?”

“No, dear,” my mom sat down on the other side of me. She placed her hand on my knee. “They didn't cure all the diseases and problems on this planet sweetheart; they took them from us to study and to understand. And to remedy. They want to make earth a better place. You need to see that.”

Through the doors, a group of prisoners walked in single-file past us, not one of them looked our way. Two girls in red dresses escorted them, leading them back to the cage with the letter ‘J’ on the door.

“That was my group,” my mom said. “They just finished dinner in the dining chamber. That was the cage I stayed in before my final commitment to the merger.”

I shook my head, still feeling the imprint of Rennick’s hand on my neck.

“So that’s it? You’re one of them? You have an alien in your brain?”

My mom nodded and forced out a smile like she was auditioning for a toothpaste commercial or something. “Almost. I'm in training. I'm still J-32 to them until the merge is complete. But they've given me this lovely dress. Exciting isn't it?”

I didn’t know her anymore. This person, this thing, was not my mother. Maybe it was anger that was fueling it, but the tears quickly dried from my eyes. I thought I had lost her before and it was no skin off my back to think it again. I know that seemed cold, but it was her fault. Shit, it was both of my parents’ fault.

My shoulders slumped over as I moved my knee away from her hand. It was clear to me what these creatures were looking for in a person, and it wasn't strength and health. My mom was a coward; I knew that a long time ago. I had no doubt she had given into a love affair with that postman—that same asshole who attacked Cara. Instead of confronting her problems with my dad, she just walked away from them.

It was people like my mom who these creatures wanted.

Rennick tapped his fingers on the armrest of the chair as Sanjay, and the other boy picked up the red book and the apples from the floor. "I think that will be all for now." He stood up and offered his hand to my mom. He escorted her back to the door and kissed her again on the mouth. He looked to me as if he was begging for another punch in the face.

"I'm sorry," my mom said to Rennick, lowering her head.

"You did your best. It was expected. I have an opportunity for him and his group. It may take time, but I'm certain at some point your son will join our family and support the vision."

My mom nodded and returned to the dining chambers as if I was already forgotten about.

Rennick spoke privately to a couple of guards and then returned to the ottoman in front of us. "Please folks, come back and sit down. Join Sheldon and me for a chat."

The fingers on my right hand shook—the blood rushed to my knuckles. I had never punched anyone before, not like that.

Rennick cleaned the cut on his nose with his little handkerchief and then picked up the red book. He flipped through the pages, scanning the text carefully.

Danny, Sab, Orillia, Cara and Bailey all returned to the couches. They appeared overwhelmed, but were incredibly calm—maybe it was sheer exhaustion, maybe it was fear. Seeing them gather around the marble table continued to bring me hope. I knew this was my team. This was my family. Yeah, they were stubborn and impulsive, but they were human.

And they were strong.

Fuck, Mom.

“Ah, here it is.” Rennick stopped on a page and tapped it with his finger. “We might be able to disable or access any technologically advanced system on your planet, like the military, your government, drones, automobiles or even phones, yet we still struggle to understand the simplest of things.” Rennick awkwardly laughed. “I can only hypothesize your use of books was a means to archive information. This is something we never needed among our development as a species. Our brains function, communicate and transfer data at levels far exceeding your abilities.”

“And your point?” Orillia asked.

"My point. Right." Rennick scanned the page again before closing the book. He held it up and rotated it around the group. "This book was written specifically for this target zone, or camp, if you will. Forgive me, I may fumble with my words, as I'm still getting used to your primitive language." A drop of blood trickled down his nose and along the side of his face. He reached for his handkerchief again and dabbed it. "This book was written specifically for the culture, geography, and climate of this area. The expectations outlined in here are presented in a simple and clear manner."

Danny flung his injured foot back on the table and folded his arms. "All strong, healthy humans must conform, or else, yeah we get it."

"I have a question." Sab leaned forward on the couch. "Why are you jumping into our brains, if you are already so much more advanced than us? Why do you want this planet if it's all going to shit?"

"Language please," Rennick added.

"Shit, sorry," Sab replied.

Rennick nodded and awkwardly smiled again. "Because you, my friend have more promise and opportunity than any other species we have researched." He placed the book back on his lap and turned to the last page he was on. "Now, if you'll kindly let me continue. There is an exciting program we are running in only a limited number of target zones."

"This is nuts," Orillia mumbled.

"Damn right." Danny bit off the tip of his fingernail and spat it on the floor.

"Pardon me?" Rennick asked.

“I said this was nuts.” Orillia crossed her legs and folded her arms like Danny.

“And then I said, ‘damn right.’” Danny shook his head, letting his mopy hair fall over his eyes.

Rennick rubbed his perfectly shaven head. “Alright.” He cleared his throat and delicately touched his nose. “Like I was saying. There is an exciting new program, designed for strong, healthy folks like yourself. We will set you free and simply monitor your behaviors in the natural elements.”

“What?” I said. “You mean, you’ll let us go?”

“Yes. In so many words. We can let you go. Due to our lack of resources at this time, we value the informal research.”

Danny pulled his leg off the table and sat up. “You’re shitting me.”

Rennick closed his eyes for a second and inhaled slowly. “Language please.”

“Sorry.”

Rennick stood up “If you survive out there, which I am confident you will, you will join a higher class within our family’s system—a class only warranted to those with unique skills and qualities.” He waved at Sanjay and another guard.

“What’s the catch?” Cara asked. She inched her foot over and touched my leg.

“Catch?” Rennick tilted his head. “I don’t understand.” He brushed the wrinkles away from his dress pants and tucked his book under his arm.

“This sounds too good to be true,” Cara added.

Sanjay and the other boy approached Rennick and stood on either side of him. They eyed us for a moment before standing again at attention.

Rennick picked off some dust from Sanjay's shoulder and then turned to us. "It might seem that way. But we have foot soldiers. Some are designed to evolve at a limited pace, used solely for obtaining resources, like food, water, and essential supplies. Some are designed, however, to capture or kill."

"Kill? Like, kill us?" Cara asked.

"Yes," Rennick replied, "Like, kill you."

"But why would they kill us?" Cara touched her scar. "You just said we are strong and healthy, like, what you're looking for. You said we don't belong in the hole. Why would you want us killed?"

"One moment please." Rennick held up his finger and then turned to Sanjay and the other boy. "There are no more guests scheduled to be arriving today. Set up the hoses in Room Thirty-Nine and prepare cages A through L for wash-down."

"Yes, of course," Sanjay said. "Will there be anything else?"

"Yes. When Clarence returns, please have him escort this group out through Tunnel D. They will be leaving us."

"Sir?"

"Section Seventeen, Trial Three." Rennick pointed to the book. "They're going to do the research program. They have a merger."

"Right." Sanjay stepped away with the other guard and marched out of the room.

Three pillars down, another group of prisoners walked in single-file toward us. Their clothes were torn, their faces dirty, and bloodied. A couple of them glanced our way as they entered the dining chamber.

Why would they give in to this?

“I don’t want you killed,” Rennick said to us finally. “I don’t want any of you killed. But the book says, if you don’t support our vision, you’re not part of the system.”

“So that’s it?” I said, jumping up from my seat. “Just like that? We’re free to go?”

“Wait.” Cara pulled on my hand. “Wait a second. How do we know those ogres out there aren’t just gonna kill us the second we step outta here.”

“I don’t,” Rennick replied. “But you have no other choice. Either you conform, or you support our vision our there.”

“Has anyone done this before?” Cara asked. “I mean, this research program. Are there any groups out there doing it now?”

Cara had the right questions and the right attitude, but it couldn’t be more black and white for me. If we stayed here, we’d be giving in to this—this terrorism.

“I’m afraid I cannot share that information with you,” Rennick replied. “Now if you don’t mind, I have a lot on my plate. I believe that is the expression you use. Clarence will be with you shortly. I must say, I am disappointed you will not conform at this time. I wish you luck out there. I am confident you will be fine, and most of you will return. We will be watching you.” Rennick adjusted his tie and snapped his fingers at a girl waiting along one of the pillars. She hustled over with her briefcase and followed him toward the dining chambers.

“Wait.” Cara stood up and scooted around the table. “Wait, please.”

Rennick stopped at the entrance of the dining chamber and turned around. “What is it?”

Cara’s flip flops echoed through the giant room as she approached him. She looked at me for a second, with fear in her eyes. She dropped her head and reached for Rennick’s hand.

“What’s it like?”

“What is what like?” Rennick asked.

Cara lifted her head. She paused for a second as if to rehearse the question in her mind. “What’s it like being one of them?”

Rennick waved for the girl with the briefcase to continue into the dining chamber. He smiled and placed Cara’s hand on the red book. “It’s wonderful,” he said. “It is truly wonderful.”

The Girl from the Bowling Alley

Rennick lifted Cara's hand up to his face and softly kissed it. The gentle sucking sound of his puckered lips touching her skin chipped away at my nerves. He smiled at her, whispering something in her ear. She lowered her head and nodded before quietly returning to the couch. He stole a glance in our direction as though he was disappointed in our decision not to conform to his alien cult. He tucked the book back under his arm and then stepped away with the guard. His dress shoes clanked against the cement floor as he slipped behind another door.

Why did he kiss her hand? Why the hell did he kiss my mom?

Two more groups came and went through the dining chambers as we waited on the couches to be escorted out. The fluorescent lights flickered, reminding me of the classroom back in town. Only this place had a moldy dampness in the air, almost like puke. The skin along my inner thighs clung to my jeans.

Cara wrapped her arms around the floral pillow beside me, deep in thought. I knew she was scared of what was out there, not knowing if we were going to wake up to see the next day. Somehow, inside this giant underground temple, there was a sense of security. Maybe it was because we were seen as superiors, according to Rennick at least, or maybe because there was an opportunity to give in.

To stop running.

But that wasn't us.

It wasn't Cara.

And it wasn't who my dad would want me to be either. I couldn't give up on him. He was out there, in hiding, and he needed me.

I looked at Orillia now, wondering what she was thinking. Did she agree with our decision to leave? Was she just as determined to find her dad as I was?

What was out there for us?

"Did you know there are nineteen pillars, twelve cages, sixteen ventilation shafts, sixty-two sets of lights and five doors?" Bailey shuffled around on the couch and settled on his knees, facing the room behind us. "And that girl over there with the pink teddy bear shirt has looked at me six times. No, wait. Seven."

I tried my best to avoid looking at the zombie-like faces back by the tunnel entrance. In truth, I had forgotten about them. To me, they were no better than my own mom.

"Hey, what did the dude mean when he said we had a merger?" Sab scratched away at his chin.

"What dude?" Danny was slouched back, squeezing his eyes shut.

Sab pointed to the dining chamber. "The bald guy in the suit."

"You mean, Rennick?" I asked.

"Yeah." Sab pushed his fingernails together and pried out a hair. "He said there was a merger in our group."

We looked around at each other, not sure what to make of the question.

“He probably meant a merger will be escorting us out,” I replied. “There isn’t a merger in any of us. We would have figured that out by now.”

“I don’t think so,” Sab said. “I think he meant one of us has been breached.”

“You mean there’s an alien in our brains?” Bailey asked. He fiddled with his zipper on his pants and tugged on Cara’s arm. “I gotta go pee. And I’m hungry. Can I have an apple?”

“No,” Cara replied.

“What does ‘merger’ mean anyway?” Danny grimaced as he shifted in his seat.

“It means one of us has a fucken alien in our brains, doe-doe.” Sab analyzed the hair in between his fingers and then brushed it off.

“Rennick doesn’t like it when we swear.” Bailey pulled on Cara’s shirt again.

“I know Bail, I know. Can you guys chill on the f-bombs all the time? He’s like, ten.”

“I *am* ten.”

“See?” Cara brushed her hair aside and pushed the bowl of apples to the other end of the table. “Maybe one of us was breached, but if we’re all strong and healthy like Rennick says, we don’t have anything to worry about, right?”

“I dunno, what about Danny here?” Orillia said.

“What about me?”

“Can you even walk?” Orillia pointed to his leg.

“Yeah, I can walk. Don’t even go there sweet cheeks.” Danny pulled his leg off the table and powered himself up to his feet. “Oh shit, oh shit.” He hobbled on one foot and awkwardly maneuvered himself around the chair. “Shit, shit, shit. Fuck.” He clenched his jaw. “Sorry Bailey.”

Bailey shyly smiled. “That’s okay, Danny. You’re funny when you swear.”

“What about you Sheldon?” Orillia uncrossed her legs and pulled one of the pillows onto her lap.

“What about me?” I replied.

“Weren’t you like unconscious for a couple weeks or something?”

“Seventeen days,” Bailey added. “Cara and I took care of him.”

“Yeah, so?” My throat suddenly tightened.

“So?” Orillia pulled a loose thread on the pillow and wrapped it around her finger. “What happened to you?”

“I dunno,” I replied. “I guess it knocked me out.”

“For seventeen days?”

I looked over to Cara, half expecting her to jump in. I mean, she was there, she was the one who helped me. But she didn’t say anything. She just looked out at the guards lined up along the pillars. She straightened up in her seat and lifted her shoulders. She almost looked like them.

“Cara? You okay?” I asked.

“Yeah. I guess.” Her eyes glazed over.

“What if you got infected, Sheldon?” Orillia pulled on another thread. “Like, what if that thing stuck something into your brain.”

“I think I would know if there was something lodged in my head,” I replied.

Orillia swallowed. She ripped another thread off the pillow and rolled it into a ball between her fingers. “My cousin didn't know. Your little friend Margaret didn't know.”

I half-laughed and shook my head. “There’s no way.”

The tunnel door creaked open and Clarence stepped into the room. His keys clanked against his hip. His pecs flexed through his fitted suit jacket with each giant stride.

This was it.

“Are you ready?” Clarence held onto a black briefcase now, just like the other guards.

“Why are you guys so dressed up?” Danny asked, leaning against the back of the couch. “And what’s with the briefcase? Why don’t you just carry the gun like a real man.”

Clarence blinked a couple times and then swallowed.

“Ascendancy.”

“What? What does that mean?” Danny side-stepped away from the chairs and faced Clarence.

“I’m not validated to elaborate. Please, if you will follow me.”

Danny rolled his eyes and turned to the rest of us. “I’m not validated to elaborate...please follow me.”

For a guy with a bullet lodged in his foot, he was still incredibly annoying. I couldn’t believe how he managed to stay alive this long.

Sab and I stepped on either side of our crippled friend and propped his arms up onto our shoulders. Danny sniffed Clarence's chest and laughed. "Are you wearing cologne? Are you for reals?"

"Yes, I am wearing a fragrance." He scanned the group and then turned back toward the tunnel door. "This way, please. I will take you to the gate now."

"Is there an alien in your brain Mr. Deputy?" Danny shook his head and winced.

"Take it easy man," I said, timing my steps with his. "Let's keep it cool until we get outta here."

"Whatever. I seem to recall it was me keeping you cool not too long ago there bud." Danny pushed away from Sab and me and quick-stepped ahead of us. "Take me home Mr. Deputy. Take me home."

As we walked past the cages, the girl from the bowling alley waved out to me. Her face looked desperate.

"Sheldon, that's the girl who kept looking at me. That's number eight now." Bailey caught up to me and pulled my shirt. "Do you know her? Do you think she's scared? I wonder if she has to go to the bathroom."

"I recognize her," I said shifting my attention forward again. "But she's not important anymore."

"Why?" Bailey asked.

I rubbed his head, remembering how I used to ask my dad question after question when I was his age. “Because she’s weak Bailey. She’s a coward and is giving her soul to these monsters.” I turned to the cages as we stopped at the big steel door. “You’re all cowards, you know that?”

The girl from the bowling alley reached her hands out from the cage. “Don’t go,” she shouted from across the room.

We all looked at her, curious, but not phased.

“Fuck off,” Danny muttered.

Clarence opened the tunnel door up ahead of us and stepped through. “Language please.”

“It’s suicide!” the girl shouted. She shook the bars on the cage door. “You know that right? This is their polite way of killing you.”

The female guard with the darker skin stepped from behind a pillar and approached the girl. “Silence please.”

“They don’t want the responsibility...”

“Silence!” The female guard opened her briefcase and pointed the gun at the girl's head.

“What responsibility?” Cara poked me.

“I dunno, just ignore her,” I said.

The girl shook the cage again. “They're not allowed to execute you, but they can send you out to be killed.”

The female guard tapped on the bars with the gun. “Please discontinue your comments.”

Danny hobbled to the entrance and waited for the rest of us. Blood soaked through the wrapped socks on his foot, dripping onto the concrete flooring. His face was pale. “What’s she talking about?”

“Nothing,” I said. “She’s full of it. Keep walking.”

“Please don’t go,” the girl said. Her bright pink shirt stood out among the blank faces and comatose bodies.

The guard pushed the gun closer to the girl.

Cara pulled on my hand. “What if she’s right?”

“She’s not right. She’s just saying that.” I tapped Danny on the arm and slipped past him into the tunnel.

“But I'm scared, Sheldon. I don't know about this. Let's stay. Stay with me.”

“You’re all going to die,” the girl called out.

The guard slammed the nozzle of the gun into the girl’s face, knocking her to the ground. Her body rolled to the side as a trickle of blood immediately seeped out of a hole above her eye.

But I didn’t care.

I don’t think any of us did.

“Come on Cara, it’ll be alright,” I said.

“This way please,” Clarence asserted.

We entered back into the cold tunnel. The light at the end was dull now. I could only guess it was nearing the end of twilight. The silhouette of Alexia standing at the other end in her dress was all I could focus on.

I was confident.

I was confident I was going to see my dad again.

I kept my gaze on her as we followed Clarence down the dark passageway. Danny hobbled bravely beside me, ignoring the pain he must have felt in his foot.

We were going to get out. We were going to start a new life out there. Yeah, it was going to be hard. We were going to have to find food and take care of each other, but we were going to make it. I was a farmer. I knew what I was doing. I knew how to grow crops and raise animals.

Maybe Cara was going to be my girlfriend. Maybe we would all live on the same street.

“Sheldon?”

I couldn’t wait to find Dad.

He was going to hug me and tell me how proud he was. And this time he would say it and mean it.

“Sheldon?”

I felt a tug on my arm. “What is it Bailey?”

“It’s Cara.” He pointed back to the door behind us. “She’s not coming.”

Chapter Forty:

The Tunnel

Pain. That was what I felt all through my body like someone had injected a poison into my bloodstream.

I ran to the door where Cara stood. Her eyes were red. Tears streamed down her face.

“Why?” I asked, struggling to get air out of my lungs. I coughed and tried again. “Why aren’t you coming? You know what they’re doing to us right?”

Cara sniffed, trying to hold her composure. She swallowed and tapped her fingers along the frame of the door. “I can’t.” She shook her head. “I can’t do it.”

“But you gotta. They’re killing people. They’re killing innocent people.”

Voices echoed up the tunnel. I knew the group was calling out to me.

“Go to them,” Cara said. She wiped her eyes with her palm. “I’m not like you. I’m not like them. I got no one, Sheldon. My family is gone.”

“Your family is here. Out there.” I pointed down the tunnel. “Those guys are our family.”

“Sab and Orillia?” Cara scratched the frame with her fingernail. “And Danny?”

“Yeah. They’re not perfect. Far from it, but they’re people. And we’re working together to live. Besides, Bailey needs you. He needs us.”

Cara shook her head. Her eyes closed tight and her lower lip folded over the top of her mouth. Tears rushed down her face again.

I was losing her.

I was losing Cara.

The female guard approached us with a gun, clanking her high heels along the floor. Behind her, the girl from the Bowling Alley lay motionless on the bottom of the cage.

Orillia’s voice drifted up the tunnel. Her words were muffled and faint.

“Can I help you?” The guard stopped in front of me, her face just inches from mine. “Do you need assistance?”

“No, I’m good,” I said, hastily. But I wasn’t, I wasn’t good at all.

“If you don’t need my assistance, then I’d like you to follow your group to the end of tunnel D please.” The guard held the gun down by her side, her finger pressed against the trigger. Her red dress gently fluttered as an air vent pushed air onto us.

“Can I please talk to my friend here, for just a minute?” I asked.

The guard looked at me. Her cold, dark eyes flickered from side to side as she scanned my face. “You have been given Section Seventeen, Trial Three, correct?”

I inched away from her, feeling my arm graze against Cara’s side. “What?”

“You have been given Section Seventeen, Trial Three. You are to be escorted off the premises and released for observation.”

“Yeah, something like that. But I'd like a minute to talk to my friend here.”

“Sheldon.” Cara touched my shoulder. “I can't.”

“But you can. We can have a great life. It's not over. You're not going to die.” I lowered my hands and placed them around her waist. “Remember what Sab said about the boat?”

“I know,” Cara replied. “But—”

“No, no but.” I pulled her in even closer. I lifted my hand up to her face and ran my fingers through her hair. I had seen my dad do this with my mom when I was really little, back when they were actually in love. “We can live on the water for a few months, til this whole mess passes.”

“This mess isn't gonna pass, Sheldon. This is it.”

“No, listen. We'll find food. We'll fish. I can fish. My dad used to take me to Bingeman's Lake when I was a kid. I was good at it too. Caught seven pike in one weekend.”

“You're still a kid,” Cara said. “I'm still a kid.”

“No, we're not. Not anymore. I grew up. Real fast. We're not kids anymore Cara.”

“I just turned sixteen,” she whispered, squeezing out more tears.

“I know. But look at us. Look at you. You're a survivor. Your scar. Tell me again how you got that scar.”

“Sheldon, I can't.”

The guard raised her gun and pointed it at me. “You need to leave now.”

“No, wait,” I said. “Please. How did you get your scar?”

“Sheldon, you already know. Why are you asking me this?”

“Because you're strong and brave. And you—you can fight.”

Cara pulled away from me and stepped back into the room. “I can't. I can't fight anymore. I'd rather conform with this alien race than die out there.”

The pain ripped through me again. “Please, don't think that way.”

“I saw my mom die Sheldon. I saw them snap her neck and carry her busted body away from me.” Cara's lips trembled. “I could hear her bones breaking, like those boys back at the school. I don't want that to happen to me. I don't want those memories.”

I punched the door, accepting the jolting sting radiate through my nerves.

Two guards dragged the girl from the bowling alley across the room. They pushed past us and dumped her body onto the concrete next to me.

“Excuse me?” A male guard tapped my arm and pointed to the end of the tunnel. He was tall and muscular like Clarence. “This way, please. I have been instructed to escort you and Terra-Lynne to Gate D.”

“Terra-Lynne?” I asked.

The guard pointed to the girl on the ground. “This is Terra-Lynne. Follow me please.”

“Cara. Come with us,” I said. “These things, are monsters. They killed your family, and you’re okay with it?” I felt the guard’s hand grip tightly onto my bicep.

“No, I’m not,” she said. “But they’re gonna kill you out there. You heard the girl.”

I looked at the girl from the bowling alley. She groaned as she stumbled to her feet.

“You’re basing your decision on her?”

The guard pulled on my arm. “This way please.”

“Fuck off,” I muttered, tearing my arm loose. “I’m talking to my girlfriend.”

“Language please.” The guard reached for my arm again, only I darted to the side and shoved him to the ground. “I said, fuck off.”

“Girl—girlfriend?” Cara stuttered.

The guard rolled over and shot back up to his feet like he was some sort of ninja. He quickly opened the briefcase and dropped it to the ground as he gripped onto the handgun. He immediately aimed it at me and marched forward, grabbing my throat and thrusting me up against the wall.

“Please don’t resist.” His voice was deep.

“Sheldon! Oh my god, please don’t hurt him.” Cara leaned out through the tunnel door as the female guard held onto her wrist.

I couldn’t respond. The guard squeezed my neck. Was this the only combat training they knew?

The girl from the bowling alley stumbled back against the opposite wall. She rubbed her head and looked out to me. Blood streamed down her face and neck, absorbing into the collar around her pink shirt. "You would've made a wicked leader," she said, letting the blood trickle onto her hand and through her fingers.

My airway was now completely blocked.

I clawed at the guard's arms, kicking his legs and feet.

The male teenager's face shook as he pushed harder and harder on my throat.

His strength wasn't human.

I knew I was about to pass out when the white cloudy haze rushed over my vision. Little bright spots flashed around me.

"Sheldon Hickory." A man's voice echoed in my ears. I knew who it was.

I strained my eyes, trying to focus through the blurry faces in front of me.

The guard finally let go of me, dropping me to my knees. The air entering my lungs had never felt so good. I gathered myself for a second until a hand reached down and helped me up to my feet.

"Rennick," I said. "I'd like to leave now."

"Good," he replied. He no longer had his suit jacket and tie on. His dress shirt was unbuttoned, and his cuffs pulled up his forearms. A thin white plaster was neatly fastened to the cut on his nose. He lifted a toothbrush up to his mouth and scrubbed his teeth. He gurgled the paste around and then spit on the floor. "I was just in the middle of settling down for the evening. Now, one of my guests will have to clean up this blood and toothpaste. I don't appreciate this disruption, Sheldon."

"Like I said, I'm ready to leave now." I rubbed my neck, still feeling the imprint of the guard's hand on my skin. "What's with you and your guards always grabbing our necks?"

"Pardon me?" Rennick slapped my face. "Did you say something?"

I shook my head. "No."

"Good. Now, I've instructed Clarence and Alexia to hold your group at the gate until you have arrived. Thomas and Lennox will take you to the upper level." He grabbed my jaw and turned my face to him. "Now, the next time I see you, I expect it will be under better circumstances. Like I said, I am looking forward to having you join our family when you're good and ready."

Cara stood at the door. Her hair fell down over her face. I knew she just needed reassurance. She needed to know she was going to be okay.

Rennick patted my cheek and stepped back through the door.

"Come with me," I said to Cara as the male guard grabbed my arm again. "Please come with me."

“I can’t. Please don’t go. Stay with me here,” she said. “We can be happy here.”

Rennick wrapped his arms around Cara’s waist, still holding onto his toothbrush. He gently guided the loose strands of hair back behind her ear and smiled his annoyingly toothy smile. “She’s right. You have an impressive future with us. There is a female Intellect assigned to you Sheldon. Once your cerebral cortex wires her in, once your mind is open to the conformity, your brain will develop on so many levels. You will see the sick, the disabled, the corrupt, you will see them as parasites to this planet and want them gone. Like I said to your friend Cara here. It’s wonderful.”

The female guard with the darker skin stepped through the door and assisted the male guard with the briefcase. She placed his gun inside and closed it. The two kissed. She handed him the briefcase and slipped away between Cara and Rennick.

“We are ready for departure.” The male guard let go of my arm and pointed down the tunnel. “This way please.”

The muscles in my body seized, my heart thumped against my ribs, blasting blood out through my veins. I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t leave her.

“I love you,” I mumbled, feeling an overwhelming heaviness in my legs. I dragged my legs forward, following the guard and Terra-Lynne. “I love you,” I said again.

Cara reached for the door frame as Rennick held her back. He lowered his head and whispered into her ear as she watched me lumber down the tunnel away from her.

A conflicted look spilled over her face.

“I love you too,” she said.

Rennick laughed as he leaned in and kissed Cara on the mouth.

He then reached for the door and slammed it shut. It echoed off the walls and down the long tunnel.

Cara was gone.

Chapter Forty-One:

Curiosity

My chest tightened with each agonizing step. The tall, muscular guard pushed me forward down the tunnel corridor as I looked back again at the closed door.

What was Cara thinking? Had they brainwashed her somehow?

Terra-Lynne walked with us, holding the gash above her eye with her hand. Drops of blood splashed onto the white concrete, leaving a trail of little red circles.

Pat.

Pat.

“They’ve been watching you since you woke from your coma, you know that?” she said.

“I don’t care,” I replied.

I eyed the briefcase in the guard’s left hand. The smell of his stupid cologne spread out like cheap bathroom spray.

“Please refrain from communicating with each other.” The guard swung his large arms out wide from side to side like he had grapefruits glued to his armpits.

Terra-Lynne side-stepped closer to me. “I heard them talking. They scanned you with them flying drone thingies, saw the potential in ya and everythin’.”

I knew she was trying to make some kind of a point, but I didn't give two shits. To me, she was just as useless as the goddamn robot who was supposedly escorting us outta here.

“Please refrain from communicating with each other,” the guard repeated.

“Please shut your face,” I replied.

The guard stopped a few feet ahead of us and turned to me. His eyebrows furrowed like he didn't know what to do. It was clear to me these ‘intellects’ had no clue what being human was all about. We were stubborn, unpredictable and passionate.

Terra-Lynne and I waited for a moment, side by side observing the giant teenager twitch and blink like he was still getting used to his new human body. Who was this guy before? Did he have a choice?

Margaret didn't.

I don't think.

The guard finally turned back to the front and continued forward—his shoes tapped the concrete reverberating around the walls and carved out ceiling. Small lights lined up along the wall flickered on, casting shadows on us from both sides.

Every now and then, the floor tremored, probably from one of the giant ogres dumping bodies into the pit, continuously stripping Hidden Trail from the supposed unhealthy and weak. Faint screams broke through our rhythmic foot steps.

“It's not all that bad, you know that right?” Terra-Lynne whispered as we neared the entrance.

Just hearing her voice irritated me. “What isn't?”

The bloodied-up pink-shirted girl swirled around like a little kid at an amusement park. She lifted her arms and pointed to the door behind us. “All of this. We got a new future Sheldon Hickory.”

Her voice was like nails on a blackboard. I closed my eyes, trying to block her out of my mind. I had to think of a way to get Cara back. What did I need to do to get her to see? I mean, she said it, right? She told me she loved me too.

Would I ever see her again?

I played with the scar on my face and looked back at the door—it was so small now, so distant.

“You can turn back, you know that right?” Terra-Lynne continued, wiping more blood off her head like it was no big deal. “You can go to her. Rennick ain’t all that bad. He’d welcome you with open arms. Tell him you want a trial. Tell him you’re ready.”

“Why do you care so much about what I do?” I asked her finally. “I don’t even know you.”

Terra-Lynne gently pushed me on the arm and laughed. “Sure you do, goof-ball. I gave you all those free games on your birthday last summer at the bowling alley.”

“That was you?” I asked.

“Yeah, and like, we practically made out too. ‘Member?”

“What? When?”

I watched more blood slap the concrete as she pranced on her toes beside me.

What was she so happy about?

Terra-Lynne laughed and punched my arm. "When you were trying on your bowling shoes. I snuck up on you to whisper 'Happy Birthday' in your ear, but you like freaked. 'Member? You turned your face so fast, and our lips touched. 'Member? I was like so embarrassed."

I half smiled, barely registering her little story as anything but an awkward encounter.

"I've had a crush on you ever since, did you know that?" She looked down at her feet, pointing her toes with each step. "Can't believe I'm telling ya this."

This wasn't happening.

The guard quickened his pace, switching the briefcase into his other hand. Up ahead, I could see Alexia waiting for us. The lights shined down on her face—on her silky red dress.

"Life can be like that all the time you know," Terra-Lynne said.

"Like what?" I asked.

"Getting shit for free. Getting treated like it's your birthday, every day."

I knew what she was trying to say. I knew that like an hour ago when that Nazi-wannabe with the shiny bald head and the one-size-too-small black suit preached to me back in that fucken temple. But it wasn't what I wanted. It wasn't right.

Utopia meant sacrifice. It meant we had to murder innocent people simply because they didn't meet a specific criteria.

Bullshit.

These intellectuals were no better than Adolf Hitler.

“If you turn around right now, they’ll merge me right away. I wouldn’t have to go through no observations or nothing. I wouldn’t need to go to trial. We’d get to kiss all the time too. That’s what they do huh? They kiss on the lips when they greet each other. Ain’t that sweet? It’s like the French.”

“Shut up,” I muttered. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.” I picked up my pace and hustled up closer to the guard.

We were near the end now. Alexia’s face was clear. She smiled at me.

I don’t know why, but I smiled back.

“Sheldon,” she said. Her arms hung straight down in front of her, holding her briefcase like she was waiting at a bus stop. “I am sorry your friend is not going to join you.”

“Whatever,” I mumbled.

As we reached the end of the tunnel, the sky had turned to a majestic purple, hosting splashes of crimson red clouds. Black pines looked down on us along the perimeter of the giant pit, slowly gliding from side to side—like they were waving at me, maybe sending out a warning.

Next to one of the rock slabs, the boy in the tracksuit and Thomas stood with the group. Orillia nodded at me and then folded her arms.

The air was cool, much cooler than the previous nights.

“Thomas will take you and your friends to the top,” Alexia said. Her auburn hair still sat perfectly on her head. She smelled like flowers and shampoo. “I hope I will see you back here again soon. I wish you all the best.”

The muscular guard continued past Alexia and me, holding Terra-Lynne's arm. Clarence stood about twenty yards away—in his hand a red book. Behind him, a dark ogre scaled down the cliff wall, its beady eyes glowed in the twilight. It lumbered to the bottom dropping a load of innocent bodies into the hole.

Moans and pained cries haunted the air around us.

“Good luck out there Sheldon.” Terra-Lynne waved back to me. “See you on the other side.”

I turned to Alexia, dismissing the bowling girl like she was a fly. “Where is she going?” I asked.

She brushed away a couple stray hairs as the winds picked up around the entrance of the tunnel. She glanced over at Clarence, standing proudly by the hole. “She's going to trial. Reassessment based on observed behaviors.”

“And that means, what exactly?”

Alexia smiled, blowing air out of her nose. "It's a formality we have, we insist on it, despite the lack of resources. Clarence runs the night shifts. If a guest is showcasing abnormal behavior, they get reassessed. Clarence gets to formally decide whether they are now waste, or if they have earned the opportunity to conform with us. Or, if there are no immediate concerns, they are placed back in the holding tank for future observations."

“And if she's waste, your job is to deliver the gun?” I asked.

“Something like that.”

The muscular guard stopped in front of Clarence and let go of Terra-Lynne's arm. He robotically turned back to us and marched along the stones. The little rocks clicked and ground with each step.

He nodded to Alexia as he walked past and continued back into the tunnel.

“Asshole,” I muttered.

“Careful,” Alexia whispered to me. “They pretty much hear everything.”

“Screw them,” I said. “Can I go now?”

Another breeze swirled around us, kicking up her short dress, revealing her upper thigh and part of her butt-cheek.

She placed one hand on her leg and waited for the gust of wind to die down.

“Can’t go yet,” she said finally. “Please wait a moment.”

The ogre by the hole lifted its long gangly arms over a protruding ledge and some jagged stone and pulled itself up the cliff face, disappearing like the others before, into the trees.

Above us, a drone buzzed out of a small opening and circled Alexia and me for a second. Like a giant dragonfly, it zipped over to Clarence and Terra-Lynne, hovering over them, spilling out loud digital beeps and scrambled noise. Moments later a bright light beamed out from it, projecting an image of Rennick's face onto the rock wall.

“I knew it,” Alexia said, holding tightly onto the briefcase with both hands again. “He must really like you.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“You’ll see. You can’t go anywhere yet. And, I’m sorry.”

“What?”

Tiny bats whisked about in front of the light, dancing around an excited frenzy of heat-seeking bugs.

The drone hissed as two small boxes slid out from either side of the main structure. “Sheldon Hickory,” a loud booming voice said, echoing out into the darkening skies. Rennick’s image appeared, shifting along the rocks, his eyes glaring out to me. “My apologies for disrupting your departure. I know your friends have been patiently waiting for you.”

I looked back at the group. I was anxious to join them, but Cara. What the hell was up with Cara? Maybe she changed her mind. Maybe Rennick wanted us to wait for her as well.

Alexia nudged me. “Say something. He’s waiting for you to respond.”

“What should I say?” I whispered.

“Anything.”

I turned to the projection of him on the rocks. “How’s your face?”

Rennick’s image shifted off the display. Muffled voices bounced around the open air.

The signal dropped leaving us in darkness for a minute before Rennick's digitized head appeared again.

“My face is fine, Sheldon. Thank you for your heartfelt concern.” Rennick's nostrils flared as he poked at the white plaster on his nose. “And how are you? I'm sure you've learned pretty quickly that we like to go for the throat when subduing disorderly guests.”

I swallowed heavily, feeling the pulsations along my jugular.

“Yeah, I figured you guys would use a coward's approach,” I replied.

Rennick's eyes diverted down, off the edge of the display, away from whatever camera he was looking into. The sound of pages turning crackled out from the small speakers on the drone. "I have made a decision regarding Section Seventeen, Trial Three." He looked out again at the camera—out to us. "Clarence, before your trial with Terra-Lynne, please consult Section Twenty-Nine, Trial One."

"Yes," Clarence replied. The light from the drone cast long shadows across his face. He opened the book and leafed through the pages, finally pausing at a particular section. The teenager returned his gaze back up to Rennick's image on the rocks. "Sir?"

"Clarence," Rennick began. "If this boy has the potential, we must proceed accordingly."

"Yes, Sir." Clarence looked out to Alexia and waved her over.

"Follow me," Alexia said. She lightly tapped my arm and walked carefully over the crushed stones toward Clarence and Terra-Lynne.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Trial One. I think he's letting you handle trial one. Rennick is following the same protocol as he did with your friend Todd. I knew he would do this. I saw the potential in you the second you stepped off that bus." Alexia quickened her pace. She reached for my hand and gripped a couple of my fingers. "Come on."

The bats whipped around the cliffs like World War Two fighter planes, shooting up into the reds and purples of the early night.

“Where are you going?” Orillia called out to me. Her distant voice was now raspy and strained. Danny hobbled through the group before being pushed back by Thomas and the boy in the tracksuit.

Clarence closed the book as we approached. Wiping his forehead with his sleeve, he cleared his throat. I wasn't sure if it was the lighting, but somehow, this boy, this conformed alien intellect, was showing his human side.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Curiosity,” Rennick replied over the speakers. “Simply curiosity.”

His image flickered and then dissolved into a black light. The drone hissed and directed its glaring beam out to us.

Clarence and Alexia both opened their briefcases and carefully gripped their polished black pistols. They placed the cases on the stone floor and closed them, clicking the fasteners on each side.

“Are you conforming?” Terra-Lynne crossed her legs and clapped her hands. “Are you here for the trial as well?”

I bit the inside of my cheek. “I have no idea what the hell is going on.”

Alexia stepped back with her gun and pointed it at my head, just inches away. Her thumb crept up the back of the gun as she unlocked the safety.

Click.

“Just do as Clarence says,” Alexia whispered. “Trust me.”

Terra-Lynne clapped her hands again and jumped. “This is exciting, this is exciting.”

Clarence loosened his tie and held the gun out to me. "I'm going to give you this weapon." Clarence nudged it forward.

"Please, take it."

"What? Why?" I asked.

"Please take this gun," he repeated.

"Do it," Alexia said.

I unraveled my fingers as Clarence cautiously placed the handle of the pistol onto my palm. "If you make any sudden movements, if you engage this weapon without my clear instructions, Alexia here will kill you. Is that understood?"

I felt the cold steel weight in my hand like it was a gift—a curious gift.

"Yes," I replied. "I understand."

"Good," Clarence said, slowly lowering his hands down to his side.

"Good," Alexia whispered.

"What do you want me to do with this?" I asked.

Clarence adjusted his tie again and pointed to Terra-Lynne.

"I'd like you to shoot her in the head."

Chapter Forty-Two:

The Hunter and the Hunted

A stream of fresh blood pooled in the corner of Terra-Lynne's eye and then spread out down her cheek and along her neck. "Is this a test? This isn't real, right?"

I felt the weight of the gun in my hand, tactfully searching for the trigger.

"This is no test," Clarence said. He opened the red book to a saved page. "Section Twenty-Nine, Trial One, permits Trial Three candidates to demonstrate decisive leadership acts whereby Trial One Guests are placed under terminal submission." Clarence closed the book. "You, Sheldon Hickory, are a Trial Three candidate."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means you are given the opportunity to prove your strengths and potential by killing another human being," Alexia said. "Just do it, trust me."

"I'm not killing her," I said.

Clarence cautiously leaned in and guided my gun up to Terra-Lynne's head. "If you don't kill subject C-12, we will not release your friends."

"What?" I dropped the gun back down to my side.

"Please don't do this," Terra-Lynne said. "I've got potential like Rennick said before. I want to conform. I want to be breached." Alexia held the gun steady, directing the nozzle at my forehead. "We'll let you go, Sheldon. But your friends will have to stay with us. I'm sorry."

Terra-Lynne stepped back, tripping over the stones and falling to the ground. She shot back up and scampered a few feet before Clarence grabbed hold of her hair and whipped her over to me.

"Please don't do this," she cried. "I'm strong! I'm healthy!"

"Shoot her," Alexia repeated.

"How is this showing my strength and potential?" I eyed Alexia and then Clarence, squeezing the handle on the gun.

"Please don't shoot me, Sheldon." Terra-Lynne dropped to her knees, weaving her hands together. The blood on her face gleamed in the light from the drone.

"She's nothing Sheldon. She's worthless to us. She's worthless to you." Alexia said.

But Alexia was wrong. The girl was confused, and that was all. She was still human, she was still someone who breathed air and made irrational decisions. She was a person with a heart, someone who had barely seen a full life. Yeah, she was a coward, a fucken traitor, but she was still a goddamn human being.

Jesus, she was the same age as me.

"I can't do it," I said, lowering the gun again. "I can't kill her."

Clarence laughed and kicked Terra-Lynne in the side. He glanced over to Thomas and the guy with the tracksuit and pointed out to the tunnel.

Alexia lowered her gun as well. Her mouth gaped open, her eyes glistened in the light.

“Sheldon, are you okay?” Orillia called out to me from the darkness.

I waved back to her. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Where are you going?” I called out. “Where are they taking you?”

Thomas pushed on the back of Sab and Danny as Orillia held onto Bailey’s hand. Their shadowy figures ambled across the terrain.

“Like I said,” Alexia began. “They’re not going with you. I’m sorry.”

“Please hand over the gun,” Clarence said.

The beam of light from the drone shifted across the pit and over to the group. They looked confused, unaware they were about to be caged again like the rest of the healthy and strong.

They were returning to the temple.

With Cara.

“Please hand me the gun,” Clarence said again.

I glanced back to Terra-Lynne, still hunched over on the ground near my feet. Soft whimpers spilled out from her mouth and nose.

“And her?” I asked. “What will happen to her?”

Alexia raised the gun up again and pointed it to me. Her eyes focused on mine. “She will still die. Subject C-12 had her trial. She is waste to us now.”

The girl from the bowling alley lifted her head and screamed. Her body flipped back as she rolled over onto the rocks. She sobbed uncontrollably, reaching out again at my feet.

“Please, no. I'm a good person. I'm strong. I'm healthy!”

The pain inside my head returned, scraping the insides of my skull, tearing away at the back of my eyes.

“I will not ask you again, Sheldon Hickory. Please hand over the weapon.” Clarence yanked on Terra-Lynne's hair and pulled her up to her feet. “Subject C-12 must be terminated.”

“Do it, Sheldon. Hand him the gun.” Alexia said. “Or I'll have to shoot you.”

My attention diverted back to the tunnel.

Thomas and the guy in the tracksuit strutted through the shadows on either side of the group.

My group.

My family.

They nudged their guns into the back of Orillia, into Bailey—brewing with laughter and torment.

Each push, each controlling, condescending poke at my friends filled me with weight and pressure.

My thoughts escaped me, replaced with a heated fury.

Terra-Lynne's cries ripped away at my nerves.

I couldn't take it anymore.

Fuck it.

I swung the gun around and shot the hopeless girl in the face, silencing her fear. Her legs crumpled as her body collapsed to the ground.

Mr. Bryer's face appeared inside my head. His wide open eyes gazed blankly out to me.

"Done," I muttered. "Now give me my friends back."

Alexia lowered her gun and nodded. Her lips stretched out into a half-smile. "Good job, Sheldon. I knew you'd come through."

Clarence checked his shirt for blood splatters and then dabbed the book with his small white cloth. "Please get me a new tie."

"Yes, Clarence," Alexia replied.

"Once Thomas and Lennox have escorted our guests to the top. They are to dispose of subject C-12 and return to their posts."

"Yes, Clarence."

Clarence kicked Terra-Lynne's body, perhaps checking if she was still alive. He smiled and glanced over to me. "Rennick will be happy. I have no doubt we'll be seeing you soon."

"Not a chance," I replied. "Not a chance in hell."

Clarence chuckled and undid the top button of his dress shirt. "Textbook behavior. Just what we're looking for. Now, please kindly hand over the weapon. I have a busy night ahead of me."

The light from the drone shifted back in our direction, beaming its yellowy glow onto us. A cold shiver raked over my spine.

I lifted up the gun and pointed it at Clarence. Without rational thought, perhaps angered by his cockiness, I shot the muscular teenaged-intellect in the head.

Bang.

Clarence's body toppled to the ground, half landing on top of Terra-Lynne. In less than a second, I realized my actions, and immediately shifted my attention to Alexia.

She stood ten feet away, angling the end of her gun directly at me.

I held my weapon steady, nervously aiming the barrel at her face.

Alexia's fingers cautiously changed positions—her legs inching out into a wider stance.

A blur of insects flittered through my line of sight.

Ten seconds passed.

Twenty.

Her hands trembled as she adjusted the grip.

Thirty seconds.

Something about her wouldn't let me fire—an aura. I eased off on the trigger and slowly shuffled back, pacing myself carefully away from Alexia and the two dead bodies.

“Shoot him!” The boy in the tracksuit shouted from the tunnel entrance. “Kill him.”

My gaze continued to lock in on Alexia. At the corner of my eye, the boy in the tracksuit approached, his gun drawn on me.

“Lower your weapon,” he said, his voice low and stern. “Don't shoot,” Alexia said, rotating her body to get a visual on the guard. “We need him.”

“What are you talking about?” the boy in the tracksuit replied. “We are instructed to terminate disorderly guests, despite potential. You know that. It's in the book.”

Adrenaline shot through me. I aimed the gun at the boy and fired. His body twisted to the side as he struggled to keep his balance. A small hole appeared on his chest.

I fired again, this time at his head, dropping him immediately to the ground.

Years of playing ‘Call of Duty’ with Todd provided me with skills I didn’t know I had.

A gunshot echoed out from the tunnel, ricocheting off the rocks behind me. I glanced back to see Thomas dashing across the pit. He pointed the gun again and fired.

Bang.

I ducked away from the drone’s beam of light and scurried into the darkness, slipping behind one of the stone slabs. I held my breath, listening to Thomas’ footsteps scuffle over the loose rock. I waited to hear what direction he went, before beelining it to the next row of slabs.

Beeps and clicks from the drone rang out. Its beam of light rotated around the pit, shedding light on the daunting black pines and overhanging rock.

By the tunnel, I could see movement from the group, scampering out toward the bus.

The drone’s light shined out to them, casting giant shadows across the vast carved-out landscape.

Back by the tunnel, a teenaged guard raced out into the open. He unlocked his briefcase and tossed it to the ground, taking hold of his firearm. Steadying himself, the boy aimed at the group.

To me, the kid was nothing but a digital image in a ‘Call of Duty’ session on my Xbox. I felt Todd beside me, munching on Oreo cookies and cheering me on. I lifted my gun and fired, knocking the guard down on my first try.

Nice one, Todd would say.

I waited for the light to cross over me before skipping along another row of slabs. Thomas had to be close.

The engine from the school bus started up, revving and sputtering as it struggled to idle.

A second guard hurried out of the tunnel, taking cover in the shadows by the rock wall. A gunshot rang out, clanking off the metal frame of the bus.

I took aim again, and fired at the teenager, hearing the bullet ping off the rock above him. I lowered myself this time, along the ground, locking my arm in place.

Bang.

The boy dropped his gun and collapsed to the ground.

I crawled back into the darkness, scanning the matrix of carved out boulders around me. Thomas had to be on my trail now. I had to keep my eyes peeled on all sides. The drone hummed, weaving through the rocks.

As it approached, I hugged the cold stone barrier and dragged my body around the corner, like a game of hide-and-seek.

It buzzed and clicked before hovering out into the open again.

I sat still, calculating the distance from me to the bus. I figured that at a full sprint I could make it there in fifteen seconds, maybe less.

If Thomas were smart, he'd wait for me to make a run for it and then pick me off like a prize buck during hunting season. But how long was Sab going to sit in that driver's seat and wait for me?

I had no time to play the waiting game.

There was no choice, I had to find Thomas. I had to hunt him down and kill him before he got to me. But I needed to be patient.

To my right, about thirty yards away, there was a blade from a bulldozer. Next to it, a stack of metal rods. If I could get there, I would have a clear view of the stone slabs, and a shorter distance to run to the bus.

Another option was a large pile of stones, about ten feet high and only a few yards away. Up there, I'd be vulnerable, but more likely to find Thomas.

Shit, what about Alexia?

Alexia hadn't crossed my mind.

Shit, shit, shit.

I eyed the stack of metal rods and the bulldozer blade, deciding it was my best option. I had to assume these 'intellects' weren't trained experts in using guns so running at full speed would hopefully make me a difficult target.

But as I eased myself up in preparation to make a break for it, a long shadow swung around into the open space, as the drone changed direction above us.

I grazed my finger over the trigger and inhaled slowly through my nose. My feet rotated in the gravel as I moved my body a hundred and eighty degrees. I slipped my right leg out to my side and glided through a narrow opening between two smaller rocks.

Gradually, Thomas's legs, torso, and face came into view. We exchanged glances. My heart stuttered. I raised my gun and pulled the trigger, only to hear the mechanical click from an empty chamber.

Shit.

I pulled it a second time.

And a third.

Click.

Click.

Thomas stood tall and chuckled, twirling his gun around like a cowboy. It surprised me how much ‘human’ behavior dominated these aliens.

“I’m starting with the man in the mirror,” Thomas sang. He kicked a small stone along the ground and strutted forward. “I’m asking him to change his ways; And no message could have been any clearer if you wanna make the world a better place, take a look at yourself and then make a change.” Thomas whistled the rest of the tune, letting the notes spill out into the darkness.

The drone beeped and directed its light over us.

“Michael Jackson. If only he were one of us.” Thomas licked his finger and wiped a mark off the barrel of the gun. He checked the chamber and nodded. “Yes, I have three bullets left. Good thing I kept track. One for each of my colleagues you deemed necessary to kill.”

As the farmboy-turned-alien guided his gun up to my head, a thunderous explosion blasted out from behind me. Thomas’s face ripped apart, ejecting blood and flesh out into the night like fireworks.

His head tilted to one side before pulling the rest of his rigid frame down to the ground.

I whipped my head back to find a girl in a red dress. Fresh gunpowder smoke seeped out from her gun.

“Alexia,” I said.

“Sheldon,” she replied.

Chapter Forty-Three:

Alexia

I had questions. I had a hundred questions, but being smart was about knowing when to ask them. Everything I hated about these creatures, everything they stood for, seemed to slip away from me when I looked at Alexia.

“Go,” she said. “Before more come.”

I wanted to ask her why; I wanted to know what was so special about me.

I drifted backward wishing I had time to understand what was happening inside her mind. I smiled and then sprinted out to the bus, bounding over the rocks, feeling the pressure slip away from me as I hurried up the steps.

Orillia greeted me with a huge hug and kissed me on the cheek. Feeling her arms wrapped around me never felt so good.

“Is Cara coming?” Bailey stood on one of the seats, leaning forward against the next chair’s backrest. His face beamed.

“Hey buddy,” I said. “She’s staying back for a bit. We’ll get her later.”

I didn’t have the heart. Besides, part of me actually believed it to be true.

I shuffled past Orillia and gave Bailey a high-five.

“She’s okay though right?” Bailey asked. “Will we see her tomorrow?”

“Maybe,” I said.

“So, we're good to go?” Sab ground the gears and shoved it into first. He revved the engine and stuttered forward, hauling on the steering wheel.

A shot rang out, pinging off the side mirror with the pink ribbon.

The dark skinned female guard from the cages stood at the entrance of the tunnel, aiming her gun at us.

She fired again, this time the bullet hit the front window and careened through the bus, embedding itself into the frame near the back. A star-shaped crack splintered out along the windshield, stretching over the dried blood-stains left from the diabetic boy's head.

“Shoot her!” Danny shouted, sitting a few seats back with his foot up. “Here, let me do it. I got a kick-ass shot.”

“There are no bullets in this thing,” I replied, tossing it into one of the duffle-bags.

Another shot whizzed past us.

“Everyone, get down,” Sab shouted, throwing the bus into reverse. “This tin can isn't exactly bullet-proof.”

“Kid, off the seat,” Orillia said to Bailey, ducking behind some bags.

I lowered myself, poking my head between Sab's chair and the metal backing. The female guard hurried forward, likely aware that we had nothing to fire back with. She shuffled around the side of the bus in her high-heels, about twenty feet away. She stopped and aimed her gun at Sab. I squeezed my eyes shut and dropped my head.

Sab pushed his foot down on the clutch and leaned away from the window.

Bang, bang.

A flash of light filled the inside of the bus.

Sab eased himself up and shifted the gears again.

We both peeked out the window at the same time to find the guard face down in the stones—Alexia stood over her.

The drone spun around near the tunnel and shined its light on us. Four more drones emerged from a hole in the cliff wall and spread out over the perimeter of the pit.

Alexia aimed her gun and shot at the one near the tunnel entrance.

Had she turned? Was that actually possible?

Sab stuck his hand out the driver's side window and waved her in. He reversed a few more feet and shifted back into first, angling the bus toward the road leading up the side of the cliff wall.

Alexia shot at a second drone and carefully hustled over the stones with her gun and briefcase.

Sab opened the doors and slammed on the breaks. "Get in."

Alexia stepped up and swung herself into the first seat. She opened the chamber of her gun and re-loaded it with a cartridge from the briefcase. "We need to lose those drones if you have any chance getting out of here." She tossed me a cartridge and pointed to the back. "Aim for the camera."

"Where's the camera?" I asked.

"It's underneath, near the front. Wait until it gets close and shoot it. We need to blind them."

I picked up the gun from the duffle bag and opened the chamber.

“Here let me do it,” Danny said. He hobbled on his foot into the aisle.

“No, I got this.” I opened a window near the middle of the bus.

“Wait for it, Sheldon,” Alexia said. “Don't waste ammunition. There's tight security up at the top.”

The bus groaned as it powered up the steep incline. Blasts of light shined on us from the side and back.

I fiddled with the cartridge trying to figure out how to load the damn thing. Alexia grabbed it from me and fixed it in and handed the gun back. She rushed to the rear of the bus and opened a window.

“There's one here!” Orillia shouted. She pulled down the top pane.

Alexia slid across the seats and disabled the thing with one shot.

Bang.

I opened the window beside me and shoved my arm out, trying to keep my hand steady. But as the bus chugged and shook, it made shooting a moving target nearly impossible.

Bang.

The drone's front shattered and veered away from us.

Alexia pulled her arm back in, a few rows up from me. She nodded and slid back into the aisle.

Damn, she's got a good shot.

“What the hell is that?” Sab ground the gears and then pointed through the front windshield. “Get that girl up here.”

Alexia and I hurried up the aisle with Orillia right behind us.

Near the top, the dark pines shook wildly, snapping and swaying from side-to-side.

“Those are our foot soldiers,” Alexia said. “Sheldon, aim for their eyes. I’ll take care of the drones in the back.”

“Okay,” I replied.

“And what about me?” Sab shouted. “What the hell do I do if those things come at the bus.”

Alexia turned back, slipping off her high-heeled shoes.

“They’re still nervous around machines. They’ll swat at you, just get some more speed.”

“It’s a fucken box on wheels,” Sab replied. “I’ll give ‘er all she’s got, but don’t expect much.”

Orillia grabbed my arm as I opened up the front row window. “What’s up with the alien-chick?” She rolled her eyes up to Alexia and then glared back at me.

I shrugged. “Dunno. Don’t care right now. Help me find these ogres.”

Orillia hovered over Sab’s seat, her blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail. Maybe a different hair color, but for a second she looked like Cara.

Bang.

Alexia downed another drone from the back.

To our left, near the top of the narrow incline, a huge arm, the size of a crane, reached across the road and slashed at the roof, jolting the bus near the edge. Sab pulled the wheel and hauled the gear back into first, trying to rev the engine for more speed.

I darted across the aisle and shot at the ogre's head as it clung to an overhanging rock. Like a demon, its eyes glowed a fiery red.

“At the eyes,” Alexia shouted from the back. “You must hit them in the eyes.”

“Okay.” I swallowed and held my breath, steadying my grip. I locked in on its furious gaze, caressing the trigger with my finger.

Bang.

“Gotcha,” I said.

The ogre let go of the wall and tumbled onto the road just behind us, bouncing off the path and over the edge.

“Where are they? Are there more?” Sab shuffled his head about, trying to see the tops of the trees. “They’re in those pines, aren’t they? They’re waiting for us in those pines.”

Orillia scanned the right side, while I looked for movement along the left.

Another gunshot went off from the back as Alexia struck down another drone, leaving us in darkness.

“I don’t see anything,” Orillia said.

Danny hopped down the aisle and peered out the window in the next seat behind me.

“Give me the gun, bud,” he said to me. “Let me murder one of those fuckers.”

“Not now, Danny.” I locked my leg onto the back of Sab's chair and pressed my shoulder against the glass. “Just keep your eyes in the trees, will ya.”

Alexia jumped into the seat beside me and tapped Sab on the shoulder. “Drones are gone. Turn off your headlights.”

“What? Why?” Sab brushed his floppy hair away from his forehead.

“Trust me,” Alexia said.

Sab punched the dash. “Come on you piece of shit, haul ass will ya?”

“Why should we trust you?” Danny dropped back and raised his leg up on top of a few pillows.

“Because she’s helping us get out of here, you idiot,” Sab replied.

“You're the idiot,” Danny muttered.

“What did you say?” Sab threw his head around. “What did that jerk-wad say to me?”

“I said, you’re the idiot.” Danny propped himself up again and turned to the front. “Dumb-ass.”

“Dumb-ass? I’m a dumb-ass now?” Sab looked up at Danny through the rearview mirror. “I’m not the dirtbag who got himself shot.”

“Bite me,” Danny muttered.

“Gladly.”

“There!” Orillia shouted. “Sab, watch out!”

A thick dark figure busted through the branches and leaped out in front of us. With its colossal size, the monster took up the entire width of the road.

“Ram it,” Alexia said, aiming her gun through the hole in the windshield. “Go full speed and ram it.”

Sab shifted up and dropped his foot on the gas. Alexia took aim and fired wide to the right. The ogre jumped and side-stepped off the road. It wrenched its hulk-like arms back, throwing its fist down onto the top of the bus.

Glass shattered along three rows as the roof caved in behind us. The entire frame creaked and teetered, popping screws out from the metal joints.

The ogre swung again, missing the rear wheels by inches. It clawed at the ground and regained its balance, grunting and spitting out thick globs of mucus.

Up ahead, the dark outlines of the wiry fencing and the pillars from the quarry entrance brought with it a sense of hope.

Hope that we were one step closer to getting out.

One step closer to finding my dad.

Alexia glided over the aisle like a ballerina and fired at the ogre from the back window. It twitched and swatted at the air, powering its legs along the road.

“I got this,” I said, climbing over some sleeping bags and a cooler. I propped myself up and squeezed my head and shoulders through the window.

The ogre leaned forward onto all fours, using its hands to help launch it over the dirt road. Like the other, its red eyes fixated on me. I took aim again, and fired, missing entirely.

“It’s gaining on us!” Orillia shouted.

A second ogre leaped out from the tangled branches—this one, larger, more developed. It swatted at the smaller ogre and bounded ahead. It used its thick legs to gather momentum and speed.

The bus rattled and moaned, banging wildly over the bumps. Containers and boxes flung about inside, smashing into us, rolling down the aisle and under the seats.

Bailey hovered near the front, pulling shards of glass from his face.

A severe blow to my head, knocked me forward and onto the floor, spilling out flashes of white light.

A hand pulled the gun from my weakened grip. Seconds later, shots were fired from outside the window above me.

The pain along the back of my skull slipped away quite quickly. I shook it off, finding Danny leaning out the window with my gun. He fired again, striking the ogre between the eyes. The fiery red glow burned out as the monster tumbled forward into the woods, snapping a couple trees in half.

“That’s how it’s done, son. That’s how it’s done!” Danny pounded his chest and hopped over me. “This is my gun now, got it?” He dropped into the row ahead, wiping off the bits of glass on the seat. “I know how to use this thing.” He kissed the barrel and smiled to himself. “I know how to use this thing.”

I fell back into the seat, hearing Bailey's cries from the front. Orillia had hurried to him now, she had a first-aid box with her, plastering up his little cuts.

For a moment there was a calm in the trees.

An uncomfortable calm.

Alexia hovered around the back seats scanning both sides of the bus. She was like a hawk, looking for her next victim.

I remained in my seat a couple rows away from her, shaken by Danny's unexpected attack.

Minutes went by. I don't think anyone could take their eyes away from the windows.

Where are they? Are those monsters waiting for us out there somewhere?

Every now and then, a branch slapped the side mirror or the window panes, sending adrenaline through me.

We drove in silence for some time through the darkness—through the deep woods.

Danny reached his hand out from time to time and pulled in some pine cones, only to chuck them out the window across the aisle.

"What are you doing?" I heard Alexia say to him finally.

"Who me?" Danny asked, picking the bits off of one of the cones.

"Yeah, what's your deal. Keep an eye out." She tapped the window with her gun and looked out again at the back.

“So, alien-bitch here is the boss now?” Danny said, tossing a pine cone over the seats. He checked the chamber on his new toy and closed it.

Alexia sat down at the back. “Please mind your language.” She placed her gun on her lap and ripped the side of her dress up her leg.

“Excuse me?” Danny replied. “Um, we’re not in your temple anymore—bitch, this is our house. So shut it. Please.”

“Danny, will you chill?” Sab shouted from the front. “We’re on the same team here.”

“You're kidding me right?" Danny leaned on the backrest and muscled himself upright. He winced and punched the window frame beside him. "How do you guys know she ain't gonna turn on us? Eh? She's one of them. They killed our families, remember?"

I hated to admit it, but he was right. How did we know we could actually trust this woman? What if she was planted in our group to watch us?

“I'm not going to hurt anyone,” Alexia said. She tore off a piece of her dress and threw it at Danny. “Here, you need to wrap your foot again. You're losing a lot of blood.”

The musclehead brute with the potty-mouth caught the red strip of clothing and looked back at her. He dangled it in front of himself. "No thanks," he muttered through his teeth. "This is tainted, everything about this, everything about you is tainted." He sniffed it and then held the torn piece of red dress out the window, letting it flap in the wind, slapping the outside of the bus. He looked at Alexia and let go.

“I'm here to help. You have to believe me,” she said.

"I believe you." Sab looked through the rearview mirror as he guided the battered bus down a steep hill. "We all believe you. Right, Danny?"

The cooling air whistled through the twisted metal and shattered glass, pushing Alexia's once perfect hair around her face.

Sab's confidence took the edge away from me, maybe from Orillia too. Danny didn't say much after that. Maybe he was exhausted, like the rest of us.

Or just too pissed off to say anything.

I had to believe in this alien-girl with the red dress. She was my link to Cara—she was my link to Dad.

As we entered the clearing and coasted down the escarpment, my muscles relaxed.

I couldn't help but think we actually had a chance.

But how was I going to tell the group that I needed to go back?

Chapter Forty-Four:

Torn

The sky was a blackened void, absent of stars and the guiding moonlight. Our only escape from the darkness were the distant flames still marring the horizon of our empty town.

We pulled off near the crossroads leading south to the water, and east to the hills where Dad was hopefully still waiting.

Hopefully still alive.

I wondered why I was so driven to find him. He had betrayed me, just like my mother, and yet something in me seemed willing to forgive.

The man wasn't exactly the nicest guy, but at least he gave me the attention. At least he cared, right?

Memories of my mom seemed to always be of her in the background, sipping coffee, playing with her phone. Yeah, she made me breakfast and cooked me dinner, sure she tucked me in each night, but that was it. My dad was the one who held my hand, my dad was the one who pushed me.

“Bailey was asking for you.” Orillia stood over me with a knitted pink blanket wrapped around her body.

The group had settled in for the night, doing their best to find a cozy spot to sleep amongst the chaotic mess inside the bus. Every now and then, a faint thunderous murmur drifted out through the skies.

But no one seemed worried.

We were too tired.

Orillia and Alexia volunteered to take watch, which didn't surprise me. Orillia may not have had that 'motherly' care that Cara had, but she was a leader, someone I looked up to at least.

Alexia, on the other hand, was a wild-card, for obvious reasons. But she saved our lives. We owed her that.

"Okay, I'll go see him," I replied, feeling my body finally start to relax.

Orillia sat down across from me and rubbed her finger along the pane of glass. "No, he's asleep now. Just wanted you to know."

"Thanks," I said.

"That kid is incredible." Orillia dropped her hand under her blanket and rested her head against the backrest.

I rubbed my eyes and yawned. The sounds of heavy breathing filled the stale air. "I know. He's got a tough shell."

I pulled up one of the pillows from the floor and tucked it behind my head. I wanted to lay down flat on the floor, but I worried I would drift into another deep sleep. I wasn't ready to completely let go yet. Not until I got to Dad.

"So do you," I added, closing my eyes.

"So do I—what?" Orillia whispered.

I fluffed the pillow and leaned back again. "You have a tough shell. You're—you're pretty cool."

Orillia pulled her legs up onto the seat and smiled. The orangey-red glow from the town spilled out onto her face. "Thanks. You ain't so bad yourself."

Another faint murmur groaned out through the night. Alexia sat up in the driver's seat, the black outline of her body shifted as she reacted to the curious sounds.

A tired heaviness sifted down my arms and legs, numbing my body. As my ear pressed against the pillow, I could hear my heart pump the blood through me.

My blood.

My heart.

“You love her, don't you?” Orillia asked. She rolled her head toward me, holding herself in the blanket like a lost child. “You love Cara, right?”

I wasn't sure what to say. I mean, I was fifteen. I said it to her. She said it to me, but I really only knew her for a few days. Did watching her on the bleachers while I picked flowers in the outfield count? I felt like I had finally found someone, though, despite the horror that surrounded us. It was funny to think, but if I had a choice of never meeting Cara, and the world being back to the way it was—back to being safe, and normal, I really don't know if I would take it. If taking back this invasion meant never having that conversation with Cara in her mom's classroom, sipping gin and smoking cigarettes, if it meant never holding her hand or sleeping next to her on the bus, I was pretty sure I would still choose this.

Somehow, when I was with her, she took away the end of the world.

“Yeah,” I said, finally to Orillia. “I do love her.”

I awoke to a chorus of birds, using the battered frame of the bus as their stage. Their little feet pitter-pattered across the roof. For a moment, I forgot where I was again, forgetting that my regular, boring, high-school dropout, farm-boy life, with cheating, two-faced parents was something of the past. I wiped my hand over the thick coating of condensation dripping down the windows. The warm colors from the rising sun peeked over the distant hills.

Why am I looking for my dad again?

Last night's drool clung to the side of my face.

"Good morning," a soft voice whispered beside me.

Cara? Did you come back for me?

I peeled my head away from the pillow and sat up.

"Alexia," I said, feeling stiffness in my neck and back. Behind her, across the aisle, I could see Orillia passed out on the seat.

"Did I wake you?" Alexia asked, lowering her hand onto my knee.

I owed Alexia my life, but I couldn't help but think she was still the enemy. I couldn't help but agree with Danny. Was that wrong? The woman *was* tainted.

She was an intellect.

She was a murderer.

I dropped my head on the pillow and closed my eyes. "Yes, you did."

Her hand slipped away from my knee. "Sorry."

A dry lump scratched at my throat. I wasn't ready for a conversation yet. I didn't want to look at her and be thankful for everything she did for us. I mean Jesus, I still didn't know why I wanted to find Dad. My feelings seemed to pull at me, ripping at my morals—at what was right and what was the right way to feel. Part of me just wanted to be a kid again, to be told what to do. I didn't care if I disagreed, at least I wouldn't be burdened with so many critical decisions and responsibilities.

It was okay playing 'grown-up, ' but I wasn't ready to do it full-time.

Maybe that was why I wanted to find Dad.

But was that a good enough reason?

“What do you want?” I said to Alexia, my voice parched and raspy.

“I want to help you,” she said.

“Why?” I asked.

“I want to help you understand.” She pulled on her torn dress and covered her thighs.

“Understand what?” I let the pillow slip down my back and sat up again.

“The research program,” Alexia replied. “Section Seventeen, Trial Three. I'm here to help you with the program. Todd and his group were very much like you. Like all of you. They had qualities and skills. His group was the first to be given this opportunity in our zone, the same opportunity you have been given, but they lasted one night.”

The pitter-patter along the roof, the tranquil notes from the choir, stopped.

My brain took a second to process. “The program is still happening? Rennick is still observing us?”

Alexia placed her hand back on my leg. “Yes. It was always happening. I just didn't want to see you make the same mistakes as your friend Todd. He was a merger but wouldn't conform. He met the criteria, so we introduced the program to his group. We assumed he would kill the weak, and willingly return once the resources ran out or became scarce, but instead he resisted the merger and got his group killed anyway. When we captured him, he still refused to conform. Your friend Todd made errors on so many levels.”

I wasn't listening to her anymore. My head filled with the potential that this girl was still with them.

“I thought you—you turned. You helped us escape.”

“I did,” she replied.

“But that—that was all planned? Are you saying that you're still—“

“An intellect?”

“The enemy,” I said.

Alexia glanced at her freshly polished handgun. She could see I was beginning to get uncomfortable. “Sheldon.” She tapped her fingers on my knee. “I'm not the enemy. I'm not like Rennick. I'm not like the intellects you saw back at the quarry. I have a different role.”

“Then what the fuck are you? What the hell is your role?” I pulled my knee away. My voice was louder, enough for Orillia to moan and shift in her seat.

“I’m your friend,” Alexia whispered. “That is my role. And what I know is that if you survive out here long enough, you’ll return to Rennick and you’ll conform.”

“I’ll never conform.”

“There is a merger in your group. Someone among you has been breached. The intellect is mostly dormant for now, but when the time is right, they’ll see to it that you join us. If that merger keeps you alive, keeps you strong and healthy, you will see the better life.” Alexia stood up and stepped into the aisle. She stretched her arms out to the roof, lifting her frayed dress up over her strong, tanned thighs.

Is she flirting with me?

“Who’s the merger?” I asked, feeling a tingle over my arms and neck.

She tucked the gun between her legs and pulled the clips out of her hair, letting the auburn strands dangle over her shoulders like a shampoo commercial. “I can’t tell, I don’t have the same gifts as the leaders like I said, I’m not Rennick. Merging takes time. I only hope, whoever it is, will accept it.”

“And my dad? What about my dad?”

“If he is strong and healthy he will have the opportunity to join us—we are capturing humans every minute of every day—we will find your dad at some point. You do realize you can’t run forever.”

“I don’t get it.” I turned to her, pulling my numbed legs up onto the seat. “You’re still talking like you’re the enemy. Who’s stopping me from killing you, like I did the others?” I pointed to Orilla. “Who’s stopping her? Or Danny? If he catches wind of this, he’d rip your head off.”

“Because you won’t say anything,” Alexia replied. She held the clip in between her lips as she pulled her hair back. “Like you said to Orillia last night, you’re in love with Cara.” Alexia tucked the clip into her hair and smiled. “And Cara is with us. And I’m pretty sure you’d like to see Cara again.”

“What the fuck?” My face heated up. A crow squawked outside, slapping its wings against the branch of a nearby tree.

“Please mind your language, Sheldon.”

Was this a setup? Was this Rennick's plan all along? I couldn't figure this girl out. If she was trying to help me, why the hell did she kill her own kind? I was screaming inside. I had to tell the group, they had to know.

“Are you going to kill my friends?” I asked.

Alexia gripped onto the gun again and sat down in the seat behind me. She wiped the glass with her hand and looked out the window. “No. I’m going to help your friends, just like I’m going to help you. You’re different than Todd. You’re different than all the people we’ve caged up. What you and Orillia did with Margaret was incredible. The bold decision you two made. Sab as well. Truly incredible. All of you. I want to help. For as long as it takes.”

I wondered again, who she was before all of this. I wanted to ask her what made her conform. But I wasn't ready for the answers. In a way, I didn't want to know. I had to keep thinking the world was going to be normal again some day. I needed to believe.

"So, Cara is in a cage now? What will happen to her?" I closed my eyes and curled my toes. I wondered if she would forget us; if breaching Cara would take away the love she had for me.

"She will be formally breached, and once the merger is complete, she will become an intellect," Alexia said. "She will be safe, strong and healthy for a very long time. And yes, Sheldon. Cara will still be in love with you."

My lower lip quivered and my eyes filled with tears. "Please don't hurt her. No one has ever loved me before," I said.

"Your mother loves you," Alexia replied. "She is a wonderful woman, with so much potential. She is waiting for you as well."

I folded my legs up and dropped my head between my knees. I suddenly pictured my mom sitting on the edge of my bed when I was little, stroking my hair after a horrible nightmare. The moonlight through my bedroom window painted her face white like she was an angel in the night.

She actually came to see me a lot when I was young.

I had just blocked those memories for a long time like I wanted to convince myself she was a terrible mother.

She wasn't perfect, but maybe I was too hard on her. I mean, I wasn't exactly the perfect son.

“Why do you keep them in cages?” I asked. “If they are willing to conform, like my mom and Cara, why are they locked up like animals?”

“Control and uncertainty,” Alexia replied. “We don't trust a pure human, despite good behaviour—and not all are willing to conform at first. In fact, most aren't. Like you. Until we learn more, it is safer we keep you in cages until you're ready for phase three or for formal breaching.”

“And our group?” I looked around the bus, at Danny asleep a few rows up. The back of his head propped up against the window. I couldn't imagine the pain he was feeling. For him to actually fall asleep with a bullet lodged in his foot was probably a gift. He was ruthless—perhaps one of the reasons he was still alive. Then there was Sab, somewhere near the front on the floor. He was a genius with engines. If not for him, we'd be on foot and likely dead. And Bailey, his innocence, and naivety have kept him alive somehow. I glanced at Orillia, across from me. Our leader. My new friend.

“Your group are survivors, and we must learn from you,” Alexia said. “How you think, how you use your bodies, how you connect and relate to each other. Love. We're prepared to do whatever it takes to learn how to be human, how to be better than human. We want to make this planet perfect.” Alexia glanced out the window. A little brown hare bounced over the curb and onto the grass leading into the front garden of an abandoned house. It nibbled on some clover and then hopped away under a fence.

“You're prepared to kill each other?” I asked.

“Yes. You're talking about Charlie, aren't you? And Thomas and Clarence.”

“Yeah, I am. What kind of perfect world is that?”

Alexia nodded and smiled to herself. A thin ray of sunlight filtered through the houses, spreading its warmth onto us.

“Two steps forward, one step back,” she whispered. “Isn't that what humans say? You'll see the light, Sheldon. You all will. You will be with your mom again. You will be with Cara again.”

Orillia's toes wiggled in front of me as she pulled the pink blanket up to her face.

Damn.

I was torn.

What the hell was I supposed to do?

My dad was out there, still alive, probably still willing to fight. He was like me—stubborn. We were both stubborn. My mom told me so, a number of times; like every day.

But was Alexia right? Was life going to be better if I conformed?

No. Why would I even think that way. Why would I want to share my brain?

I had to fight this. And if it meant using this red-dressed intellect to move forward—then so be it.

I will fight.

Chapter Forty-Five:

Danny

The bus started up with little problems—a sign we were getting that one step closer to the hills. I had to think about the group, and put the idea of rescuing Cara aside. At least until I found Dad.

The sweltering sun was almost at its highest point in the sky by the time we set off. The distant rumbles had faded, and the road ahead was clear.

No ogres.

No drones.

We all crowded up at the front of the bus, anxious about what the day was going to bring. I sat beside Bailey, happy to see his face was okay and that he was in good spirits.

Orillia sat across from me with Danny. The two leaned on the front bar, wide-eyed and hopeful.

“I assume you’re heading to the water,” Alexia said. She sat a few rows behind everyone. She held a cloth up to her face and dabbed away the beads of sweat.

“Not quite,” Orillia replied, leaning her face on her arms. “We have one more stop before we head south.”

Alexia leaned back and propped her bare legs up on some boxes. Her toes were painted red, matching her fingernails and dress. “Risky if you were to ask me. The smart thing to do would be to get on a boat and steer yourself clear from all those foot soldiers, as soon as possible. I’m sure your friend Sab here can fix up one of the disabled engines down by the harbor.”

I was amazed. This girl spoke like she had heard all of our conversations from days past.

“We’re picking up some people first,” Orillia said like she was annoyed this new girl was joining our group.

Sab straightened the bus out and turned onto the eastbound rural route.

“You’re looking for your dad, aren’t you Orillia?” Alexia asked. “He’s a police officer if I’m not mistaken. Ernie, right?”

Orillia glanced at me like I blabbed my mouth to the stranger the night before. I looked at her and shrugged.

“How do ya know that?” Orillia dropped her hands from the bar and turned to Alexia. “Do you know where he is?”

Alexia folded her cloth and placed it on the briefcase beside her. “Perhaps. Drinks a lot, correct?”

“He’s been known to enjoy his alcohol, yeah. You seen him? Last we heard he was at the hills.” Orillia swallowed and then looked over to me. “Others might be there too.”

“It’s quite possible,” Alexia said. “But I’m curious. And don’t get me wrong, I’m still learning, but are you willing to risk your life for an abusive father with a drinking problem?”

Orillia’s fingers curled up—her jaw clenched. “Pardon?”

“In fact, my research suggests he was responsible for the death of your most recent mayor.”

Orillia jumped from her seat and stepped into the aisle. Her fingers scratched at the skin on her thumb. “What did you just say?”

“I think you heard me,” Alexia replied. “I’m not aware of any hearing problems. Otherwise, you wouldn’t be deemed healthy.”

“Who the hell do you think you are?” Orillia muttered, leaning her chest forward as if she was ready to pounce.

I slid in front of the two and cautiously held onto Orillia’s shoulders. “Let it go. Just ignore her. We’re going to find your dad. Okay?”

“What do you think Danny?” Alexia crossed her legs and dabbed her face again with the cloth.

Danny didn’t move. He watched the road intently, grimacing every time the bus drove over a bump.

“Do you want to risk going to the hills to rescue some people who might not even be there? Not to mention, risking your life for an unhealthy, weak man who supported the drug trade in your town?” Alexia placed the cloth on the briefcase again and checked the paint on her nails. “I do believe your dad died of a drug overdose, am I right Danny?”

“What are you doing?” Orillia glared at the intellect like she was the dirt on the bottom of her shoe.

“I don’t understand,” Alexia replied. “I’m simply communicating with you. Isn’t that what humans do?” She opened her briefcase and carefully pulled out the gun. She dropped her feet to the floor and moved to the seat behind Danny. She leaned into his ear. “You do realize your foot will get infected shortly if you don’t get medical attention. There is a hospital with ample supplies down by the water. I can help you.”

Danny shook his head and then buried his face into his arms. I had never seen the opinionated potty-mouth speechless before.

We drove through the valley of Hidden Trail on the edge of town before straining up the hillside. Flames shot up from some of the storefronts and warehouses near the industrial zone. Over the buildings and charred rooftops, past the shelf of pines and giant oaks, I could see the sun reflect off the shingles on our farmhouse.

I missed my bedroom. I missed my home.

No one spoke for some time, perhaps nervous about sharing anything with the intellect. I knew what she was doing. She was trying to turn us into lab rats, observing and experimenting with our emotions and behaviors. But it wasn’t working. We were better than that.

Alexia leaned into the aisle and looked out the back window. Through the valley, bordered by the cliff face of the escarpment, the deep blues from Lake Ontario spilled out along the horizon.

“Stop the bus.” Danny lifted his head and shuffled past Orillia. “Sab, stop the bus, right now.”

“What?” Sab glanced back through the rearview mirror.

“We’re nearly there, chill, will ya?”

“I'm serious. Let me off.” Danny reached back into the seat behind him and grabbed a backpack. He tossed it over his shoulder and punched the bar. “Stop, or I'll make you stop.”

“What's your problem?” Orillia shouted, clawing at Danny's bag and yanking him back.

“What's happening?” Bailey said, reaching for my hand.

Danny bullied forward, pushing Orillia aside with his chest. The ends of his scraggly hair were soaked, trickles of sweat rolled down his patchy face. He launched himself to the front and smashed his fist on the dash. “Stop the goddamn bus.”

“Screw you, Danny. We're nearly there. I ain't stopping.” Dust picked up along the road as Sab turned onto a narrow cutoff, causing Danny to lose his balance. He slashed at Sab's arm and grabbed the steering wheel, yanking it to the side. The two wrestled in the driver's seat, pulling the bus left and then to the right.

I jumped down and wrapped my forearm around Danny's neck, ripping him off of Sab. He elbowed my side and swatted at my face, dropping me over the steps. Sab slammed on the brakes and guided the bus onto a patch of grass. The battered frame creaked and moaned as we finally came to a halt.

Danny stood between Sab and me now. His eyes widened, his entire body shook. “Outta my way Sheldon,” he muttered between his teeth. “I don't wanna have ta hurt you.”

“Let him go,” Sab said, checking his lip with the top of his hand. “He's gonna get us killed sooner or later anyway.”

I squeezed to the side and let Danny past. His foot was soaked in blood, leaving red marks on the rubber matting. He banged on the glass door and dropped his head, like part of him was unsure.

“You’re an asshole Sab, you know that?”

“I’m the asshole? I’m the asshole?” Sab kicked the plastic garbage can that had been rolling around the front. It bounced off the fire extinguisher and hit me in the leg. He stepped down and grabbed Danny by the shirt. The two were inches away from my face. “If you step off the bus, don’t come crawling back, you hear me?” His breath reeked of canned beans.

“Works for me. You’re all gonna die, you know that?” Danny said. His eyes were dark and puffy. “That chick is right. We should’ve gone right to the water. We should’ve gone down there last night. We’re sitting ducks out here. Just because you can fix a stupid battery, it doesn’t mean you’re in charge.”

“I never said I was in charge.”

“Oh, you’ve been walking around these past couple-a days like ya own us. You don’t own shit.” Danny elbowed the dash and dropped down to the last step.

A thunderous boom shook the ground, rattling the bus’s flimsy structure. The fallen screws vibrated along the floor. A large object wrenched open the doors and wrapped itself around Danny. A strip of metal snapped off the panels, knocking me into Sab. The bus dragged sideways along the grassy field as thick tentacles pulled on Danny’s legs and torso, crushing him against the busted frame.

The bus teetered back, ripping up the earth below it. The steel bent and gave way as Danny's body finally squeezed through the tangled opening.

As he disappeared above us, the bus wavered back, landing wildly on all sets of tires.

Sab scampered over the seats and tore open the second briefcase. "Where's the gun. Where's that other gun?"

"I have it." Orillia reached up into the racks and tossed it to him.

He busted through the opening, slicing his arm on the jagged strips of metal.

"Shoot it Sab, shoot it," I shouted. I leaped over the seats and pushed my head out the broken windows near the back. "Aim for the eyes!"

Down the narrow roadway, the massive creature, still lugging its black shell, flung Danny up over the trees, tossing him around like a toy.

Memories of my encounter raced back to me, of the pain and horror I had felt before the world was taken from me for seventeen whole days.

Sab fired at the thing's head, hitting the maples on the other end of the clearing. The creature powered its muscular legs across the field in two strides and broke into the woods.

Sab fired again, striking the lower part of the shell, spewing up a small explosion of tissue and dark liquids.

The ogre swatted at the air as if the bullets were nothing but pesky mosquitoes looking for blood. It glanced back at Sab, its eyes, a fiery-red like the others the night before.

Sab stopped in his tracks and took aim again, steadying his arms out in front. He dropped to one knee and fired, striking the great beast in the face. The thing grunted, stumbling slightly to one side as Danny's limp body flapped around in its grasp. A tall pine snapped in half as the monster used the trees to guide its body upright again.

The creature stood tall, touching its leathery face. A black ooze poured from the brow above its eyes, slapping onto the ground below.

Sab fired again.

Bang.

The monster teetered, swatting again at the air. It stumbled to one side, struggling to keep upright.

Sab crept forward over the grass, keeping his gun pointed at the over-sized rodent. It groaned and hissed before plowing into the woods, toppling over trees along the way.

In a matter of seconds, the monster, with Danny still in its grasp, was gone.

Sab glanced back at us, his lanky arms still holding the gun out into the trees.

I didn't remember stepping off the bus, but I soon found myself walking over to him. His face looked defeated, perhaps confused. As I moved closer, his entire body trembled.

“There’s no more bullets” Sab mumbled. “There’s no more bullets in this gun.”

Trees snapped, echoing out through the hills.

“You did everything you could. There’s no chance trying to save him now.”

“Do you see where it went?” Sab tossed the gun into the grass and pointed out to the woods. The blur of rich greens and warming yellows spread up over the rolling hills, beyond the grassy clearing. Scattered through the thick woods, there were patches of farmland bordered by white fencing and shapely barns.

“He's gone," I said. I placed my hand on his shoulder.

"Danny's gone, man."

Sab looked back again at the bus and shook his head. “No, dude, he ain't.” His eyes widened. “That girl. She’s got a gun, why didn't she help me?” He pushed past me like I wasn't even there and hustled over to the group. “I need that gun. Get that gun from the girl.”

I didn't know who he was talking to, his voice muttered out into the humid air.

“Wait,” I called out to him. “Will you just wait?”

“Get that gun from the girl!” He pointed to the busted windows, the color rushed away from his face, blood poured from his arm. “Where is she?”

Alexia stepped through the twisted doorframe like a runway model. She held onto the briefcase and opened it for him. "Take it," she murmured. "Go save your friend."

Sab snatched the gun out and immediately checked the chamber. His grease-stained fingers wrapped firmly around the handle. His gaze steered past me, out to the hills again. "I gotta get him. Who's coming with me? Who's coming with me?"

"He's gone Sab," I repeated as calmly as I could. "Danny's dead."

"Shut up. He's not dead. Orillia? You coming? We gotta help him." He hustled over the grass a few feet and turned back to us, throwing his hands up over his head. "Seriously?"

Orillia jumped down from the bus—

her hair flopped about over her face. "Sab, it's suicide. Please. Sheldon's right. I beg you." Her voice carried a foreboding tone, a strain only born from a growing friendship between the two.

Sab dropped his arms, dangling the gun between his fingers. "You're kidding me, right? Are you not human?"

"Yeah, I am, but that thing will kill you." Orillia reached out to him, like a mother to a son. I hadn't seen this side of her before, this delicate, sensitive warmth. She hesitated a moment before hugging him.

Sab's body immediately fell loose, as he leaned his weight on Orillia's shoulders.

As he dropped his head and closed his eyes tight, I felt my muscles relax as well. We had to be smart, and Sab knew that. We couldn't let our feelings get in the way of survival. Yeah, we had to look out for each other, but like Margaret, we needed to know when to let go.

I lowered myself to the ground and laid out on the soft grass.

Yeah, Danny drove me nuts, but the guy didn't deserve to go like that.

No one did.

As I watched a thin white cloud graze over the sun, a ladybug perched itself on the thick hairs along my arm.

It was at that moment when I heard a cry—a deep, throaty cry.

Chapter Forty-Six:

Shrill

We knew it was Danny.

We knew Danny was still alive.

The pain and horror in his voice, in his cries, sent a surge of adrenaline through my veins.

I rose to my feet, ignoring the dryness in my mouth and the hunger pains in my gut.

A flock of crows shot up over the treetops, slapping the branches with their wings.

"There," I said, pointing at a cell phone tower out in the middle of a small clearing. "It's coming from there."

Sab and I sprinted across the field and into the thick woods, focusing on the sounds and movements ahead. Danny was out there, and he needed us. Rays of sunshine sent pillars of light around the forest floor, revealing the ogre's angry trail.

We had a fair distance to cover, maybe a half mile. My dad and I took an ATV through this area when I was in the sixth grade. He was contemplating buying one and borrowed it from Mr. Bryer. This was around the same time he was getting the itch to own something fast. Turned out Dad decided to go with the 1989 cobra mustang, may that poor raccoon rest in peace.

“This way,” Sab said between strides. He leaped over a thin stream that cut through the landscape. His shoes kicked up fallen leaves and broken twigs. I could only assume the creature was slowing down, perhaps weakening from the gunshots to the body and face.

Danny's cries echoed out again, deeper into the forest.

We followed a trail of toppled trees—some with the roots torn right out of the earth. Sab was quick on his feet, darting between the brush and over the uneven ground. Every now and then, we came across the rotting bodies of dead ogres, struck down by some sort of attack. Crows busted out of the decomposing shells with flesh falling from their sleek black beaks.

At the edge of the woods, we slowed down, ducking behind a fallen oak, splintered near the base. The sun reflected off the cell phone tower about a hundred yards away.

“Do you see him?” I asked.

Sab shook his head, slinging the gun around at every grasshopper or swaying tree branch. “Nothing, where the hell is he?”

We crept out of the shade and crossed the threshold into the sunlight. I kept close to Sab, searching carefully for our fallen friend.

Every inch we moved through the tall grass, I felt the adrenaline slip more and more away from me. My nerves shifted from bravery to fear, a logical fear that perhaps we were on a suicide mission.

“There,” Sab whispered, lowering himself in front of me. “I see him.”

At the foot of one of the cell tower's steel supports, an arm reached up over the weeds and wildflowers.

"Should we just go?" I asked, touching Sab's back. "I don't see any sign of that foot soldier."

Sab's shirt was drenched, clinging to his skin. The foul odor from his sweaty body played with my gag reflexes. He poked his head up like a groundhog and scurried forward.

The closer we got to the tower, the less concerned we were of any ogre's jumping out and attacking us. As we passed the midway point, it was apparent the person at the base of the tower was Danny. The whites of his eyes glowed through the blanket of fresh blood that covered his face. His right elbow dug into the ground, as he tried fruitlessly to keep himself upright.

"Jesus Christ, Danny." Sab dropped to his knees in front of him. "Can you move?"

Danny carefully shook his head. His left knee was bent in the opposite direction and twisted completely around. His femur jutted out from his torn jeans, still clinging to the pink tissue from his thigh.

"We'll get you outta here. We'll get you some help." Sab wedged his arm between Danny and the steel support. "It's gonna be okay. It's gonna be okay."

Danny grimaced and then coughed up a wad of blood, letting it ooze down his chin and pool at the bottom of his neck. He cringed and trembled.

“Breathe, buddy, breathe,” I whispered to him, trying to sound comforting. Todd said that to me once when I took a bad spill on my bike. I cut my knee and banged my head pretty badly. My dad told me later that I had gone into shock which explained why I was all confused and disorientated. I could only imagine Danny felt a hundred times worse.

“I’m—I’m sorry,” Danny said, gargling the leftover blood in his mouth. He coughed again and spit it up over his face.

“Sorry for what?” Sab replied. He guided the end of his shirt over Danny’s brow, trying to clean up the mess.

Danny squeezed his eyes closed and muscled his hand upwards. He swallowed. “Sorry for being an ass—hole all this time.”

Sab leaned down and clasped his friend’s hand. He couldn’t contain himself as his eyes welled up. Once the first pearl-shaped tear broke free, the rest followed in an unbroken stream down his cheeks. “You’re not an asshole.” Sab turned away and wiped his eyes with his collar. “I’m the asshole. I should have listened to you.”

Danny’s mouth stretched wide, exposing his blood-stained teeth. “I messed up, didn’t I?”

“No you didn’t, man. It’s all good.” Sab took hold of my arm and collected himself for a second. “Go get help.” He said to me. “Go find Orillia, we can make a stretcher. We can take him to that hospital down by the lake.”

“Okay,” I replied.

“Here,” Sab said, checking the chamber in Alexia’s gun. “Take it. There ain’t a lot of bullets but use it if you need ta.”

“Okay.”

Danny hacked up more blood, thrusting his head sideways. He slammed his hand down, writhing in pain. “Don't go,” he spluttered. “There's no point. I ain't gonna make it.”

Sab pulled Danny's hand back up and held it to his chest. “Bullshit. You don't know that. We can fix you up man. Orillia knows a lot about helping people. Her pops a cop, remember? We'll fix you up real good. We'll get you to the water like we planned. We'll find some hunnies to come with us too. Lotsa hunnies. I'll get that battery working on the boat. We'll live off the fish and supplies we find along the way.”

Danny shook his head again, arching his back. “I'm not gonna make it. I'm broken, dude. I'm all busted up inside.” He half smiled. “At least I don't feel the hole in my foot no more.”

Sab choked up, trying to take a breath. "Go, Sheldon. Get Orillia."

I was pretty sure Sab knew Danny was going to die. The question was whether we should let the guy suffer. I suddenly felt the roles had now been reversed as it wasn't long ago I was forced to take part in the killing of someone close to *me*.

Dear sweet Margaret.

Sure, Danny wasn't infected, or breached, as those intellects called it, but he was done. Like he said himself, he was ‘broken.’

But I owed these guys my life. I couldn't just turn on them now.

I agreed to go and ducked down in the grass, carefully slipping back toward the tree line. I glanced back one last time at Danny, wondering if I was ever going to see him alive again.

With each mindful step, my energy slipped, as hopelessness replaced fear.

“Sheldon.” Sab’s voice whispered out behind me.

I propped my head up and turned to him. He waved his hand out and then pointed to the trees. I scanned the shadows, focusing on the darkness.

Nothing.

What was he pointing at?

“What is it?” I whispered loudly. “I don’t see anything.”

He fluttered his hands again and then waved his finger. “There,” he replied. “It’s right there.”

I kept still and focused, letting my eyes adjust to the contrasting light.

A high-pitched, discordant ring lifted up over the grass—the sounds of grasshoppers, perhaps warning me of what lurked in the shadows.

A militia of chills marched down my spine.

There.

I could see it, a black haunting figure, rising up from the dark. Branches snapped off the trunks as the creature moaned, driving its weary body upright.

My ears throbbed. My breaths got deeper and deeper.

I froze, almost paralyzed, feeling the weight of the gun in my right hand.

Oh god.

Its face, it's disgusting, black peeling face turned in my direction. For a moment its eyes were a cold gray, almost empty inside. It's deep throated moans bellowed out from the core of its thick torso.

A bead of sweat rolled down my forearm, feeding the scavenging flies that crawled over my skin.

I wanted to scratch. I wanted to lift my trembling hand up and shoot the thing in the head.

The shrill ripped at my eardrums again, tearing at my nerves. I blew the hair off my brow and concentrated on my breathing.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Inhale.

I looked up at the crippled giant and pushed out a long breath.

Two tentacles beetled out from either side of its flaky exterior, dragging along the forested floor.

I just needed one good shot. That's all it would take.

I gently pushed out a calming breath and lifted the gun.

I was ready.

But a chilling darkness grew over me. The ground shook, sending a surge of tremors up my legs. The sun escaped, disappearing behind a second monster, pounding the grassy earth with its lizard-like feet. It thrashed at the tower, shredding the steel like it was cardboard. Heavy chunks of metal framing crashed to the ground, missing Sab and Danny by mere inches.

A third ogre tore through the tree-line to my left, joined by a fourth one, marching in behind it.

The creatures, the ruthless, bone-crushing creatures, looked down on me—on Sab and Danny, as though they had been hunting us like wild animals, excited to finally claim their prize.

Chapter Forty-Seven:

The Crows

Ever since the invasion, I felt like I was walking on a tightrope, high above the earth. Below me was the rest of the human population, succumbing to their shortened stay on this once beautiful planet. Yeah I was scared, terrified actually, but I couldn't help but feel lucky—lucky because every step I took along that flimsy high-wire, I knew I hadn't fallen.

Yet.

Death seemed inevitable for me though, and I was positive my life would be cut short like the rest. I was going to fall at some point. And that was fine, as long as I didn't give in to the intellects.

But as I stood there in that small clearing, in front of the cell phone tower and four giant alien rodents, I suddenly questioned everything.

Like everything.

What if I gave in? Would it be so bad? I'd get to ride out the rest of my shared life with Cara.

Wasn't that all I really wanted in life nowadays anyway?

And Dad. Was he really all that much better than these fricken aliens? He lied, he cheated, he hurt people to get what he wanted. Right?

Mom was the same.

Jesus. The line between good and bad was getting blurrier and blurrier.

“Sheldon!”

Sab’s voice rang out in my head.

“Sheldon, shoot them.”

My finger twitched on my right hand. The same hand that held the gun.

“Sheldon!”

The warmth slipped away from my body, sending goosebumps up and down my skin.

“Shoot them now!”

I knew death was not the answer. Dying meant I couldn’t be with Cara. Dying meant I was weak.

“Hurry!”

I lifted the gun up at the first grizzly ogre, steadying the nozzle, aiming between the eyes. It staggered out of the woods, taking its first clumsy step onto the grass. It’s foot, the size of my dad’s truck, sunk into the earth as the toes spread out over the ground. A dark syrup-like ooze streamed out from its head, splashing off its legs and torso.

Downing this one made the most sense. It would only need one bullet, according to Alexia. I just needed to hit the sweet spot. Then I could move on to the others.

“Jesus Christ, will you shoot it?” Sab’s words were a distant murmur in my head.

Focus.

Just one shot.

The steel joints, cascading up the cell tower, rattled as more debris fell from above, clanking behind me.

I didn't want to look at the other monsters. I didn't want to look at Sab holding onto his dying friend.

The hairs on my legs tingled, as if tiny bugs were crawling over my skin.

Just one shot.

I hovered my finger over the trigger. Sab mentioned I only had a few bullets, but how many was a few?

Shit.

I played out the moves in my head. I needed to shoot the crippled ogre between the eyes, swivel back to the second one by the tower and strike it in the same spot. If at any point I were to miss these two rodents, I needed to move onto the next ogre, and then the next—that way, at least all four were injured, perhaps enough for the three of us to high-tail it outta there.

I held my breath and fired.

Bang.

An explosion of liquid and flesh burst out from the ogre's forehead. It's arms and tentacles immediately fell limp, dropping to the creature's sides. It staggered for a second or two before crumbling backward into the trees.

I flung my arm around, following the line of sight on the gun with my left eye. I nervously searched for the second ogre's face and quickly pulled the trigger again.

Only nothing happened.

No explosion.

No flesh.

Nothing.

I tried again.

Click.

Click.

The second black alien muscled its legs forward into the clearing, eyeing us, perhaps toying with the idea of who it should kill first. The other two hovered behind, like there was some sort of chain of command.

Rennick said, once we were released back out, the foot soldiers were free to hunt us and do what they wanted. I knew he was excited about our potential but I was confident the bald intellect was going to be disappointed.

I glanced over to Sab and Danny, cowered under the steel framing and wire cables. If Sab was smart he'd leave his friend and sprint back into the woods. But, he's human. Like me. We're not supposed to do shit like that. Right?

Or am I wrong?

What would Dad do now?

The black monster swatted at the cell tower, grinding its teeth together.

As it adjusted its footing on the ground, a series of gunshots erupted out from the trees, to the north.

I dropped to the ground as the three remaining creatures absorbed a flurry of bullets. Their thick skin exploded and ripped apart, littering the field with flimsy chunks of rubbery flesh. In minutes, the savage foot soldiers were pushed back into the woods, likely searching for a place to die.

I pulled off a piece of fresh tissue from my back and tossed it aside. Up the hill, past the shaky cell tower, a man appeared through a white haze of gunsmoke. The sun beamed down on him, like he had just come from the heavens, assigned to save our lives.

He held a large rifle, maybe a machine gun, in his hands. His face was covered in hair, his dark blue shirt, unbuttoned and torn. He fired into the trees a couple more times, perhaps making sure the ogres were gone. He wiped his brow and reloaded his weapon. Behind him, another man stepped into the clearing—a taller, older looking man. The two looked like they were talking as they pointed in my direction.

I waded through the tall grass toward Sab and Danny, unsure if these strangers on the hill were friendly. I didn't recognize them and was quickly learning not to trust a person until they've earned it.

“Holy crap, that was close dude,” I said, still feeling the blood push through every inch of my body. “Did you see the skin fly off those things? I thought we were done like dinner. I thought I was gonna die.”

Sab didn't look at me. He just nodded and glanced back at the two strangers on the hill.

“Should I go back now?” I asked. “Or should I wait til those foot soldiers are dead? Do you think they're dead? Do you think those men got them between the eyes like how Alexia said?” I tucked the gun in my belt buckle and clasped my hands together, trying to stop them from shaking. I took a deep breath. I was starting to sound like little Margaret. “How's Danny?”

Sab shook his head.

A loose joist attached to a broken cable rattled in the breeze, tapping the steel frame above our heads.

“Danny’s dead,” Sab replied.

The man with the beard took a few steps down the hill. He held his gun down by his waist, pointing it at us. From where we stood I was pretty sure it was an M-16. Could have been from Ernie and his connections, or from Lawrence’s dad. I remember him saying something about his old man having a collection of guns in the basement at his bar.

“Identify yourselves!” The man shouted.

“Sheldon Hickory!” I hollered back. “And uh, Sab.”

“Sebastian Lawinski!” Sab added, raising his hand, his face was as white as a ghost.

“And the other one?” The man took a few more steps. “Who’s the kid in the grass?”

“Who the hell are you?” Sab threw both hands up now. “Why don’t you identify *your* asses? Huh?” He stepped over Danny and kicked a plastic satellite dish across the ground. His voice echoed over the landscape.

“My name is Bryson Keller,” said the bearded man. The blonde hairs on his chest glowed in the sunlight. “And this here is Paul Collins.”

The other man lifted his hand and waved. He looked like he could have been someone's dad, maybe a teacher or a dentist.

"Are you armed?" the bearded man called out.

"No," I replied. "I mean, we have a gun, but there's no bull—"

"Can you please identify the boy in the grass?" The bearded man wiped his brow again with his arm and pointed the gun back at us.

"Danny!" Sab shouted. He picked up the satellite dish and tossed it against the tower. "Danny James Wyatt. And what's it to you?"

The two strangers conversed for a second or two before the second man reached into the shadows and lifted out a shotgun.

"Can Danny identify you both?" The bearded man asked. "Can you have your friend stand up please?"

Sab shook his head and punched the steel frame of the tower, sending a wave of vibrations up and down the structure. His hand immediately started to bleed. "He's dead. Did you hear me? He was my best friend, and I was a goddamn asshole to the guy. I lived next door to him since the third grade on Hillcrest Avenue. What else do you wanna know? What size his shoes are? He's dead. Did you hear me? My best friend is dead!" Sab dropped to his knees and curled forward. His back shook as he cried into his hands.

I didn't know what to say. I had no clue the two were friends. I wouldn't have guessed in a million years.

I swatted at some flies and leaned down to him, tapping his shoulder. I had been numbed from hurt since Margaret was killed and Cara was taken. Shit, I was numbed when my parents stopped talking.

The bearded man lowered the M-16 and lit a cigarette. He blew out some smoke and leaned into the other guy.

The crows hovered above, diving down every now and then to snag up some leftover ogre-meat.

Man, what I would do for a steak right now. A burger.

A hotdog.

Damn, even mac and cheese would do.

Sab remained curled up in the grass for several minutes as the two men paced back and forth at the top of the hill.

“Sorry ‘bout your friend,” I said finally. Only I wasn’t. In a way, I was relieved Danny was gone. He had stressed me out for too long and to be honest, he was gonna get us killed sooner or later.

“We are coming down to greet you. Don’t make any sudden movements or we’ll be forced to shoot.” The men looked back into the shadows and then carefully approached Sab and me.

Sab lifted his head and staggered back up to his feet. He bit his lip and slowly inhaled, forcing back the sobbing hiccups. He flicked the dangling cable and looked up at the crows, perched on some overhanging branches.

“Are you with anyone else?” The bearded man shouted.

“Shut up!” Sab shouted back. “My friend just died. Give us a second will ya?” He shook his head and wiped the blood off his knuckles. He sniffed and collected himself. “Shoulda just gone to the water. Damn it. We shoulda just gone to the water.”

I understood his frustration. It made sense. The only reason we were here was because of Orillia and me. But now wasn't the time to mourn Danny's death. There were two strange men about fifty yards away from us ready to shoot us dead.

“Just be cool Sab. Will you?” I said. “We don't know if these guys are breached or not. If they see you looking all weak and shit, they might take you down.”

“If they're breached, they would know if I'm weak. I ain't acting cool for nobody.”

“I repeat, are you with anyone else?” The bearded man pulled the gun up to his shoulders and half aimed it in our direction.

“Orillia and Bailey. They're back at the bus,” I replied.

“Their last names please.” The taller man shuffled his hands around the shotgun, making it click.

“Orillia Greylin,” I said. “And Bailey—” I shook my head. “Bailey—Smith—ers.”

The kid lived on my street for two years, and I had no clue what his last name was. I always called his mom, 'ma'am' and his dad was in prison. I think. Besides, I always knew the kid as Margaret's friend.

As the men approached, they lowered their guns. The shorter man with the beard tossed his cigarette at our feet and spit on the grass. “Did you say, bus?”

Sab tapped the hanging cable again and looked back at Danny. His body lay still in the grass, twisted and cold. Flies hovered around his maimed leg.

“Yeah, he did. What’s it to you?” Sab muttered.

I nudged Sab’s arm and smiled at the two men. “Yeah. We have a working bus.”

“That’s impossible,” the taller man replied. “They immobilized everything. Nothing works.”

“The bus works, trust me,” I said.

The two men eyed the trees behind us as a group of crows swarmed a large piece of flesh, snagged on the branches. Deeper into the woods, the tips of the taller pines shuddered and swayed.

“Bullshit. How did you get it to work?” the bearded man asked. “The alternators were seized. Everything was seized.”

Sab stepped forward and flung the cable to the side. “Listen—sir. I don’t care if you don’t believe us. We’re not fucken car salesmen.”

The man with the beard poked Sab with his gun. “Are you trying to be funny, kid?”

Sab pushed forward, letting the nozzle dig into his chest. “Are you trying to be an asshole, sir?”

I pulled Sab back by his arm and stepped in front of the two. I had never seen Sab like this. Yeah, his friend just died, but something wasn’t right. The guy suddenly had a death wish.

"We're not trying to be anything, sir," I said, letting go of Sab and holding my hands up by my head. "We're just looking for some people who we heard might be hiding out up here, that's it. We're not here to cause any trouble."

Sab stepped back and picked up the busted satellite dish, throwing it at a crow hungrily eyeing Danny's lifeless body.

As the ruthless scavenger frantically lifted its body into the air, a horrifying cry scratched my ears.

A distant cry.

Out past the pines.

A cry from the other side of the woods.

"Orillia," I said, looking at Sab. "That was Orillia."

Chapter Forty-Eight:

Dad

My first impulse was to snag the empty gun from my frayed blood-stained pants and scurry back into the forest. I didn't think twice about Dad. I mean, I wasn't even sure he was alive, and I was all about priorities.

And loyalty.

Orillia needed us.

I didn't want to imagine what was happening to her and Bailey at the bus.

Sab took the lead as the two men followed close behind. Despite what happened minutes before, Sab didn't once look back at his best friend's body in the grass. I guess he didn't want to lose Orillia as well.

Even if there were a chance we would return, in essence, we had just given Danny up for the crows. Poor bastard.

Being survivors, we weren't stupid, or careless. As we approached the edge of the treeline, we lowered ourselves and paused in the shadows. The two men slipped in behind us, both wheezing and breathing heavily. I didn't know why they were following. Besides having a semi-automatic machine gun and a twelve-gauge, the two looked like they had nothing much to contribute.

Up by the road, the battered bus stood out like a withering deer in a lion's cage. Three ogres hovered close by, picking at the bloodied wounds on their bodies. At their feet was Alexia, formally standing like she did at the quarry, holding onto her briefcase.

“What the hell is she doing?” Sab moved a twig out of his way. His fingers trembled.

The two men caught their breath and stooped down next to us. Seeing them up close, with their wrinkled skin and mottled faces brought Dad back to my thoughts. For all I knew, these two men had a conversation with him earlier in the day. Maybe they were all friends.

“Who is that?” The bearded man lit a cigarette between breaths and propped his gun upright. He flicked the lighter a couple of times and placed it in his shirt pocket.

“She’s just a girl,” I replied, not wanting to share too much about her. “A really confused girl.”

The older man checked the bullets in his shotgun. I couldn't help but notice it was empty.

The man with the beard lowered his face and took aim at the injured creatures. His cheek pressed down against the black frame of the gun as he closed his left eye.

The cigarette smoke wafted over me.

Alexia remained still, looking out in our direction. I knew she could see us. I just didn't quite know what she was doing. Was she trying to help?

“Where’s Orillia?” Sab asked. He scampered past the two men along the brush and tall grass that separated the woods from the field and slipped behind a tree. “Is she on the bus? Is she okay?”

The bearded man swiveled his positioning toward the bus and adjusted the eyepiece on the gun. “I see two people,” he said, holding the cigarette between his lips. “A small boy and a young woman.”

“That’s them. That’s Orillia and the kid.” Sab hustled back to me and lifted up the twig again. His busted nose, from Danny’s wild headbutt, whistled out a high pitch as he breathed in, and a low pitch as he exhaled. “They’re in there. What the hell is going on?”

I looked at him, wondering if he was breached. His behavior just didn’t seem right. But then again, it was hard to judge him considering the circumstances.

The bearded man fired his gun out at the ogres, striking one in the head. The thing swatted at the air and pounded its heavy foot down on the ground.

“Wait,” I said. “Don’t shoot. Not yet.”

“I got this kid. We’re gonna get your friends outta there. We’ll take them back to the hills. Those things can’t get to us in them caves.”

“We’re not going back to the hills, sir. We’re headed to the water.”

“In that thing?” The man with the beard eyed the bus and sucked back on his cigarette again.

“Yeah,” I replied. “In that thing.”

“Not on my watch. We didn't waste those bullets back there just to see you children go and get killed. Sorry kid.”

The man fired a second shot.

“Stop!” I shoved him off his perch and dug my fingers into his hands. “I said, don’t shoot.”

The older man grabbed me from behind and wrapped his arms around my neck. I immediately dropped to the ground and kicked my leg out, knocking him to his knees.

The bearded man slid out of my way and directed the rifle at me. His fat, hairy hands wrapped around the handle and grip. “What are you doing kid? I’ll shoot ya. God as my witness, I’ll shoot ya dead. I’ve shot others like you before.”

I held my hands out by my side and stepped forward. "I bet you have," I said to him, sticking out my chest. A calmness slipped through my veins. A controlled energy I had felt from time to time, but never more than now. "It's people like you who make us look bad; you know that? Hiding in the shadows. Is that how you plan on spending the rest of your life?"

“You don’t know what you’re talking about kid,” the bearded man said. “You don’t know what it takes to survive.”

“That ain’t true,” I said. “I’m not the idiot firing my gun without understanding my position.” My dad used the word ‘position’ like that all the time when he was arguing with Mom. I was pretty sure it was an adult way of saying that it’s important to know what the hell you’re doing before you go and do something stupid.

“We just saved your life, you little shit. Like I said, you don’t know what you’re talking about.” His once cool and collected tone shifted to a stern strain.

I shook my head and smiled. “You know what?”

“What?” The bearded man replied.

“My friend out there isn’t confused. In fact, I think she’s far from it.”

“Please, enlighten me.” Condescend spilled from his voice.

“Her name is Alexia,” I said. “And she would disagree with you.” I gestured to the field with my head and then quickly returned my focus to the men. “She believes I am a survivor. Sab here too. She believes we are strong and healthy. And I’m starting to realize something very important. But what scares me is that there are too many people like you who will just never understand.”

“Understand what?” the taller man asked.

I bit the inside of my mouth and held my breath for a moment. They didn’t get it. They were weak and naive. They were too busy thinking about hiding and nothing about moving forward. Survival wasn’t about being a coward; it was about progress.

I lifted my hand up and grabbed the nozzle of the man’s gun, forcing it downward. I then pulled back, yanking it from his grip. Sparks from his cigarette exploded on his arm and leg. In a split second, I had the m-16 pointed at the two men, with my finger on the trigger and my right eye looking straight through the rear sight.

The older man got up from his knees and lifted his shotgun.

“Drop it,” I said, shifting my attention to him.

He lowered the gun and stepped back, showing me both of his hands.

“Now, you both listen to me.” My cheek pressed against the warm steel of the semi-automatic. “I’m looking for my dad, and I’d appreciate it very much if you could help me find him.”

Sab stood beside me now. His nose whistled. He picked up the twelve-gauge.

“Who?” the bearded man asked. “Who’s your dad?”

“Winston Hickory,” I replied.

“Yeah, we know ‘im,” the taller man said. He pointed back through the trees. “He’s living in the caves with the rest of us. He’s in pretty rough shape, but he’s alive.”

The sun pushed through the trees and warmed my face. My legs weakened. Dad’s face flashed inside my mind. His voice returned to me. What the hell was I doing? Why didn’t I fight harder to find him earlier?

“I need to see him. Go get him,” I said, feeling the calming energy leave me yet again. I was taught to speak to grown-ups with manners and kindness, but that instinct had faded. “Go get all of your people. We’re going to the water.”

The bearded man laughed. He picked up the remains of his cigarette butt and re-lit it. “We ain’t going anywhere, kid. It’s suicide out there. You can take your dad, be my guest. But I ain’t losing any more good people. We’re sitting ducks out here in the woods as it stands. As soon as them drones come we’re screwed.” He blew smoke out of his nose.

“So you’re just gonna stay in hiding?”

“Yeah.” the man with the beard replied.

The taller man brushed off the dirt and leaves from his pants. “And we’re going to stay alive. There are women and children with us. We’re not risking it.”

“That isn’t living,” I said. The ogre’s distant grunts and moans shook the insides of my stomach.

“It’s surviving kid.” The man with the beard looked through the trees to the field. “Now do your friends on that bus need our help or not?”

I turned the gun to the edge of the woods and fired at a rotting birch. The bark split into a million pieces, revealing a cluster of small black rodents. “Go get my father. Please.”

The two men jumped back and lifted their hands up above their heads.

I lowered my face again and peered through the eyepiece. My neck pulsated.

Behind them, a blood-thirsty crow broke the brief silence. The beams of sunlight raked through the shadows, broken by the silhouette of a man stepping into a small clearing. “Put the gun down, Sheldon.”

“Who is that?” I asked.

“It’s Ernie. Constable Ernie Greylin.”

“Mr. Greylin?” My fingernails tapped the trigger, glaring at the bearded man’s anxious, beady eyes. “Mr. Greylin?”

“Sheldon, I'm here, please put the gun down.” Ernie reached his hands out from behind a cluster of tangled trees. I glanced at him for just a moment, seeing his aging face and greasy hair at the corner of my vision. His clothes were faded, dirty and torn. Around his waist, a thick belt and holster.

“I need to see my dad.” I focused again on the bearded man. “Or I'll shoot him.”

“You're dad is fine, Sheldon. We can go and get him. We can go and get him right now.” Ernie inched further out from the blur of twisted branches and leaves.

“I will wait right here then, and this man will wait with me.”

“Sheldon, please listen to me.” Ernie's voice was calm and clear. His once wild, alcoholic slurs were far removed from his words. “Please put the—”

I shifted the gun to the left of the man and fired at another birch.

I hated birches.

“Get him now,” I said, grinding my molars.

“Okay, okay, I'll go and get him,” Ernie said. “But I must ask, what are your intentions, son?”

Son? Since when did he have the privilege to call me, 'son'?

“My intentions?” I replied.

“Yes.” Ernie side-stepped toward the bearded man, angling his head to engage eye-contact with me. His face was emaciated, covered with red bumps and uneven white hairs. He coughed up some loose phlegm and cleared his throat. “There is a bus behind you. I assume it is working.”

“Yeah, what’s it to you?” Sab moved behind me and pointed the empty shotgun at Ernie. I didn’t understand why the other man didn’t announce there were no bullets in the chambers, but it wasn’t important anyway.

“Sab, I got this,” I muttered.

“Okay, man,” he whispered back to me.

I inhaled slowly, letting the air sooth my nerves. Dad taught me the importance of breathing in baseball when I was up at the plate. He said that if I focused on my breaths, it would give my brain the space to focus on the ball.

“The bus is working,” I said to Ernie. “We’re headed to the water.”

The bearded man lowered his arms. “And we ain’t going, it’s suicide.”

“Hands up,” I said. My cheekbone pressed hard on the frame of the gun. “Get your hands up right now.”

Just over the bearded man’s shoulder, strips of bark from the second birch crumbled away from the gaping bullet hole. A small alien rodent, the size of a mole, scampered down the trunk.

“Paul. Go get his dad,” Ernie said. “Go get everyone.”

“What?” The older man awkwardly stepped back, favoring his left knee. “You’re not serious.”

“Get them.” Ernie’s tone was calm, yet stern. “Our friend Sheldon here is about to rescue our entire group.”

I couldn't tell you how long Sab and I stood with the bearded man and Ernie.

An hour?

Maybe two?

My hands were practically fused to the semi-automatic like I was never going to part with it.

Sab had managed to get Orillia's attention on the bus, and through a series of hand signals, he assured her we were coming. We just didn't know when.

Or how.

One of the ogres had finally succumbed to its gunshot wounds. It didn't take long for the crows to find it and fight over the exposed areas of meat.

Alexia continued to wait, almost like a statue in a park. She held onto the briefcase, simply gazing out in our direction. It was those kinds of behaviors that made it more apparent she wasn't human.

“What if there are too many of them?” Sab asked me finally. Somehow, with Danny's death, his mind was now vulnerable, distracted from the leadership role he seemed to play throughout our journey together. “What if there's like a hundred people?”

“We'll ram 'em in like sardines,” I replied.

“And how exactly are we gonna get them to the bus with them critters out there?”

Ideally, Orillia could drive the bus to us but who was to say the two remaining ogres wouldn't just rip it apart.

I chewed on a piece of grass, sucking back on the sugary end. I wanted to believe Alexia was helping us, that she was paving a safe path for us to get back to the bus, but something didn't feel right.

I just didn't know what it was.

Last resort, we had a working m-16.

The sun was arching over the west end of the hills when we finally heard movement in the trees.

The older man staggered into the clearing, holding a backpack and a walking stick.

“He’s here. We’re all here,” he said.

I dropped my arms, letting the semi-automatic slip from my fingers. In a moment of weakness, I staggered down the slope, slipping on the loose earth and leaves. I jumped back up to my feet, eyeing a trail of men, women, and kids lumbering through the forest.

The guns, the ogres, the death—it all slipped away as I hurried back through the assembly-line of frail and exhausted looking survivors. I passed a woman with a crying baby, sharing a brief smile before racing deeper into the shadows.

“Dad?” I shouted. “Where are you?” I stopped at a fallen elm, looking carefully at each person as they trekked past.

“Sheldon?” A man’s voice called out.

I knew it was him.

“Dad?”

At the lowest point of the forest, where a narrow stream split in two, a man with a flimsy walking stick, stood tall. His narrow face stretched into a smile. His eyes glistened under a dirty baseball hat.

I ran to him, feeling my mouth shudder and the insides of my body cave in. I tackled him, dragging us both to the ground.

His strong arms curled around me, squeezing me tight. His furry face rubbed up against mine.

I cried, letting the tears spill out of me, letting the weight of the world escape from my thoughts.

Somehow, nothing else mattered anymore. All the anger I had, all the pain I felt, just seemed to slip away.

I held onto my dad for a long time.

Five minutes.

Maybe ten.

He scanned my face, touching the scar on my temple and cheek. He looked at me like it was the first time he had seen me.

Ever.

I knew everything was going to be okay.

I just knew it.

Chapter Forty-Nine:

Position

Forty-seven.

Forty-seven of us painted the treeline, unsure about the prowling creatures roaming along the northern horizon. Two smaller ones marched from the east, huddling together with the others. Somehow they were being held back, trained like a dog to wait by their master's side. Was Alexia controlling these things? Was Rennick controlling Alexia? Was this a test?

I felt a tug on my leg. There were at least two or three young kids, maybe even toddlers, crawling around along the forested floor, quietly peering out at the mix of weak and healthy monsters. After spending so much time in the caves, perhaps these kids had learned about staying under the radar, about knowing when to disappear.

"My not know you," said a little boy. His nose was coated in dried snot, his lips chapped.

The woman with the baby stood back from the rest, soothing her newborn back to sleep. "Leave him alone Harper," the woman said. Her glasses reflected off the thin rays of light. She looked familiar like I had seen her working at the library or maybe the Max Milk.

Forty-seven.

Forty-seven weary, tired, and scared men, women and children, looking to move on—to move forward, despite what a few of the other members thought. The man with the beard and the older car-salesman-looking-guy talked privately with Ernie a few yards up from the group. They whispered loudly, but incoherently, gesturing with their hands, pointing out to the alien rodents from time to time. Beside them, a muscular woman decked out in hunting gear and black bands tied around her arms crouched over a fallen birch, angling a rifle out toward the ogres.

A second working weapon perhaps?

Meanwhile, I was on cloud-nine. I couldn't believe my old man was alive. He seemed slower than usual, more careful with his movements, but I assumed it was because he hadn't eaten.

Jesus, none of them had. Not much anyway.

I stood with him at the edge of the woods, hoping he would scuffle up my hair and tell me I did a good job, that I had found him, that I had potentially saved him from starvation or from being captured.

My dad was strong. Rennick would want him, to breach him like the others. If the Intellects were going to weed through our newly-sized group, my old man would surely be picked from the crop. They would scan him and maybe send him out for observation, like me.

Like now.

We were survivors, and we knew what it took to stay alive. And Dad was better than these invaders and their ridiculous visions. Utopia wasn't about a perfect species, on a perfect planet, it was about happiness.

And happiness was all that mattered.

Right?

Utopia was Cara.

Utopia was starting again with Dad.

“What's the plan?” A younger man, maybe in his mid-twenties carried a bag over his shoulder. He dropped it in front of Ernie and the other two men and then lifted out a large plastic container. “Are we stopping here? Or going back? Do you want me to give everyone water now?”

Ernie scratched his chin and eyed me for a second before turning back to his friends.

“So the thing runs eh?” My dad knelt down and took off his dirty baseball hat he must have found while on the run. He wiped the sweat from his brow with his bony arm. “Tell me about that bus.”

“It works,” I replied. “Sorta. My friend Sab over there figured out some way to get the battery to charge, and the alternator to work.”

“And?” My dad rubbed his eyes.

“And? What do ya mean, ‘and’?”

“Does it run? Will it get us to the water?”

I swallowed, feeling my ears tingle. “Yes, of course, it does. That's how we got here.”

My dad's forehead furrowed like it did so many times when the postman came to visit Mom.

“Ernie.” My dad leaned on his knees and carefully tucked the dirty hat back over his thinning hairline. “Thinking we take out the giants and pack the group onto the bus. Are we on the same page?”

Ernie gestured a ‘hold on’ to my dad with his finger and finished his conversation with the two men and the waterboy. It seemed to me they were the ones running the show and my dad was somehow lower on the totem-pole. Although he often mentioned in baseball that leadership was sometimes knowing when to step back.

“Tell me about them giants,” my dad said to me.

“Two are injured, they might die soon. The other two are new. They came from out there, just past the water tower, see?” I pointed out through a hazy wash of green trees and blue sky. “I think they're healthy ones. But I'm not sure if shooting them is the answer. Not sure we want to hit Alexia.” My dad rubbed his chin and breathed heavily through his nose, swatting at a couple of flies. “Alexia? Who is Alexia?”

“The girl out there is named Alexia. She’s an intellect.”

“A what?”

“She’s one of them. Breached. The aliens are scanning us, looking for healthy and strong people to invade. They want to share our brains and use our bodies.”

“For what?” My dad asked.

“To take over. Apparently, we're not doing a good job at running this planet.”

My dad chuckled to himself. “We’re not.”

“Yeah, I’m quickly figuring that out.”

“And what’s she doing out there?” my dad asked.

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out. I can’t decide if this is a set-up, or if she’s actually helping us.”

The baby’s cries started up again, wrenching at my insides. The woman adjusted her glasses with her knuckle and scurried back down the slope, shushing and coddling the little bundle.

“Why would this Alexia be helping us, if she’s one of them?” my dad asked, his Adam’s apple shifted up and down along his prickly neck.

“That’s just it, Dad,” I replied. “It’s gotten really—complicated.”

My heart fluttered. I suddenly wished Cara was standing beside me, wrapping her arms around my waist, stroking my palm with her pinky finger. I couldn’t stand the idea she was at the quarry, with them, with those visionaries. I missed her like crazy. It was like I was invaded, but only it was with love.

Behind us, a line-up started in front of the water container. The twenty-something man poured sparingly into a small cup and handed it to the group, one member at a time. There was no way there was enough for everyone. I could only assume these people were getting desperate.

Ernie patted the muscular woman on the back and wandered over to Dad and I. He knelt down and glanced out at the ogres.

“Your son here has given us a golden ticket outta them caves,” he said.

“I see that,” my dad replied, keeping his gaze out on the field as well.

The muscular girl joined them and knelt down beside Ernie.

“Jaya here believes she can slay the giants from the north point,” Ernie said.

“Yes, sir,” she replied. Her hair was black, pulled back in a tightly braided pony-tail, her tanned arms covered in red and black tattoos of unicorns and dragons. “When I open fire, that will be your cue to get everyone on the bus.”

My dad's Adam's apple shifted up and down again. “I see.” He turned to the girl. “And you? How will you get to the water?”

“I'll make it down there. Twenty-four hours. That's all I need. If you don't see me by this time tomorrow, you can hit the water.” She clenched her fists and tightened the black bands around her arms. “That bus will make it down there, right kid?”

“Yes, ma'am,” I replied.

“It's a piece of shit,” Sab added, standing over us. “If the thing don't run, I'll need time to check the engine.”

“How much time?” Jaya asked.

Sab shrugged. “Dunno. Twenty?”

“Twenty minutes?” Jaya whipped her head up to Sab. His nose whistled.

“Can you get out there and start the thing before we load everyone on?” Ernie asked. He pointed down to our right by the road. You could enter from the south. Might take a stretch to get down there, but it's worth a shot.”

“Or we can signal out to your daughter to start, sir.” Sab tucked his bloodied hands into his pockets.

“My daughter?” Ernie stood up. “Orillia's on that bus?”

“Yes sir,” Sab replied. “Didn't anyone tell you?”

Ernie stumbled back, reaching for a steady trunk to hold his balance. He gathered himself and then pulled the branches aside, focusing on the glare along the row of windows. “Man alive. My daughter is on that bus. Did you hear that Paul? My daughter is on that bus.”

The older man with the bad knee half smiled at Ernie and then engaged himself in a conversation with some woman.

“That's great news, Ernie,” my dad said. “And I agree with you about starting up the bus. But what I don't understand is the identity and position of the—the intellect. Do we take her out as well?”

“No!” I said in a loud whisper. “No, don't shoot her.”

“Sheldon, if she's one of them, we need to wipe out the group.” My dad rubbed his eyes again and coughed. His bony arms flexed. “What's her position?”

How was I supposed to tell them she was my friend. She wasn't like the others. She was different.

“She's helping us,” I said confidently. “I know it. I know it now. She's a nice girl. She's kind.”

“Sheldon,” my dad began. “Kindness only gets you so far.”

“No, we can't kill her. Please don't kill her. She helped us escape.”

“Escape?” Ernie asked

“Yeah, she helped our group, she helped Orillia and the rest of us escape from the quarry. We were captured and—”

“I say we kill them all. Let's cut the squawking and move on this.” The bearded man threw the empty cup of water back at the twenty-something boy and stepped down to us. “I'll stay back with Jaya. We can take those things out in a matter of minutes.”

“No, please,” I said.

My dad placed his hand on my knee. “Son, you're acting like your goddamn mother. You don't know what it takes to survive. You gotta be smart. You can't let your mother's sensitive side hold you back. Do you remember back at the farm when you wanted to keep that little alien because you thought it was friendly? It ended up killing Tom Bryer. You're better than that. Don't be like your mother now. You're better than that woman.”

That woman?

My muscles tightened, twisting into a heavy knot inside my chest.

The bearded man held the m-16 I had carelessly dropped earlier. His yellow teeth and snarling grin reminded me of Charlie.

“But Dad, isn't being smart knowing your position? You just said that yourself. I'm positive my friend Alexia is out there helping us. She's controlling those foot soldiers. She's moving them away just for us. Our position is to move forward, but not to attack.” I shifted my knee away from his hand.

My dad rubbed his eyes again. I hated when he did that. It was his stupid subtle way of showing me he was stressed and that I should cave into his demands.

If you want me to put food on the table every day, you need to help me on the farm, he would say. You can always go back to school when you're older.

Asshole.

I held my breath and stood up. I needed some water. The last thing I wanted to do was to get into another fight with Dad.

“Where are you going?” He reached for my arm.

“I’m thirsty,” I replied, pulling away.

It was the farm all over again.

I eyed the twenty-something boy and pushed ahead of a woman in the line. “Water please,” I grunted. “Now.”

The baby’s cries pierced my eardrums ripping at my nerves.

How was it that I was finding myself equally frustrated with humans as I was with these aliens?

“Sheldon?” A scratchy woman’s voice crept over my skin.

“Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” I said, grabbing a half filled plastic cup of water from the twenty-something. I carefully swallowed the lukewarm drink and briefly relished in the sensation of it hydrating my insides.

“Winston and I were so worried about you,” the woman said, rubbing my shoulder.

I whipped around, feeling the blood spill up into my face and ears.

“Mrs. Bryer?”

“Please, call me Colleen,” she replied. “You make me sound old.” The wrinkles around her eyes spread out across her temples. Skin flaked from her face, leaving red patches along her forehead and cheeks.

Somehow, in the last few days, I had managed to block this woman out of my mind. Thinking about her made me sick to the stomach. And now seeing her, hearing her voice wrenched at my insides, like fifty crying babies.

I dropped the empty cup and stumbled backward. The thick branches bordering the woods jabbed into my back and neck, snapping with my weight. There was a sudden emptiness inside my body, inside my head. The knots somehow unraveled, leaving me with a sense of direction.

“Sheldon? What are you doing?” My dad’s voice was nothing but a muffled hiss, like a trapped fly in a tent.

“Knowing my position,” I mumbled.

“Sheldon.” The blur of my dad’s aging frame strained upright. “You can’t go out there. You don’t know what you’re doing.”

But it was too late.

The heat of the sun warmed my skin, filling my body with energy.

A fresh energy.

A new energy.

Chapter Fifty:

Proposal

The blades of grass brushed against my legs, tickling my ankles where my jeans had thinned and ripped away. Tiny white seeds danced in the sunlight around me, like little guardian angels.

The heat of the late afternoon carried with it a calming silence.

No grasshoppers.

No crying babies.

No Dad.

Somehow, I was able to block out the tension from the other forty-six who anxiously sketched out the tree line behind me.

Up ahead was the bright yellow bus, just a few hundred yards away. Inside, the shaded faces of Orillia and Bailey gazed out through the shattered windows, probably excited to finally see some movement.

A light breeze swept over my face, tickling the hairs on my arms.

North-east, where the tall grass and thistles broke away into a labyrinth of apple trees, the colossal ogres waited. Their moans and heavy grunts were nothing but a soothing vibration along the earth's floor. Alexia was their puppet-master, controlling their actions with a force us human's didn't understand.

I waved to her, feeling a positive energy return to me. She was complex, she was the enemy, but she was a beautiful creature.

Perhaps it was the warmth of the sun, or maybe the smiling faces of Orillia and Bailey as I approached the bus, but something in me knew it was safe. This was my chance to save my father.

I signaled back to the group, motioning for them to come, to take that first step into the open.

I held my breath.

Moments later Sab emerged from the shadows and waded through the grass. Behind him, the men, women, and children, including my father, broke through the treeline and cautiously followed my new friend.

The ogres surveyed from the apple trees, growling and hissing at us as the crows pecked away at their ruptured limbs.

Orillia rushed out of the bus and wrapped her arms around me, breaking down into bumbling sobs. “Is...is...Danny dead?”

I didn’t respond. I figured if I continued to hold her, she would figure it out. I could still smell her shampoo from her visit at the farmhouse.

“We’re going to the water now,” I said. “It’s going to be packed on this thing, but it won’t be for long.”

“Is...is my dad with you?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I replied.

Orillia pulled away and looked at me as if to check whether I was serious or not. Her face lit up, filling with color. She kissed me on the cheek and trotted over the grass toward the group. Her once elegant movements were now that of a little girl, longing to be held by her daddy.

“Did you see my mom?” Bailey stood at the steps. The right side of his mouth twitched into a half-smile.

“No buddy,” I replied, kicking a stone underneath the front fender. “I’m sorry.”

“That’s okay,” he said dropping his head. “I have to pee.”

“Just go in the grass,” I said, pointing to the back. “Go around the other side though.”

“Okay.”

The sun painted the tips of the trees over the hills as the group lumbered forward. When they finally arrived, I did my best to help them on the bus and unload what little gear they had with them. Sab joined me, piling the extra bags on the racks and under the seats.

“Is there space in the undercarriage?” my dad asked. He walked with Mrs. Bryer, letting go of her hand as he approached me.

“They’re full,” I replied, scratching the back of my head and skipping forward to help the woman with the crying baby. “Sorry.”

The woman thanked me with a warm smile and followed Sab inside.

“Alright.” My dad patted my shoulder. “You should get on the bus, son. You did good.”

His tone irked me, jabbing at my ego.

“No, I’m okay,” I said. “These people need my help.”

I held out my hand to guide Mrs. Bryer up through the twisted door frame. She was different to me now. She was no longer the quiet neighbor from across the road. “You’re a good boy,” she said.

“Yeah, yeah,” I mumbled at the side of my mouth. “Mr. Bryer used to say that to me as well.”

My dad didn't respond. He nodded and followed his 'girlfriend' up the steps, holding carefully onto whatever bits of frame was left. My dad seemed different now too. Even when I first saw him in the woods. I wanted to believe it was because he was hungry and tired, but I wasn't sure anymore. I guess I just didn't want to think my old man was selfish and weak.

I lost myself for a minute or two, watching my dad sit near the back with Mrs. Bryer. Did he actually love me? Was this how all dads behaved after not seeing their son for nearly a month—when the world was collapsing around them?

Sab started the engine with little problem as I helped an older woman with a bandaged leg. A few people in the back clapped and hugged each other, likely feeling the relief that we were that much closer.

"Are we good to go?" I asked Sab. I pried on the remains of the door frame and tried to close it shut. Through the sharp metal ends, Alexia's elegant figure stood confidently across the clearing. She was closer now, just a hundred yards or so away.

"We got company," Sab announced. "From them trees down there."

"What?" I hopped up the steps and looked out the other side.

To the south, two ogres marched up the hillside, led by another intellect in a red dress. A murmur of voices filled the bus. The group flocked to the windows.

A curious shiver ran up and down my neck. Maybe this was a trap. Maybe I was wrong all along. “Let’s go,” I said to Sab. “We can take the road back the way we came. Can you turn this thing around?”

Sab pushed his foot on the pedal and played with the gears. The windows rattled. “I’m trying man; the thing’s stuck.”

“How can it be stuck? We’re on the fricken road?” I said, with urgency in my voice.

Sab flopped back in his seat. “When that ogre took Danny, it must have pulled it closer to the ditch. Shit.” He punched the steering wheel. “Shit.”

I kicked the busted door open and rushed around to the back. Sure enough, the right rear-wheel was wedged in a dried crack along the side of the road. I pounded on the emergency door. “All healthy, strong people need to come out here and help me push this thing!” I slammed my hand down on the door again. “Let’s go, let’s go, let’s go.”

In seconds, a dozen or so men and women hurried out both doors and joined me at the back. We all pushed as hard as we could, pressing our hands against the hot metal frame.

The engine screamed, the front tires dug into the road blasting dust and rocks from both sides. The little kids inside smeared their faces along the glass

For thirty seconds, maybe more, I pushed with everything I had. My dad was beside me, leaning his weight on this piece-of-shit-bus we found. Why couldn't it have been a greyhound? Or a fricken jet?

I had to get us outta of there. I messed up. My instincts backfired on me. I had to prove to my dad that I was a leader, not a screw-up. I had to prove to him that I was strong and healthy—that I was everything he pushed me to be.

My palms pressed hard; my wrists bent awkwardly.

“Push!” I shouted. “Push!”

The engine screamed louder; the dust spilled out over my face, over everyone's face, until finally there was movement. The cluster of hands slid away from the frame as the rear wheel skipped up over the wedge and stuttered several yards forward.

I dropped to the road, engulfed in a brown cloud, seeing tiny stars flash around my head. My breath was short; my lungs strained to pull in air.

The woman in the red dress appeared from the south, marching her high heels up over the dust covered road—the ogres hovered over her.

“On the bus!” I shouted. “Sab, let's go, let's go.”

My dad reached down and pulled me up to my feet. “You okay son?”

“Yeah, Dad. I'm fine.” I shoved him away and hurried back to the front. “Come on; we need to move.”

My dad hobbled around the side of the bus, wheezing and coughing. I waited at the busted door, pulling off pieces of glass from the folded metal strips. Alexia approached from the north, just thirty yards away; her ogres now marching through the apple trees toward us.

No, I can't talk to you. I trusted you. Was this a set-up all along?

The ground shook. Loose screws rattled and fell to the ground.

“Are we all on?” Sab shouted, revving the engine again.

I pulled my dad up to the first step and slammed my hand down on the dash. “Move, move.”

Dark shadows crept overtop as the ogres from the south swarmed the front and sides. Their mammoth bodies acted like barriers, dropping wads of slime from their rubbery mouths. A grayish ogre, with thick hairs scattered over its body, leaned into the front windshield fogging up the glass with each thundering grunt. It licked its new white teeth and lowered its face, peering inside. A red glow surrounded the thing's eyes.

We had nowhere to go. No chance in hell.

It wanted to rip us to shreds, pull us apart and dump us into the quarry.

But something was holding it back.

Both of them.

The second ogre ran its scaly claws over the roof like it was toying with the idea of snatching a human up at any time.

“Sheldon.” Alexia appeared at the entrance. “There’s someone here to see you.”

I wanted to throw up.

“Please don’t do this,” I replied. “Let us go. We just want to go to the water.”

Alexia gently rubbed her ruby red lips with her finger and then shook her head “I’m sorry.”

“What do you mean you’re sorry? I thought you were on our side? I thought you wanted to help?”

“I did want to help. I still want to help.”

“Then what are you doing? Why are you here?” The baby’s cries from a few rows back scraped at the insides of my ears again.

Sab continued to rev the engine, pushing out the stutters and chokes. The veins on his arms popped out of his skin.

“We have a proposal for you,” Alexia replied.

“We?” Strips of bile lifted up into my throat.

Alexia carefully grazed her finger over the ends of the sharp glass along the door, letting it pierce her skin. She watched as a drop of red blood pushed out. “We, as in Rennick and I.”

The hum from a drone whizzed past the north side, hovering behind Alexia. The speakers adjusted and expanded out of the small machine, followed by a short beep. Near the top, the camera rotated and shifted, angling the lens in my direction. “Ah, there is my boy. Section Seventeen, Trial Three. How are you?”

The speakers hissed and crackled.

“Please let us go,” I said.

Rennick chuckled. The drone lowered and spun around in a full circle. “Sheldon, Sheldon. I love how polite you are. You are a true intellect. We cannot wait to have you in our family.”

“Fuck you,” I shouted, feeling the bile and saliva spill from my mouth.

The bug-like machine clicked and beeped and then thrust upward.

Seconds later, a giant hand reached in through the hole along the middle seats and ripped out the car salesman. His shoe flipped over onto the aisle as his body disappeared into the shadows overhead. The sounds of bones snapping echoed out like fireworks.

Bailey sat a couple of seats behind Sab, covering his ears and closing his eyes. His mouth stretched wide, his face filled with fear. Screams spilled out around the group.

The floor shook. The shadows moved in and out of the sun's weakening rays.

"Where is the gun? Do we have a gun?" Orillia squeezed my arm—her face inches from me. "Sheldon? What should we do?" She shook my arm again. "Do something."

The drone lowered and fluttered down beside Alexia. The goliath beast marched away with the man's remains, perhaps returning to the quarry with its latest kill.

The drone's speakers spread out again. The tiny propellers buzzed. The camera zoomed and focused back on me.

"Please refrain from using that language Sheldon. You know better than that. We are committed to changing this planet and the people who inhabit it."

The waterboy folded over near the back and sobbed, crying out for his murdered friend. Maybe the man was his father.

Damn.

This was not the time to let my anger get the best of me.

Keep yourself together Sheldon. You're a leader.

Being in control was key. I had to keep reminding myself of that. "Okay, I understand. I'm sorry."

“That's my boy,” Rennick replied. “Now, if you're ready to listen I have a proposal for you. Are you ready? Are you ready to listen?”

His condescending tone reminded me again of Dad.

Breathe Sheldon. Big breaths.

My gaze diverted down to Alexia, waiting motionless at the bottom of the stairs. She looked up to me with a sadness about her.

“Yes, I'm ready,” I said finally.

“Good,” Rennick said. “Now it is important you pay attention.” The drone yawed up over Alexia and hovered closer to the bus. It clicked again, followed by a long lower pitched tone. “I am willing to spare the lives of every soul on this—this environmental hazard, under one condition.”

“And what's that?” I said.

Alexia eyed the blood on her finger.

The waterboy's sobs stopped.

“The condition is, Sheldon, you come with us,” Rennick asserted. “You let your mind give into the breaching. You are valuable to us. You are incredibly special. Please, support our family.”

I squeezed the steel bar behind Sab's seat because this wasn't happening. There was no way. “Why me?” I shouted. “What the hell is so important about me? I'm just a fifteen-year-old kid!”

There had been many a time when I thought I was something great, something important, but I was often reminded that I really was a nobody, like everyone else. I remember getting a two-run home run in the fifth inning of our championship game a couple of years back. Everyone cheered for me and chanted my name as I ran around the bases. I was the hero. I was the most important person on the planet—all until I dropped a simple fly ball in the ninth that cost us the game. Man, was that a low point in my life. My dad didn't once talk about my great hit. Not once. He just harped on the dropped ball for weeks.

Maybe that was the reason why I wanted to believe that Rennick saw true qualities in me. Because no one else did. But I also wasn't stupid. I knew he was full of shit. He was recruiting. He was like those cult leaders I read about in Social Studies. He was brainwashing me.

“You are our future, Sheldon,” Rennick replied. “Like I said before, you have unique skills and qualities.”

He was messing with my mind. He didn't know me from a hole in the ground.

“What qualities? What skills?” I let go of the pole and folded my arms.

“Strength,” Rennick said. “Mental strength.”

“How do you know that? You don't even know me.”

The camera turned and focused on the other intellect from the south as she approached the door. “There is someone here who knows you. And perhaps she can help you see your value.”

The young intellect brushed up beside Alexia and then kissed her on the lips. She smiled and looked up at me with her black leather briefcase. Her lashes were coated in mascara, with silver paint fanned around her eyes. Her lips were ruby red; her blonde hair pulled back tightly in a bun.

It might have been ten seconds, maybe a minute, but as the blood drained from my face, I realized I was looking at Cara.

Chapter Fifty-One:

Fathers

The awkward feelings I once had for Cara suddenly returned—the same bashful insecurities from the days she sat in the bleachers while I picked flowers in the outfield.

“Cara?” My voice squeaked. I held onto the steel bar behind Sab’s seat, squeezing out all the confusion inside. Her auburn hair was perfectly shaped, shiny and golden. The scar on her face was now gone—her skin smooth and silky.

Bailey hurried past me with his science magazine and shuffled down the steps. He wrapped his arms around her.

“Sheldon,” Cara began. “You must listen to Rennick.” Her face tightened. “You need to join us. You can’t fight this forever.”

“What have they done to you? Did they hurt you?” I asked.

She shook her head and stroked her fingers through Bailey’s thick orange hair. “No, they haven’t hurt me. Quite the opposite actually. It’s euphoric.”

“What does ‘your-for-ick’ mean?” Bailey asked.

Cara whispered something into his ear and sent him back up the steps. He smiled at me and pulled my shirt. “Cara is back.”

I didn’t respond to him. It wasn’t the right time.

“What’s euphoric?” I asked her. “Did they breach you?” The taste of bile still lingered in my mouth.

“Yes, Sheldon. And you have been breached too.”

“What? How?” I immediately touched the scar on the top of my head.

“When I found you at Morris Point. When I picked you up and brought you to my mother’s school.” Cara lowered her face and gripped the briefcase with both hands.

Flashes of the attack returned to me. I remembered the tentacles bursting through the back window of my dad’s truck and ripping me out. I remember seeing the earth below as I was carried high up above the pines.

I remember I couldn’t breathe.

I remember thinking I was going to die.

But, that was it. I woke up in Mr. Love’s car, being driven by Cara and then I passed out again.

For seventeen days.

When did that creature breach me? Wouldn’t I know if there was some alien jammed in my brain?

“That’s impossible,” I said.

Cara reached out her hand and wiggled her fingers. “Come here,” she whispered. “Please.”

The grunting sounds from outside grew louder. Was she telling the truth?

“I’m scared,” I replied.

“Please, Sheldon. Come here.” Her voice was soft and soothing.

I loosened my grip on the steel bar, feeling my muscles relax along my arm and back. No matter what had happened to her, she was still Cara. She was still the beautiful girl I fell in love with. The girl whose name I wrote in my math journal at school just to feel the butterflies.

“Okay,” I said, reaching out to her. I stepped down; her delicate touch caressed my dry, dirt-stained skin.

“Sheldon.” Her face leaned into me, the warmth of her lips, of her breath, brought back those flutters in my stomach. “Rennick has been tracking you because of your ability to fight. No one, in all the zones have been able to resist the breaching the way you have.” Cara gently grabbed my face. She smelled like a bouquet of fresh flowers—like the primroses that grew in our front garden.

“We can make this planet beautiful,” Alexia added, tucking her hand between Cara’s arm and body. “Can you imagine it?”

“Perfection.” She touched Alexia’s face and smiled. “Beauty and perfection.” She turned to me again—leaning in and kissing me on the lips—sending a numbness around my body. “Open your mind, Sheldon,” she whispered. “You don’t have to be afraid anymore.”

Oh my god.

I wanted to wrap my arms around her, but I knew better. “But, but what about all these people? What about my dad?”

“They’re weak, Sheldon,” Cara said. “You have to let go. You can have a better life. Don’t fight this anymore. You can be with me. With us. I was able to let go; I was able to say goodbye to my family.”

The drone hovered above me now. “Come home,” Rennick said. “This planet has experienced thousands of years of war, war over religion, over territory, racism, sexism, greed. Be part of the last movement. The last time Earth will ever experience turmoil, conflict, tragedy and despair.”

What the hell was I supposed to do? How could I just let all these people die so that I could save myself?

Alexia placed her hand on my shoulder. “Once you see the light, you will hate how the world was. Your mother is waiting for you.”

I closed my eyes and shook my head. This wasn't happening. I had come this far. How could I give up now?

The throbbing pain in my temple returned, perhaps the alien inside my brain was trying to merge.

Maybe I was too stubborn to let it.

Maybe there was something else?

Like a tumor.

Or Alzheimer's.

But I was fifteen.

What was wrong with me?

I don't know how long I stood there. Word quickly spread around the bus about my situation. No one could do anything. Even my old man couldn't help; although I started to question again how high up I was on his priority list.

I turned to Sab. His head dropped on the steering wheel. It was like he didn't want to look at me.

“What do I do?” I asked him. My mouth was parched and sore.

The tall, lanky kid I had only met a few days earlier, a boy who I now considered to be my friend, swallowed and looked out the front—out through the shattered windshield, at the dried blood splattered along the dash. "Just go," he whispered. "You should just go."

I lifted myself up onto the steps. The eyes of forty-six plus survivors stared at me like I didn't belong there anymore.

Like I was already an intellect.

A traitor.

"It'll be okay," Orillia said. She walked down the steps and shook my hand. "You got us this far. You saved us." She pulled herself in and hugged me. "We'll wait for you. We'll wait an extra day. If we're not there, we'll head to the island. Find us at the island." She pushed away and wiped Cara's lipstick off my face. "You know the island I'm talking about right?"

I nodded and dropped my head. "Yeah," I replied under my breath. "I know."

Orillia kissed me on the cheek and stepped back inside.

I knew she was talking about Amherst Island a few miles south of here, but I wondered why this was the first time hearing about the plan.

"Are you leaving us?" Bailey asked. He pulled up his baggy pants and tucked his science magazine in his back pocket.

"Yeah, buddy. I'm leaving."

Orillia held Bailey's hand, her eyes filled with tears.

"Are you coming back?" Bailey asked. A couple flies looped around his overheated face.

“I don't think so,” I said. “I'm sorry.”

Baileys's shoulders slumped. “Do you not like me anymore?”

“Of course I do, but I don't have a choice buddy, the monsters will hurt you if I don't. And I don't want them to touch ya. Do you understand?”

The drone clicked. A red light beamed out the top, scanning the faces of everyone through the window panes.

The machine clicked again.

“I appreciate what sadness feels like,” Rennick said. His voice crackled again through the speakers. “But sadness is a human trait, a human quality passed on to other species. It is the result of the evil that exists in your blood.”

“And your acts of murder aren't evil?” I said, feeling the words stream from my brain in a mature, calculated way—a feeling I've had a lot lately. “You're wiping out this planet, killing innocent people.”

Laughter erupted from the speakers.

“Innocent people?” Rennick replied. “These weak, unfit humans are filled with corruption, with greed, selfishness, and stupidity.”

“You don't know that,” I said.

The drone pointed the red beam of light through the window frame at my dad.

“Look at this man,” Rennick continued. “Winston Hickory. Married sixteen years to Sophia Watson. Father to a fifteen-year-old boy with the mental capacity of a military leader. Your father. Sheldon, your father, emotionally and physically abused your mother, and then selfishly decided to sleep with his best friend’s wife. Your father cares more about his decimated farm and new mistress than his own baronial son.”

Cara’s hand glided over to me. Her fingers softly rubbed the top of my wrist. She looked to me like she knew about Rennick’s speech—like she was preparing me for more.

I pulled away from her again and lifted my head up over the rail again—down the aisle to my dad. He stood up; guilt strewed across his face.

“But you knew this already, didn’t you Sheldon?” The voice from the speakers crackled. The drone pulled away as Rennick appeared from the road, decked out in his finest suit and tie. A group of young intellectuals stood behind him, holding tightly onto their briefcases. Rennick dabbed his head with a white cloth and placed his hand on my shoulder. “You already knew your father was weak. You just don’t want to believe it.”

A drip of sweat trickled down my forehead, stopping at the end of my nose. “He’s my dad,” I replied, stepping back down onto the road. “He’s my family.”

“Family is blood,” Rennick replied. His cleanly shaven head glittered in the sunlight. “And nothing more.”

“I’m not changing,” I said. “I’m not letting this, this thing in my brain manipulate me.” I tapped my head. “It’ll die in here. I’ll never give up. I’ll come with you, but I’ll never stop fighting.”

I looked to Orillia—she clenched her fists and nodded to me.

Rennick laughed again, his eyes closed as he tilted his head up to the sky. “Oh but you will stop, I can promise you that. The secrets that lie within are dark and ominous my son, very dark.”

“I’m not your son,” I asserted.

“Oh, but you are, Sheldon. Ever since I laid eyes on you. Ever since you were breached on that glorious sunny morning in May. I am the father of this zone, and my family grows each day.”

Cara rubbed my back, letting her fingers gently graze over my sweat-soaked shirt. “I love you, Sheldon,” she said. “I love you with all my heart. Please just come. Come now, before anyone else gets hurt.”

The butterflies fluttered about inside me, their wings tickling every inch of my body.

I had been waiting to hear those words. I had been wanting to hear those words more than anything.

“Don’t listen to her,” Orillia shouted. She threw an empty water bottle at us and stood at the top of the stairs. “She’s weak Sheldon, remember? She’s one of them. Don’t give in. You can fight this.”

“Silence!” Rennick demanded. His voice bounced around the hills, repeating over and over until it faded into the late afternoon sky. Rennick eyed the drone like he was commanding it with his mind. The tiny machine spun around to the front of the bus and beamed the red light onto Orillia.

“You may be strong,” Rennick said to her. “But you are foolish. You carry impulsivity and anger, a trait your father passed on to you.” He scratched his chin. “By the way, what kind of town allows a corrupt alcoholic to be their chief of police? Oh wait, I forgot I am dealing with humans here.” He tapped the side of his nose, where the scar had already healed. He turned to Alexia. “Constable Ernie was responsible for the death of the mayor, is that right Alexia?”

“Yes, that is correct,” she replied.

“Right,” he said, “Just checking.” He picked up the water bottle from the ground and stepped onto the bus. He looked over to Sab and politely pointed to the aisle. “May I?”

Sab’s eyebrows furrowed as he shrugged. “Be my guest.”

“Thank you,” Rennick replied. He stepped onto the bus and handed Orillia the empty water bottle. “I believe you dropped this.”

Orillia snatched it from him and tossed it to the floor.

“Control yourself,” Sab said to her, subtly steadying his hands out like he was her coach.

Rennick dabbed his forehead again and returned to the road. "Orillia, my dear, you will become a blithering drunk like your dad," he continued, eyeing Constable Ernie through the windows. "That is if you choose to run. I see it already. Your uncontrolled strengths are what killed your brother. You focused so much on your own survival that you didn't see your family fall apart in front of you. Foolish." Rennick shook his head and laughed again. "Oh, how foolish you are."

Sab sat up from the steering wheel. "Don't listen to him." He revved the engine, letting it wheeze and sputter. "Lia, don't listen to him, okay?"

Orillia clenched her fists and eased out a slow breath.

The drone pulled the beam away from her and lowered it to Sab. The red light slowly scanned his face from top to bottom.

"Sebastian," Rennick said. "Sebastian Lawinski. Have they told you yet?"

"Told me what?" Sab replied. His fingernails dug into the wheel.

Rennick hopped onto the bus again and looked out at the terrified passengers. He raised his arms up, gripping the storage stacks above his head. "You didn't tell him about his dad?" Rennick shook his head and waved his finger. "Shame, shame. Gutless."

"What are you talking about?" Sab stood up behind Rennick. "My dad? My dad was here?"

"It's a beautiful twist actually. I have been looking forward to sharing this all day."

"What?" Sab bullied closer to Rennick.

“Hold on, hold on. Please keep your distance young man. I don't care how big you are; I will destroy you.” Rennick snapped his fingers. “Like that.” Sab inched back and dropped his shoulders. “What's going on? How do you know my dad?”

Rennick strutted forward down the aisle, stepping over bags and shifting past sweaty bodies. He pointed to each person as he walked past them. “Waste, waste, waste, potential, waste, breach, waste.”

“What is it?” Sab punched the back of the driver's seat. “How do you know my dad?”

Rennick pivoted on one foot and spun back around to Sab. “These ‘humans’ you seem to feel indebted to, allowed a teenage kid to murder your father.”

Sab swallowed and rubbed his eyes. “That's impossible; my dad is in prison. My dad wouldn't be here.”

Rennick pointed to a group of three women huddled together in a seat. “Waste, waste, waste.”

“My dad is in prison,” Sab repeated.

Rennick straightened his tie and raised his eyebrows. He walked back down the aisle, carefully passing Sab and once again returning to the road.

“My dad is in prison.” Sab punched the seat again.

“The boy who slammed a rock into his skull had so much potential too. He would have been a strong intellect.” Rennick kissed Alexia on the cheek and then did the same with Cara.

“My dad is in prison!”

“Tax fraud if I’m not mistaken. I believe Orillia’s father arrested him too. Am I right?” Rennick stepped back off the bus. He brushed a white seed from Cara’s shoulder. “What a town—what a remarkable town—and how interesting it is to think that the strength in this miserable group of survivors comes from the children with pathetic and weak fathers.”

“You don’t know anything!” Sab barked.

“Oh but I do,” Rennick replied. “Your father cheated your pathetic government for ten years. Meanwhile, your friend Orillia here is the product of an abusive alcoholic who condoned drug trade while orchestrating the assassination of the mayor. Then there is my favorite.” Rennick grinned at me, flashing his pearly whites. “My boy Sheldon.” He jumped back on the bus again, like he was enjoying the exercise. He looked to Sab again, acknowledging the earlier invite to use the aisle. “Ladies and gentlemen, did you know Sheldon Hickory’s father knocked up this little boy’s mother?” The cocky intellect ruffled his hand over Bailey’s hair. “Yes, it’s true. Bailey is Winston Hickory’s son.”

My dad shot up from his seat and wagged his finger out at Rennick. “What kind of animal are you? What right do you have coming here and destroying us like this?”

“I’m here to save your planet,” Rennick replied. “And awaken the strength that lies inside the strong and healthy.”

“Go to hell.” My dad stepped into the aisle and spat on the floor in front of Rennick.

The drone immediately zipped upward again, passing some beeps and tones out to the ogres.

Seconds later another giant arm pushed through the gaping hole along the left side of the bus and pulled out a short, stocky man, seated beside the mother and baby.

Screams followed.

Ear piercing screams.

“Stop this!” Sab jumped up from his seat. “Please stop.” He bounded down the steps and tackled me to the ground. His strong hands gripped my shirt, pulling me up into his face. “Get out of here. Will you just leave us?” Saliva foamed up at the corners of his mouth. He slammed me down onto the gravel road again. “You’re killing us. Get it through your thick skull!”

The stones from the road dug into my skin.

The sounds of bones snapping across the field echoed out.

Whimpers and sobs spilled from the twisted metal and broken glass.

A second later, a bullet whizzed out from the trees, striking the murderous ogre. A second and third rattled the drone overhead, causing it to break apart as the mini propellers tangled up in the bulrushes along the side of the road.

A flurry of gunshots snipered the other ogres, busting open their thick skin with tiny explosions.

The intellect guards dropped to the ground and opened their briefcases.

Sab and I took cover and scurried back inside.

“Get down; everyone get down!” Sab shouted. “Everyone get down!”

Bullets sprayed the front, panging off the grill and bumper.

The intellect guards fired from the side, striking a couple of passengers.

My dad leaned over me, blocking my face. “Don’t move, son. Just stay still.” His breath reeked of stale air.

The engine screamed as Sab heaved the bus forward. “We’re heading to the water!”

Behind me, Ernie fired a gun out at the intellects. Meanwhile, the waterboy and a tall woman swarmed the surprised alien leader and yanked him upward. They pulled at his tie and scratched at his face.

“Throw him off,” Orillia shouted. “Throw him off.”

More passengers joined in, including my dad. They hoisted Rennick up over the seats and tossed him out the gaping hole along the south side of the bus.

Chapter Fifty-Two:

The Escape

“We need to pick them up. We don't have to stop; we can roll by them.” Ernie loaded what looked like a 357 magnum and then stepped over a dead woman with a hole in the side of her face.

“Sebastian, did you hear me?”

Sab shifted gears and focused on the road.

Gunshots continued to fire out behind us.

“Yes sir, I heard ya. Where are they?”

The bus bounced wildly over the road, rattling the teetering frame. Ernie balanced himself and hustled a couple steps forward to the front. He pointed to the north side, near an opening in the trees.

“There,” he said. “By that fallen birch, see? The one that’s split in two?”

Sab nodded and checked on the alien pursuit through what was left of the rearview mirror and then scanned the field ahead.

“Yeah, I see it. I can’t get the bus over there, they’re gonna have to run out to us.”

Ernie patted Sab on the shoulders and made his way back to the north side windows. He fired a couple of shots toward the ogres and then waved his hands out to the treeline.

Seconds later the bearded man and the muscular woman named Jaya jumped out into the clearing with their machine guns only to be torn to shreds by one of the healthier ogres from the south end. It tossed their body parts aside and powered over the uneven ground.

Ernie leaned out, firing shot after shot, striking the fitter and larger beast in the face. For a moment I wondered if the Intellects had the ability to move across the ground at high speeds—like these ogres. It baffled me how they were able to transport themselves to the hills in such little time.

“Drop the gear man!” I shouted, noticing the healthier ogre closing in. I tucked into a seat with my dad at my side. “Push the engine. We can pick up speed when we hit the end of the escarpment. We don't know what these things are capable of. Move it!”

Sab whipped his head back to me for a split second. His greasy long hair flopped about over his eyes. “Shut up dude. I'm pushing this thing as fast as it can go.”

Ernie's hands trembled as he fed the revolver with another round of bullets. He fired again out the window. The giant beast staggered, dropping its boulder-sized hands to the ground for balance.

“No, you're not. Change gear Sab. The bus can't take the weight in that gear. Push the engine. Come on; it's gaining on us.”

“Do you wanna drive?” Sab squealed.

My dad squeezed my arm and lifted his brow—his condescending glare suggested Sab was right.

In that snapshot of time, I felt my heart deflate—my spirit yanked from within.

“I’m just trying to help,” I said back to Sab, but eying my dad at the same time.

“Well, you’re not helping!” Sab shouted. “Just keep your trap shut.”

“Fine,” I replied.

The bus veered to the left side of the road, avoiding a crippled telephone line.

The now wounded ogre slowed down its pace as we reached the edge of the escarpment. I was confident we had yet again escaped from the wrath of the alien beasts.

The pained wails from the engine simmered as the clanky bus eased down the steep hill.

Ernie slipped his head back in and checked the vital signs of the woman in the aisle. Thick white hairs jetted out around his face. Like some of the others, his skin was red and patchy. He pressed his fingers on the woman’s neck, waiting for a few seconds before pulling up. He stepped over her and helped out a man with a gunshot wound to his arm.

“Jack’s losing a lot of blood,” Ernie shouted to the waterboy. “Put pressure on it, right here.”

The waterboy wiped the tears from his eyes and jumped over a couple of seats to help.

“Your dad’s gone kid, okay?” Ernie said. “Look at me. We still need you to help.”

“Okay,” the boy replied.

I watched Ernie place his hand on the kid's head and ruffle up his hair.

It was those moments that gave me faith in our race, in our people, in this planet. But at the same time, I was poisoned now, poisoned with the scarring knowledge of what lay beneath all of these people—like Ernie—a supposed leader. To me, I could only see him now as an abusive father—corrupt. Were they all phoney? Had the wool been pulled over my eyes all my life? Was this the human way?

I sat alone in the third seat from the front while my dad joined Ernie and attended to some of the injured who were hit by the onslaught of bullets.

I closed my eyes and thought about Cara. I wondered if she really did love me, or was she just programmed to suck me into her new utopian ways?

I could still feel her lips touching mine. It felt so real. I didn't understand how anyone could fake that.

I love you too, Cara.

I wondered if she kept those flowers I left for her that day, or whether she simply admired them for a brief moment and then tossed them aside in her blinded love for that boyfriend of hers.

Would she be sitting here with me if I had gotten the courage that day to talk to her?

What I'd give to be back in that classroom again, only this time I wouldn't be sipping gin and smoking cigarettes—not after what it did to some of the low-lives in our new group.

I missed everything about her.

Breached or not, she was still, still...Cara.

Shit, I even missed the sound of her walking.

Flip.

Flop.

Flip.

Flop.

“You shouldn't be here,” Sab said. Both his hands gripped the wheel as he glanced at me through the mirror.

“I know,” I replied.

He was right. Rennick wanted me, not them.

We drove for about twenty minutes through the deserted roads just on the outskirts of town—the same roads Todd and I took on our bikes to get to the diamonds, the same road we used to get candy and root beer before practice.

I remembered he would always tell me to slow down, to enjoy the ride.

Look around you, Shel! He would say, pedaling hard to catch up to me. *We're gonna be all grown up and not have time for this shit soon.*

I never knew what he meant by it until now. I guess there just seemed to be so much going on in my little life that I didn't have time to savor what was around me.

Man.

My best friend was wise for his age.

No wonder Rennick liked him.

This *was* a beautiful place.

Earth.

I just don't think anyone really spent that much time appreciating it.

When the bus had finally stopped at the docks near Bronte Harbour, the passengers helped unload everything while Sab worked on hotwiring one of the fancy yachts at the end of the pier. Long shadows stretched over the boardwalk.

I guess having a father as a convicted criminal; it made sense his offspring were going to have some sort of issues with the law as well. Or, as I thought about many times, Sab was just damn good with his hands.

To no surprise, my energy was finally dwindling, and the efforts to carry any sort of heavy luggage was too draining. I stepped aside as Ernie led a group to raid the restaurants along the lakefront, while the rest of the excited passengers hurried to get comfortable on the luxurious mini-ocean liner.

My dad walked leisurely with the two-timing neighbor, chatting like there was nothing wrong with this planet—like they were about to head out on a cruise around the world. Maybe they were, but I was pretty sure it wasn't going to be a dream vacation.

Orillia kept her distance from me; I wasn't sure why. She checked back from time to time as she walked with my new little brother.

Shit.

That was messed up.

How could that wretched woman possibly respect my dad after the news Rennick spilled? There she was, walking hand in hand with the same man who cheated on his wife (my mom, who happened to be trapped in some mine-shaft being brainwashed by aliens) and at the same time he had a son with another neighbor who lived a few doors down.

Nuts.

Chapter Fifty-Three:

Progress

“Sheldon? Are you coming?”

I stood at the edge of the dock, looking down at an old tire and some random bits of garbage floating in the water. The smell of rotting fish and puke drifted through the air. A lone seagull dug its beak into a dead snapping turtle.

“Sheldon, pay attention.”

My dad tapped me on the arm. The two of us stood alone.

“I’m hungry,” I said,

“We’re all boarded. We got enough food to last a few weeks.

We’ll get you something to eat, son,” he said.

I kicked a rock into the water and nodded. “Mm-kay.”

I struggled to look at him, almost angry I had spent my entire life thinking he was a tough father, but a good dad.

“Are you alright?” he asked me.

“I guess.”

“You spaced out again,” he said.

“I did? For how long?” My first instinct was to look up at the sun, now creeping closer to the trees along the distant hills.

5:30.

Maybe 5:45.

“Long enough,” he replied. “Now, do your laces up, will ya?”

I looked down at my boots. My laces were tied.

The pier was empty. Nothing around us but rows of sailboats, catamarans, sea-doo's and yachts, all swaying gently in the stale breeze. Ahead, was the void of Lake Ontario—a gateway to safety, an escape from the new world order. A few miles southwest, was Amherst Island. A potential safe-zone, according to Orillia.

Out among the hills, there was no sign of the drones or the ogres, just a parade of curious autumn colors—of red, yellow and orange.

“Dad?” I bent down and undid my laces and then re-knotted them into perfect bows.

“Yeah, Sheldon?”

I stood up and walked with him along the dock toward the yacht. “Do you love me?”

My dad laughed and gently pushed me on the arm. “Of course I do, why would you ask me that? For goodness sake, why on earth would you ask me that?”

I shrugged and tucked my hands into my pockets. “I dunno.”

My dad pulled me in close to him and wrapped his arm around my shoulders. “I don't say it, I know. It's just not my style. You know how it is, right? Do you understand?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

The deep purr from the yacht's engine started up. The sun reflected off its giant black tinted windows, like all the world's light was beaming down on it. The thing had to be eighty feet long, if not more.

“Do you love Bailey?” I asked.

“Yes.” My dad eased back and took a big breath. “In a different way, I suppose.”

“But he’s your son too.”

“Yes, but—“

“Do you love Mom?” I asked.

“Sheldon, why are you asking me these questions? Now isn’t a good time.”

“Just answer, do you love Mom?”

My dad scratched his nose, picking at the sun blisters on his skin. He pulled a toothpick from his front pocket and sucked on the end. I could tell he was uncomfortable with the bombardment of questions. Part of me was expecting the typical answer a parent gave to their kid when the marriage had finally ceased to exist.

“No,” he said bluntly. “I haven’t had those feelings for your mother in years.”

I folded my fingers into my thumbs and cracked my knuckles. The survivors on the yacht were already changing into the comfortable clothing we had on the bus, feasting on the tinned food scavenged by Ernie and his helpers. The waterboy sat alone on the steps—the woman rocked her baby from side to side as she shushed in its ear.

Was this the human way? Was this how we survived for so long as a species? We just accepted death, betrayal, corruption and simply moved on?

My dad stopped and turned to me, holding my shoulders again with both hands. His eyes were hollow, underneath his dirty baseball hat—empty of life and energy. “Everything is going to be alright, son. I promise.”

But I knew he was lying. His words were fake, like when he talked to me at the hospital. Besides, how could he possibly think everything was alright when the world was crumbling around him?

“Do you believe in God?” I asked.

My dad let go of me and dropped his hands down by his side. “I don’t know what I believe in, son. I guess I believe in surviving. And I’ll do whatever it takes to do that. Survival is about progress, and I believe in progress.”

He sounded like me; only there was one difference. “Are you talking about survival? Or about life?”

“I’m not sure I follow.” His eyes narrowed.

“Well, it just sounds like you’d do whatever it takes to lead a good life, even if it means hurting people. You hurt Mom. You hurt me.”

My dad pushed air out of his mouth and continued to walk along the pier, like a spoiled child. “That’s not true.”

“But it is,” I said, shuffling my feet to catch up to him. “All you care about—”

My dad whipped his head around and grabbed my arm. His vein pulsated above his temples.

“All I care about is the safety and well-being of these people. Sheldon, I care about you. But there’s others to think about as well right? You know that as well as I do.”

Then tell me how proud you are, just tell me how proud you are that I found you—that I got you outta the hills. I mean come on, can't you at least say the words, 'I love you, Sheldon?'

“Yes, Dad,” I said with a sarcastic tone. “Whatever you say.”

“Please don't do this Sheldon, not now.”

“Do what?” I asked.

“You know exactly what I'm talking about.”

I shook my head and pushed air out of my mouth like he did earlier. “Whatever.”

My dad ripped his baseball hat off and threw it to the ground. “Jesus Christ Sheldon! It's that. It's that attitude. You're just like your Mother.”

Why was he so mean all the time?

How was it that my own parents compared each other's faults to me? Was I just the product of their flaws?

“What? What am I doing? I don't get it,” I said.

“That.” My dad bent down and snatched his hat up. “You're doing that ‘teenager’ thing.”

“But I am a teenager, Dad. I'm fifteen.”

A thick cloud crept over the sun—the shadows faded along the pier. We were right back at the farm again, back when blindness had taken away my father's patience—back when I was simply an empty bucket to dump all his problems into. My old man scratched his chin and vigorously rubbed his forehead. He closed his eyes tight and heaved out a sigh.

“I know you are a teenager, but you're more than that. You're better than that.”

“Better than what?” I asked.

“Better than all those kids you went to school with.”

“My friends?” I couldn't believe he was saying this. Was the truth finally coming out? “Those ‘kids’ you're talking about were my friends, and you took them away from me—all so you could keep your fucken farm right?”

“Hey!” My dad snapped. “Careful what you say.”

The horn on the yacht lifted out across the water—the lone seagull scattered, taking its remains along with it.

“Whatever,” I replied.

An empty potato chip wrapper blew across the concrete and then drifted over the edge, landing softly in the foamy water.

I knew I was pissing him off, but I didn't care.

My dad cleared his throat and pointed at my feet. He waved his finger. “Can—can you please do your shoelaces up properly?”

“They're not undone. And they're boots, not shoes. Are you going blind again? Jesus.”

“Do your laces up!”

Yes, Dad. Whatever.”

I held my breath and tightened my laces, tearing off one of the ends.

I wondered if Rennick was watching me somehow. What would he say to me? What would he think?

I exhaled slowly and focused on the giant yacht. The word ‘Figment’ was painted along the side in bright red cursive. Maybe that's all it was. Just a figment.

Too good to be true.

Orillia caught my eye as she waved from the railing. Her blonde hair gently swayed in the wind. My chest immediately loosened at the sight of her warm smile.

“Are you okay?” She greeted me on the landing and hugged me.

“I guess,” I replied.

Her warm face whispered into my ear. “Did he tell you?”

I pulled away from her and gazed curiously into her eyes. “Tell me what?”

Orillia rubbed her hand up my arm—her hair brushed over her face as the winds from the water picked up.

I looked back at Dad, conversing with Ernie about something important. “Orillia, what are you talking about?”

She shook her head nervously and squeezed me again, this time burrowing her lips into the side of my neck. “I thought he told you. I thought he told you what the group decided to do.”

I returned her squeeze, feeling her body wrap around my back. I closed my eyes again, imagining the arms belonging to Cara.

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about,” I replied. “Is there something wrong? Is there something wrong with the boat?”

Orillia slid her arms back and then kissed me on the cheek. Her lower lip trembled as she dropped her head.

Like before, a curious distance formed.

An emotional distance.

Where was she going?

“No,” she said. “It’s not the boat.”

“Sheldon?” Ernie marched over to me with his magnum in hand. His voice was deep and formal. “We need to have a word.”

“What is it?” I said. More passengers appeared from the front and underneath, making their way to the back landing pad. The waterboy pulled himself up from the step and hopped down onto the landing.

“Please don't do this,” Orillia cried. “It's not right.”

“Do what?” My stomach moaned, the acids stripped away at the inner lining.

Ernie shook his head and looked at his daughter. “Not now sweetheart, I'll handle this. Believe me; it's the right thing to do.”

The engines churned up the water as two men loosened the ropes from the dock, leaving a couple tied up at the back and front. They gave someone at the top a thumbs up and jumped aboard.

My skanky neighbor stepped through the crowd and wandered over to my dad, subtly reaching for his hand.

Their fingers weaved together.

My heart pounded.

“What's going on?” I asked.

“We've been talking,” Ernie said, placing his arm around Orillia. The two looked alike. I could see the resemblance now.

“Talking about what?” I asked.

An uncomfortable silence crept throughout the boat. The seagull dropped bits of turtle flesh into the water as it circled above.

“About what happened to you,” Ernie said, “About the incident ___”

“About the breaching.” Sab stepped down from the bridge, like a king getting up from his throne. His hair now slicked back, pulled tight with some sort of elastic. He carried a spoon and a can of pears. “It’s starting to—“ He waved his other hand around his head and wiggled his fingers. “It’s getting into your brain. You can’t fight this.”

“You blacked out back there.” Ernie continued, not taking his gaze off of me. He gripped his revolver in his left hand. A row of bullets was attached to his belt and holster. “We all saw it. You left us.”

“So?” I replied. “I always space out. I’m tired. I just needed a bit of time to myself, that’s all.” I knew what was happening now; I could see it in Ernie’s eyes—in everyone’s eyes. “You think the alien is merging, don’t you?”

Ernie’s brows raised. He scratched at the back of his neck with the end of his magnum.

“Yeah, we do,” Sab said. “And we can’t trust you anymore.”

I looked to my dad, waiting for him to speak up for me. Waiting for him to act like a real father.

But he just played with his filthy baseball hat and cowardly cuddled up to his new lady friend.

“There’s nothing wrong with me,” I said. “I just black out sometimes.”

My dad nodded. "Yes Sheldon, you do. You used to daydream all the time too. But this was different, son. You checked out. We're worried about you."

"You're not worried about me, you're worried about yourself," I muttered.

Ernie nodded, "You're right, he is, but he's worried about all of us too."

"And it ain't daydreaming," Sab added. He scooped out a spoonful of pears and shoveled them in his mouth. Juice dripped down his chin. "I didn't come this far to be killed off by someone in our own group man."

"I'm in control," I said. "I'm strong. You heard Rennick. I'm the only one who—"

"Rennick?" Sab tossed the empty tin into the water and laughed. "You actually believe that bald-headed freak? He's an alien, dude, an alien who has killed our families." He pulled up his loose pants and stopped a couple of feet in front of me. Black and yellow bruising pooled under eyes and along the bridge of his nose. He held the end of his spoon up and poked me in the chest. "And you're one of them."

"I'm not one of them," I said, pushing away his hand. "I'm fine. There's nothing wrong with me. I'm telling you the truth. I'm strong, that's why that thing in my brain hasn't been able to do anything."

Sab shook his head. "No way man. I fixed this boat; I say who comes and who stays."

“But I helped you get here, Sab. You’re just gonna forget that I helped get you here? You’re gonna forget how I helped us get out of that quarry?” I folded my fingers under my thumbs and cracked my knuckles again. “Sab, you can’t do this. Let me come with you.”

The once tall lanky quiet kid who followed Orillia's lead—the kid who butted heads with his supposed best friend Danny, now held himself with an air of bravado—a cockiness that suggested he was the new kingpin. He plugged a nostril and blew out some mucus from his nose. "No man. I can't do it. I can't risk it. What if you turn on us when we're out there, eh? It doesn't take over you, it merges with you, and it changes your ideas, your beliefs, your morals, your judgments. I've seen it with my own eyes. You'll forget important things, like names—you won't know it's merged, Sheldon. That's what I'm worried about—what we're all worried about. How do we know you won't just turn on us?"

“I won’t,” I replied.

“How do we know that for sure?” Sab wiped his nose with his arm and then licked his spoon. He looked around at the rest of the people—his people. “How do we know you won’t kill one of us in our sleep because we’re sick or injured?”

Murmurs bounced back and forth as the men and women, moms, dads, grandparents, children- all shared their concerns.

Maybe I *was* different. But it wasn't because I was breached. If anything it was because I was finally awake, I was finally understanding what kind of people inhabit this planet.

I wasn't the one the group should be worried about. It was them.

It was Sab.

It was Ernie.

Christ, it was the whole goddamn town.

Chapter Fifty-Four:

Merge

From the east, in the heart of Hidden Trail, an explosion disrupted the dimming skyline. Red and orange lights ballooned up into the air, pushing out giant clouds of smoke.

A cluster of drones hovered around the growing flames, like tiny black flies.

Gun fire followed, echoing out across the water.

I could only assume another group of survivors were on the run, or another Section Seventeen, Trial Three.

In minutes, a second and third explosion pushed upward—this time closer to the water. The harrowing disfigured giants rose up from the horizon, stampeding across the landscape.

Their speed was incredible, faster than the ones that chased our bus. These things were evolving and growing more and more every day.

“Pull the ropes away!” My heartless ex-friend shouted. He pushed through the gawking crowd on the landing and pointed to the dock. “Get those ropes off.”

The massive ogres pounded through the streets, knocking down the local church and tossing up cars and minivans like they were dinky toys.

The group scattered, flocking to the cabins below.

A little boy hurried over to me and tugged on my arm.
“Sheldon?”

A woman pushed passed, looking at me in disgust. Her little daughter pointed. “Is that the alien boy mommy? Is that the one who is going to hurt us?”

The mom yanked the girl away and disappeared with the rest of the panicked crowd through the doors.

“Sheldon?” The boy tugged on my arm again. His nose was caked in dried snot.

The driver steered the yacht away from the pier, gunning the engines to their fullest potential.

The ogres ripped away the hydro poles, sending sparks out into the streets.

“What is it?” I said to the boy as politely as I could, my patience was wearing thin, my energy was fading fast. “This isn’t a good time.”

The boy looked at me for a long time, studying my face—his eyes filled up with tears—he wanted to tell me something.

But he never spoke. He simply wiped away his sadness and hurried down below the deck.

Ernie fired his gun again, aiming carefully at the Ogre's head as it quickly approached. Its body was larger than the others, chiseled with muscle and thick, tangly veins.

The waterboy huddled by the steps, too terrified to move.

A second shot rang out.

The giant alien surged through the pier, splitting the wooden docks into hundreds of pieces with its thrusting legs and overwhelming weight. Ernie ducked down over the rail as the ogre launched itself into the water, sending a towering wave out to us.

The ship teetered to the left and then nose-dived forward, exposing the powerful engines as they lifted out of the lake.

The monster's torso twisted from side to side as it muscled through the shallow bay.

My dad returned from below with a signal gun. He hustled to the back, steadying himself on the cushy chairs. He nervously fiddled with it for a few seconds and then launched a red flare out at the creature. Seconds later a small fiery explosion illuminated off the monster's chest.

Ernie stood up on the other side of the landing and took another shot, striking the thing's jaw and part of the neck.

The creature continued forward, surrounded now by half a dozen drones.

From the west, a second ogre splashed out into the water, strong and large like the other. Its body waded through the waves, slapping aside a docked sailboat and a small catamaran. Two more drones followed close behind.

The front of our yacht tilted upward as it sliced through its own wake. The momentum sent suitcases and leftover bags over the side.

Ernie grabbed hold of the railing, using all his strength to keep himself upright. His face grimaced like he was in pain.

I wrapped my arms around the siding, digging the tread of my boot into the floor.

The dark, menacing beasts picked up speed, surging through the shallow waters. Their fearless grunts beckoned anger and urgency.

The waterboy slipped on the wet flooring next to the stairs and in a flash stumbled overboard. His body was immediately ripped up by the massive claw-like hands of the first monster and torn to shreds.

In the opposite corner, my dad continued to fumble with the signal flare. It seemed useless to fire the thing at them.

“Dad!” I shouted. “Dad!”

He turned to me, slipping to his knees. Another wave crashed over the top, blinding us for several seconds.

I pointed to the doors and called out to him again. “Dad! We gotta get below! We gotta get below now!”

My old man nodded as the flare gun dropped out of his hands and disappeared over the side.

Above us, more drones circled the boat, watching our every move, like we were simply their entertainment.

Was this part of the observations? Were the intellects learning from this?

“Dad! Watch out!”

The first ogre's hand slammed down into the water, causing the boat to shift wildly upward again. The second ogre crossed over the wake and flanked the other side, trapping the yacht within the rocky walls of the bay. Near the front of the side deck, a woman crashed through the window like a rag-doll and tumbled into the lake, disappearing under the engines.

The boat veered from side to side, avoiding the thrashing hands from both creatures, now attacking from either end of the harbor.

My dad's grip on the railing weakened, and his legs gave out, slipping over the ledge of the landing. His shoes ripped off his feet. He looked at me as though he knew he was about to die.

“Dad!” I shouted, navigating my way over to him. I slid on my stomach along the floor and reached out for his hand. I squeezed his wrists, wedging my ankles and legs between the metal bars. “I got chu; I got chu!”

With all my strength I pulled on my dad’s arms, feeling my fingers dig into him. He yanked his left hand aside and wrapped his fingers around one of the bars. His face contorted, his eyes squeezed shut.

Every emotion I held for my father rushed back to me—anger, hate, envy, admiration, worry—pain.

I had his life in my hands.

Literally.

It wasn’t long ago I was standing on the edge of Morris Point, wishing my father would die—imagining one of these creatures ripping him away and tossing him over the cliff.

My own father.

Who the hell was I to think that?

What was happening to me?

“Winston! Hold on!” The town’s supposed leader shoved his gun into his holster and reached over the railing—gripping my dad’s armpits. “Pull Winston, pull now!”

I unhooked my legs from the bars and quickly re-adjusted my stance behind the rail. The waves smashed over my face, stinging my skin.

The beasts surged forward again, swinging out their bulging arms—just feet away from us now.

With their momentum and powerful thrusts, it was just a matter of seconds before they were going to slash through the back of our boat.

I had to think fast.

I had to save us—I had to save my dad.

I pushed from my heels on the support of the railing and reached into 'what-his-face's' holster. I pulled out the Magnum, unlocked it, and fired straight ahead at the first ogre.

Bang.

A small explosion of skin and blood sprayed out between its eyes, and in seconds it dropped below the surface of the water.

Dead.

I took aim at the second one. “Hey!” I shouted up to the bridge. “Slow down. Let me get the shot.”

The noise from the engines was too loud. I stepped back, waving my left hand up and down, signaling for him to ease off on the throttle.

As the boat lowered and the engine eased, I focused on the second beast—targeting that key spot between the eyes.

Bang.

Bang.

Two shots this time.

The monster's head flopped forward instantly, pulling the rest of its enormous mass under the crashing waves.

I helped my dad up and guided him to the doors before he collapsed onto the cushioned seats like a withering old man.

The driver navigated through the rock walls and out of the small bay.

What was his name again?

Eight drones continued to follow us overhead, diving down, recording our every move.

“Is that what you wanted to see?” I shouted, spitting on one as it came in for a close-up. “Did you learn anything?”

I pointed the gun at the camera and shot the drone, stepping back as metal bits splashed down on the deck.

“Did I pass?” I shouted. “Did I pass the test?”

I wasn’t quite sure what I was saying. I guess I was angry. I didn’t understand why Rennick was putting me through this. If he wanted me to conform so badly, why was he trying to kill me?

I reached for the scar on my head, feeling a flood of little tingles numb my brain.

Visions of Cara slipped into my thoughts, like a drug, sending an instant calm through my veins.

Her scarless face.

Her soft skin.

I wanted to keep the picture in my mind, the feeling of her near me.

I closed my eyes and reached out to her.

Cara.

Cara.

But as quickly as she appeared, she was gone.

The engines slowed even more—to a gentle purr now, as the boat cruised out a few miles from the shore.

The driver stepped down from the bridge, adjusting the stupid tie in his pony-tail.

An awkward, twisted smile grew on his face.

He approached me and shook my hand. "That was impressive, dude. Real impressive."

I didn't say anything, nor did I give the guy much eye contact. He didn't deserve the respect—not after the way he attacked me back on the bus.

The guy let go and looked out at the drones—now sticking their cameras up close to the tinted windows like pesky house flies.

"What the hell do they want with us, huh?" he shouted, leaning over the rail. He picked up a bucket that had been bouncing around the landing and tossed it at one of the machines. He glanced back at me as though I was the problem.

But I wasn't.

I wasn't the problem at all.

It was people like him, like the idiot police officer who disgraced our town and —and my dad.

My gutless, selfish dad.

"Give me the gun, I wanna shoot one of those bastards," the kid said. His name was escaping me.

What on earth was his name?

"No," I replied.

"Whaddya mean, no?" he grunted. "Are you worried I'm gonna shoot you? Well, I ain't gonna. You did good man. You did real good."

I stepped away from him and flicked the lock back and forth on the revolver with my thumb.

Six chambers in the barrel, two bullets left.

More distant explosions from the town echoed out over the lake.

This was it, wasn't it?

It really was the end of the world—the end of this pathetic planet.

"Can I have my gun back Sheldon?" the policeman asked.

I turned my back to him and shook my head.

A blonde girl stepped out from below and hurried over to the policeman. Her eyes welled with tears. She was beautiful—filled with energy and emotion—she reminded me of Cara.

"We did it Dad, we're gonna be okay, aren't we?"

The policeman wrapped his arms around her, closing his eyes. His breath was short. "I don't know sweetheart. This is not the time to let our guard down."

The girl dried her eyes with the tip of her striped t-shirt—tied snugly at the back to fit her slim figure. I didn't know why, but I could tell she was strong and healthy—level headed, clear of tainted idealisms.

I immediately liked her.

The girl shyly looked to me—folding her hands together over her front.

Another explosion rocked the horizon—this time on the other side of the lake.

"Thank you, Sheldon," she said. "Thank you for everything."

I half smiled, not certain what she was talking about. Perhaps she watched me shoot down the ogres—or the foot soldiers as Rennick liked to call them.

Had I pleased him?

Rennick.

Was my aggression—my stubborn will to survive—good enough?

More passengers emerged from below as we cruised steadily southeast toward some island. The strangers patted me on the back, acknowledging my supposed heroic actions.

I struggled to accept their gestures, I mean it wasn't for them—I didn't just kill those monsters to help a bunch of low-lives—a bunch of mediocre peasants who had wanted to see me dead less than an hour ago—despite what they thought, I was proving myself worthy—even though I was pretty sure I had already.

I checked on my ailing dad and then climbed to the bridge. I had to get out of there, away from the crowd of commoners.

The flat mirror-like-waters out ahead blended their purples and reds up into the sky, reminding me that this planet *was* beautiful and that it was the inhabitants who had tainted it.

I breathed in the clearer air, pretending to feel the warmth of Cara's body close by. Her quiet whispers tickled my ears. Her soft lips touched my skin.

Cara.

Flashes of orange and yellow exploded over the distant hills, followed by thunderous booms.

A single drone followed us about a half-mile back.

Cara.

I touched my head again, noticing for the first time my scar was gone.

“Sheldon, I'm coming up.” The tall, lanky kid climbed to the top and took hold of the steering wheel. He checked the compass and the digital screen and then sat back on the chair. He wore a clean shirt now—a cigarette clung to the end of his lip. “Want one?”

I made a funny face and shook my head, waving away the smoke from my face.

I looked back at the drone again.

“Your dad is doing better,” the kid said. “He might have broken a rib, but he'll be just fine.”

I nodded, soaking in the incredible smells that ascended from the darkening waters.

The conversations from the deck below, sifted into my brain, translating clear messages like I was able to hear every piece of dialogue from the strangers.

“Are you okay Sheldon?” The kid asked.

A fuse burst inside me. “Why does everyone keep asking me that?”

The kid took a drag from his smoke and blew a toxic cloud in my direction. “Cuz you space out all the time, dude. It's like you leave us for awhile—like your somewhere else.”

“Well, I’m right here,” I replied. “Stuck on this environmental hazard with imbeciles like you.”

The lanky kid spat on the floor and stood up. He puffed out his chest and flicked his cigarette at me. “Fuck you, Sheldon.”

A dark cloud lowered over my brain, fuelling me with hatred and strength. I marched over to him and wrapped my hand around his prickly neck. I looked into the eyes of the panic-stricken kid as I crushed his throat. My fingers dug into his skin—deeper, deeper—until his muscles let go and his body fell limp. “Please refrain from using that language,” I said to him as he crumbled to the deck.

I eyed the drone, about a quarter of a mile back now.

I took hold of the wheel and continued navigating the boat southeast. The sun lowered behind the trees now, immediately cooling the air.

Straight overhead, a series of faint flashing lights appeared, like twinkling stars, moving steadily across the sky.

Chapter Fifty-Five:

Man

“Sheldon?” A female voice called out to me. “Are you up there?”

The blonde girl with the pretty face skipped up to the bridge with a couple granola bars in her hand. I knew who she was now—the daughter of the policeman—the girl who let Cara, me and the little kid join her group on the school bus. She was friends with the dead boy—the one who lay motionless on the floor in front of me.

“On my god, Sheldon, what happened?” She dropped to her knees in front of the lanky teenager and placed her head on his chest. “He’s dead. Sab is dead.”

Sab.

That was his name.

“I killed him,” I replied. “He was strong, but his mind was unsteady.”

“What?” The girl jumped to her feet. “What’s going on? Has that thing merged? Has it gotten to you?”

I backed away from her, leaning up against the steering column. “I’m not sure what you’re talking about.”

The girl covered her face with her hands and trembled. “Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god.”

I leaned into her, recalling a closeness we shared over the past week. “There is no god,” I said. “We are but an evolution of good and evil.”

“What are you talking about?” she skirted back, eyeing the gun in my hand.

“I’m just sharing the truth,” I replied. “That’s all. I can see it now.”

“See what?” she asked.

“The truth.”

The girl shook her head and stepped back over the dead boy. She looked down at the landing where the strangers continued to share their useless dialogues.

The snotty-nosed boy appeared on the stairs, his eyes were red and puffy.

“What’s his name?” the girl asked me, pulling the little kid up to the bridge. “What’s this boy’s name?”

I looked at the two of them, watching me with calamity and confusion. I could only imagine how their hearts were deflating—‘breaking’ as the humans liked to call it.

“What’s his name?” the girl asked again.

I knew what she was doing. My thoughts were becoming skewed—fragmented.

Perhaps I *was* merging.

“His name is Bailey,” I replied finally. I had heard her talking on the lower deck, trying to convince the little boy that the island we were heading for was a safe place—a place without trees.

The boy’s eyes welled up again as a smile grew on his face. Happy tears. He skipped over the dead guy and hugged me around the waist. I patted his head, remembering how much I wanted my own father to do that with me. “It’s gonna be okay, kid, I promise.”

The boy sniffed and wiped his nose with his hand. “You’re not gonna hurt me, right?”

I messed up his hair and smiled. “No, Bailey. I promise. You’re strong, and you’re healthy. Nothing will happen to you.”

The girl nervously pulled Bailey away from me—like a mother would with her own child.

She was a good person. I could only wish she would someday see the light.

“Dad!” The girl turned back toward the lower deck and gestured with her arms. “Dad, come up here.”

The policeman, her ‘dad,’ had been talking with my own father—discussing how they were going to take possession of the .357 magnum I held so firmly in my right hand. I heard the entire plan, word-for-word as I was in the process of killing the lanky kid named Sab.

The policeman cautiously stepped onto the bridge, holding a sharp object up the sleeve of his new shirt—not once taking his eyes off me. My dad followed close behind with the skanky neighbor he was sleeping with.

“Take the boy down below,” the policeman said. “Get everyone off the landing and get them down below.”

The blonde girl glanced back at me, with a hint of love in her eyes. Did she have feelings for me all this time?

“Go Orillia, hurry,” the policeman ordered with a husky strength to his voice.

“Okay, Daddy,” she replied.

The girl disappeared down the stairs, leaving me with three nervous adults.

Still two bullets left in the chamber.

The policeman held his hands out by his side, like he was ready to pounce. His fingers on his left hand wiggled, his throat lifted and lowered as he swallowed over and over again.

Ernie.

I remembered now.

Then there was my father, standing next to Ernie. What ever happened to that ridiculous tilley hat he used to always wear on the farm?

My once influential parental unit inched his hand closer to the skanky neighbor. Like Ernie, his eyes remained focused on me.

This man murdered a bull just to cover up an affair. What kind of man was he?

I turned my attention on the woman.

Mrs. Bryer.

Yes.

She was nothing to me—weak, unhealthy and corrupt—but to dispose of her without the gun, would be difficult in my current situation. I had no choice.

I pointed the .357 magnum at her head and fired.

Bang.

Her face exploded—spraying drops of blood all over the white interior of the steering column and leather cushions. Her body fell back, sliding over the side of the bridge and finally crashing into the water below.

One bullet left in the chamber.

Faint screams bellowed up from a couple floors down.

My father dropped to his knees, crying out for his mistress—like the pathetic child he was—a child inside a rotting man.

Biologically this male multi-cellular organism was my father, but he didn't represent me, not anymore.

“Stand up,” I said to him, cleaning off spots of blood from my arm. “I need for you to look at me in the eyes when I tell you this important piece of information.”

“You robbed me!” my father shouted. “You fucken robbed me!”

Hearing my father curse for the first time was like music to my ears—a symphony of harmonious sounds and melodies. Yes, it was forbidden for intellects to accept profanity, to positively acknowledge the polluted minds, but in this case—in this particular case, it was magical to me.

“Look at me Father,” I said.

The ailing man gathered himself and rose to his feet. He glanced over the side of the boat at the corpse drifting away in the water.

I leaned into him and slapped his face. “Do you want to know why I killed that woman? I killed her because I wanted you to know what it feels like to hurt. Are you listening to me?” I grabbed his face and turned his head toward me.

Ernie jumped forward before stopping at the sight of my gun pointed up at his head.

I eyed him for a second until he eased back to the rail.

“Why are you doing this Son?” My father moaned. “You're sick, aren't you? Let me help you.”

I slapped his face again. “I don't need your help *Daaaad!* What I need is for you to listen.”

His eyelashes fluttered—he looked back again at the body in the water. “Listen, to what Sheldon?”

I sucked in the air, opening my lungs. I lowered the gun away from Ernie and propped myself up on the control panel. “You hurt me,” I began, organizing all the moments in my life growing up where my father talked down to me, where he yelled at me or treated me like I was not important enough.

“How did I hurt you?” my father asked.

“Shut-up,” I said. “Just shut-up.”

“No, how did I hurt you? Was it because of your mother? It was because of your mother, wasn't it? She left me, Sheldon, she was the one who abandoned our family, long before Colleen—I mean Mrs. Bryer started coming around.”

“Shut-up,” I said again.

“No, I'm not going to shut-up. How dare you speak to me like that. I'm your father.”

“My father? Seriously?” I couldn't take it anymore, I couldn't take his voice, his tone, his heart-wrenching choice of words. “How dare I speak to you like that?” I bellowed. “Are you kidding me?” My voice grew louder. I pointed the gun at him, keeping an eye on Ernie re-gripping some sort of knife in his left hand. “You don't know how to be a father.”

The color in my dad's face faded into a pasty white. He pulled the hat off his head and wiped his brow.

I looked back at the drone—about three hundred yards away.

My dad leaned forward, resting his hand on the rail.

“You didn't once tell me I did a good job,” I said to him. “You know that?”

He wheezed and then shook his head. “What are you talking about?”

I opened the barrel on the revolver and checked the lone bullet in the chamber. “My point exactly. You don't even know. You don't even know how much I needed you to just—just acknowledge me—thank me for helping you on the farm, damn, you could have just told me I made a good hit, or a good catch when you watched my games—something—anything. Just once, just once would have been nice. Because I would have at least known you were proud.”

“I *was* proud of you Sheldon,” he replied.

“I'm pointing a gun at you, you have to say that.”

“No, I don't have to say that. I'm saying it because it's the truth. But you know this already Sheldon. For goodness sake, we've had this conversation before.” He spat out some blood and pulled himself upright again. “I was hard on you because I wanted to toughen you up—make you understand that life isn't just handed to you on a silver platter, you understand? I didn't want to coddle you. I wanted you to be a man.”

“A man?” I nudged the steering wheel, noticing we were on course for the island now. “Is that what you think makes a ‘man’?”

“I do,” my father replied.

“Is that so?”

“Yes,” he replied. “That *is* so.”

I laughed, feeling a release of anger and nervous pain leave my body. For some reason, his response was what I was waiting for.

"Are you saying that lying and cheating makes you a man?"

My father cleared his throat and rubbed his eyebrows with his thumbs. “No, I was—”

“Are you saying that ignoring your son makes you a man?” I asked, tapping the end of the gun on my forehead.

“What?” My father waved his finger and shook his head, “No, that’s—”

“A man is someone who puts his family first,” I said.

“Someone who shows his family he loves them.” I soaked in the air one more time and then checked back on the drone.

One hundred yards away.

It was time.

This planet needed a reset—these humans needed a reset.

“Do my shoelaces look undone to you?” I asked him.

“What?” my father replied.

“Are you losing your eyesight again?”

The soulless human shook his head, spitting more blood onto the deck. “No.”

“You’re weak Father—in every way possible.” I lifted my arm up and pulled the trigger on the revolver, shooting him square in the head.

Bang.

His body toppled over the rail and splashed heavily into the water.

Zero bullets left in the chamber.

Chapter Fifty-Six:

Welcome

Ernie didn't say much to me as I guided the yacht southeast toward the safe haven.

The island with no trees.

I was certain he was aware the gun was empty, but perhaps he realized there was no point trying to fight this.

The sun had slipped away behind the hills by the time we reached the shore. A medley of tents and make-shift shelters spread out along the uneven ground.

Ernie took over the bridge under my watch and guided the yacht into a section of old docks, holding four sailboats and some carefully crafted wooden rafts.

A few hundred yards north, the remains of a fifth sailboat sat tangled amongst the jagged stones and precarious waters.

Further up the shore, along the sandy terrain, hundreds of canoes and kayaks were lined up in organized rows—somehow, word got out pretty quickly about this place, recognizing the apparent minor flaws in 'The Explorers' takeover.

But that's all they were—minor flaws.

From where I stood, there was nothing but calculated success behind this shift in leadership.

As darkness fell, I waited on the bridge with an apple I found from the kitchen down below. I took a juicy bite and watched the passengers gather their belongings and step off the boat, not daring to look at me. As weak and corrupt as they were, these humans greeted each other with open arms, inviting the new immigrants onto the shore and leading them to their pathetic little piece of land.

The drone circled around me now, about twenty or thirty feet up, its red light casting a warm glow onto the water. I had every confidence in navigating the ship back to the harbor, somehow, every memory I had of watching others work any sort of motorized vehicle was now clearly stored inside one of the many new compartments in my brain. From YouTube videos to movies, from my dad at the farm to Sab and Ernie's expertise, I was now as experienced as any qualified licensed driver.

Through the crowd and glowing torches, I spotted the blonde girl named Orillia. She glanced back at me as she wandered along the beach with her father. The little boy, Bailey held her hand, likely heartbroken and confused.

It was only a matter of time before I saw them again—before their strength and intellect returned them to the mainland.

"Sheldon Hickory." A man's voice sounded out from the night sky, echoing over the daunting waters. A beam of light cast out over the lake, displaying a blurred image of Rennick—the father of this target zone. It was exciting to think there were eighty-two thousand other leaders around the world, just like him—and even more exciting to know I could be one of them someday. "Are you ready Son?" he asked.

I waved up to the drone and nodded. “Yes, I am ready.”

“I’m proud of you,” he said, his face distorted in the waves.

The passengers didn’t look back as I reversed the yacht out of the docks. All we had in common at that point was we were both looking forward to our new lives—and what lay ahead.

For me, it was quite simple.

Acceptance, Respect, and Cara.

Visions of her face appeared again in my thoughts—her voice as well. She spoke to me.

“I love you,” she said. I could hear her like she was whispering in my ear. “I’m waiting for you.”

Shivers ran up and down my back and neck.

I had trembled in fear, many times.

But for once, I was trembling with excitement.

With joy.

I could not wait to be part of this brave new world—a world of strength, health, and integrity.

I laughed to myself again, thinking back to the time I first saw these intellects. I remembered thinking how they looked like rats—tiny rodent-like creatures—the bottom of the food chain. But as I bit into my apple, absorbing a wealth of flavors I had never experienced before, I realized it was Winston Hickory who was at the bottom—it was Winston Hickory all this time who looked like the rat.

As I pushed forward along the lake through the darkness—leaving my past behind, a cool, soothing breeze brushed over my face.

Beyond the clouds, the flashing white lights continued to move steadily across the night sky.

“Welcome to phase three.” Rennick’s drone followed close behind, humming quietly into the night. “And more importantly, welcome home.”

The End

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY



Christopher Francis was born in Brisbane, Australia, on June 21, 1974. At 19, he was accepted into the Animation program at Sheridan College, and then graduated with a degree in Sociology from McMaster University. Following a two year adventure overseas working with children, Christopher completed a Bachelor of Education at York University. He is now teaching junior level students in Burlington, Ontario.

Through Christopher's experience working with children, he found writing and illustrating to be one of his passions. Currently working on a middle grade series, Christopher has recently completed the first four books entitled: *Solving Damian Dermite*, *Respecting Mr. Ravi*, *Remembering Kaylee Cooper* and *Alex was Here*. Recently, *Remembering Kaylee*

Cooper, has been published by Curiosity Quills Press Publishing House. In addition, Christopher has completed a Paranormal Teen Fiction novel, titled, *Stoneway*, and recently finished the Teen Fiction Sci-Fi, titled, *They Came from the Trees*, based on a short story he wrote called, *That Thing in the Sky*. He has also created eight primary levelled books called *How to sneak your Monster into School*, *Mr. Pancake Turkey*, *I Don't Want to go to Sleep! It's Up to You*, *How Mr. Monster Biggens Changed My Life*, *There's and Ogre-Beast in the Playground*, *Bigger than Alexander and The Whispering Tree*. Additionally, Christopher has illustrated children's novels for several independent authors and publishing companies including *Kids4kids.com*, *The Hamilton Spectator*, *BrendanKelly Publishing*, *Highbview Press.com* and *Trimatrix*. Most recently, They all can be viewed on francisart.com.

