

World Sick: Surface Tension

Jotham Yelle

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"Humanity has overcome the food chain, and having surpassed all other predators, has now turned to a strange form of cannibalism: humanity preys upon itself."

- A.E. Samaan

Chapter 1

“Mom? Dad?”

I open my eyes and wipe sludge away from my visor. Dirt and running water blur my vision. My head is throbbing and my ears are ringing. The faint sound of rain is the only thing confirming I can still hear. As the ringing slowly fades I try to pick myself up. I've apparently been lying face down in some kind of sloppy mess for who knows how long. My arms feel heavy and I struggle to push against the earth to lift my own weight.

Is that a gun in my hand?

I pull my leg up from underneath me to prop myself up. I feel much heavier than I'm used to. My hands clench into fists and the pistol grip in my right hand squeaks against my gloves.

What am I wearing?

My gloves feel like leather, or some other kind of tight material. I'm warm, despite the fact that it looks like it snowed recently, and it's pouring rain. I don't recognize my surroundings.

“Hello?” I shout.

My voice sounds muffled. I don't think it carried very far coming out from behind this visor. I lift my

hands to my head and feel a helmet around my head. It feels sturdy. So does the rest of this protective gear I seem to be wearing. I can't understand why I'm wearing it. Or where I am for that matter. Or how I got here, or why I have this gun, or anything really. I don't remember any of this. I feel strange and I can't really tell what's happening around me. When I first opened my eyes, everything seemed white. Everything still kind of does. It's almost as though I can only see what I'm looking directly at and my peripheral vision is just non-existent; a blurry assumption of what's within sight.

Is that another gun? Why do I have guns? I really hope I'm not in trouble. I suddenly have a sinking feeling in my stomach. I want to throw up. I think I'm going to.

My legs are on auto-pilot and I begin to stumble toward what looks like a brick wall. I press my left hand against the wall and shift my weight to one leg. The wall doesn't like that and lets me know by quickly collapsing to the ground. The collapse causes me to trip over the loose bricks and I throw my arms up to brace myself. I'm down in the sludge again.

Getting myself up off the ground is a little easier this time, but when I look back to the wall I'm confused. I didn't fall that far, but the crumbled wall is over ten meters away.

How did that happen? This is weird. Everything's fuzzy again.

Blinking quickly to remove the blur, I scan my surroundings. There are buildings close by. Houses.

Maybe there are people in them. Checking them out is probably a good idea. Perhaps someone can help me figure this all out.

As I approach the first house I notice the windows are all boarded up. The door is hanging off its hinges and there are holes scattered across the stucco. They look like bullet holes.

Do I smell fire?

There is a column of smoke rushing up out of another house behind me.

“HELP!! HELP ME!!”

Someone is in the house and screaming for help. I have to do something. There is a wooden gate blocking my path to the front door and its latch shatters to bits as I kick it open. I begin to run to the door. My feet aren't moving as fast as I'm telling them to, and it's almost as though I'm moving backward.

“HELP M-”

The force of the house exploding knocks me back at an incredible speed, my body tumbling and smashing through the wooden fence in the front yard. I am shook up, but it seems like my protective gear took care of most of the blow. I pick myself up. Again.

The house is no longer there. Not because it exploded, but because it's just not there anymore. Neither is the wooden fence or the yard. I take a look around again and see that there are many houses in a row on both sides of the street I am standing on. Some of them are completely destroyed, while a few

are just partially falling apart.

Empty bullet shells crunch and sink into the sludge beneath my boots, but I haven't fired any shots.

Whose shells are these? It might be a good idea to investigate. I slip my pistol into the holster on my hip and swing the sub-machine gun from around my shoulder to the front of my chest. I take careful steps and keep my head low.

Why are my footsteps so loud right now?

Something small whistles ridiculously fast past my head. Another one whistles by. They sound like bullets. There is a loud snap on the road in front of me and dirt bursts into the air. I listen as the dirt taps against my armour and realize I'm being shot at. The closest thing to hide behind is a completely busted car, so I jump behind it and peek out over the hood. No shooter in sight just yet.

Oh! There he is.

I hear the sickening sound of metal being hit and torn. The bullet bounces off the hood and barely misses my head as I fall back behind the car. That was too close, but at least I know where this guy is shooting from. I crawl to the back of the car and get myself ready to attack. My hands are sweating inside my gloves. I tightly squeeze the gun's grip and clench my jaw.

Now or never.

As I quickly stand and twist myself in the direction of the shooter, I can see him raising his gun to me. He's already in my cross hairs. I pull the trigger. He is hit directly in the chest as sparks fly from him in

every direction. He is projected backward by the electric arc and I check my gun. This thing definitely isn't shooting lead. I like it.

Footsteps. Lots of them, and they're getting louder. I need to go right now. I throw my gun back around me and begin to run. Looking over my shoulder, I can see four people chasing me. They look just like the guy that was shooting at me. They also don't look very friendly.

Did I do something to upset these people?

All at once, their weapons begin to fire. Bullets whiz past me and I continue to run for my life. Hoping to throw them off, I zig-zag through rubble-littered yards and around crumbling homes. Bullets burst into the walls and windows beside me as I weave through this horrible neighbourhood. I pick up the pace. I think I'm losing them.

My leg is aggressively thrown forward from underneath me. I lose my balance and fall, rolling over a collapsed wall and across the ground. They must have hit me. I look at the back of my leg and there it is. Even through my gloves, I can feel that the bullet is still hot as I peel its flattened face from my armor. These guys are relentless. I need to stop them.

Lying on my back, I raise my sub-machine gun in their direction and lift my head to look over the collapsed wall. Here they come. My finger squeezes the trigger as they appear over the remains of the wall. Electric blasts fly from the barrel of my gun toward them and electricity arcs between the four of

them. Every one of my blasts makes contact with them, but some of their bullets were just as accurate. I've been hit at least three times and it's awful! I feel like someone just punched me with an iron fist over and over again. I can hardly breathe, but I'm grateful I'm not dead. I love this suit. I look over to my pursuers and see them sprawled out on the lawn, their bodies still twitching from the electricity.

Once I feel like I can breathe again, I'm up on my feet and scanning for more shooters. A string of bullets crashes into the wall behind me and I duck for cover. This is too much; I need to get out of here or they're going to kill me.

I spot a car with more crazed shooters coming out of it. There! That's how I'm getting out of here.

Gun barrel ablaze, I run straight for the car. The shooters are caught off guard and try jumping out of the way of my bullets, but I hit two of three right away. The third one manages to get to cover and he begins shooting at me. I keep firing in his direction while sprinting toward the car. One of his bullets hits me straight in the stomach and I am flung back while falling face-first to the ground. That was extremely painful.

I don't know how much more of this I can take. My skin feels wet with blood underneath this armour.

I recover quickly and scramble to my feet, running like a mad man. He's still shooting at me. The car is almost in reach. My gunfire finally succeeds and I see the bright light from the electricity as it hits the shooter. I jump into the car and push the button to

start it. I'm getting out of here as fast as I can.

There is no clear path, just rubble and broken homes. I drive over fences and dried-up shrubs.

The glass windshield explodes and bullets fly into the car. I slam my foot down on the accelerator and the roar of the engine drowns out the sound of lead ripping through the leather upholstery and plastic interior.

Where are all these people coming from? A bullet smashes the side view mirror. They're everywhere.

These men are shooting at me from every angle and I'm pretty positive I'm going to die. The rear windshield explodes and glass scatters all over the back seats.

Wait, I might live!

I see a road up ahead and decide it's my only way out of here. The side of my visor is grazed by a bullet and it pushes my head violently to the side. Hand over hand, I turn the wheel as sharply as I can and skid past four or five angry men. The car's tires bounce and chirp along the pavement as I finally make it to the road. With the accelerator down all the way, I speed away from the worst neighbourhood I've ever visited.

I continue to pick up speed. This is good. It's nice to have a break from all that chaos. What is going on? I still don't remember a thing and nothing's coming back to me. Maybe this road will take me somewhere people don't want to kill me. That would be nice. Maybe I could ask some questions and find out what is happening.

What is that?

Something big is in the air and flying toward me. It's a car. Is someone throwing a car at me? I don't have enough time to react. It smashes into the front of the car I'm driving and completely stops me in my tracks. My body is thrown from the car. My back hits the roof on the way out. My legs bang against the thrown car. Limbs sprawled, I'm spinning in the air. My arm slams against the pavement, followed by my hips and legs, which causes me to bounce once before sliding along the slippery road for what seems like forever. I come to an abrupt stop underneath a huge foot and cough blood against the inside of my visor.

“What are you?” I sputter through grinding teeth.

A huge man has trapped me underneath his giant foot. He has to be at least 14 feet tall.

“Come with me,” he commands in an uncomfortably deep voice.

With what seems to be my only working limb, I unholster my pistol and aim it at the giant's head. The reach makes me cry out in pain and I almost drop my gun, but quickly fix my grip on the gun and pull the trigger. The giant seems to dissolve before the bullet can hit him and is completely gone from my sight.

I look back toward the car. Nope. The side of the road? Nope. Maybe he's just – the gun is smacked out of my hand and I'm suddenly lifted up off the ground and draped over the giant's shoulder. Where did he come from?

“Hey! Put me down!” I demand.

We are headed toward the car. He walks so fast,

like some – What just happened?

“How did you do that?” I yell at the giant.

He does it again. How does he do that? It's like we're flying through two different places at the same time. Is he teleporting? I look around to find out. We're definitely teleporting. This is crazy. I don't believe this is happening.

The road is nowhere in sight. There are burnt trees surrounding us now and I think they're –

Now there's water. He teleported again. Being draped over the giant's shoulder, I can only see the ground and damp earth, but I can hear what sounds like rushing water. We must be close to a river or another kind of –

Suddenly it's dark. Like, really dark. I can't see anything. I'm not a big fan of all this teleportation.

“Hey, what's going on?” I manage to grumble. A greenish tint gradually begins to fill my vision. I can start to make out different shapes and figures in the dark. This has to be my suit. My visor must be light-sensitive and is automatically adjusting to a night-vision setting.

I see faces. Lots of faces.

The giant picks me off his shoulder and I'm thrown to the ground. It's not wet, there's no sludge. I must be inside now. A light begins to grow around me and the green tint from my visor begins to fade as this growing light illuminates the room. I look around and see that the faces belong to more giants. There are twelve of them, each one at least 14 feet tall; nowhere near as tall as the seemingly endless distance

between us and the ceiling. Their hands and feet are bare and they are clothed in what looks like really bright, but blurry, jumpsuits. They are all looking at me.

I prop myself up on my elbows and then turn over to stand up. The scuffing sounds from my boots echo in this huge room as I stand. I look around again at all the giants and see them staring back at me.

I need to get out of here. I look for the best way to escape. Maybe I can leave this place without anyone noticing.

“I don't think so,” says the giant that brought me here. “You're the reason we're here right now. We don't usually gather in such large numbers so close to the surface, but this is an important time.”

That was weird. It's like he can read my mind.

“We can,” says another giant, “and we'd like to answer your questions, but please listen first to what we have to say. By the end, you will find the majority of your questions have been answered.”

I nod my head as I realize the giant wasn't even moving his mouth to speak. So, they can read minds and speak to me in mine.

A voice speaks from behind me and I turn to look.

“We are Anakim. Children of great heritage, belonging to a wonderful community and people. There were many like us for thousands of years before our time. In the past, the Anakim were known for their strength and power in war, but we have changed. On the earth's surface, we slew many men with our swords and spears. We crushed both the

feeble and the strong beneath our feet. Fear spread in our wake and wonder lay ahead on our path. But it is here,” the giant says, pointing around the massive room, “inside the earth, that our hearts have changed, our minds enlightened, our abilities strengthened, and our purpose defined.”

“Wait, what do you mean inside the earth?” I interrupt, “You mean to tell me we're underground right now? What, like in a cave or something?”

One of the giants stretches out his hand to me, points his other outward and says, “See.”

The room is no longer a hollow shell, but a beautiful, grassy meadow. The sun, which seems to be hanging in the air as if almost within reach, shines brighter than I am able to comprehend. There are people walking and laughing in the distance. The grass sways gently as the wind calmly breezes by. A strange plane skims through the blue sky above me.

Oh, what? That's definitely a plane of some sort, but that's not the sky. I think that's –

“Water,” says the giant. “An ocean, to be precise.”

I'm confused. “But how is it in the air above us?” There is also land and forests across the sky.

The giant smiles and replies, “See the beauty of this world. We have known it for thousands of years. We share a peaceful life here with many others. We hold knowledge and understanding above all else. It is different than the world you know, but only in its people and technology. Things we consider to be simple technology are still considered magic among

your people.”

“Where are we right now? You said we were underground or something,” I ask with a slight tremble in my voice.

“We stand inside the heart of the earth,” another giant says confidently. “This place is beneath the world you are familiar with, the surface world. This is Inner Earth. We do not war with one another. We do not kill each other. We do not poison our skies and pollute our waters. We care for our home and it cares for each of us. We have one King and one Queen, who do not dictate for us, but lead us in progression and learning. Our way of life is pure and simple. We are connected to the Light that guides all things living. Your people are not.

“Among your people is a greedy and violent society. A man does not extend a hand, unless to smite or to receive increase in return. You treat your home as an ungrateful child treats a loving parent. You expect to receive water to drink, food to eat, and air to breathe yet your selfish living requires a savage disrespect to each source. Your carelessness and recklessness have caused our gathering here today.”

The giant that brought me here speaks again. “We have kept a watchful eye on your people for many years and have seen the untimely destruction you bring upon yourselves. We have known about it for some time and have tried to reach out in order to help you from completely destroying yourselves. You must listen carefully to the words of the Anakim. Like our people, we believe that your days of war and

chaos can come to a fruitful end and enter a new age of prosperity in learning and wisdom. We believe that your people, as a whole, are generally good people and worth saving, which you will hopefully aid us in achieving. It is your leaders, however, that cause in us a desire to raise awareness in you to make a change. All things must come to an end but we have instructions for you specifically, to help prevent your world leaders from speeding up that process.”

I shake my head, “I don't know anything about politics, I'm sorry. I really think you have the wrong guy for whatever it is you're trying to accomplish. I don't really know what you're talking about.”

This is too weird to understand. What are these giants trying to tell me? Do they really think I'm going to believe that I'm inside the Earth right now? And that I have to change the world's leaders?

“Yes,” another giant says. “We expect you to believe what we are telling you, because your world really doesn't have a happy ending otherwise.”

The first giant continues to speak. “You must understand the condition of your surface home and the state of those in power.”

He takes a few steps towards me. “Right now is the time to make a difference. You are a grown man now, but you will be young. You have seen the state of the surface world: chaos, destruction, darkness, pollution, violence. You have seen the destruction of your precious surface world. You must not let this happen.”

“Hold on,” I say, scratching the back of my head.

“Are you saying the end has happened already, or that it's going to happen? You're jumping all over the place. Could you please rephrase any of that?”

“Hear my words to you,” the giant answers.

“There is a plan. It involves many of your world's political leaders. They have plotted to eradicate all people on the surface world except for the elite, in hopes of repopulating the earth with a higher class of human. A form of eugenics. They will save only the most financially, politically, and scientifically successful people on the planet; people they deem as having traits worthy of mass continuation. They will use whatever force necessary to ensure everything goes according to plan. You must stop them. There will be others ready and willing to aid you on your journey. Seek them out and gather them together. Protect them and lead them. Change this world you live in, together with those who will fight along side you.

“Your people need time if they hope to achieve a state of progression. Give them that time. Stop the world's leaders from fulfilling their dark plan. Believe these words and change your world's future.”

The giants begin to turn around and walk away from where we were gathered. The one who brought me here stays and looks at me while the others leave.

“That's a lot to take in,” I say to him. Turning to look at this Inner Earth, I am overcome by the serenity of it all.

The rest of the giants are gone. Birds fly up from a tree into the air. I've never seen birds like these

before. They fly toward a small collection of trees and I see a herd of large, horned animals run out from behind the tree trunks. Their movement is graceful, beautiful even. I wonder where they're going.

The remaining giant says, "We all have purpose. All of us." His robe sways behind him as he turns and walks away.

The ground abruptly shifts and I almost fall over. More birds fly up from trees and the sound of stampeding animals vibrates through the ground. Another shift and now the earth begins to shake. Everything is shaking. I am on my hands and knees, struggling to crawl somewhere, anywhere.

The sound of a roaring explosion fills the air around me. There's another explosion in the distance. This time I can see it and the giant cloud of smoke it expels. The ground continues to shake while closer to me, another two explosions go off. Dirt and grass are thrown into the air and a few seconds later I am knocked over by the force of the explosion. I roll myself back over onto my hands and knees and try to stand. A fifth explosion erupts directly in front of me and I am rocketed back and into the air as my visor shatters. I see the fire's light from the explosion reflecting on the little bits of glass as they move away from my face, quickly at first, then slower and slower until they no longer moving. They are standing still, suspended in the air. I think time has stopped. There is no sound. I can't feel my body.

The air begins to move, which is weird, but it's happening. I can see particles shifting and lifting

upward. The glass bits begin to dissolve as the colours reflecting in them remain. My arms and legs are slowly lifted upward in the air. Everything seems to be bending and evaporating. The colours all around me begin to shoot upward and start fading away all together. Everything is disappearing. The edges of my vision blur as all I can see turns to white. Everything is gone.

Chapter 2

It sounds like someone is knocking on a door.

The ceiling is a pale blue. I blink a few times and squint my eyes. It really isn't an appealing colour. My vision is back. The white is all gone and I can see again. I see my ceiling. My lamp. I can see my computer, my mirror, my window, and my dresser. This is my room. I must have dreamt that whole thing. That was so weird.

There's the knocking sound again. My parents will probably get it.

I roll over in my bed and look at the clock on the wall. Eight thirty-six. Oh, maybe my parents won't get the door since they should be at work already. Wait a minute, I should be at school right now!

“Mom? Dad?” I shout from my room. No answer. That's not good, I'm so late.

The blankets fall to the floor as I jump out of bed. I still hear knocking as I quickly change into my school clothes. The knocking is getting pretty aggressive and now I hear someone shouting as I run down the stairs. Is that Co-Z?

“Woven!! Let's go! I know you're home!”

“Hold on!” I shout back. “I'll be right there!”

My hand slaps against the door and I reach for the handle. The door swings wide as I pull it open. There she is. One of my two best friends, Colbie Zirra. But we just call her Co-Z for short. We've been friends for as long as I can remember and it has been awesome.

“Co-Z! We're so late!”

She laughs and replies, “I know! I've been waiting outside your house for like thirty minutes, so I just started knocking. What took you so long?”

I begin to explain my morning but she interrupts, “Grab your bag and tell me on the way. We're probably going to get in so much trouble!”

My bag's in the living room. I run over to get it and grab a banana from the kitchen on my way back to the door. With one arm, I swing my bag onto my shoulder and with the other, I close the front door. The alarm system says, “Please confirm door lock.”

I respond with my name, “Wyatt Oscar Venn.” The door locks and the confirmation tone plays.

“Okay,” Co-Z says. “Let's get going. I bet you Bongo's worried sick. He probably thinks we're skipping school without him. Poor guy.”

“Nah,” I shrug, as we quickly walk down the stairs and out of the front yard. “He's most likely flirting it up with Jamie. He loves it when I'm not there to tease him about her.”

We both laugh. Bongo's quite the flirt.

Co-Z shoves my shoulder lightly and says, “Yeah right, he doesn't stand a chance with her! He's probably hiding under his desk, getting yelled at by

Ms. Allen.”

“Like he usually is,” I chime in.

“Oh shoot!” Co-Z's eyes widen. “What day is it? Isn't it his birthday soon? Like today or tomorrow or something?” She winks her eyes quickly. Left, right, then left again; she's accessing her Flye Lids network.

“Contact list. Benjamin Ongoco. Birthday” she tells it. I watch her quickly read as we walk together. “I knew it!” she says with a smile. “It's tomorrow. May twenty-first, two-thousand forty. Twelve years old. Why hasn't he invited us to his party yet? Is he even having one?”

“Maybe he's waiting for us to ask him about it,” I reply. Of the three of us, Bongo's the youngest by two months and he always feels like his birthday is the least important since it comes after Co-Z's and mine.

“Yeah, probably,” Co-Z agrees, while winking again to sign out of Flye Lids.

My parents still don't want to buy me Flye Lids, but that doesn't keep me from asking them for it almost every day. They are always talking about being too connected with the rest of the world. Flye Lids are basically contact lenses that a company called Forward Language made that have a cool semi-transparent display and a camera. So, I suppose Forward Language or 'FL', plus 'eyelids' gets you 'Flye Lids'. You can use them to access the internet, take videos, zoom in on stuff, and lots more. Every kid's dream.

“We really need to get to school, like right now!”

Co-Z says. "I had a billion messages from Bongo asking where we are. Apparently, Ms. Allen is not very happy about us being late and said she's calling our parents if we're not there soon!"

That's not good.

"What?! She needs to chill out!" I respond. "We'll be there in a few minutes anyway. I'm sorry I made you late, Co-Z."

She smiles and says, "That's fine, Woven. You *were* taking forever though. I could've left you and been on time, but I'm just such a good friend. You know?"

She nudges me with her elbow.

I laugh and reply, "Yeah, yeah, real great pal. Seriously though, this morning I had the weirdest dream,"

"Me too!" Co-Z cuts in. "What happened in yours?"

I continue, "I don't even know how to explain it. I was a grown-up and I had guns. I was in some crazy neighbourhood. I'm not really sure if it was a neighbourhood I know, but it had a lot of the same kind of houses that we have around here. I was shooting people and they were shooting me, and it was all gross and rainy. I had this really awesome protective armour suit that could block bullets! And there was all this nasty, muddy goo on the ground. I drove a car to get away and this big giant dude threw a car at me, which made me fly out through the windshield and he stopped me from sliding with his foot. Then he picked me up and started teleporting!"

“Whoa,” Co-Z says, “this is so weird. So weird!” She seems kind of shocked.

“I know!” I agree. “He teleported us to this underground hideout thing, which actually turned out to be an entire place. Like a huge field with weird birds and stuff. It was like the inside of the earth, but it looked just like the outside of the earth. Like with trees and oceans and grass, but everywhere and in the sky, like it was just a big circle. It was crazy. Then there were like a bunch of other giants and they were all reading my mind and talking to me inside my head.”

Co-Z's eyes are wide and her mouth is slightly open. She blurts out, “What did they tell you? Did they tell you to do something? Like something important?”

We stop walking.

I raise one of my eyebrows, “Yeah, they did. They were telling me that the leaders of the world are planning some really bad things and that I'm supposed to stop them. They also said that there would be people that I'm supposed to find, and they'll help me change the world. Then there were all these huge explosions and I think I died or dissolved or something. Isn't that crazy?”

“Uh, yeah! That *is* insane,” Co-Z replies. “I pretty much had the exact same dream!”

“What? No, you didn't!”

“Yeah, I did! I promise!” She continues. “Except, mine started with explosions and when they stopped, I was in some cave tunnel thing. I kept climbing all

these huge steps and kept hearing lots of voices. When I got to the top of the steps I was in a huge, dark and dusty room. I could barely see anything and had to feel around to find my way out. When I got out of the room I was outside and saw a huge pyramid. I'm pretty sure it was one of those Giza pyramids, you know the ones that we learned about last year, during that ancient Egypt period?"

I nod my head, "Yeah, I remember."

"Well," she explains. "That tunnel cave thing that I came out of was apparently underneath a pyramid. When I got outside of it and saw the other pyramid, I also saw a bunch of people shooting at these giant men, who were smashing people and teleporting around. One of them grabbed me and teleported me back down into the cave. He told me not to worry then teleported us again. We were in the middle of this frozen place with snow and ice everywhere and I was freezing! Then we teleported again and I was inside the earth, exactly like how you described it. There were a bunch of giants, just like with your dream and they told me the exact same thing they told you!"

I can see some tears swelling in her eyes.

"Isn't that so crazy?" Co-Z asks. "It felt so real and I was so scared! Why did we both have the same dream, Woven?"

My mind is racing and I can feel my heart beating super fast. Why *did* we have the same dream? It's too similar to be a coincidence.

"I don't know. Did we watch a movie or

something together recently?" I ask. "Maybe there was something like that in it?"

She shakes her head, "No. It was too real and we haven't seen any movies like that. The giants, the teleporting, the mind-reading, the same message. Come on, Woven, that's weird, isn't it?"

"No, it's definitely messed up," I agree. "Maybe we should tell our parents or something. What if our dreams mean something?"

"Let's see what Bongo says about us having the same dream. He might be able to make it sound more normal than it seems. He's pretty good at stuff like that," Co-Z suggests.

I nod my head in agreement and say, "Deal." Bongo is usually a bit more level-headed than Co-Z and I when it comes to weird stuff like this. Although, this is probably the weirdest thing that's happened to us.

We start walking again and Co-Z winks up her Flye Lids to tell Bongo we're a couple minutes away.

"Bongo says we're in big trouble," she informs me.

I believe it. Ms. Allen isn't the nicest teacher in the world and has always been very particular about punctuality. I just hope that she doesn't make us sit out in the hall or something. I really want to talk to Bongo about the dreams.

We reach the school and wave our wristbands across the access strips. The front doors open and we shuffle inside. We are welcomed by the automated greeter, "Good morning, Colbie Zirra. Good morning, Wyatt Venn."

If only Ms. Allen was that pleasant sounding.

Co-Z and I walk down the hallway toward our classroom and when we get there I rest my hand on the doorknob.

“You ready?” I ask.

Co-Z presses her lips tight together, nods, and replies, “Let's go.”

I turn the doorknob and we push our way into the classroom.

It's empty. Except for one other student, Benjamin Ongoco. Or as we like to call him, Bongo.

“What the heck took you guys so long?” he asks in an aggressive whisper. “Ms. Allen is not going to be happy with you. She'll actually kill me if she finds out I'm in here with you. I told her I was going to the bathroom, but I knew you guys were coming so I decided to wait here. I've only been here for like two minutes, so we should be alright. Everyone else is in the library though. Let's get over there quick, before Ms. Allen gets suspicious.”

“Ok cool, but we have to tell you something so weird!” Co-Z says.

We all move toward the door and Co-Z begins to explain the dreams to Bongo.

He puts his hand out in front of us, stops us from walking and interrupts, “Hold up! Let me guess. The giants could teleport and they told you that you have to change the world. Right?”

Co-Z looks both surprised and scared, and turns to look at me, then back at Bongo.

“Yeah,” she says. “Exactly! You had the same

dream!”

“Yup,” Bongo answers. “I knew it was too realistic to just be a dream. I wrote it all down so I could show you guys later. I guess that was a waste of time, since you guys already saw it.”

My voice comes out a little louder than I expect, “What does this even mean? We need to do something about this. Maybe these giants are from the future or something and are trying to warn us. We have to do something. There's no way that all three of us can have the same dream and it not mean anything. I mean when –”

I'm interrupted by the classroom door opening. Ms. Allen.

“Wyatt! Colbie! Benjamin! Get to the principal's office right now! I'm contacting all of your parents immediately. You are in so much trouble, skipping class like this!”

She is clearly not happy.

I try to smooth out the situation, “I'm sorry Ms. Allen, it's just that we had a very inter –”

“I don't want to hear it, Wyatt!” Ms. Allen interrupts. “All of you. Office. Now!”

The three of us, with our heads down, brush past Ms. Allen and walk down to the principal's office.

Ms. Allen is walking a few steps behind us to make sure we make it to the principal's office. I can hear giggles coming from Bongo.

“This is hilarious,” he whispers to us.

“Benjamin! Quiet!” Ms. Allen's voice is like a whip sometimes. “Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Ongoco.

Your son, Benjamin, is in the principal's office. Please come to the school immediately. Thank you.”

She's making voice-to-text messages on her Flye Lids, which is completely unnecessary. Flye Lids can recognize certain hand gestures and you can use them to type in the air in front of you. She just wants us to hear her and be scared. It's working.

“Hi, Mrs. Zirra, your daughter, Colbie, is in ...” She's so ridiculous.

Co-Z looks at me and says, “Maybe this is a good thing. Now we can all tell our parents, and see what they say about our dreams.”

I nod and say, “I guess. But for some reason I feel like they might not pay attention to the dreams and might focus more on the fact that we were late and were sent to the principal's office.”

“... son, Wyatt, is in the principal's office. Please come to the school...”

Bongo replies, “Yeah, but your parents will probably have something to say about it. They *are* politicians, make sure to tell them about the evil plot! Maybe they can do something.”

“You three!” Ms. Allen screeches. “That is enough! We are here, now please behave while we wait for your parents. They've all replied and will be here shortly.” She opens the door to the principal's office and leads us inside.

Mr. Wilson's office is always super clean. He keeps his desk tidy and his pictures perfectly level. The three of us sit down on the few chairs he has against the back wall of his office, facing his desk.

He's not here yet, so we wait patiently for him while Ms. Allen stares us down.

“Do you know how long they'll be?” I ask.

“Wyatt, you just wait patiently. Your parents are going to be very upset with you!” Ms. Allen almost has trouble holding back her smile. She is so pleased with herself, I bet.

Mr. Wilson opens the door to his office and steps in.

“Oh, hey!” He says excitedly. “What a surprise! What are you guys doing here? Come to hang out with your favourite principal?”

“Mr. Wilson,” Ms. Allen rudely spits. “Don't encourage them. They've misbehaved and are waiting for their parents. Now, I've got to get back to the library to check up on the rest of the class. Please, let their parents know that Wyatt and Colbie were very late to class, and that Benjamin was skipping class to chat with them after they were already late. I am very disappointed with them, Mr. Wilson, and you should be too!”

Mr. Wilson's face changes from a smile to a frown. “Of course, Ms. Allen,” he says. “I'll be sure to let them know. I'll talk to you later and let you know how things went.”

Ms. Allen nods and opens Mr. Wilson's door to leave.

She turns back to us before she leaves and says, “You kids are just throwing away your future. It's important to listen to your superiors! You just don't understand that we are looking out for you.”

She walks out and the door slowly closes behind her.

Mr. Wilson's smile comes back and he says, "Well she's pretty upset with you, isn't she?"

We all laugh and Co-Z replies, "Yeah, well, she doesn't know why we were late."

I put my hand up and say, "Well, it was my fault, but we do have a good reason."

Mr. Wilson gives a short laugh and says, "Well, I'm sure it's all fine. I know you're a good bunch of kids. We'll just hang out until your – oh, here they are now!"

I can see my parents walking toward the school through the window in Mr. Wilson's office.

"I really didn't think they'd get here first. They're always so busy," I say.

Bongo turns to me and says, "Don't leave anything out. Just make sure you tell them everything. Especially about the world leaders!"

I nod my head and reply, "Yeah, hopefully they'll actually be able to help."

The office door opens and my mom and dad walk in.

"Senator Venn, Mrs. Venn," Mr. Wilson says to my parents. "Come on in. How are you doing?"

My parents shake hands with Mr. Wilson and my mom says, "We are doing well, Mr. Wilson. How are you?"

Mr. Wilson's face lights up as he says, "I am doing just great. I've had an excellent morning so far and I am loving this day. And I got to see these three

wonderful kids!” I like Mr. Wilson; he is always really nice to us.

“I am glad to hear that, Mr. Wilson,” My dad says. “I hope that my boy and his friends haven't caused too much trouble for anyone today. They're usually pretty well-behaved.”

“Oh, I know,” Mr. Wilson agrees. “There hasn't been any real trouble. Ms. Allen is just concerned about their lack of punctuality today. She seemed pretty upset about it.”

My mom quickly replies, “Wyatt was late today?” She looks at me, “Wyatt, why were you late?”

“It's okay, Mom, I had a crazy dream this morning and I didn't hear my alarm,” I respond.

My dad laughs as he says, “You slept in? That's why we were called down here? Awesome.”

He turns to Mr. Wilson and asks, “Do you mind if we take Wyatt with us for a little while. We'll bring him back after lunch if that's alright with you and Ms. Allen.”

“I'm sure Ms. Allen won't be too pleased about that,” Mr. Wilson laughs, “but I'm quite alright with that. You go ahead and spend some time with your son, Senator.”

“Alright,” my mom says. “Wyatt, say goodbye to your friends and say thank you to Mr. Wilson.”

I turn to the principal and say, “Thanks, Mr. Wilson. You're cool.”

He grins and says, “Sure thing, Wyatt. You take care.”

“See you guys later,” I say to Co-Z and Bongo.

"I'll be back soon."

They say goodbye as my parents and I open the door and leave Mr. Wilson's office.

We walk to the front entrance of the school and my dad says, "So you slept in, huh?"

I answer, "Yup, Co-Z was waiting for me outside our house so I made her late too."

We reach my parents' car and we get inside. As I'm adjusting myself in the back seat my mom says, "So what was this crazy dream you had that made you late?"

My dad starts up the car and we begin driving.

"Okay," I start. "Craziest dream ever! I was a grown-up, like you guys, but I had guns and I was fighting these angry people who were shooting at me. We were fighting in the streets of this really broken down neighbourhood. I heard someone calling for help, but the house exploded before I could save them."

"This sounds like a scary dream," my mom says.

"It was," I reply. "But it gets crazier! It felt so real, I can't explain it. Like it really was happening. I could hear things and feel things, like when the bullets hit me. But I was wearing a really cool armour thing that stopped the bullets from killing me. There were too many guys for me to fight so I tried to escape. I found a car and drove it really fast away from them!"

My dad speaks up, "Man, it's like an action movie." He laughs. "Have you been playing too many video games?"

I smile and say, “No dad, I promise this wasn't like that. This is where it gets different. When I was driving, I crashed. Some big giant guy threw a car at me and it smashed mine. I went flying and the giant guy stopped me with his foot.”

My mom turns her head and looks at my dad. She says to me, “A giant? Really? That must have been cool.”

“I know, it sounds weird, but there were giants, okay?” I say.

My mom grabs my dad's hand and looks at him for a few seconds.

“There was more than just one giant?” My dad asks.

I nod and say, “Yeah, I think there were twelve in total. They teleported me underground and they said we were inside the Earth. And it really did look like we were, but it looked like inside out, like instead of the sky there was land.”

My mom leans over to my dad's ear and whispers something to him.

“What are you guys talking about?” I ask. “I'm not crazy or anything, I promise. I can prove it. Bongo and Co-Z had the same dream as me!”

My dad steps on the brakes and slows the car down, turning onto the shoulder of the road. He stops the car and shifts it into park.

“Giants took you inside the Earth?” He asks with a very stern look.

I'm suddenly really scared. I think he can tell

because his look softens and he says, "Don't worry, Wyatt, it just sounds very interesting. Did they say anything?"

"Why?" I ask. "Did you have the same dream?"

He shakes his head, "No, I just think it's a really interesting dream. Maybe it means something. Who knows? What did they say?"

I can feel my throat getting coarse and I think one of my eyes might be watering a bit.

I respond, "They said that the world's leaders have begun an evil plot to kill everyone except for people that they think are good enough to start a new society with. They said that lots of bad things will happen and that I'm supposed to stop them from happening. They said the same things to Co-Z and Bongo."

I can see my mom squeeze my dad's hand and her eyes widen then narrow again.

She turns to me and says, "Honey, I think that what happened is very interesting and very strange. But I also think that you should just forget about it. Your dad and I love you very much and don't want you thinking that anything like that would happen."

I butt in, "That's why I wanted to tell you about it, since you guys work with politics anyway. Maybe the giants are right and maybe we have to do something to stop the bad leaders. You guys could maybe talk to other politicians and find out if anyone has some crazy plan to do something like that. I don't know. You can help though, right?"

My dad smiles and says, "Wyatt, listen. It was just a dream. I know that it probably felt very strange and

very real to you, but you said it yourself: it was a dream. Dreams are usually just visual representations of things we are feeling or thinking at the time.”

“Yeah, but this was different!” I interrupt. “I wasn't the only one who had this dream!”

My mom shakes her head and replies, “We know, Wyatt, but you three are best friends and spend a lot of time together. You all have very active imaginations and play a lot of the same games together. It's most likely that you three just shared a similar experience and in return, had very similar dreams.”

“NO!” I yell. It echoes softly in the car. “This is a real thing. We need to do something to change this evil plan. What if we do nothing and it happens for real? Then what? You guys aren't listening to me! I need your help!”

I'm crying by this point, but trying to stop myself.

“Wyatt, it's okay, don't get upset,” my dad tries to ease the situation. “We understand. We just don't want this dream affecting you the way it might. Look, like you said, we are politicians. We do have a hand in what happens with things like that. So, you have nothing to worry about.”

He reaches out to me and puts his hand on my knee. “Listen. We do want what's best for you, and think about it. If you think this dream has real meaning –”

“It does!” I shout.

“Hey, buddy,” he gives my knee a little shake. “If you pay any mind to what happened in this dream, it's

going to change the way you look at politics. You have to understand that the way you're seeing this dream is very dangerous. You have no proof that any evil plan is going on, just a dream, yet you are convinced that it is real. Imagine what kind of effect that might have on the way people acted as a society. If you, Colbie, and Ben, all think about the world's leaders as these evil men in a dark room trying to take over the world, you might try to do something dangerous. That's not okay, your mom and I want you to be safe. More importantly, we want you to be a healthy, productive member of society. Someone who contributes positively and isn't under the impression that the government is out to get them.”

My mom nods her head and says, “Wyatt, honey, we love you. And I know you don't want to be some kind of menace to society; picking fights and starting a rebellion. Is that what you want? To start a rebellion against the world's leaders?”

I look at the floor of the car and wipe tears from my eyes. I wonder what Co-Z and Bongo's parents had to say.

Chapter 3

(17 years later)

May 16, 2057

“... two explorers from Mato Grosso, Brazil are setting out today, to lead a wild expedition into the newly discovered tunnel system in a cave located near their densely-forested home town. Miguel Pereira and Gabriel Rocha believe this could be one of the deepest cave systems mankind has ever explored!

“The duo has been exploring caves for over twenty-five years now and feel as though this will be the pay off for their many years of diligence. They are live-streaming the entire thing on a split-screen image display via their Flye Lids video application, which we've provided the link for. Here is a preview of the two as they prepare for the adventure.”

Two videos play simultaneously side by side. The left side plays Miguel's feed while the right side plays Gabriel's. They are laughing and speaking Portuguese while they shake hands with other members of their expedition. The crew is standing around a hole in the ground that has a diameter of approximately seventy feet. Most of them are wearing parachutes strapped to their backs.

“As the crew prepares for the descent, we are

obligated to tell you that the station does not endorse or encourage this type of activity and strongly suggests that viewers do not attempt to repeat any of the events they may see here today.”

Miguel and Gabriel pull the straps on their helmets and tighten the belts on their parachutes.

“The cave has already been explored to a depth of 2,200 feet. The cave explorers will jump into the opening of the cave and pull their chutes after approximately 100 feet. Once they reach the cave floor, they will continue their journey on foot to the location that had previously been labeled as the deepest point. A few feet behind a pile of loose rocks is a small opening that leads to an amazing, large and intricate system of tunnels, which Miguel has reported 'appear to be man-made.' What kind of mysteries lie beneath the feet of these brave and excited explorers? Be sure to check out the link on our...”

The crew checks their bags one last time. Gabriel looks inside his bag and touches a pistol. He grabs it and removes it from his bag. He pulls back the slide and checks the chamber. The slide slips back into place as he releases it. His thumb moves up the grip and presses the magazine release. The magazine slides out and falls into Gabriel's open hand. He counts the rounds then pushes the magazine back into the stock.

“... and these men look like they're prepared for anything that they might come across...”

June 14, 2057

“... the explorers have now reached a depth of 7,215 feet. This depth has officially surpassed the current record of 7,208 feet. What an exciting time for this daring duo and their team!...”

Miguel and Gabriel are facing each other and speaking excitedly in Portuguese. In the background, crew members are setting up tents and placing wirelessly-charged lanterns around the cave.

“... crew has come to a large, open area inside the cave and are setting up camp. It's important for them to get proper rest and maintain their eating schedules in order to continue their expedition successfully...”

The feed switches from the Flye Lids to the crew's overhead drone camera.

“The explorers will now rest and continue on their exciting adventure tomorrow morning...”

June 27, 2057

“... as we can see from the gradual degradation of the image quality, our explorers are at extreme depths now. This afternoon they reached an astonishing 10,341 feet. According to the crew, they had never expected to get this far, so the portable Flye Lids network transmission routers they had brought to relay their live feeds to the surface have reached their optimal performance limits. We can expect the image quality to only decrease from here on out.

“We count our many fortunes as we reflect on the

wonders this daring team has already brought to light from beneath the surface of our very own planet...”

Beams of light shine through the darkness and bounce against the cave walls. Miguel speaks quickly in Portuguese with a huge smile on his face, while pointing to paintings on the cave walls all around them. Paintings done in acrylic, oil, fresco, and pastels. Paintings of giant people and wild animals. Paintings of planets and aircrafts.

Gabriel kneels and prays silently by himself next to the cave wall. Close by to his side small statuettes and carvings can be seen. Statuettes of angelic beings and demons. Carvings of prehistoric animals and other unknown beasts.

July 8, 2057

“... it's hard to tell just how far down Rocha and Pereira have ventured now, but from the last few updates they have sent us it could be estimated that they are now around 12, 600 feet below the surface. It has been amazing to see all of the discoveries over these last two months. So many questions have risen from the depths of these caves that leave even the most educated minds in awe and wonder.

“Hundreds of historians are studying the video images relayed back to the surface. They are looking to understand the origins of these paintings and even some of the few written characters seen along with the paintings and inscribed on the statuettes. Many

believe that these characters and symbols share similarities with those of ancient findings at Neolithic sites. These historians will most likely need to wait until the artifacts are brought back to the surface before they can make any concrete statements. The excitement that surrounds these adventurers and their discoveries is incomparable to anything we've experienced in the last century..."

Video images of the crew cut in and out. Miguel's feed is slightly clearer, but is also struggling to relay information properly. There is lots of shouting and talking heard –

The stream cuts out.

It's back.

Flashlights seems to be moving sporadically, as though the team is running or jumping. Miguel's feed shows Gabriel shouting and pointing. His eyes are wide and there is sweat all over his face and arms –

Stream cuts out.

It's back again.

"... I can't believe what we are seeing here right now..."

There's a door. It's made of some type of metal. Miguel and Gabriel's feeds are both displaying the door. The crew members are running baton-like devices along the length of the door.

"... appear to be checking for any signs of toxic vapours or liquids that might be contained behind the door..."

The crew begins to apply gas masks and respirators.

“... seems as though there are no levels of toxic gases detected, but the crew is justifiably preparing themselves for any scenario...”

Gabriel takes off his back-pack and unzips it. He reaches in and pulls out his pistol. The zipper gets caught as he tries to close it and he struggles with it for a few seconds. His hands are shaking. He throws the bag to the side and his feed displays the door again –

Lost signal...

Signal connected.

The pistol is being held out directly in the middle of the Flye Lids feed display. Gabriel has it pointed at the door as Miguel leans in and puts his gloved hand on the door handle –

Lost signal...

Signal connected.

Gabriel is holding a stack of thin metal sheets with symbols and characters engraved on them. There are fourteen sheets of metal in his hand, all bound together with metal rings. The image quality is too poor to make out any of the characters. Miguel is speaking loudly and excitedly in Portuguese.

“... we are seeing here is absolutely amazing! I simply can not believe it. These two men and their team have discovered an incredible number of mysterious objects on this expedition. These events will certainly be marked down in history. The things we'll be able to learn from these artifacts are certainly some of the most important discoveries of our time. Think of the possibilities. We might learn so many

new things about our history and maybe even our future! This is just absolutely amazing...”

The team is giving each other high-fives and hugs in a large room. Gabriel is still scanning the room with his flashlight. Miguel walks over to Gabriel and asks him something in Portuguese. Gabriel responds in a whisper and puts his hand up to silence the others.

“... seems to have seen something and is motioning for the others to quiet down. Perhaps another wonder is yet to be revealed...”

Gabriel is pointing to a small dip in the cave floor. The light appears to be reflecting off something. The team gathers closely to find out what they are looking at.

It's not light reflecting that they are seeing. Little pieces of wood lay together in a pile. There are embers. A small amount of smoke lifts up into the air. Gabriel and Miguel look at each other. Both of their faces look serious and slightly panicked –

The signal is lost again...

“... oh my goodness! What a horrible time for the signal to cut out. It appears that the crew has found a small fire burning. This can really only mean one thing...”

The signal reconnects.

The crew is huddled together and pushing against the door they used to enter the room. There is banging on the other side of the door. There is shouting and panicked pleas in Portuguese. Their feet shuffle and slide against the dirt of the cave floor as

they struggle to keep the door shut.

Gabriel backs away from the door and points his gun toward it. He starts yelling at the other crew members and they pull away from the door –

Signal lost.

“... no, no, this is not good. Oh my goodness. Oh no...”

Signal reconnects.

Loud gun shots echo through the caves. Bright flashes from each shot light up the entire doorway. A flash of light reveals a short man in the doorway. He appears to be very muscular and covered in an excessive amount of body hair. He's not wearing anything except for a cloth around his hips. Another man with the same appearance can be seen behind him as another flash of light from the gun illuminates the doorway –

Signal lost.

“... I can't believe this. This is insane. Something has to be done. I can't believe what we're seeing here...”

Signal reconnects.

“... oh my – oh no! The crew is being attacked! Why is this happening?...”

The small, hairy men swing blades at the expedition crew. The blades are about eight inches long and are secured on a rope, which the cave-dwellers have each tied around one of their ankles. They are shouting and kicking their legs, trying to attack the adventurers.

One of the crew members begins to choke after

one of the blades slashes his neck open. Gabriel shines his flashlight on the small, hairy man and shoots him in the head. The cave-dweller falls to the ground and two crew members run to their injured friend. They put pressure on his neck and try to stop the bleeding.

Miguel's feed shows him face-to-face with the other cave-dweller. He's on his back with his hands around the neck of his attacker. The small, hairy man keeps punching at Miguel's face –

Signal is lost again.

Signal comes back.

Miguel is sitting on his knees, panting heavily and mumbling words in Portuguese, while touching his bloody face with one hand. Gabriel is pacing back and forth with his head down. One of his colleagues lies dead on the cave floor with a blanket covering his face, blood soaking through the fabric. The two dead cave-dwellers lay side by side on the ground. Crew members are scanning the bodies and speaking to their own Flye Lids, taking notes as quickly as possible.

“... I can't... this is simply too... I just... there are no words to describe the events that just took place. To witness something as tremendous as this is just... I don't...”

The video feed glitches for a few seconds and then a loud noise can be heard echoing through the cave tunnels. The expedition crew looks at each other with worried faces and begin a panicked conversation –

Signal lost.

Signal reconnects.

Beams of light from the flashlights are shooting all around the walls of the cave tunnels. The entire crew is sprinting through the caves, trying to get out of there as fast as they can.

“... received confirmation that rescue teams have been sent to meet the adventurers at the halfway point. It will take the rescue team approximately 25 days to reach our expedition crew. Let's hope and pray that they will be able to stay out of trouble until then...”

Gabriel looks down into his bag as he runs, and pushes the thin metal sheets deeper toward the bottom. He zips his bag shut and continues to run.

September 14, 2057

“... after such an unbelievable journey. Now, the team of professional historians have received the necessary permissions to begin the translation process of the mysterious metal sheets. After much debate and controversy, it has been decided that the artifacts will stay in Brazil for further inspection. We are living in such an exciting time!

Brilliant minds from all over the world have been brought in to assist in the uncovering of this exceptional mystery. We are all anxiously waiting for the information that might be brought forth to our knowledge once these diligent men and women have

had the opportunity to translate the inscriptions.

December 22, 2057

Miguel and Gabriel are talking to each other quietly while they wait, sitting in a room with several other people. They are seated at one side of a long glass table.

“... have been having quite a few legal issues with the transmission of this broadcast. Miguel and Gabriel seem to be working off several different networks in order to allow us to view their video feeds. Apparently, the Brazilian government has agreed to the transmission, but our government is not quite on the same page.

“We apologize in advance if the signal is lost, either temporarily or permanently. We are also in a bit of serious legal trouble ourselves with this whole situation and are doing our best to supply you with access to the video feed. We've already been shut down a few times and thank those of you who have stuck around with us for your patience. We will continue to do our best to allow you access to history in the making. What these historians are about to reveal could change what we know about history and possibly even the future.

“Keep an eye out for any links that show up that look like they might be from us. We might have to switch links every now and then to stay under the radar. Remember that the government doesn't want

anyone viewing these videos without their screening them first, so this live feed is especially disagreeable with them.

“It looks like they're getting ready to begin their discussion. Let's take a look at...”

Men and women are seated all around the table. Miguel and Gabriel walk around the table and shake hands with them. Photographers are scattered around the room, taking pictures of the historians and adventurers. A man with a dark suit stands at the head of the table and raises both of his hands to silence the others.

“... are providing a translation of the Portuguese that will be spoken today. The other historians in the room from elsewhere in the world will also be reading the translations on their own Flye Lids.

Communication is key in this discussion, which is another amazing feat accomplished by our adventurers and their teams. They have developed software, designed specifically for Flye Lids, that translates between Portuguese, English, German, and Mandarin in real time as text. Software like this has been available before, but never with this degree of accuracy...”

The room is now silent as everyone looks toward the man in the dark suit. He lowers his arms and begins to speak as text displays on the Flye Lids feed.

“Welcome, everyone. My name is Rafael de Sousa. Thank you for taking this time to gather here and discuss these current events and studies. As you are all aware, much effort and many hours

have been put in to the exploration of the magnificent cave tunnel systems of Mato Grosso, as well as the care and translation of the artifacts found during the expedition. A special thanks to Miguel Periera and Gabriel Rocha for organizing the expedition and this discussion. They also put in more effort than imaginable in the preservation of the artifacts and keeping them away from those who would use them for selfish purposes. We really appreciate the lengths they've gone to protect our history.”

Applause erupts in the room as Michael and Gabriel are asked to stand. They modestly shake their heads with smiles on their faces and clap for the others in the room.

“Alright. This is an important day for the world. Let us bring to light the things which have been revealed. I have with me, uploaded to my Flye Lids storage, all of your notes taken and the translations of the metal sheets and the engravings on the statuettes that were found. Many magnificent pieces of information have been discovered and we are here to discuss the possible meaning of these things.

“Let us begin with an excerpt from Doctors Costa and Gomes' translation of the first two mysterious sheets.”

An image of the metal sheets, side by side, is displayed.

“I will read from the translations you provided as well as a few of the notes that accompany the

respective translation. This is the translation from the first sheet, about one-third of the way down the text:

“It has been that our people, the Anakim, are a strong and fierce people.

“During our days on the surface of the earth, we fought bravely along side man. Friend defending friend as though he were blood.

“It has been that man did not live in harmony with our people, the Anakim, for the space of all time. Man became a hard-hearted people who did not love as we did. Though we were strong and fierce, we cared for man and for their well-being.

“It has been that man and the Anakim entered into great battles. The battles endured over the space of many years. Though many men were killed only a few Anakim were killed.

“The number of slain men caused great contention among all nations. The Anakim were no longer respected or loved as in the beginning.

“The king of the Anakim, Abod, understood that man would not return to peace with our people. He understood that man would not have the chance to survive if the Anakim were to war with them.

“It has been that Abod decided in mercy that it was time to leave the lands our people shared with man. Our people moved North into the colder regions, but not without travail. The Anakim came across many tribes and peoples who were much less than friendly.

“It has been that along the path to the North, many battles were fought and fear of the Anakim began to spread across all lands.

“Abod lead the Anakim to the cold North. Abod was an honourable king and did only that which was honest and fair. He was guided by the Light, which lead him and his people to the Passage in the most North place on all the face of the earth.

“It has been that the Passage lead our people, the Anakim, into the earth, into our new home which would appear to have been hand-crafted for the Anakim.

“In our new home, our people lived in peace, there was no tribe or people to disturb the Anakim and our way of life, even for many years.

“It has been that a small tribe did come to our new land. The tribe were a small people, smaller in stature than man that we knew and loved. The tribe was strong and quick, they helped the Anakim with farming and hunting.

“It has been that this tribe was called by our people as the Tiny Arrow tribe. This they were called after the manner which they hunted. Tiny arrows tethered to their ankles, which they used to spin and whip toward their prey. Few Anakim even called them by the name of scorpion men.

“It has been that the Tiny Arrow tribe came upon our home through means of tunnels in the east.

“After the space of many years, the Tiny Arrow people began to grow hungry for power over our people, the Anakim. Their numbers were too few,

they could not defeat the Anakim people, but their spirits were great and so were their battle cries.

“The Tiny Arrow people fought the Anakim for many days, but Abod and his Anakim had the strength of the Light with them and stopped the Tiny Arrow from warring with our people.

“It has been that Abod no longer extended friendship to the Tiny Arrow people, but did show them mercy. He did not destroy or imprison them, instead he gave them charge to watch the caves. He commanded that they live within the caves which lead to the surface, and guard them from any other people who might try to enter the earth.

“It has been that Abod commanded the Tiny Arrow people to do this thing or to be put to death for their evil. They swore to do this thing and left the presence of our people.

“Now, I just wanted to read some of the notes that go along with what was just read:

“The Passage that is mentioned in these accounts is reference to an opening in the earth at the North Pole, which we have sent a team to investigate. We still have not received word from them.

“The cave which lead the Tiny Arrow people to this subterranean location is believed to be somewhere beneath the surface of current day Uzbekistan, though there are several other cave tunnel systems around the world, which we believe also lead to this place the Anakim describe.

“The description of the Tiny Arrow people matches many descriptions of cave-dwellers in myths and folklore from cultures all around the world. The men in the caves that the expedition came across were, more than likely, part of this tribe.

“There is a lot of information given to us in just this short translation alone. I'd like to hear some thoughts and questions from others now, in accordance to what has been read here.”

A woman sitting on Gabriel's right side puts her hand up and begins to speak in German. The software translates it on the Flye Lids display.

“Now, there was mention of the Tiny Arrow tribe,” she says. “being in charge of guarding these cave entrances to a subterranean land. The expedition came across two of these men and were violently attacked, which would correlate with their responsibility to guard these secrets pathways. But my question is this: are these texts accurate? Or are they simply more folklore coming from a civilization who traveled from the surface into these deep caves and decided to stay? What do we know of the world beneath our feet? Surely, this is simply a fairy tale designed to give a simple people an interesting background, no?”

The woman sitting next to her throws her hand up and says in Mandarin, **“Those are valid questions, Dr. Freidrich, and they can be answered simply. We have studied the earth for many years as a**

people and have come across an enormous amount of data and theories that would suggest there is a great possibility of life within the earth. From bizarre first-hand accounts, to the scientific discovery of ringwoodite minerals found 600km within the earth, to the exploration of extremely deep and intricate cave systems, the idea that there is enough water and room to sustain life inside the earth has been a very prevalent theory in the last thirty or so years. We have simply been waiting for such a piece of evidence to come forth. Something tangible from a civilization who has either seen or lived inside the earth. I believe this is that proof.”

A man sitting across the table from the last woman raises his hand and also speaks in Mandarin, **“I would like to back up what Dr. Tseng said about this being a type of proof. I've read the translations of Doctors Costa and Gomes and they coincide with my own translations of the same text, which describes many prophecies, many of which have already come to pass. For example, they even prophesied of this very event. Us meeting in this room speaking of these things.”**

Rafael speaks up again, **“Prophecies, Dr. Liao? These people are psychics or something? They can tell the future, is what you're saying? These Tiny Arrow people?”**

“No,” Dr. Liao says. **“Not the Tiny Arrow tribe. The Anakim. In their texts, they speak of things to come. The metal sheets are full of histories of the**

Anakim and other people, as well as many descriptions of their land inside the earth. But on that second sheet, which Doctors Costa and Gomes translated, there are some very interesting prophecies. If these are accurate than they are very startling. Would you mind reading some of the text on that second sheet, around half-way down the text?”

“Of course, Dr. Liao,” Rafael says. “Let me pull it up quickly. Alright, now it says here:

“It has been that Abod spoke with the Light about things of this earth. Both within and upon it. He learned many truths about yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

“Abod taught these things to our people, the Anakim, who in turn wrote them down, to remind our people of the truths in days to come.

“The Light showed Abod our people and their past, even many years before our fathers and their kind. The Anakim were –”

The signal is disconnected. The Flye Lids display shows warning symbols for illegal activity, informing that authorities have been notified. Links flash and scroll up the display.

A new signal is connected.

“... definitely don't want us viewing this. The feed will be up in a minute. Don't expect it to remain for long. This is awesome, I really can't put into words the excitement these translations are bringing. Okay, here we go...” ***“... raise the temperatures of the***

winds, destroy the crops, starve the people, poison the water –”

The signal is cut once again.

“... this is it; I think we only have this last source. We probably won't be able to supply you with the video feed if this one cuts out. Just wait a couple seconds for it to...”

“... World leaders of the surface people will no longer labour for the good of mankind, but will labour to satisfy their own greed.

“It has been that Abod taught us of the war to come between the good of mankind on the surface and the evil rulers, and the war between the evil rulers and the Anakim.

“They will plan to destroy our people, the Anakim, to fulfill their evil. They plan to destroy all people, save but a select few they deem worthy to aid in the rebuilding of a society they believe will be a greater one.

“It has been that the Light disproves of this evil plan and has shown Abod and his people, the Anakim, a way to reveal to the surface people this evil and aid them in avoiding such calamity.

“It has been that the Light revealed to Abod where such –”

The signal is disconnected. No links, no flashing displays.

April 19, 2058

An image of the South American continent is displayed on the Flye Lids feed.

“You're watching WCRFL. Thank you for joining us. Today we've received breaking news that has apparently been hidden for the past month or so. We're not entirely sure how these things have been kept secret for so long or even why this is going on, but it appears that something horrible is going on in South America and even part of Central America.

“Recent satellite images are shocking and are raising many questions. South America does not appear on these images. There's just ocean. We know this is not the case in real life, but it appears as though someone is trying to hide something.

“A huge wall has been built right across Panama City and the US military is guarding it day and night. No one gets past this wall. When asked about this wall, government officials have completely denied its existence. But photographic evidence, which is being displayed now, and eye-witness reports confirm that it is very real and something is going on. All flights to and from anywhere in South America have been canceled and airports have reportedly been shut down. No one gets in or out.

“What makes things even more suspicious is the patrol around the entire continent. Boats are situated all around South America, but not just our US forces. There are boats from several countries surrounding the continent, disallowing entrance to or exit from South America. All communication has been severed

from South America. All of their websites and internet access have been shut down, phone lines, wireless communication is non-existent, radio transmission jammers have been put in place, satellite feeds are being monitored and doctored, any means of communicating with anyone in South America has been completely blocked. What is going on? Any news we might – Oh, hold on.

“I’m being told that officials have contacted our station and are informing us to broadcast a message to our viewers. It sounds like a law has been put in place. Yes, this is confirmed. Oh, wow. A life sentence has been put into place for anyone that breaks this law.

“The new law states that no one is to attempt to make any contact whatsoever with anyone in South America. All attempts will be monitored and the offender will be sentenced to life in prison, or in extreme cases will be held on trial for the death penalty. I repeat, do not make any attempt to contact anyone in South America. Whether it be friends or family or networks or anything, do not contact them. They are extremely serious about this. Further development on this and...”

This is it. It's begun, and they don't want anyone to know. But people will know.

The news display fades as I sign out of my Flye Lids feed.

Chapter 4

(3 years later)

“Come on, let's go,” I say to a woman and her son. “It's not going to be safe here for much longer. You need to trust me. Let's go.” My hand is extended toward them.

The boy looks at his mom and says, “Should we go with him, Mom?”

The mother looks at me with wide eyes and hesitates before asking, “Who are you? Why should we go with you?”

“I get it,” I respond. “Some crazy guy with a gun and armour bursts into your house and tells you to go with him, it's scary. You have to trust me though, please.”

“What's your name?” the boy asks.

I lift my visor and say, “Woven. My name is Woven. I saw that you guys triggered a distress signal and so I did what I do best; I came to rescue you. Now, you can either come with me and make it out of here unharmed, or you can wait around for the Zoo to take you away in chains. Your choice, but make it quick.”

“What's the Zoo, Mom?” the boy asks his mother while tugging on her sleeve.

“You're a Prophet then?” the mother asks me.

I take a step toward her and say, “I'm just someone who doesn't like the idea of innocent people suffering for the decisions of bad people in power.”

I turn to her son and tell him, “And the Zoo is a bunch of monkeys working for the bad guys.”

His eyes narrow as he raises an eyebrow.

I laugh and reassure him, “Not actual monkeys, I just call them that because they're strong and will do anything for a treat.”

He smiles and looks at his mom. She puts her hand on his shoulder and turns to me.

“Ok, we'll go,” she says. “But what about my husband?”

“Where is he?” I ask.

She shakes her head and replies, “I don't know, he left this morning to get food. He doesn't usually take this long, but it's been harder and harder to get food these days so he might just be on his way back now.”

“Well,” I say, “we definitely don't have time to sit around and wait for him. How about this? I'll take you two to safety first, then I'll come find your husband and bring him to you. Sound good?”

“Mom, I want to wait for Dad,” the boy says.

The woman smiles at her son then looks at me with worry all over her face.

“He shouldn't be too much longer,” she says.

I sigh. I get it, but I'm getting frustrated.

“You don't understand,” I say. “We really don't have time. When you triggered that distress signal, I picked it up on my network, but so did the Zoo. Their

trackers are just slightly slower than ours, so they're usually just behind us when we get to the signal source. This means that we have to go right now and have already wasted too much time talking about it.”

I extend my arm toward them again and say, “Come on, let's go!”

“Alright, okay, fine, we'll go with you. But please, promise me you'll bring my husband to us afterward,” she says to me.

I nod my head and answer, “Of course, I promise. Now, they're probably going to want to surround this place on all –”

I'm cut off as the sound of glass shattering unexpectedly fills the room.

“That was upstairs, do you have a basement?” I shout.

The woman shakes her head and starts to scream as we hear boots stomping around upstairs.

I run over to the boy and pick him up. I grab the woman's hand and pull her toward the hallway. The footsteps upstairs get louder, which means there are a lot of guys up there. I hear banging at the front door as the Zoo try to break it down. There's no hiding now.

I put the boy down, run back to the living room and pick up the couch.

“Hey!” I yell toward the woman and boy, “Get in that corner, now! Get down and don't move or make a sound!”

They crouch together against the wall and I lean the couch upside-down, covering them. I swing my

gun out in front of me and run toward the front door. I lay two mines on the door mat and pull the pin out of a flashbang. I head up the stairs as I hear metal clinking against the front door. They've attached a chain to it, they've probably got it attached to a vehicle on the other end. I don't have much time now.

The barrel of someone's gun peeks out from behind the door frame at the top of the stairs. I don't hesitate and throw the flashbang through the doorway.

“Grenade! Grenade! Get down!”

The flashbang goes off and I run into the room. The first Zoo I see gets a kick square in the chest and I shoot him before he even falls on his back. The electric arc briefly lights up the room. Two of the Zoo appear from around the corner. I run head first into the first one and tackle him into the second. We're all knocked onto the floor as gunshots blare and bullets race across the room into the walls and ceiling.

I'm straddling the Zoo and I begin to punch him in the head. His helmet is hit off his head and I pick it up to use as a weapon. I smash it across his face, knocking him unconscious. The second Zoo tries to pull himself out from underneath the first one, but I'm quickly standing over him with the helmet raised above my head to strike.

“Drop it!”

A bullet hits me in my chest and I'm knocked backward onto my back as I trip over the first

soldier's body. The helmet falls out of my hand. I hear the door come off its hinges downstairs as it's violently pulled off by a loud truck.

I remove my pistol from its holster and shoot my attacker. The electric blast takes him and his companion out as they fall to the ground unconscious. I get up to my feet.

"Don't even try it," I say to the remaining soldier.

He reaches for the gun he dropped.

I hear shouting as the electric pulse mines detonate downstairs; someone received a warm welcome.

The helmet I dropped is still rocking back and forth from when it fell out of my hand. I pick it up and throw it at the last soldier, knocking his gun out of his hand.

"Wait!" He yells with one hand up toward me. I shoot him and turn around to make my way downstairs.

A soldier is standing in the doorway with his gun drawn, next to two of his unconscious buddies. He sees me coming down the stairs and raises his gun toward me.

"Put your gun down, now!" He yells at me.

With my gun pointed at him I say, "Nope. You put yours down. I'm getting out of here either way, so make your choice."

"This is your last chance," he shouts. "Don't be stupid."

"I'm not sure if you heard me," I say, "but I told you that I will be leaving here, through that front door. So please, put your gun down and get out of

my way.”

He tightens his grip on his gun and furrows his brow.

“Alright,” he says as he points his gun toward the couch leaning against the wall. “I know they're behind there. Drop your gun or I will light them up. Your choice now.”

I shake my head and say, “You're crazy, you know that? You think I'm afraid of you shooting a couch?”

He turns his body toward the couch and yells, “THREE! TWO! –”

His body is unexpectedly thrown forward and electricity arcs against the walls as he lands face down in the hallway.

I run down the stairs with my gun pointed straight in front of me. The boy and his mom are peeking out from behind the couch.

“Can we come out?” the mother asks.

“One second,” I say while holding my hand up toward them.

The front door has closed slightly from the force of the soldier's body pushing past it, chains still hanging from the door handle. I guess they didn't need to break it open. I lean toward it to look outside through the doorway. The neighbours are huddled in their windows and at their front doors, looking at this house. I see my friend, Kendall, with his gun still aimed toward the front door.

“I'm coming out, Kendall. Don't shoot me or I will hurt you!” I shout through the front door.

I hear him laugh and shout back, “No promises.

How do I know you didn't switch sides?"

"If anyone switched sides, it would be you, now don't shoot! I'm bringing out the others too," I shout in return.

Bits of drywall crunch beneath my feet as I walk toward the couch. I grab the armrest and throw the couch aside.

"Okay," I say to the mother and her son, "now we can go."

We leave through the front door and walk toward Kendall. He's already pulling open the doors of the Zoo's truck and motioning for us to get in. My eyes search for more soldiers as we walk across the front lawn to the truck.

"Looks like you've cleaned up alright out here," I say, waving my hand toward the truck.

"Yeah, man," says Kendall. "They didn't even see me hanging back around the corner. I knew you could handle the Zoo that kicked their way in through the windows, so I held tight and waited for the others to get out of their truck after their buddy got the door open. The first two guys loved your welcome gift and that third guy was too busy soiling his diapers to notice me taking care of his buddies coming out of the truck. You're welcome, by the way, for dissolving that situation at the door there."

My eyes narrow and I throw him a glare.

"Oh, yeah," I say sarcastically, "thank you so much, I really don't know what I would do without you."

He laughs and gets in the truck on the driver side.

"I'm driving," he says.

I help the mother and her son into the truck and I hop in on the passenger side.

“So, Woven. Who are your friends?” Kendall asks as he starts the truck.

I point toward the woman and say, “Well, we have – sorry.”

She shakes her head, “No, I'm sorry. I was so caught up in what was going on, I didn't even introduce myself. I'm Ava, and this is my son, Liam.”

I turn around in my seat and shake their hands. “Pleased to officially meet you,” I say. “Sorry about your place,”

“That's okay, Woven,” Liam says with a slight grin. “We were planning on moving soon anyway. Thanks for saving us. Were those the bad guys you were talking about? The Zoo?”

The truck goes over a bunch of loose rocks on the road and we all bounce a little in our seats.

I respond, “Yes, Liam. That was most definitely them. Not very friendly, huh? There are usually more of them, I think we got lucky this time.”

Ava reaches over and puts her hand on my shoulder. “We really are grateful for you and your friend. Thank you.”

“Any time,” says Kendall. “It's literally what we do.”

“Kendall's a good guy,” I say to Ava. “He's been helping me find dreamers for about a year or so now.” I slap him on the shoulder. “He's great.”

Kendall laughs and leans over to punch my leg. He says, “Don't believe everything Woven says. I can

be a jerk most of the time.”

“Watch the road,” I bark at Kendall. “Jerk.”

“What's a dreamer?” Ava asks. “Is that us?”

“Yes, exactly,” I respond. “People like you, who have had the dream and have been shown what's going on in the world. There are lots of dreamers around the globe. In fact, two of my best friends, Co-Z and Bongo, are in Asia and Africa right now, helping find dreamers there.”

“Are they Prophets too?” Ava asks. “I've been reading lots about the Prophets and their disciples ever since having the dream.”

“Well,” I reply, “we definitely don't call ourselves that, but in accordance to what people are referring to, yes, Co-Z, Bongo, and I are what they consider Prophets. We were three of the first people on earth to have the dreams. We were the ones who started this whole stand against the Zoo and their leaders.”

Ava's eyes widen and she says, “Well if you're a Prophet, then you'll have no problem saving my husband! Right?”

I smile and respond, “Ava, I've been doing this for almost three years now and I can guarantee that it has always been nothing but problems saving anyone. But I made you a promise and I don't plan on breaking that promise. As soon as we bring you back to the RSD, Kendall and I will go back and find your husband. What's his name?”

Ava quickly replies, “His name is Cole.”

She pauses as she wipes her eyes. “What is the RSD? You said you were taking us there. Is that far

away?”

“It's actually pretty close,” I answer. “I think there are almost twenty of them here in BC. But the closest one to us here is in Cranbrook. The Lids are showing that we're only about six minutes away.”

“And as Woven forgot to mention,” Kendall chimes in, “RSD is a safe haven for the dreamers we rescue from the grasp of the Zoo. It stands for the Resistance Sanctuary for Dreamers. There are lots of the so-called “disciples” guarding these places. They're very safe, I promise you that. I can also promise that at the RSD you will learn a lot about what's going on in the world right now; stuff that you probably never imagined could happen to us.”

“Bad stuff?” Liam asks with wide eyes. “Like in the dreams?”

“Hey Liam,” I say. “Don't even worry about it. I'll get you guys to the RSD and you'll be fine. I'll find your dad and the only thing you'll have to worry about is whether or not there's dessert after dinner.”

Liam nods his head and smiles. He leans over to grab his mom's hand and rests his head on her arm.

“Thank you, again,” Ava says. “Really, I was afraid they'd come and take us away. They took our neighbour's boys the other day and I could hear them talking about the dream. When I started having the dream I thought they would somehow know and come take me away from my family. So again, really, I appreciate this.”

I smile and say, “Of course. You did the right thing, signaling for us. They would have found out

sooner or later, so it's best that we got to you first.”

Ava closes her eyes as a tear rolls down her cheek. She lets out a short laugh and wipes the tear away.

“Don't cry, Mom,” Liam says. “Everything's gonna be okay now. Woven even said there might be dessert! Wouldn't that be the —”

The rear passenger tire of the truck explodes. Kendall struggles to keep the truck on the road. We're skidding from side to side and we hear snapping against the side of the truck. We're being shot at. The back windshield smashes and Ava screams as she covers Liam with her body.

“Keep your heads down!” Kendall yells.

Two more of the tires get shot at and burst, causing the truck to spin almost completely around. It skips along the pavement and comes to a stop at the edge of the road.

“Kendall, I have no idea where they're shooting from.” I say. “We need to get out of the truck now, though. We can make it to the RSD on foot.”

A bullet skids across the roof of the truck.

“They've been connected to my stream for a couple minutes now and they know we're in trouble, which means they'll already be waiting for us.”

Liam shouts as his door is hit with three bullets. They don't pass through into the car.

“We'll have lots of cover getting in,” I continue. “Let's go!”

“Sounds good to me,” Kendall says. “No sense in sitting around here, volunteering as target practice.”

I turn to Ava and Liam and say, “Ava, grab onto

Liam and go ahead of me, I will stay behind you to protect you. Just go exactly where I tell you to go and we'll be okay. Don't stop for anything. We're only a few minutes away from where we need to be and there will be people waiting for us there. We can do this. Are you ready?"

The passenger side-view mirror is smashed as a bullet passes through it.

Ava uses the back of her hand to wipe the tears from her face and says, "I think so. I can try."

Kendall kicks his door open and starts shooting his gun.

"I'll cover you while you get out. Move! Go, go, go, go!" He shouts.

"Okay," I say to Ava and Liam, "let's go now!"

I open my door and begin to shoot toward the roof tops of some nearby buildings. I point in the direction of the RSD and tell Ava to keep moving. I continue to shoot and walk backward. The other cars parked on the side of the road provide decent cover from the Zoo. We move from car to car, weaving around and ducking behind them. Kendall is on the other side of the street, firing down toward where we came from.

"You hitting any?" He calls out to me.

I shake my head and say, "I don't think so. I don't even know where they are. Did they stop firing?"

Three bullets crash into the pavement beside me, shooting up bits of debris into the air. I jump over the hood of a car, pulling Ava and Liam down onto the sidewalk.

"That answers that question!" I yell over to

Kendall.

“Dollar store to the right. On the roof. There's two of them. You see 'em?” Kendall asks.

I peek over the hood of the car at the end of the street. I see the dollar store. It's right on the corner of the street, perfect for spotting us. One of the Zoo lifts up her gun and fires at the car, smashing the windshield.

“Yup. I see them.” I say as I duck back behind the car. “Probably can't take them out from here, though. What do you think? You distract them, I'll get up to the roof and take care of them? Sound good?”

Kendall gives me a thumbs-up from across the street and yells, “Game on! Ava, Liam, you two stick with me!”

He gets up and starts shooting toward the roof. The Zoo duck down as we both shoot at them. I sprint across the street and through the dollar store parking lot. The door at the front is blocked off. This place has been closed for a long time. There's an opening where the glass windows have been smashed at the front of the building, which is where I enter.

The sounds from Kendall's gun echo through the empty store. It's weird how quiet public places have become. I'm trying to be as fast and as quiet as I possibly can, but each step reverberates throughout the entire building. They're probably going to hear me coming. So be it.

I find the stairs and my visor adjust to the darkness of the stairwell. There are only five flights of stairs. I take them three steps at a time. When I'm almost at

the top, I get a text display on my Flye Lids from Kendall:

Kendall: I think they know you're coming up. One of them moved away from the edge and it looked like they were moving your way. Just a heads up.

The stairwell is filled with light and then quickly fades to black again. The sound of the rooftop door slamming echoes down the stairwell. I've got company.

"I know you're here," I hear a voice echo down the stairwell. It's the Zoo from the roof.

Her flashlight sends a beam of light down the stairs. I back away from the railing and lean up against the wall.

"Just give us the woman and her kid and you can leave unharmed," she says. "We don't want to hurt you or them. It's much safer if we take them from here."

As her flashlight scans around the stairs, I switch the setting on my gun to a directional E.M.P. As soon as she's in my cross-hairs I squeeze the trigger. Her flashlight turns off and she begins to shoot at random. I sprint up the stairs, zig-zagging to avoid getting hit. When she's within arm's reach, I kick her hard in the chest. The force of the kick causes her to drop her gun and fall back through the door to the roof. My visor returns to regular visibility as I run through the door. The soldier is already getting back on her feet.

I look across the roof and see the other Zoo turning toward us. My gun is up before his and I shoot

without hesitating. As soon as the blasts leaves my gun, I feel a sharp pain in my wrist as the soldier I kicked slams her elbow down on my hand, causing me to drop my gun. I throw my hand up to the side of my head to block her incoming punch. Her wrist hits my forearm and I quickly bend down and turn my shoulders to elbow her in the knee. She cries out in pain. As she falls to one knee, I pull out my zapstab and swing it at her arm. The second it touches her, a bright blue electric arc appears and she falls to the ground, unconscious.

Kendall: Thanks, friend, but we're still getting shot at from behind. Come back down and help us out.

“Hold on a second, I think I have a better idea,” I say.

Flye Lids converts what I said to text and relays the message to Kendall.

The Zoo that I shot earlier had dropped his weapon, an automatic sniper rifle. Pea gravel crunches beneath my boots as I run to pick it up. The roof has a ledge and I use it to support the rifle. Looking through the scope, I can see four Zoo soldiers shooting at the car Kendall, Ava, and Liam are hiding behind.

“Kendall, I'll give you some cover. You three run around the corner across from me at the intersection. Go when you hear me firing,” I message to Kendall.

Kendall: Deal. Let's do this.

I start shooting in front of the Zoo's feet as they scramble to find cover behind the cars on the side of

the road. Kendall, Ava and Liam begin to run toward the intersection. A soldier pops his gun up over the hood of one of the cars and starts to shoot at them. My cross-hairs glide over to the windshield beside his head and I pull the trigger. The glass smashes and the soldier pulls his gun back down behind the car as he ducks for cover.

RSD – Cranbrook: We've got cover all over Victoria Avenue and Fourth Street, so you just get over here and we got your back!

“Hey Kendall, let me know when you're around the corner. The RSD just messaged me and said they have lots of cover for us up ahead, so I'll come down when you guys are clear,” I message to Kendall.

Kendall: We just made it around the corner. Come on, I'll cover you once you get to street level.

I squeeze a few more rounds into the cars the Zoo are hiding behind and drop the rifle. I probably don't have very long before they start sprinting over here, so I run across the roof and swing open the door to the stairwell. My visor's location memory instantly changes visibility when I pass through the doorway and I maneuver down the stairs with ease. As I'm exiting the dollar store, I look to my left and see the Zoo running toward me with their guns raised. Behind them are even more Zoo soldiers. That's no good. I need to be gone, now! My legs are pumping hard as I make a quick sprint across the intersection to Fourth Street.

Kendall: No worries, buddy, I got you.

Kendall shoots at the Zoo just as they begin to fire

at me. I feel a bullet graze the back of my armour as I sprint by Kendall, putting my arm out to pull him with me. We fall on the pavement and hear the RSD crew begin to shoot at the Zoo from the tops of the buildings.

Ava runs over to us and says, "Come on! They're still coming!"

"It's all good, Ava!" I reassure her. "The Zoo would never come this close to the RSD. They know how many people we have guarding the place. We're safe now. RSD's just on the other side of those houses." I point behind her and she turns to look.

Liam walks over to us as Kendall and I are getting back up to our feet and says, "Excuse me, Woven. Why didn't you just shoot those guys? You had that big gun and you could have stopped them from coming to try and get you."

"Yeah, but that big gun shoots lead bullets," I explain. "Those kill people. I don't kill people. None of us do. That's not what the RSD is about. It wouldn't make very much sense if we spent all of our time trying to save people from being killed, then when someone attacks us we just killed them, right?"

Liam shakes his head, "I guess not. Thanks for saving us again, Woven."

"You are very welcome, Liam," I respond.

The four of us continue to walk toward the RSD, which is now in sight.

Ava touches my arm and says, "Woven, are you sure this place is safe? I mean, couldn't the Zoo just come and shoot everyone with their jets or

something?”

I smile and reply, “They wouldn't do that. You'll learn more about it soon, but the government's biggest concern right now is keeping civilians civilized. With all the food shortages, constant forest fires and crop failures, imagine if people saw a jet fly by and bomb a big community center like the RSD. Nobody would be okay with that. So, they keep to their foot soldiers, where they can easily brush off the shooting in the streets and *random* house inspections as a war on terror. To attack a place like the RSD without making it look like the government is working against and not for the people would take a lot of organization on their part; a lot more organization than they're willing to put in right now. We're safe. You and your son are safe.”

Ava smiles and nods her head.

“Alright,” I continue. “Let's go inside and get things figured out. You're going to need some rest.”

We reach the front entrance of the main RSD building and Kendall opens the door for us. We step inside and are greeted by our friends.

Chapter 5

Welcome to the Resistance Sanctuary for Dreamers! Here's what you need to know about what's going on in the world today. If you have any questions at all, we advise you to continue reading, as your question(s) may be answered in the subsequent text. If your question(s) isn't answered, be sure to write down anything you might want to ask and bring it to the next information session. Information sessions are held every evening at 7:00pm.

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Section 1 – Prophets, Disciples, and Dreamer

What is the RSD and who is it comprised of? Well, to get the big picture you need the full story. In 2040, three young children had the first 'dreams' we are

aware of. These young children are known as Woven, Co-Z, and Bongo. They are from Kentucky, USA. These are our 'Prophets' (which is a name coined by those whom they have saved). A few years after they had the dreams, they learned that others around where they lived were having the same dream. They began to find those that were having these dreams and they met in secret. As their numbers grew, they began to establish larger meeting places. The government learned about these meeting places and the people who were meeting there. They were not happy with what was going on and a very hushed war broke out between those in power and the dreamers.

In the early days, those who fought alongside the Prophets called themselves Disciples. The beginning of the fight between those who had the dreams and those who worked for the government caused a pause in the work of finding and saving. Once things began to progress again, the Disciples stopped calling the newcomers Disciples and simply called them 'dreamers.' Those who learned to fight and save others would then be called Disciples. We currently have RSDs in 13 countries, including: Canada, USA, Mexico, Greece, Italy, Slovenia, Georgia, France, Indonesia, Uzbekistan, Zimbabwe, Australia, and New Zealand.

Section 2 – Iy Anaq

We have seen the giants. If you've had the dream, then so have you! But who are they? How did they make their way into your dreams? We believe we

know the answers to those questions.

'Ty Anaq', or 'the Anakim' are people from an ancient civilization. They used to live on the surface world and were mighty warriors. Because of their size, they were unbeatable as a people. But now, they live inside the earth. That's right, there is more to this earth than just the surface. Inside the earth there is water and land just like there is on the surface, as well as a radiant source of light.

The Anakim have been visiting us for thousands of years, but because of their advanced technology, we are usually unable to recognize them. Although they were a warring people, they were and are a very considerate people. They have done what they can to help and influence us for good.

So how did they appear in your dreams? Well, according to our research, the Anakim use a radio-like communication technique. They emit signals from inside the earth outward to the surface through intricate cave-tunnel systems, just like the one discovered in 2057. The strange thing about their signals is that they do not look or act like the radio-waves we are used to observing. Their signals move slower and as though they were some kind of liquid, which they are not, but only act that way. Somehow, they are able to embed messages - images and dialogue – into these signals and when the signals reach those closest to these tunnel systems, the messages are received via dreams.

The giants are very wise and very knowledgeable. So far, everything they have predicted has happened.

It looks as though the other things they have predicted will also definitely happen. From their text, it would seem as though they do not rely on their own understanding of things for these predictions, but as it says in their text, they rely on something or someone called 'the Light' to direct them. They are trying to help us. We're not too sure why it's important to them, but we know that it is.

As mentioned in the previous section, there are RSDs in several countries, and this is due to the location of the cave tunnel systems. The names and locations of the caves that the giants are broadcasting through are as follows:

Mammoth Cave (37.1833° N, 86.1000° W)

Heavy Breather Cave

(49.199183° N, 114.749897° W)

Sistema Sac Actun (20.2466° N, 87.4641° W)

Dero Caves (36.638181° N, 22.38077° E)

Mt. Epomeo (40.7300° N, 13.8950° E)

Cehi II (46.3363° N, 13.5196° E)

Krubera Caves (43.4100° N, 40.3400° E)

Gouffre Mirolida (46.0847° N, 6.7281° E)

Sra Kaew (8.043876°N, 98.815849°E)

Boy Bulok (38.39583° N, 67.52981° E)

Great Pyramid of Giza

(29.9792° N, 31.1344° E)

Chinhoyi Caves (17.3500° S, 30.1250° E)

Naracoorte Caves

(37.033188°S, 140.796044°E)

Nettlebed Caves

(41.2550327759° S, 172.692804337° E)

Section 3 – Empty Bellies and the Rotten Zoo

If you are here at the RSD it's because you have had the dream and have been brought here. This means that you have had some things shown to you by the giants and some other things only mentioned to you. Let's go over those things:

1) Destruction: This is a prophecy that is already partially fulfilled. At the time of the first dreams life was very different. Food was not scarce like it is now. As a nation, we were not under such apparent surveillance like we are now, with soldiers roaming the streets and “random” house inspections. We still had communication with South America. Our government was actually still working for the people... kind of.

The destruction and chaos we have already seen has been both directly and indirectly due to the government. Some of the destruction is simply the fault of all people on this planet. Like global warming, for example. This was caused by our lack of concern for the environment, which resulted in forest fires, coastal flooding, crop shortage, lakes drying up, etc. Unfortunately for us, the government saw this as a window of opportunity and disguised their own attacks as “simply natural” occurrences. The fact that 33% of the entire planet's plant life has been destroyed is not simply due to poor climate conditions, even though our government would have us believe so. We have video evidence and countless eye-witness reports of soldiers burning forests with flamethrowers and other combustibles. There have

also been claims by farmers that soldiers have destroyed entire crops and poisoned the soil on their land. We have been warned that things are only going to get worse.

2) An Evil Plot: So exactly what is going on? Why is the government doing this? And how come no other nations have come to stop our leaders?

Here's the deal. There have been many kidnappings since the dreams started. Those who have had the dreams and contact the RSD are usually caught in a race between us and the Zoo. You either get saved by us or taken away by the Zoo.

The Zoo is a government-run military group. Their objective is to hide the truth, which they do by making dreamers disappear. The government doesn't want the truth to be widespread and accessible since a rebellion might cause their evil plan to fall apart. Now, the main reason that no one else has come to stop the Zoo or the government is because every other nation's leaders are in on the evil plan.

The Anakim warned us of the world's leaders scheming together to achieve a sinister goal. There is a group of evil people, who currently hold esteemed positions in politics and in their communities who wish to eliminate everyone on this planet, except for those they choose. They plan on "starting over" with their selected people. They believe this world is in need of a deep cleaning, that there are too many worthless lives among us. This is obviously not true; every life has value.

The world leaders, which we have named "The

Virulent” have been planning this evil for many years and it is well in the works already. We don't know the extent of what steps they plan on taking next, but we do know that they are well-prepared and extremely organized.

The Virulent have prepared themselves a bunker in Antarctica, where they've gathered and stored the things they will need to repopulate the earth. Things such as seeds for every type of plant life, as well as eggs and semen for the many different types of animal life, which shows us that their plans might involve much, much more destruction and chaos. We've already seen a huge decline in the number of animals on the earth, especially livestock.

We have only recently discovered the contents of this bunker and its location (66.60349° S, 99.7202° E). We plan on eventually attacking this location in order to disrupt their plans once we are large enough in numbers.

Section 4 – Saving For A Rainy Day

With the Virulent on the loose, we strive to free the people. Alongside the Prophets, we fight to bring freedom and safety to those who have received the dreams and request assistance. The RSDs are safe havens for all. We are guarded and secure. We have underground shelters made to withstand even a nuclear blast. With food as scarce as it has become, we have planned ahead and have gathered food and supplies to last us long enough to re-establish ourselves if something horrible were to happen. We

are strong and we will stop the Virulent from destroying our precious planet. Do not be afraid; be prepared. Welcome to the RSD.

Please note: We strongly advise against using your Flye Lids to communicate with those outside the RSD network. The signal you activated, which allowed ourselves and the Zoo to locate you, has given the Zoo reason and ability to track and monitor all your conversations outside of the RSD network. Contact made with those outside of the RSD may put the contacted people in great danger. Thank you for understanding.

Chapter 6

Co-Z: Hey Woven, how are things going over there?

“Co-Z!” I reply to her message. “I miss you so much! Things are going well over here. We just brought a couple more dreamers to the RSD. Are you missing Zimbabwe yet?”

Co-Z: I miss you too! It's really hard to stay focused sometimes, knowing that you're all the way on the other side of the world from where I am. I hope you're staying safe.

Yes! Zimbabwe was amazing! So many dreamers over there and they're so willing to fight with us and make a change. It was just so awesome being there with those people, but they're in the process of opening a second RSD there. So, they definitely didn't need me anymore.

“But Egypt's treating you well?” I ask.

Co-Z: Oh yeah, no, I'm loving it here. The pyramids at Giza have been oozing with dream signals lately. The RSD tripled in numbers in the last two weeks alone. I'm safe, just so you know. No worries. I'm with a few of my new friends now. They've been with me in Egypt, helping out for the

last few months.

“Oh, trust me,” I reply. “I’m not worried about whether or not you’re safe. I’m completely aware of how capable you are on your own. I will admit, it does make me happy knowing that you have company with you though. You know, so you have an audience when you’re kicking everyone’s butt.”

Co-Z: Ha ha, very funny! I've gotten into some pretty serious messes over here though, I wouldn't be so confident if I were you.

“Hey, come on,” I say. “Don’t give me any more reason to worry!”

Co-Z: No, no, it's all good. I'm always cautious anyway. So, what are you up to right now?

I smile as I read Co-Z’s messages. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen her last and I am really missing her.

“You know, saving the world.” I message. “One dreamer at a time.”

Co-Z: Oh, is that what you're doing right now? Saving the world, huh? Ha ha, well I guess you better get back to it then. Don't let me distract you!

“No no!” I respond. “I’ve still got some time before the whole saving-the-world thing. I want to chat with you.”

Co-Z: I know. It really sucks not having you here with me.

“Definitely,” I agree. “It would be a million times easier if you and I were kicking butt together again. I’m heading out to rescue a husband of one of the

dreamers. The dreamer's name is Ava and we helped her and her son, Liam, out of a nasty situation earlier. I promised her that I'd go get her husband, so that's what I'm going to do. I'm taking Kendall with me to help. We're doing a food-supply run afterwards. We still have a lot of supplies at the RSD, but since the whole increase in fishing, we figured we'd collect and store a bunch of dried fish. You know, for protein and what not."

Co-Z: Good thinking. We just started doing the same thing over here. In fact, I have a bunch of dried fish in my bag with me right now. Gotta be prepared.

I hope your adventure goes well and you find Ava's husband! Let me know how it goes.

"Thank you," I reply. "I'll be sure to let you know. How do you think Bongo's doing? Should we add him in?"

Co-Z: Definitely! I'll add him in.

Bongo, what's up?

Bongo: Ahhh yeeeeaaaahhh! How you guys been? Am I interrupting a special moment or anything?

I smile as I reply, "Bongo, the warrior of the southeastern world! We miss you. How are things in Indonesia?"

Co-Z: I don't want to hear about any romances you might have had! Just let us know how the RSD is growing over there.

Bongo: Now now, it's all business over here. I would never even consider something as childish

as *romance* in a time like this! People are hungry and angry and wild and scared and anxious and pretty, lots of pretty girls here. In fact, there is this one girl right now at the RSD who –

Co-Z: I'm gonna stop you right there, young man. How's the Zoo down there? Are they as nosy as they are over here?

Bongo: Man, probably worse. The RSD is doing great - much better than I had ever expected – but shoot, the Zoo are relentless. Every now and then they try to make these organized attacks on the RSD building, not like they'd ever stand a chance against us, but last time it was a little sketchy. They were really striking hard. My time is almost up here though. I've got a ton of requests from farther west to move out that way. More work to be done, of course.

“That's how it's looking out here as well,” I message. “I'll be heading east soon, eventually back down south along the coast, I'm guessing.”

Co-Z: Well, it's good to hear that things are moving in the right direction. The Virulent might be up to a bigger challenge than they had originally thought. It's pretty awesome to think about how close we're getting to actually making a difference. Who knows, maybe in a few more months we'll have enough people to make a stand. Even try to end this thing for good.

“Yeah,” I reply. “But we don't want to get ahead of ourselves. The Virulent have a big Zoo and they might be a little more organized than we think. With

food quickly disappearing and all these kidnappings, they're bound to have other things up their sleeves. Let's just keep doing what we do and make sure we do it fast. We're running out of time.”

Bongo: Good point, party pooper. Co-Z makes a good point too, though. In a few months, we very well may have enough dreamers to make a stand against the Virulent. We'll be able to organize our team and attack their bunker. Take it from them. Regrow what they've taken from this world.

Co-Z: Exactly. We really should be careful though. Woven's right about the Virulent. They do seem to be up to something other than just trying to starve everyone. It's not going to be easy, that's for sure. But I mean, look how far we've gotten already. I believe that we can do this.

“It really sucks not being with you guys,” I say. “But we're almost there. We can do this. We will. And I'm sure we'll be meeting up before too long anyway. Alright, take care of yourselves out there. Bongo, let me know when you get things going in your new location. I'll do the same.

Co-Z: Sounds good, Woven. You two be safe.

Bongo: Will do. Woven, Co-Z, until next time! Peace!

“Later Bongo,” I reply.

Disconnected from group chat: Bongo.

“Hey Co-Z,” I message.

Co-Z: I know, Woven. I love you too.

“I love you,” I respond.

Disconnected from group chat: Co-Z.

I smile to myself and walk toward the RSD. Time to get moving.

Chapter 7

It's getting dark out as Kendall and I load a few bags into our RSD-supplied truck. This is a good thing and a bad thing. There's a lot less visibility in the dark, which for us means the Zoo will have a harder time spotting us. It also means that there will be a lot more Zoo out on the streets. The government has a curfew in place and they are very strict with their enforcement of this curfew.

Normally, in a situation like this we wouldn't take a vehicle with us. They're too big and move fast enough to be noticeable, but we're in a crunch for time and also have to bring back quite a bit of food with us.

“I sure hope this trip is worth the trouble,” Kendall says.

I close the truck door as I sit in the driver seat and say, “It's always worth the trouble, Kendall. This is someone's husband, someone's dad.”

“You know what I mean,” Kendall replies. “I just hate doing anything past dark. Also, this guy doesn't even know we're coming, so I'm really hoping he's friendly.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” I reply as I start

the engine. "I asked Ava about him and she said he is a tough guy who would do anything for his family. Sounds like he might be difficult to deal with if we don't start with a solid first impression."

Kendall nods his head and says, "Yeah, I don't imagine him being very friendly if he gets back home to an empty, shot-up house."

"Let's just get there first then," I respond.

It's difficult to maneuver through the streets without the headlights on, but it's the safest way to get around right now. We slowly pass houses as we inch along the road. We just need to get out of the main part of town, then we can move a little faster and more safely.

"Up ahead, over there," Kendall says to me as he motions to the right.

There is a beam of light coming from a searchlight mounted on the roof of a building at the end of the street. It's slowly scanning along the sidewalks and across the road.

I quickly turn the wheel and point the truck in the direction of a side street.

"Guess we're going this way," I say quietly.

We continue down the side street for a minute until I gently push down on the brakes.

"Over there," I say, pointing to a shadowy figure on the sidewalk. "Zoo."

"Keep driving," Kendall says. "Don't slow down."

He opens the door and steps out onto the road. I slowly take my foot off the brake and continue to drive along the road.

Kendall quietly runs toward the buildings with his zapstab in hand.

I lower my visor and it automatically adjusts to night-vision. The shadowy figure is definitely a Zoo soldier. His back is facing me as I drive toward him. Kendall is only a few meters away from the Zoo.

The truck is now too close for comfort to the soldier and I'm getting a little bit antsy. I hover my foot over the brake, ready to slam down and help Kendall if I need to. I hear the tiniest squeal come from the tire. The Zoo looks over with his gun drawn and its pointed toward the truck. He begins to shout something at me but is instantly silenced before his first syllable gets out as Kendall touches the zapstab to the soldier's neck. He drops to the ground, unconscious, and jerks a couple times.

Kendall jumps back into the truck and says, "Sorry, that was really close."

"Little bit too close for my liking," I reply. "But it did the trick. Let's keep moving."

We keep our eyes peeled as we continue to inch along the road. We're only a couple more streets away from getting out of here.

"Left, or right?" I ask Kendall. "Both will get us to where we're going. You choose."

"Left," he says, then changes his mind. "Nope, definitely right. Let's go right."

"Done," I respond as I turn the steering wheel.

When we're about halfway down the street, we see a Zoo truck approaching the corner of the intersecting street.

“Go back, go back, go back!” Kendall pleads

The truck makes an audible *clunk* as it shifts into reverse and we proceed to make our way back to where we came from.

Kendall is tapping his hands on his legs. “Oh man, he's gonna turn that corner,” he says. “We're screwed!”

“No, no, we got this. We're good,” I reassure him.

With one hand on the wheel and the other on the back of Kendall's head rest, I'm propped up in my seat and turned so that I can look out the back window. As we're nearing the previous street I see another Zoo truck coming right toward us.

“No, you're right,” I sigh. “We are screwed.”

My head is turning left to right, scanning everywhere for a place to escape.

“There!” I say, almost too loudly.

The truck lurches forward as it shifts back into drive and I step on the gas. The first Zoo truck is now turning the corner and the second truck is just about to round the other corner. I pull the truck toward the adjacent car parked along side the street and perform the quickest parallel park of my entire life. I squeeze the keys in my gloved-fist as I shut the engine off.

“There's no way they didn't see us,” I say as both trucks have now turned onto the street we are parked on.

Kendall nods and says, “I'm with you on that one.” He pulls his gun from his holster and holds it between his knees. We both slide down in our seats as the

two trucks begin to drive toward each other. It seems as though their headlights are lighting up the entire street. As they move closer to us my heart begins to pound in my chest. I feel blood pumping throughout my body and I notice that I'm sweating. If we can't silence whoever might be in these trucks before they alert the others we are going to be in much more trouble than we'll be able to handle.

The second truck is now only two car lengths away from us and the first is about four away. I take a deep breath and let it out slowly as I unholster my pistol.

The first truck has stopped and the second truck is slowly driving beside our truck. It doesn't stop. It keeps moving down the street toward the first truck. Once the two trucks are side-by-side, both vehicles are shifted into park. The drivers roll their windows down and begin to talk to each other.

“What time did your watch start?” The first soldier asks. “I thought you were supposed to be my relief in the morning.”

The second soldier responds, “I *was* supposed to be, but I've switched with Gagnon. And I think he switched with Nelson. So, one of the two will be your relief in the morning. How are things looking?”

“Ah, you know how it is,” the first soldier replies. “Pretty much the same thing every night. Hey, you see Lam before you started?”

“No, what happened? She alright?” the second soldier asks.

“Oh man,” the first soldier says. “You should

check her out after your shift. Those dreamers got her bad, man. Broken rib, fractured kneecap, and her shoulder's all toasted.”

“Shoot!” the second soldier replies. “Those dreamers are crazy. They're like wild animals, they just need to be locked up.”

“Agreed,” the first soldier laughs. “But hey, they've been doing more of that overseas lately, eh?”

“What do you mean,” asks the second soldier. “Like over in Israel? They still puttin' up a fight?”

The first soldier answers, “Yeah, man. Apparently, we've caught two more of their leaders though. I don't know how much that'll help, but at least it's something.”

I look over at Kendall as his eyes widen.

“You think they'd just let it go after all this time, hey?” the second soldier asks.

“Well, yeah,” the first soldier replies. “They're literally the only ones not on board. They don't see the problem with that or something?”

Both Zoo soldiers laugh.

Kendall: You hearing what I'm hearing?

“A nation that actually has leaders fighting against the Virulent?” I message back. “We were positive there weren't any left.”

Kendall: We definitely need to get on that, ASAP.

“I'm messaging Co-Z and Bongo now. They'll be able to relay on-land messages much quicker than us trying to Flye Lids our way in there,” I reply as I send the video and audio feed of what we just witnessed

over to Co-Z and Bongo. The message is marked "Find Out if Israel is On Our Side."

"You think the dreamers are getting big enough to start something?" the second soldier asks.

"Nah," the first soldier answers. "They can keep hanging out together all they want, but it's not going to make a difference. There's just too many of us. They don't have enough supplies to last them much longer anyway."

"Yeah, I suppose you're right," the second soldier says. "Yet, here we are watching the streets. Making sure they don't start anything."

The first soldier laughs and replies, "You're something, Palmer. Let's get back to it, yeah?"

Both Zoo soldiers shift their trucks back into drive and continue down the street away from us.

"Well, that was ridiculously close," I say as my heartbeat returns to its normal rate.

"Yup, let's get out of here!" Kendall responds.

I start the truck and we begin to drive again. Moving quickly to avoid another close call, we finally make it out of the crowded streets of the city and make our way toward Ava's house.

"Alright," Kendall begins after a few minutes of silence. "What's the game plan?"

"Okay," I answer. "So, I'm assuming there are going to be soldiers keeping an eye on this place since we just rescued people from it. Given the current situation, I see this going one of three ways. One, we get there and Ava's husband is already there. Two, we get there and have to wait for him to arrive.

Three, he has already come home, saw what happened, and left to go find them, in which case we are in a lot of trouble. Most likely because there is no way he's getting past the Zoo and they won't want to just let us bring him back to his family at an RSD.”

“So, we're hoping for option one then?” Kendall asks.

“Yes, definitely,” I answer. “Depending on how he reacts, it'll either be fun times or really stressful, but either way, he'll be there and we can safely bring him back with us. Option two is super risky and three just sucks.”

“Well, let's just hope he's home then,” Kendall says while giving me a thumbs-up.

“Let's hope. If he is home and we can get him out of there safely, then we go a few miles east and pick up the huge supply of dried fish we're supposed to get. Then we take the scenic route and we're back home before morning.”

Kendall taps the dashboard and says, “Sounds good to me! Fun night of adventure!”

I laugh and reply, “Exactly. Just some guys out for a good time. No party quite like a husband rescue and dried fish party.”

“Typical weekend, really,” Kendall jokes.

We're getting pretty close to Ava's house now. As we approach her neighbourhood, we notice some lights are on in one of the houses.

“Alright, I'm going to park by these houses here. It's probably going to be much easier on foot from here,” I say to Kendall.

He nods his head and replies, “You got it.”

I pull the truck over to the side of the road and put it in park. We open our doors and step out onto the pavement. Both Kendall and I have our guns drawn as we quietly run across people's front yards.

Kendall: What's up with those lights? I thought curfew was in effect.

“I'm pretty sure it is,” I message back. “It's probably Zoo. Maybe they're causing trouble.”

Kendall: Should we try and get a closer look? Maybe listen in if we can?

“Sure thing,” I reply. “Follow me.”

Kendall nods and we run across the street to the backyard of the house with its lights on. There are two Zoo trucks parked on the street. One in the driveway of this house and the other a few houses down from Ava's.

“Yep,” I message. “It's definitely them.”

I open the fence to the back yard and we walk through toward the back door. Through the window, we can see shadowy shapes moving around. The sound of a plate smashing fills the air. A man's muffled voice is heard, then two more voices. They're shouting.

My helmet has an “auditory zoom” built into it, which is controlled through a Flye Lids connection. When I zoom in with my Flye Lids, the audio signal is amplified in the direction I'm looking. I use this to listen in on what's being said, but it's still muffled and I only pick up bits and pieces.

“... asked around and we know ... with the family

down the street. There ... two people that left with ... records show that there are three residents at this ... “

“I'm telling you, I swear we don't know ... looking for! We're just neighbours and ... this. Just please leave us alone and don't hurt ... family.”

“You ... worry about than us ... your family! I can promise you that if you don't ... that you're family's not going to be together for much ... ”

I turn to Kendall and message him, “We gotta get Ava's husband now and get these Zoo out of here! They're looking for him and they're going to hurt this family soon.”

Kendall: Alright, let's get on this!

We run back to the front yard and scan the street before sprinting toward Ava's house. We jump over the gate to her neighbour's backyard and start to climb the fence when we hear a loud bang. The noise echoes through the quiet street.

“What was that?” I ask. “That sounded like a gun.”

The wooden fence creaks and rattles as we jump back over it to get to the front yard. We look down the street and see a man with a twelve-gauge shotgun in his hands. He points it toward the Zoo's truck that's parked at the house of the interrogated family and fires at the windshield. It smashes and glass bits fly up into the air and crash along the driveway.

“That can't be good,” Kendall says.

“GET OUT HERE NOW!” the man yells toward the house. “WHERE'S MY BOY? WHERE'S MY WIFE? GET OUT HERE NOW!”

“That's our guy,” I sigh.

He fires another burst of pellets at the truck and it tears into part of the hood and explodes the front passenger tire.

“I'll smoke the driveway and cover you, let's get him to come back to his house,” I say to Kendall.

“Done,” he replies.

A loud hiss emerges from the grenade I toss in front of Ava's husband and smoke begins to billow out of it. Ava's husband lets off a couple shots in random directions. Zoo soldiers stick their heads out of the window of the neighbour's house and begin to fire their weapons toward the smoke. I duck behind a small lawn ornament across the street and start shooting my weapon at the Zoo. They duck back inside the house to avoid my shots.

The sound of the shotgun firing echoes loudly again through the street and I hear both Kendall's voice and Ava's husband's.

Kendall: Got him, cover me.

I start shooting at the front door of the neighbour's house and at the windows. The Zoo are firing back at me and two more soldiers appear from the front door of another house. Kendall and Ava's husband sprint past me and I follow while continuing to shoot at the Zoo.

We make it to Ava's house and we burst in through the front door. Kendall slams the door shut behind us as bullets fly into the house through the walls and windows.

“Stay down!” I shout to Ava's husband.

The three of us crawl along the floor toward the kitchen. Suddenly, a loud voice can be heard through a megaphone.

“Please remain calm,” it says. “The situation is under control. Please remain in your homes. Do not exit your homes or you will risk being shot. The situation is under control. Fugitives are armed and dangerous inside your neighbour's house. Do not exit your homes or you will risk being in great danger. Please remain calm.”

We sit up against the island counter in the kitchen and Ava's husband says, “You said Ava sent you. Who are you? Where's my wife and my son?”

I turn to him and reply, “I'm Woven, this is Kendall. We're dreamers, just like you and your wife. We have a safe place in the city where there are lots more of us. There's food, clothing, shelter, safety for everyone. We took Ava and Liam there and promised we'd come back for you.”

Ava's husband looks at both Kendall and I for a couple seconds and then says, “I'm Cole. Thank you for helping my family.” He shakes our hands then asks, “How do we get back to this safe place?”

“Good question,” Kendall replies.

“Well,” I say. “We have a truck parked about a block over and if we can get to it before the Zoo do, then I think it's smooth sailing from there. Kind of.”

Light shines in through the back windows of the house and I hear a deep, chopping sound.

“Is that a helicopter?” Cole asks.

“Yeah it is,” I answer.

“This is getting really awful, all things considered,” Kendall says, calmly.

“How are we going to get to the truck now?” Cole asks worriedly.

I put my hand up and say, “Just give me a second, I'm thinking.”

The sound of tires screeching grow louder as more Zoo trucks speed onto this street.

“You are surrounded. Do not make this more difficult than it has to be. Cole Peterson, give us the fugitives and we'll take you to your family.”

“They are lying, obviously, don't listen to them,” Kendall says.

Cole shakes his head, “This is insane, what are we going to do?”

“Wyatt Venn, Kendall Price, come out with your hands behind your head and you will remain unharmed.”

The Zoo have unreasonably accurate facial detection software and scanners. They also have zero ability to make a lie sound like the truth

“That you two?” Cole asks.

“Excellent guess,” Kendall replies.

“Okay,” I begin. “The front door is definitely not going to be an option. You guys don't have a basement. The upstairs windows are all blown out, which they could come in through at any point now. They have a helicopter, which I may or may not be able to disable with my EMP, and they have a ton of trucks outside that we're going to have to outrun if we manage to get to our truck. This is really not going

anything like we had planned.”

“This is your final warning. Give us the fugitives or we will be forced to take immediate action. You are clearly outnumbered. Make the right choice here.”

“Kendall,” I say. “You still have a smoke grenade on you, right?”

He checks his belt and replies, “Yes, still have one.”

“Good,” I continue. “We’ll throw that out the front door and I’ll distract them from the roof. You two get out through the side door and make it to the truck. I’ll cut across the back lot toward the street and meet up with you there. We’ll be off to dried fish paradise in no time.”

“Kendall shrugs his shoulders and says, “Sounds pretty crazy, but I’m not seeing any other options. I’m game. Cole, you stick to me like glue. Keep that shotty close, we might need to use it as cover while we’re driving away.”

Cole nods his head and cocks his shotgun.

Loud shuffling is heard outside the house and something smashes against the front door.

“Alright, time to move,” I say.

We get up and start moving toward the stairs as another loud crash shakes the front door. The bottom hinge breaks off from the door frame.

“We are out of time, get mov –” I’m cut off as a loud boom rings through the living room and shakes the entire house, knocking picture frames off the walls and disrupting the already shattered windows.

A tall, beautiful woman with long, almost silvery hair and large, vibrant eyes is standing in the middle of the living room looking toward us.

The three of us immediately raise our weapons and aim them at her. Another crash against the front door sends wood slivers across the hall between us and the woman.

She speaks and it sounds as though there are two or three women speaking.

“I will not harm you,” she says. “Don't fire your weapons. I am here to aid you.”

A final crash against the door sends it flying off its hinges and into the house. Before it hits the floor, the woman raises her hand and without being touched, the door is slammed back into place.

She continues, “I will aid you through this door and to your vehicle. Follow me and do as I say.”

Kendall, Cole and I look at each other in confusion and the woman says, “Do not be afraid. You will be protected, but you must do as I say.”

Kendall looks towards us, nods and says, “She popped out of nowhere and moved a door with her mind, I'm in.”

“Yup, sounds good to me,” I agree.

“Plus, she's gorgeous,” Kendall adds.

The woman says, “Please, your window of opportunity has almost closed.”

“Okay, let's go,” I say to the woman.

She raises her left hand and without touching it, pushes the door outward, with tremendous force, through the frame, which knocks the three soldiers at

the front door back onto the front yard. They fall flat on their backs and the woman raises her other hand toward the sky.

Facing the Zoo, she slightly turns her head to us and says, "Shield your eyes."

A bright light forms around her open palm and continues to spread throughout the air, getting brighter and brighter. It is now brighter than anything I have ever seen and I cover my eyes.

Guns begin to fire and the Zoo soldiers begin to yell, to each other and at the woman.

"Do not fear," she says to us. "Their weapons will not harm you."

My eyes are still covered, it's way too bright to uncover them. My ears are ringing from the gunshots, which are still raging on, full force. I can also hear the Gatling gun from the helicopter screaming in the night sky.

Suddenly, the motor from the helicopter begins to quickly fade and the sound of gunshots gets quieter and quieter. I think I'm going deaf. I open my eyes and realize that I am not deaf, it's just silent now. The Zoo are all lying on the ground, motionless. The helicopter is gone. Bullet casings are littered all over the street.

"Move to your vehicle," the woman says. "There will be more of them soon. You need to press forward. Go."

"You heard her," I say. "Let's go!"

The three of us turn and begin to run to the truck. When we get to the end of the street I look behind us

and see that the woman has disappeared. She's nowhere in sight.

“What's going on?” Cole asks. “What was that?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” I reply.

We reach the truck and I start the engine as we shut the doors behind us.

“But I don't want to be here when the back-up arrives. Let's get out of here,” I say.

The tires squeal as we speed off down the street.

I'm not sure what just happened, but I'm really glad that it did. I was almost certain that we were not getting out of that house in one piece.

“We're headed east,” I explain. “Cole, we'll bring you to your wife and son, but we need to pick up some food for them and the others at the RSD first. We're meeting up with a friend of ours who has a storage bay.”

“Yeah, sounds good,” Cole says.

Kendall is staring off into the distance through the window.

“You all good?” I ask.

Kendall replies, “Man, what the heck just happened?”

“Yeah,” Cole adds. “Was that woman with you guys? Is she one of those 'Prophets'?”

“No way, man,” Kendall answers. “Definitely not. And no, she was not with us, but she clearly wasn't with the Zoo either. Woven, you know anything about this? Was she in any of your dreams?”

I shake my head and reply, “No. Honestly, I have no idea. That was the craziest thing I have ever

witnessed.”

We drive a while in silence as we try to wrap our heads around the event that just took place. We're taking the back roads to avoid any more run-ins with the Zoo, but it's also the quickest route to Ryan, our dried-fish friend. Ryan's an interesting character. He has had the dreams, but believes that he should have nothing to do with any of it. So, he stays on his modest piece of land and helps those who pass by. That's how we met him. Kendall and I were on our way to town after rescuing a family of seven and our truck had broken down. We found Ryan's home and he helped us. He gave us food, shelter for the night, and helped us repair the truck. We talked about the dreams and the RSD. Even though he had the dreams, he felt that he should stay where he was and enjoy life as it came. Crazy old man.

Ryan has kept in contact with the RSD and has offered many services, like supplying food that he continues to grow in small quantities and being a meeting point for many dreamer-RSD rescues. He contacted the RSD a little while back when farming pretty much died out and fishing became the biggest source of food. He let us know that he had come across a very large shipment of fish and was drying them out for us.

“We're getting pretty close, hey?” Kendall says.

“Yup,” I answer. “It's looking pretty familiar now. Just a couple more minutes.”

The road we're on now is lit up by the fire burning through the forests. There have been so many forest

fires since this all started. It's almost weird now to see a forest that's not on fire or blackened and burnt to a crisp. Tiny bits of ash and little burning pieces of trees rain down around us and make soft tapping sounds as they fall against the windshield. I'm uncomfortable with how familiar this sight has become.

“I can see his house now,” I say.

Kendall slaps the dashboard and says, “Sweet! I'll message the RSD and let them know we'll be on our way soon.”

“Oh wow,” Cole blurts out. “I can definitely smell the fish.”

We laugh and I say, “I'm assuming he has a ton of it.”

We approach the entrance to his driveway and stop at the gate. I'm about to get out of the truck when Ryan pops out from behind his house with a rifle in hand. He lowers his rifle and begins to make his way to the gate to let us in. I call out to him while he's walking over.

“Hey there, neighbour,” I say, jokingly. “We were just out for a family road trip and needed to use the bathroom. You don't happen to have one in your house, do you? Perhaps an outhouse, even?”

Ryan scrunches his nose, furrows his eyebrows and says, “Not for your type. There are some crispy, smoked shrubs across the street you can use, though.”

We both laugh and I open the truck door to greet him.

The ground begins to rumble. Just slightly, but

noticeable enough for both of us to stop moving and look at each other.

“You feel that?” Kendall shouts out.

“Definitely just felt that,” I reply and look up at Ryan. “That's unusual.”

“Yeah, I did not like that,” Ryan says. “Why don't you guys hurry on in and I'll show you the supply.”

Ryan opens the gate and I drive the truck down his driveway and park beside his house. The three of us exit the truck and proceed to follow Ryan to the warehouse behind his house. As we are walking toward the warehouse we are all stopped in our tracks by an enormous and terrible, thunder-like boom, which is quickly followed by another one exactly like the last.

We all look around and at each other, wondering what on earth is going on.

“You think that's what we were just feeling in the ground?” Ryan asks.

I nod my head and reply, “I think so. Whatever that was it was huge and terrifying. This is probably really bad. Ryan, if you don't mind, we should perhaps make this visit as brief as possible.”

“Oh, not a problem, Woven,” Ryan replies with a grin. “The sooner I can get you freeloaders off my property the better.”

He turns around and continues walking toward the warehouse as we follow closely behind him. He unlocks the doors when we finally reach them and slides one of them open. Inside, there is an assortment of old farming machines and vehicle parts.

There is a large steel shipping container on one side of the warehouse. Beside it are several tables with tons of vacuum-sealed bags of fish.

“This must be the supply,” I say, pointing toward the tables.

“Yessir,” Ryan replies. “That’s an awful lot of fish for just one man. I felt like sharing.”

“I don’t mean to be nosy or anything,” Cole begins. “But how did you get all this fish? I mean, I know pretty much everyone’s a fisherman these days, but these aren’t freshwater fish and we’re pretty far from the ocean. It’s like you said, that’s a lot of fish for one man.”

Ryan smiles and answers, “Maybe I was making a run into the next town, like I’ve been known to do from time to time. There might have been a Zoo transport truck carrying food and supplies. It’s possible. Perhaps I came across an opportunity too good to let pass me by. Maybe I’m a mysterious old man with mischievous ways. Who knows?”

Kendall pats Cole on the shoulder and says, “Ryan’s the man. And don’t worry about the Zoo, their fat faces wouldn’t ever be left unfed. I’m sure they had fresh vegetables and meat in their comfortable base camp that night, or you know, found a poor orphan boy and devoured him whole or something. Dirty Zoo.”

“They definitely didn’t need any of this,” I add. “And they certainly don’t deserve it. Okay, enough chit chat. Let’s grab these bags and get them to the truck. I’d like to get back while it’s still dark.”

We collect as many bags as we can and then walk them over to the truck. As we load the truck Ryan looks up at the dark, smoky night sky and strokes his chin.

“Hey Kendall,” I begin. “Any word from the RSD? They know we're coming, right?”

Kendall throws two more big bags of fish into the back of the truck and answers, “No reply yet. They got the message though. Lids say it was delivered. I'm sure it's all good. Probably busy on watch or something.”

“My wife and kids are safe, right? You said they'd be safe!” Cole blurts out.

“Of course, they're safe,” I reassure him. “The RSD's practically a fortress. Let's just make sure we hurry up and head back so we can be with them already.”

Kendall tosses the final three bags into the truck and says, “That's the last of it. Let's go. I'll send another message right now.”

“Thanks, Kendall,” I say. “Alright, let's get moving. Ryan, thanks again for everything. You never cease to be an amazing help.”

Ryan puts his hand up and waves, saying, “Don't mention it, Woven. Get back safe and go save the world, okay?”

I laugh and reply, “One bag of dried fish at a time, Ryan. Take care of yourself.”

We climb back into the truck and I start the engine.

“Hey Woven,” Kendall says. “I can't get any

messages through. Signal's messed up. Any messages I try to send results in an error response. Can you try?"

"This is Woven, we're coming back now," I message.

Message Error: Message not sent – Internet Connectivity Issue. Please view Network Settings.

"What the heck? Mine's not working either," I say. "Is yours also saying it's an internet issue?"

"Yup," Kendall answers. "I actually can't connect to anything, really."

I try my Flye Lids connection.

Connectivity Error: No signal. Please view Network Settings.

"Alright," I say. "Let's get back to the RSD and figure this out there."

The gravel on Ryan's driveway crunches beneath the truck's tires as I turn the wheel and reverse the truck back onto the road. We all wave to Ryan as we drive away from his home and into the dark night.

Time passes by as we drive in silence. We sit and think. What was that earthquake and loud noise all about? Could it have been natural? Or is there something else we should be worrying about?

"Woven, what do you think that sound was?" Kendall asks.

I shake my head and reply, "I don't know, man. I was just thinking about that. I'm hoping that it was maybe just an earthquake. But that bang and our signals not working have me curious."

"The Virulent?" Kendall asks.

“Yeah, maybe,” I answer. “I didn't want to say it, but I wouldn't put it past them to do something crazy right now.”

“Think they blew up some network access points or something?” Kendall asks.

“They could have,” I reply. “Seems like a stupid thing to do on their side of things, though. Everyone uses the internet, even them. How else are they going to communicate with each other and fulfill their ridiculous agenda?”

We both look at each other and our eyes widen.

“Satellites? There's no way they're using such a traceable means of communication,” Kendall says.

“I completely forgot we even have access to satellite signals,” I say as I turn on my suit's satellite transmitter/receiver.

My audio feed is instantly filled with static and extremely low-quality clips of voices and other sounds. Suddenly I hear a voice I recognize.

“... been trying to contact you! Woven, you ...” the signal is overflowing with static.

It's Co-Z.

“... hear me? This signal is super weak. Try sw... a different channel. Maybe just ...”

“Hold on!” I quickly respond. “I can hear you. What's happening?”

I wait for a reply as we continue to speed down the road. Her voice reaches through the flood of static.

“... point one six four... repeat... to station one three ... one six four. If you can hear me Woven, switch... three seven point one six four...”

One three seven point one six four. I switch stations and notice a significant increase in signal strength, but there is still some static and choppiness to the feed.

“Co-Z!” I say loudly. “You there? This is Woven.”

“Woven!” Co-Z shouts. “Bongo just contacted me at the RSD they've... monitoring the satellite feeds and the Virulent really slipped up this time! I'm assuming... didn't have any other choice for relaying their message, but they used one of their satellites and Bongo's crew picked it up. Did you feel a quake or hear anyth... ago?”

“Yeah!” I reply. “Was that the Virulent?”

“...es, it was them,” Co-Z replies. “Apparently, they ... volcanoes in the Pacific and ... cables!”

The static's getting worse.

“Sorry, Co-Z,” I reply quickly. “I didn't really catch that, could you please repeat yourself?”

“What?” Co-Z replies. “... what you said.”

This is so frustrating.

“I said I didn't catch what you were saying,” I explain. “Could you repeat that last bit?”

“Oh, yeah,” Co-Z answers. “... Virulent blew up some ... underwater super volcanoes in the Pacific ... blew up a bunch of internet cables with it. There's no internet connection between the hemispheres except... atellite signals. They're trying to ensure there is no communication between anyone now... literally making it impossible to ... and radio jammers like crazy. We won't be able to communicate for very

much... I doubt we'll ...”

The static grows worse and it drowns out anything Co-Z is trying to say.

“Co-Z,” I call out. “Co-Z, you still there? Are you getting any of this?”

There's just too much static. Nothing is getting through on either end. I switch through channels and there's nothing but static and high-pitched tones mashed together.

“Shoot,” I exclaim. “That was Co-Z. She says the Virulent are behind those explosions we heard. Apparently, they triggered some super volcanoes under the Pacific Ocean some how, which also resulted in internet cables being destroyed. I guess the Virulent tried to relay that info to someone somewhere, because Bongo picked it up via radio and was able to communicate what happened. But that's it for communication now. She said they're using radio jammers to block all transmission signals. I just switched through a bunch of channels and got nothing. Just noise. We need to get back to the RSD right now and figure this out. It might be time to strike.”

“Oh man,” Kendall replies. “I don't know if that's even going to be possible without communication, which is probably exactly what they wanted. The RSD is pretty organized, but I don't know if we could plan an attack without being able to talk to anyone at the other sanctuaries.”

“You're right,” I agree. “We definitely won't be able to plan anything without talking to the other

groups. We're going to have to sort this out fast. If the Virulent can have it their way, they won't stop until every last person on this planet is dead. This is obviously the next step in their evil plan, but it ends here. We have to strike next before they can do anything else."

Kendall nods and says, "This certainly isn't going to fix itself. Let's get back to the RSD and come up with a plan."

Cole taps the back of my seat and says, "Hey guys, look at that."

He's pointing in front of us at a lightning storm in the distance. Each time the lightning lights up the night sky we can see a huge pillar of black smoke. The lightning seems to be forming in and around it.

"That must be from the volcanoes," I say. "If we can already see that much smoke from here... I don't even want to think about how massive that thing is."

"Those booms *were* huge," Kendall replies. "They definitely didn't sound like they'd be too friendly."

I look in my rear-view mirror and watch as Cole rubs his face in his hands.

"Hey man," I say to him. "Things will get better soon. Just hang in there."

He gives me a tight-lipped grin and says, "I sure hope so."

"We'll come up with a plan when we get back," I reassure him. "My friends and I have seen many things and we're getting closer and closer to getting to the bottom of this. We have so many people on our side, so much hope and even more strength. There

are too many good people left on this planet for this evil plan to work.”

Kendall nods his head and says, “Yup. People like you, who are willing to risk their lives to save the people they love. That's what's going to win this war. Not these storms or some crazy volcanoes. Good people.”

I turn the headlights off and slow down a bit.

“We're getting close to the city now,” I say. “The Zoo have probably been given instruction before this whole communication problem. I don't imagine they'll be taking the night off at a time like this. Get ready for some bumpy roads ahead.”

Chapter 8

Every part of my body is aching.

My arms are extended above my head, my butt's being dragged along the ground and my legs are bouncing around; the heels of my boots skipping on the pavement. I blink hard a few times to try and focus my vision. It's dark. It must be nighttime or early morning. My eyes find their way toward the sky and I see big, dark clouds forming in the distance, slowly moving this way.

Lightning quickly flashes and I see buildings.

Suddenly, I remember what's going on. I pull my right hand away from whoever is dragging me and reach for my pistol. I pull it out of the holster while spinning my body around to face my captor and point the gun at his face.

“Whoa, easy, Woven,” Cole says.

He lets go of my other arm and raises his hands up to his shoulders while saying, “It's me, Cole. You were out, I was trying to get you to cover.”

His face is cut and scraped in a few places.

I put my pistol back into its holster, drag my leg out in front of me, and get back up on my feet. I quickly look around and see our truck lying on its

side, wheels spinning slowly. The driver-side door is missing and the windshield is completely smashed up, along with about a third of the rest of the vehicle.

“Where's Kendall?” I ask.

“I don't know,” Cole answers. “He got thrown out the windshield when we rolled. I can't see him anywhere though.”

We start moving toward the buildings nearby and I say, “Alright, let's get to cover and find Kendall. What happened?”

“We were hit by a rocket or something,” Cole says. “I didn't see anything, but there's was a faint whistling right before it hit us and we went flying. Were both of you idiots seriously not wearing your seat belts? People are literally trying to kill you and you guys are just okay with a car accident taking you out?”

“Definitely a stupid decision,” I reply. “But I'll be wearing one next time, that's for sure. So, we got hit by a rocket? The Zoo is upping their game, I see. That's no good. Pretty sure that means they're no longer concerned with the civilians' outlook on what's going on. Things are going to get a lot more difficult.”

Gunshots go off and echo through the streets. A dark figure is moving toward our truck. My night-vision boots up and I see Kendall running with his gun out. He's firing at an unseen target at the end of the street. When he makes it to the truck, he jumps behind it and crouches.

“Kendall,” I yell over to him. “Get over here,

they've got rockets. Get away from the truck!”

He gets up and starts shooting down the street again. Return fire collides with the truck as Kendall turns and runs towards Cole and I.

There's whistling again and a projectile hits the exposed underside of the truck. The truck explodes and little bits of metal and glass speed through the air in every direction. Kendall dives to the ground and covers his head. I step out from behind the building and give Kendall some cover fire.

“Get up,” I shout to him over gunshots. “Let's go.”

When he runs past, he grabs my shoulder and pulls me along with him. We get back to cover behind the building.

“Thanks, Woven,” Kendall says.

“No problem,” I reply.

“Where were you, Cole?” Kendall asks.

“Hey!” Cole says, “I lost my gun, I was useless to you just then.”

“It's all good,” I laugh. “Cole saved me from the Zoo a few minutes ago. I was out cold for a little while there.”

“Shoot, worst road trip ever!” Kendall exclaims. “Oh no! The fish!”

I completely forgot about the fish. What a waste.

“Well that really sucks,” I say as I shake my head.

“That was a lot of food.”

“What do we do now?” Cole asks.

“We definitely don't go back for more fish,” I answer. “Let's get moving, we need to get to the RSD

as soon as possible. It's time to set a plan in motion here. Especially with the Zoo living up to their name right now.”

A display screen shows me a map of Cranbrook as I switch my Flye Lids on.

“GPS obviously doesn't work right now,” I say. “But I still have saved maps. I know where we are. Follow me.”

We begin to run through a back alley toward the RSD, which is a lot closer than I had thought it was. A loud crack booms through the sky, shaking the buildings around us. We all stop and look up at the sky.

“Those clouds are moving fast,” I say. “That's insane!”

“Is that from the supervolcanoes?” Kendall asks.

“I think so,” I reply. “That doesn't look friendly at all. We need to get moving before that ash starts falling. That stuff is dangerous.”

We continue to run as thunder and lighting play their games above us in the night sky.

“This way!” I yell as we turn a sharp corner and head for someone's backyard.

Rain drops begin to splash against the buildings, cars, pavement, and us. We're only a few streets away from the RSD now. If only I could message them, then we'd have backup. I guess we'll just have to push through.

Our feet pound against the dirt as we run across what was probably once someone's garden. I'm the first over the fence and I help Kendall and Cole as

they make it over after me. I turn around and we run again, this time to a narrow walkway between two houses.

“FREEZE! DON'T MOVE!”

We stop in our tracks as a warning shot is fired at the ground in front of us. The cement walkway spits up broken pieces of itself as the bullet collides with it. The three of us look up at the roof. A soldier is standing on the edge of the roof, holding a rifle that's aimed at us.

“DON'T EVEN THINK ABOUT MOVING! I WILL SHOOT YOU!” he shouts.

“What do you want?” I ask.

The Zoo soldier looks over his scope at us and replies, “You're coming with me for questioning.”

As he speaks I am scanning the other rooftops and checking for any other Zoo soldiers nearby. I can't see any.

“Well, why don't you come down and get us then, we'll patiently wait here,” I respond.

The soldier slides his rifle's bolt back and yells, “YOU THINK THIS IS FUNNY?”

“Woven, we gotta get moving now,” Kendall whispers. “That shot is going to draw attention. The Zoo are definitely on their way.”

“No, sir,” I reply to the soldier. “I was just being polite. We'll stay here, you come down and we'll wait.”

“DON'T TELL ME WHAT TO DO, I'M IN CHARGE HERE!” he yells back. “KEEP YOUR HANDS IN THE AIR!”

Our hands stay by our sides. He clearly has no idea what he's doing. I don't think he knows what the orders are – which were probably to shoot us – and is too afraid to do anything. That can be dangerous though.

“Look,” I say. “We don't want any trouble. We're just trying to get home before this rain gets worse. You mind letting us get back to it?”

“Oh yeah, just out for a stroll in an armoured suit and way past curfew. What are you doing out here anyway?” the soldier asks. “I can't just let you get away with breaking a law.”

“We were coming back from –” I'm interrupted by the soldier as he sees another Zoo.

“HEY!” he calls out. “I HAVE THREE OF THE _”

I pull out my pistol and shoot the soldier square in the chest. He falls back onto the roof as an electric arc flickers between him and his rifle.

“RUN!” I shout.

The three of us sprint toward the other side of the street. Bullets streak past us through the air. I'm grabbing Cole by the arm and running with him on my side opposite to the Zoo. Kendall and I have armoured suits, Cole doesn't.

Two streets away from the RSD.

We cut through a small lot to get to the next street. When we come around the other side of a small building there is a line of Zoo soldiers with their backs turned to us, shooting toward the RSD. Disciples are fighting back from rooftops and

alongside buildings.

“We gotta get through there, right now,” Kendall yells out. “We've got Zoo on both sides. Let's go!”

A few of the Zoo turn around and notice us. They start shooting at us and we quickly jump back behind the small building.

“We're done, man,” Kendall calmly states.

Zoo soldiers appear from the other side of the lot where we came from.

“Protect Cole!” I yell as I push him behind my back. “You cover the RSD side, I got this side.”

I start shooting at the Zoo as Kendall peeks around the corner of the building and shoots at the soldiers fighting the RSD. Bullets are flying toward and past us from both directions.

I hit one of the Zoo as he lifts off his feet and falls back into another soldier. A bullet hits me in my abdomen and I am pushed back against Cole and Kendall.

Cole braces me as I struggle to stand and asks, “Are you okay?”

I cough a few times and breathe deep to get my lungs filled up again. It feels like someone took a sledgehammer to my stomach.

“I'm great,” I wheeze back to Cole as I stand up straight again and continue to fire.

I hit two more Zoo soldiers and get a few seconds to rest.

“Woven, they're moving over here. Trying to make a push against us,” Kendall calls out.

I turn around and keep Cole in front of me,

between myself and Kendall.

“Keep your head down,” I tell him.

Kendall and I are both shooting at the Zoo from around the corner while they shoot back, bullets barely missing, just inches from us. The rain gets heavier.

A spray of bullets zoom by from behind and crash into the wall beside my head. I turn around to see at least ten Zoo soldiers running toward us. I get hit twice in the shoulder and drop my gun while falling to the ground. Cole crouches down to help me back up. Bullets whiz by as the concrete wall beside us pops and snaps, taking the bulk of the Zoo's attack.

“Woven! Don't stop now, buddy. You gotta get back up,” Cole encourages me.

I look up to see the Zoo approaching from both sides. Suddenly, Cole is yelling.

“You hit?” I yell to Cole. I grab him and throw my body over him, while checking for entry wounds.

“It's hot! It's burning me! Something's burning me!” he yells.

“Woven,” Kendall says. “The Zoo are backing off, I don't know what's going on.”

The Zoo soldiers are yelling and scattering. I look over at my gun on the ground and watch as the grip peels and begins to melt, deteriorating before my eyes. My eyes lock onto one of the Zoo soldiers as he tears his rain-drenched clothes off, rubbing and gripping at his skin. His skin is red and I notice that almost his entire body is bleeding.

“Kendall, the rain,” I say. “It's acid. We need to

get these people to cover.”

Kendall grabs my armour and helps me up.

“Let's get Cole to the RSD first,” he says and points to a Zoo truck. “There. Let's get him in there.”

“Stay covered, Cole. Just keep crouching like that,” I instruct as Kendall and I cover Cole with our bodies. When we get to the truck I open the door and Cole climbs inside. The roof is beginning to melt away.

“Shoot,” Kendall exclaims. “We gotta get this thing going. Cole, start the engine!”

Cole turns the key, but nothing happens. He tries again. Nothing. And again. Nothing.

“Perfect,” Kendall shouts.

I open the driver-side door and grab the gearshift and put it into neutral. I run to the back of the truck and start pushing. My feet slip a few times, but Kendall joins me and eventually we have it rolling.

We keep pushing for what feels like an eternity as the screams of Zoo soldiers ring through the air. We finally make it to the front entrance of the RSD just as the tires of the truck begin to crack and crumble beneath the truck. Cole opens the door while Kendall and I press up close to him, trying to protect him from the rain.

The door to the RSD opens and we are ushered in by people wearing all-plastic outfits. We are led to a room off to the side and sprayed down with water from a hose. More plastic-covered people run outside to collect the others and bring them inside. Kendall

and I are led to another room while the plastic-covered people continue to spray Cole.

“He'll be alright. My guys will take care of him. Your suits are designed for this sort of thing,” a short woman with a lab coat explains. “They're meant for stopping bullets also, but we designed them for underground exploration, given the situations we had discussed. Beneath the earth's surface you can find many different gases, which we wanted to protect you from. Gases like sulfur dioxide, which come from volcanoes, and when stored in giant ash clouds in large concentrations can result in acid rain.”

“So, that's what's going on?” I ask.

“Yes. Were you afraid it was some sort of chemical warfare?” the woman replies.

“Yes, I was,” I reply and pause for a moment. “And this definitely *is* chemical warfare. Albeit a natural process I'm sure, it was certainly not naturally occurring. Those volcanoes didn't just go off on their own. We heard from Co-Z and Bongo that the Virulent detonated bombs that set off supervolcanoes. This is their doing. They wanted this to happen. They cut off our communication, now they want to keep us cooped up inside.”

“This will prove to be an extremely difficult situation for many out there,” the woman continues. “This acid rain will poison any drinkable water sources. With an ash cloud as big as this one – it doesn't seem to stop growing – I'm sure any lakes and rivers this cloud reaches will be poisoned.”

I shake my head and raise my visor. I say, “The

Virulent are monsters. Their own soldiers were out there, literally melting to death. They're insane." I lift my head and face the woman. "Thank you for your help, what's your name?"

The woman smiles and says, "Emma. Emma Roy. And you are Woven."

"Yup," I say with a grin. "I remember your face, but I am awful with names."

"No worries. We met in the beginning. I was there in Kentucky at the first big meeting. I was with the team who volunteered to design and produce the suits you and your companions would wear. A few years later I went North and decided to help up here."

"Well thank you for everything you do," I reply.

"You are very welcome," Emma says. "After the dreams, it only felt right to give all I had to help this cause."

I smile and nod, "You made the right choice. We're going to need to meet with all the leaders at this RSD as soon as possible. We need to go over the plan to stop the Virulent once and for all, before they can cause any more damage. Can you help us with that?"

"Of course," Emma answers. "I'll spread the word. People here have been itching to get the ball rolling lately. It won't take much time to gather everyone for the meeting. Let's have it in the boardroom on the second floor. I'll meet you there in thirty minutes."

"Thank you, Emma," I say.

She nods and leaves to gather everyone.

“Awesome,” Kendall says. “Smart *and* pretty! After we save the world, I think I might have to ask her out on a date. Yeah? On second thought, maybe I should ask her out beforehand. Just in case. You know?”

I laugh and shove his shoulder. “Ow,” I say and rub my own shoulder. “Maybe I should stop getting shot.”

“I don't know, man,” Kendall laughs. “You're getting pretty good at it.”

“COLE!!”

We turn around and see Ava running down the hallway. She reaches Cole and wraps herself around him. He grimaces in pain but laughs and hugs his wife.

Liam runs down the hall as well and stops when he sees Kendall and I.

He turns to us and says, “Thank you for saving my dad!”

His shoes slap along the floor as he runs to his dad and hugs him around his waist.

“Thank you so much,” Ava says with tears in her eyes. “I was so scared! I can't believe how terrified I was. I thought I might never see my husband again! Thank you so much!”

“You probably wouldn't have seen me again if it weren't for these two,” Cole says as he rubs his arms through the recently wrapped bandages. “I owe my life to them. Truly, I am forever grateful to you two. Any way I can help out, let me know, I'm there.”

“You just help keep these people safe,” Kendall

tells him

“Alright you guys go get some rest,” I say to the Peterson family. “You deserve it. Kendall and I have some things we need to see to.”

They thank us again and leave through a door at the end of the hallway.

“Well,” Kendall begins. “What *is* the game plan?”

I think for a minute and answer, “We need to reach the other RSDs and synchronize an attack. We can't message them or radio or whatever, so we're going to have to physically go to them and fill them in on the plan. Kentucky still has the biggest, most organized RSD so we'll start there and get them to help us reach the others. I know they have aircrafts there, which will be extremely useful. And that's what we need right now.”

“An aircraft?” Kendall asks.

“Yes,” I answer. “You and I are going to steal a helicopter from the Zoo and fly it to Kentucky. You in?”

Kendall smiles and answers, “You know me too well. Anything that involves messing with the Zoo sounds like a good plan to me. Count me in.”

“Awesome,” I reply. “It probably won't be overly difficult considering that we saw how ill-prepared they were for the acid rain. We head over to their base, ask politely for a chopper and then fly it away.”

“I like it,” Kendall says. “But how do we get there? We walking?”

“That's what I was hoping they'd be able to help us with in the meeting,” I reply. “There are a lot of

smart people here, I'm sure someone can come up with something. We need to get there fast and walking will take us forever, so that's out of the question."

"Well, let's get to it then," Kendall says. "No time to waste."

"I'm going to give Emma a few minutes to get everyone together," I reply. "In the meantime, I think I'm going to make the rounds and just check up on things. You're welcome to join me."

"Honestly, I think I'm going to lay down for a bit," Kendall says. "Not sleep, just lay down. My body is aching big time. You want to grab me on your way back from making the rounds?"

I nod and answer, "Sure thing. I'll see you in a bit."

We leave through the same door and I go left, while he goes right. The RSD is pretty big, most of it being underground. It's also connected to a lot of different neighbouring buildings through underground tunnels between basements.

I make my way downstairs and to the housing units. The housing units definitely aren't anything to brag about. Just plain and simple living arrangements that can hold four to six in the smaller units and six to eight in the larger ones. I pass by the different units as hopeful faces look back at me through open doors. As I walk through the halls a few people come out to greet me and give thanks for helping them out before, but I don't spend too much time chatting. I've got a lot on my mind and like to use the rhythm of walking

to help me think.

It's awful not being able to speak with Co-Z and Bongo. For the first time since this all started, I'm actually worried about them. They are very capable and can handle themselves in all sorts of situations, but I always had their reassurance that they are doing fine. That's another reason to get this all over with quickly. It's been too long since we've seen each other in person. I want to spend time with the people I love. I'm tired of fighting. I'm tired of watching people being torn from their loved ones. The Zoo just push forward, blind to the true will of their leaders, like so many others who have chosen to ignore the dreams, or the words of those who have had the dreams.

We need to make this attack and stop the Virulent. They have to be stopped, there is no other option. Judging by the way things have been going, we don't have much time.

I make my way back up the stairs and toward the common area. Kendall is asleep on the couch next to the water cooler.

“Just laying down?” I say with a loud voice.

Kendall's body jerks and he opens his eyes.

“Yeah, yeah,” he says as he sits up. “Just laying down for a couple of seconds.”

I laugh and reply, “It's all good. Let's head over to the boardroom and get this plan in motion.”

“Aye, aye, captain,” Kendall says as he jokingly salutes me.

We drink some water and make our way to meet

up with the rest of the council. When we arrive at the boardroom there are ten others chatting among themselves. Kendall and I grab some seats at the side of a long table and wait for the chatter to die down.

“Thanks for getting together so quickly,” I begin. “I don't want to take up much of your time so I'm going to try to make this as brief as possible. Big things are happening right now. Bad things. The Virulent have somehow forced the eruption of two supervolcanoes in the Pacific Ocean. This has resulted in the loss of underwater internet cables, and a big ol' nasty ash cloud in the sky, which of course has lead to this acid rain we are currently experiencing. The static from the ash and storms has caused other signals to fail significantly and has given the Virulent opportunity to introduce radio jammers as well. We can't communicate with anyone anymore unless it's in person.

“So, what we need to do is put a plan into action now, before things get even worse than they have already become. The Virulent are not going to stop. They've done too much damage, they've gone too far. They will go through with their plan if uninterrupted. We will put an end to this plan, now. Starting today, we will train more of our people. So far, training has been wonderful, but we are going to increase our numbers, intensity, and frequency. Every able-bodied person is going to fight to take this beautiful planet back from those miserable and egotistical cowards.

“We'll come up with a time frame, obviously as soon as possible, but an actual date that we can attack.

On that day, we will take over the Zoo bases everywhere in the world. While we are taking down the bases, we will also be sending a specialized team to Antarctica to the Virulent's base. I will be there to lead, as well as Co-Z and Bongo. What we already know about their base and what we'll be able to get from the captured Zoo will be enough to allow us access to their bunker and we will take them down.

“What we need from you is your help in training those willing to fight and we will also need a means of transportation to the nearest Zoo base. Kendall and I are going to take a helicopter from them and travel to the RSD in Kentucky, where we'll be able to organize the attack on a larger scale. So, that's pretty much it for my bit. Questions, comments?”

Emma puts her hand up and says, “We can give you transportation. Rubber is no good with all that sulfuric acid, it becomes brittle and cracks very easily, so tires are out of the question. We don't have an aircraft, but we do have a hovercraft. We can easily apply a polyethylene covering to avoid any damage to the craft from the rain acid. It already has a methyl methacrylate windshield, which will provide ample protection from the rain. We can have it ready by this afternoon.”

“Thank you, Emma” I reply. “That is perfect.”

An older man with a grey beard and glasses leans forward in his chair and begins to speak, “What will you do for weapons in this weather? Am I correct in assuming that the Zoo will indeed require a degree of coercion before handing over a valuable piece of

equipment to their enemy?”

“That is a correct assumption, my friend,” Kendall answers. “Woven's gun melted and mine is in awful condition, so if you happen to have any spare acid-proof guns lying around, we would gladly take them off your hands.”

“They don't necessarily have to be acid-proof,” a very overworked looking woman at the head of the table says. “Just don't let the rain touch them. We can modify your holsters to prevent any rain getting onto your weapons when you're not using them. As for actual use of the weapon, I recommend just covering them with something. You'll be able to upgrade your suit in Kentucky with retractable weaponry, but until then, keep them dry.”

“She's right,” Emma adds. “We don't really have the resources here to supply you with what you need for the retractables, so that'll be your best solution until you make it to Kentucky. Your zapstabs, however, are already made up of a material that resists the current chemical situation we're in.”

“Excellent,” I say. “This is all very helpful. Weapon and vehicle situations taken care of. I apologize in advance, but I don't think I can guarantee the returning of the hovercraft in perfect condition.”

“Not a problem,” says the older man with the beard. “They're not difficult to make. Do what you must to bring this chaos to an end.”

“Thank you,” I reply. “Again, I am very grateful for all of your help and willingness to see this through. We will move quickly and do what needs to

be done.”

“We'll have the craft and your holsters ready to go as soon as possible” Emma says. “You can plan on leaving as early as noon. You two should go get some rest. You've had a long day.”

“That's probably a good idea,” I say. “Thank you, we will be ready at noon.”

We all stand up from our seats and begin to file out of the room. It's time to get some sleep and get ready for what's next.

We're going to steal a helicopter. Awesome.

Chapter 9

This thing moves fast!

Kendall and I are hovering through the streets at ridiculous speeds. The acid rain beats against the windshield as we zoom past cars and buildings.

“You sure you know how to drive this, Woven?” Kendall asks.

I laugh and reply, “Shh, not now! I'm concentrating on not smashing into things!”

“Alright, alright,” Kendall says. “Just promise me we'll get there in one piece.”

“No promises,” I reply as I crank the steering wheel, making a sharp turn around a street corner.

We quickly make it out of the city without running into any problems. It's weird seeing everything so empty. No one dares to go outside right now because of the rain. Not even the Zoo are anywhere to be seen.

The nearest Zoo base is in Calgary, which is where we're headed. I've been there before when I first came to this area to rescue dreamers. It's big and they have lots of hangars. I don't know if they have any aircrafts other than helicopters, but that's what we'll need either way. Just one good helicopter to take us

to Kentucky.

“You know how long this trip is gonna be?”

Kendall asks.

“What?” I reply. “Bored already? We just left!”

“No, no,” Kendall answers. “I brought a colouring book, I'll be fine. I was just curious is all.”

I laugh and say, “Well, the road to Calgary from here is pretty uninteresting. Beautiful view, but not a lot happening along the way, especially now. But time-wise, considering we're driving this beast, I'm expecting us to be there in about an hour and a half.”

Kendall nods his head and says, “Not bad. Not bad at all. And when we get there? What's the deal? Kick down the door and rob a chopper?”

“I like your style,” I reply. “But I haven't completely thought it through yet. I just know that we need a helicopter and they have a bunch. So, we'll come with something on the way, I'm sure.”

“You're pretty confident in your ability to come up with plans last minute these days, eh?” Kendall asks.

“Well,” I answer. “These days we've been doing a lot of things pretty last minute, considering we haven't had much time to prepare for each of these executed events by the Virulent. So far things have gone well for us, I'd like to think. So yeah, I've gotten confident in my ability to act first and think later. It's much better than constantly having to just react to plans against us, wouldn't you say?”

“Oh definitely,” Kendall replies. “I've seen you do lots of incredible things in the last year. I don't doubt for a second that we're going to take a helicopter and

fly it to Kentucky.”

I look over at Kendall and notice his uneasiness.

“What's on your mind, friend?” I ask.

“I don't know, man,” Kendall replies. “It's just, I know you believe it, but I'm just having a hard time picturing us going into a fight with the Zoo, you know, the RSD versus the Zoo, and coming out on top. There are just so many of them. We've been growing, like a lot. And we've been doubling almost every month recently. There are a lot of us now, but there are still way more of them. And they're trained soldiers. We have the disciples, but they have significantly less training and nowhere near the numbers the Zoo have. They fight to kill, we fight to disarm. It almost seems like a suicide mission. Do you really think that this is a good idea? To potentially destroy everything we've worked for, you've worked for? So many years and so much effort has been poured into this and we're getting close, but do you really think we're ready? Now?”

I smile, slowly nod and say, “Honestly, Kendall, do I think we're ready? Maybe. Maybe we are, maybe we're not. That is something I'm not a hundred percent certain about. But I can tell you what I am certain of and that is that we don't have a choice. If we don't act now, we *will* lose it all, much sooner than you may think. Just think about it. Food has been diminishing, water is becoming undrinkable, communication is lost, people can't even go outside without worrying about dying. The thing that worries me the most, especially with communication now cut,

is that the Virulent have kind of abandoned the Zoo. You were there, you saw them. The Virulent did this and it's like the Zoo had no idea it was coming. It's like the Virulent are now ready to destroy everything. If they don't need their monkeys running around doing their dirty work for them anymore, what does that mean? We don't have much time. I want to stop them before they erase everyone and everything we love from this planet.”

Kendall shakes his head and sighs. He says, “You're right. This all sucks, but you're right. I've been thinking about it and it just sounds so much worse once it's been said out loud. The Virulent are ready to do something stupid, aren't they? And we don't really have a choice, if we want to live that is.”

He pauses for a few seconds then turns to me and asks, “Those giants from the dreams. Did they show you how this ends? Did they tell you what happens? If we win? If the Virulent destroy everything?”

I shake my head and reply, “No. Man, they showed me the inside of the earth and told me not to let some evil rulers blow up our planet. They really didn't give me much to go on. If it wasn't for my parents' connections within the government, I never would have been able to meet the people I did and learn the things I learned. And without Co-Z and Bongo, I don't think I would have even made it to the creation of the first RSD. The giants didn't show me anything other than that they probably picked the wrong guy for the job.”

Kendall furrows his brows and replies, “Yeah

right, if there was anyone on this planet crazy enough to listen to some giants in a dream and spend the rest of his life helping other people because of it, it was you. Like you said, you were the one with government connections, you were the one with friends who would take you where you needed to go. It had to be you. Look what you've done so far. The Zoo know you by name and shake when you're nearby. Literally hundreds of thousands of people look up to you, Co-Z, and Bongo as their leaders.”

“I just hope we haven't already failed,” I say. “I don't mean that to be a party pooper, I just mean with the way things are going, so much has already been destroyed. What if too much has been lost. I mean, this is what the giants warned me of and it's already happened. Am I really making any difference? Have I changed anything from happening? Honestly, I don't think so. So, I have to make this stop. The giants picked me to do so. So, I will.”

“I believe it,” Kendall says. “And when it's all over, we'll get things back on the right track. We have the supplies and the people to get it done. We can go back to our families and people we love. Actually, now that I think about it, I don't think I ever asked you. Whatever happened to your family? You mentioned your parents having government connections, did they help you with any of this?”

My grip tightens on the steering wheel and I reply, “My parents worked for the government and they thought that my dreams were ridiculous and that they should be completely ignored. They felt that if I gave

value to the dreams then I'd end up as some kind of anarchist; throwing Molotov cocktails in the streets. When I eventually revealed my plan to them, to start the RSD, they fought me. I had honestly never seen them so upset in my entire life. They said all this stuff about treason, mutiny, and sedition and even threatened to have me arrested. I left and haven't spoken to them since. I don't even know where they are now. I don't know if they were high up enough to be considered one of the elite that the Virulent wants to save for their fresh new world or if they're in some Zoo prison somewhere. It kind of kills me not knowing. I should have just taken them with me, stayed and convinced them. But they just wouldn't listen.”

Kendall reaches over, pats my shoulder and says, “I'm sorry. I'm sure they're safe right now. Who knows, maybe they made their way to an RSD.”

“I somehow doubt that,” I say. “But it is a nice thing to think about.”

We continue to speed down the road. The rain has calmed down a little, but hasn't completely stopped. The landscape is mostly grey. The rain has brought a lot of ash down from the clouds themselves and it has covered almost everything in a layer of sludge. It is a good thing we're not driving something with tires. Even if the rubber could withstand the sulfur, we'd be slipping all over the place. Especially at these speeds. This is definitely the fastest land-vehicle I've ever driven.

On the horizon, buildings and houses begin to

appear.

“The Zoo's base is on the North side of the city,” I say. “So, we'll have to drive through, which probably won't be a big deal considering no one really wants to be outside right now.”

“Yeah, good point,” Kendall says. “Besides, I don't think anyone could keep up to us in this thing.”

“As for the plan,” I begin. “I'm still trying to come up with one, so any help on that front would be appreciated.”

Kendall laughs and says, “That's comforting. I'll try to think of something.”

We approach the city and begin to slow down. I'm not super familiar with these streets and even though I have the map being displayed on my Flye Lids I would much rather not risk anything at this point.

My eyes wander as we drive along the vacant streets. The acid rain has done its work around here as well. Deteriorating cars litter the streets.

“Shoot,” Kendall exclaims while pointing. “Look at that.”

He points to an area near the sidewalk where a few bodies lie on the street. Their clothes are almost completely destroyed and their skin is red and missing in most parts.

“They don't see this,” I say. “The Virulent are nice and warm in their bunkers, happily plotting a new world to live in. Meanwhile this is what they are doing. Killing innocent people, so many of them. They don't see it, they don't watch as these people fight for their lives, only to be melted alive and die in

the streets. Bunch of cowards. I can't wait to get my hands on them.”

“Soon, Woven,” Kendall replies. “So soon.”

We notice several more bodies scattered along the streets as we drive down each road. As we near the outer streets of the city we come across an interesting find.

“Is that what I think it is?” I ask.

An overturned truck lay on its roof, with the front of the vehicle smashed up against a pole. The tires have crumbled off the rims and lay beside the truck on the pavement. The bottom of the truck is disintegrating as the rain continues to fall on the metallic surfaces. The windshield and windows are smashed, most likely from the truck flipping over. Inside we see two bodies still strapped in with seat belts.

“That's Zoo,” Kendall says.

“I think I have an idea,” I say.

Kendall claps his hands together and says, “That's what I like to hear!”

“Help me get their uniforms,” I say.

We stop the craft and jump out to retrieve the soldier's clothing. Their truck provided enough protection from the rain that their uniforms hadn't yet been damaged.

Once the soldiers have been stripped, we bring their uniforms with us back to the hovercraft.

“Put yours on,” I say to Kendall. “I need to get something.”

I run back to the Zoo truck and climb into the front

seat area. My hands move along the surface of their dashboard displays until I come across what it is I'm looking for. Using one of the Zoo's clubs as leverage, I pull a small black rectangle out of its place from the dashboard and stuff it into my pocket. I'll need that later.

The sludge squeezes up through the gaps between my fingers as I crawl out from inside the Zoo truck. I stand up, wipe myself off and jump back into the hovercraft.

“What was that?” Kendall asks,

I hold up the little black rectangle and reply, “Every Zoo vehicle has one. It's part of a GPS tracking device, but also doubles as a gate key. Zoo base gates will only open for those who have this in their vehicle. That's how we're getting in.”

“See, I knew you'd come up with something,” Kendall says. “You gotta give yourself a little more credit every now and then, Woven.”

I laugh and say, “Thanks. Who knew I had it in me all along? Okay, let's get moving.”

I pull the Zoo uniform over my suit and we continue on our journey. We've now left the main part of the city and are headed toward the outskirts. Just a few more minutes until we are at the Zoo base. My heart begins to beat a bit quicker and I feel sweat forming on my forehead.

“We're getting pretty close,” I say. “You ready for this?”

“Ah, you know,” Kendall replies. “As ready as I can be for something like this. Sure.”

“I don't know how tight security is going to be with this acid rain,” I say. “So, getting in might not be so difficult, but I honestly don't know what to expect once we're inside. There are going to be a lot of Zoo soldiers. Way more than you and I can deal with so we need to avoid being seen at all costs. Let's get in, I'll drive straight to the hangars. We find the nearest chopper, check for gas and go. I know you're a social butterfly, but no stopping to chat with the Zoo, okay?”

We laugh and Kendall replies, “Hey, if we need to ask for directions or something...”

“No!” I say with a smile. “We got this. We're in and out. Let's do this.”

We are coming up on a huge, walled base with a large metal gate in the center of it.

“This must be it,” Kendall says.

“Yup,” I reply. “Let's hope this works.”

We slow down as we approach the gate. As we inch towards the gate, my eyes are scanning everything, trying to locate someone in a watch tower or someone guarding the entrance, but so far, I don't see anything.

The little black rectangle makes a faint beep sound and suddenly the gate begins to slide open. Inside we can see a parking lot to the left and the aircraft hangars to the right. In the center are some doors that lead inside the building.

“Alright,” I say. “Act natural.”

I turn the hovercraft to the right and head over to the hangars. Still nobody shooting at us or anything

like that. So far so good. We get to the first hangar door, which is shut, they all are.

“I'm going to park under this canopy and then let's find a way in,” I say to Kendall.

He replies, “Deal. The quicker the better.”

We gently lower onto the ground and I stop the engine. Our doors open up and we jump out. Kendall points toward a walkway and we quickly walk toward it. The walkway leads to a door on the side of the hangar. I reach to open it, expecting an alarm or something to go off, but nothing happens. I turn the handle and slowly push the door open. We step inside through the door. There it is.

“She's a beauty,” Kendall says.

I nod my head and say, “Yeah she is. Let's check it out. We need to see if she's filled up and ready to go. Actually, I'll do that if you want to go find out how to open the hangar door.”

“Done and done,” Kendall replies. He turns away and jogs toward the hangar door.

My footsteps echo as I walk toward the helicopter. It's been a little while since I've piloted one of these, but it's like riding a bike. I pull the door open and climb inside. Before trying to start the engine, I look around to see if anyone has come to check up on us. Everything's clear. As I look to the control panel I notice a clipboard and pick it up. It has a bunch of dates written on it and information about the helicopter. My eyes skip to the last recorded date, which is yesterday's date and check out what it has to say. There's a routine maintenance checklist with

boxes ticked off and notes scribbled on the bottom. Looks like the gas has been topped off and the oil's been changed. This is perfect.

My eyes skip down to the scribbled notes and it reads, "Rain loaded with copious amounts of sulfur, rotary blade protection in place to avoid erosion and other abrasive damage. Blades coated with polyurethane and polyethylene layers. Should protect against mild to medium exposure of both the acid rain and ash cloud."

I don't think we could have stumbled across a more perfect find.

"Kendall," I call out as I step out of the helicopter. "This one's perfect, ready when you are."

Kendall calls back, "Sweet. Just about ready, I think I found the door's hydraulic system."

The door we came in from creaks open and someone calls out, "Hey. What in the world are you two doing? All personnel must immediately report in upon entry to this facility, soldiers!"

Kendall and I look at each other and then back at the man at the door.

"We were just about to report in, Sir," I begin. "We just had to check up on emergency intel from a fellow soldier in the field, Sir."

He looks at me with furrowed brows and then over at Kendall. He turns back to me and says, "What part of immediately report in upon entry do you two not understand? You are way out of line right now. Give me your names so I can personally see that you two can not make this mistake ever again."

Neither of us speak and the tension in the room rises way too high.

“That’s an order!” the man barks at us as he places his hand on his holstered gun.

This has to end now before this blows up in our faces. I slowly take a few steps toward the man as my hand hangs by my side, ready to draw my gun at any second.

“Stand down, soldier!” the man yells at me, taking a step forward.

I take another couple steps toward him and he pulls out his gun, aiming it toward me.

“I said stand down!” he shouts even louder. “Do not make me shoot you.”

He looks down at my boots and pulls the hammer back on his pistol.

“Those,” he says pointing at my boots. “Are not government issue, soldier.”

I stop walking and put my hand on my gun. I look over at Kendall, who also has his hand on his gun.

My eyes meet with the man's eyes and I say, “Well, soldier. *I am* the government's issue.”

I pull out my gun as I jump to the side and fire a couple shots at the man while falling to the ground. He shoots back as I'm falling. My shots miss by a few inches and so do his, but he manages to get back through the door and slams it shut behind him.

“He's no doubt getting backup,” I say. “And others would've heard those shots. Let's go, now!”

Kendall turns on the hydraulic door opener and runs back to the helicopter. I jump in the driver side

of the cockpit and take a seat. I start the engine and the blades slowly begin to spin. The hangar door is taking its sweet time to open up. In the meantime, Kendall and I tear off the soldier's uniforms we were wearing.

Kendall jumps into the passenger area and calls out, "I'll man this gun; give them a little scare."

The hangar door is finally open and we begin to lift off the ground. The door we came in through opens up again and Zoo soldiers pour into the hangar. Kendall starts shooting close to them as they fire at us. Bits of concrete and dust spew into the air as the bullets from Kendall's gun spray along the hangar floor. The Zoo soldiers jump back and out of the way of the incoming fire. We are now in the air and moving toward the open hangar door.

"Hold tight," I call out. "We're almost out of here!"

Kendall shouts back, "Weeehoooo!" as he sprays a continuous line of fire at the floor and walls of the hangar.

We reach the hangar door and lift up and away from the hangar. Enemy fire continues to zoom past us and a few bullets manage to hit the backside of the cabin, but not causing enough damage to stop us from leaving. The chopper gains more and more altitude as we lift away from the Zoo base.

Kendall and I cheer as he climbs back into the cockpit.

"We actually did it!" He shouts. "We stole their helicopter!"

We both laugh and I reply, “Man, my heart is pounding right now! I wasn't sure if we were going to make it out of there. Grandpa army man was all business, no sense of humour, that guy!”

Kendall laughs and says, “I would have shot at you too if I were in his shoes. What kind of cheesy line was that? I *am* the government's issue! You are hilarious.”

“Hey, come on,” I retort. “It was decent. Besides, I think it did the trick.”

“Honestly,” Kendall says. “That whole thing kind of felt a little too easy. But I mean, I guess they've probably got a lot on their plate with the Virulent turning their back on them and all.”

“Yeah, that's true,” I reply. “But still, if that hangar door didn't open or this chopper didn't start, things could have been a lot worse. I feel like we got a bit lucky back there.”

Kendall nods his head and says, “Agreed. Either way, that was great. Now we got the chopper. Things might just work out after all.”

“Things *will* work out,” I reassure. “They have to. Well, you ready for Kentucky?”

“Yeah I am!” Kendall answers. “I ran out of pages in my colouring book though, is this trip going to be long?”

I laugh and answer, “Well, I might have seen a few toys back there that you can play with in the meantime, but this trip is going to be about twelve and a half hours, so I hope you went to the bathroom before we left.”

“Oh boy,” Kendall says. “That’s quite the adventure. Well, let me know if you see a burger joint along the way. We should probably stop to get some snacks or something.”

I laugh and shake my head.

“Well actually,” I reply. “I saw a cabinet back there in the cabin that has dried food and water bottles in it, as well as a first aid kit, so I think we’ll be alright. No need to make any pit stops. Sorry about the burgers.”

“Ah it’s all good, I guess,” Kendall says. “I do love me some dried foods. Ooh! And water bottles, my favourite!”

I shake my head again, “This is going to be a long trip.”

We both laugh and Kendall shoves my shoulder.

I notice something out of the corner of my eye and point at one of the display monitors.

“You see that?” I ask.

Kendall takes a look at the built-in rear view camera display and says, “Let me check it out.”

He jumps back into the cabin and opens the sliding door to stick his head outside.

“We definitely have company,” he calls back.

“Looks like two incoming choppers.”

“I honestly didn’t see that coming,” I say. “They must be really upset to send two choppers after us.”

“What are we going to do?” Kendall asks. “I doubt they’re just going to ask us to pull over and write us up a ticket.”

“Nope,” I answer. “Probably not. We don’t have

time for this, we can't be delayed at all. I'm just going to floor it, if they want to come along for the trip then that's their choice."

I accelerate the helicopter up to full speed as the enemy helicopters shrink smaller and smaller in the rear-view display monitor.

"Doesn't look like they want to come along for the ride," Kendall says as he pulls his head back inside the cabin.

Suddenly there is a quick-paced beeping and a red light flashes on one of the display boards.

"We're about to get hit!" I shout as I reach for the flare trigger.

As the flares are released I maneuver the helicopter into a quick nosedive. We begin our descent and hear a loud explosion behind us as the Zoo's missile hits a flare.

"We have to shoot back," Kendall shouts. "They're going to kill us!"

"Well *we're* not going to kill *them*," I shout in response as I pull the chopper back up.

I check the rear-view display and notice the enemy helicopters are gaining on us. I need to think of something quickly or we are going down right now.

Bullets speed past as the Zoo fire a continuous stream towards us.

"Kendall," I call out. "I'm going to swing this thing around. I need you to fire the directional EMP at them. If they're not completely stupid, they'll jump out and parachute to safety once their engines fail. We only have one charge each, so try to get them

both in one shot. You can use mine if you miss.”

“Sounds good,” Kendall replies. “I’m on it.”

I change the direction of the helicopter while shooting out another load of flares. A missile speeds past us and explodes, shaking the cabin and blowing out the rear-view display camera. We are now flying directly toward the other two choppers at full speed.

“I’m going to pass them on your side,” I say. “Get ready, Kendall.”

I swing the helicopter out wide and bring it back in to pass the Zoo choppers. As we get closer to them, Kendall aims his gun and steadies his hand. In the Zoo helicopter closest to us there is a soldier holding on to a mounted gun and he has it pointed directly at us. He begins to shoot and I make an attempt to evade the bullets. No luck. Bullets stream into the side of the cabin in a broken line, hitting the tail end first and making their way toward the cockpit. Kendall jumps back as a bullet nearly misses him and smashes his gun right out of his hand. I manage to turn the helicopter away in time before the Zoo soldier can cause any more damage.

“Kendall,” I call back. “You alright?”

He climbs back into the cockpit, holds up the broken pistol grip in his gun and says, “I’m alright. My gun? Not so much. I might need to borrow yours.”

I hand him my pistol and say, “Maybe we won’t go so close this time. That thing has pretty decent range. We’ll stay back a bit.”

Just then the warning signal sounds again and the

red light flashes. I pull back on the pitch lever and release the flares, but it's too late. The missile hits us directly on the back of the cabin and the tail end of the chopper is blown off as we begin to spiral.

Kendall slams his seat belt buckles in place as I struggle with the levers and controls. Pieces of metal and debris are being pulled out through the open end of the craft as the sound of rushing wind blocks out all other sounds from outside. Meanwhile panicked beeps and warning lights go off like crazy.

“Does this thing have ejection seats?” Kendall shouts as we plummet toward the earth beneath us.

“I think so,” I shout back. “We're probably going to have to use them. Hang on.”

Suddenly the spinning begins to slow down until it stops completely. Our main rotor also stops spinning and we are no longer falling. We are suspended in mid-air.

“What's going on?” I ask.

“No idea, man,” Kendall replies. “Are we dead?”

“Is this the Zoo? Are they doing this?” I ask.

We hear the chopping of the Zoo helicopter blades above us. They get louder as it descends towards us. We turn around and see one of the Zoo helicopters staring back at us through the hole in our cabin. The Zoo pilot waves to us and we see a retractable gun lower from the right wing of his helicopter.

“Yeah right,” Kendall says as he points my gun at the Zoo chopper.

He fires the directional EMP and the Zoo helicopter's electrical systems fail. Their main rotor

also sputters a bit and then completely fails. They begin to fall out of sight.

“Good thinking,” I say to Kendall. “I’m pretty sure you just saved our lives.”

“Anytime,” Kendall says as he hands me my gun.

But then we hear it again; the chopping of the Zoo helicopter. This time it’s the second one.

“Ah shoot,” I say. “Get ready to eject, my friend.”

The second Zoo chopper is descending in front of us while also facing us. His guns are already lowered and ready to shoot.

“Okay,” I say. “Let’s get out of here.”

We both press the emergency eject button on our seats. Nothing happens.

“That’s not good,” Kendall says as we begin to unbuckle from our seats.

Before either one of us can get out of our seat the pilot begins to fire. Bright fire emits from his guns as they release a string of speeding bullets. Kendall and I brace for impact, but the bullets aren’t reaching us. Each bullet slows down in front of our windshield and melts right before our eyes, falling down toward the ground in a gooey mess. Hundreds of rounds are being fired and each one melts before it gets anywhere near us.

A loud boom shakes the helicopter and cracks the windshield.

There she is again. Standing in front of the helicopter, just floating there, is the woman from before. Her long, silvery hair swaying in the wind, her bare feet suspended beneath her, her arms hanging

by her side. She looks back at us with her large, vibrant eyes and then back at the Zoo helicopter. A long flame flows out from her right hand and forms into the shape of a sword, which she grips tightly. She raises her left hand toward our enemy's helicopter and the blades instantly stop spinning. Still flaming, she holds the sword by her side and glides toward the immobilized Zoo aircraft. She picks up speed the closer she gets and when she's just a few feet away she, almost effortlessly, swings her sword up through the enemy chopper, cutting it cleanly in half.

Both halves of the helicopter begin to fall to the earth and the woman's sword extinguishes itself, going out in a wisp of smoke. She turns back to us and glides slowly toward our helicopter, which is still lying motionless, suspended in the sky. When she is just a few inches from the windshield, she disappears into thin air.

"Please," the woman says with her lovely and devastating voice.

We spin around in our seats and see her stepping into the helicopter through the torn-open cabin.

"Behold what I shall show you," she continues as she walks over to us.

We both stand up out of our seats and face her.

"Observe these things," the woman says as she holds her hand up toward us.

The woman and the helicopter begin to fade. The sound of wind and rain are drowned out by a deafening silence, and suddenly I can not feel the

floor beneath my feet. I close my eyes.

Chapter 10

My eyes can no longer stay shut, so I open them.

Fire is crackling as flames climb toward the sky. I am standing in a forest, but it's completely ablaze. My skin is sweating, but I don't feel the heat. The earth beneath my feet has been blackened and is covered in ashes. Branches fall from the trees and onto the ground.

The woman stands beside me, looking straight ahead at the flames. My feet feel heavy and slow as I turn to face her.

“Who are you?” I ask.

Her eyes pierce me as she turns to look at me and I almost look away in fear.

“I am a servant,” she answers. “I serve the Light. I do not come here of my own agenda.”

I hesitate for a second, then ask, “What is your name?”

She softly replies, “Your ignorance is forgivable, but I ask of you not to repeat your question, for I can not reveal this sacred thing unto you.”

I'm amazed at how ashamed and confused I feel at the same time.

“I'm sorry,” I say. “I'm just a little confused. Why

did you help my friends and I?"

She smiles and answers, "I serve the Light."

She then turns back to the dancing flames, delicately extending a finger toward them.

Her voice carries as though her mouth was inches from my ear while she says, "See what has happened to the Earth. What has happened to the life your Mother brings to Her children. She suffers the growing pains of Her children's adolescence."

There are Zoo soldiers at the entrance to this forest. They're carrying flamethrowers and gas canisters. They spray the beautiful, fresh green trees with oil and flames.

Suddenly the flames begin to die down and the trees melt into the ground. They melt into a thick, grey liquid, which builds itself back up and forms into buildings and roads. I look down at my feet and see that I am standing on black tiles that shift into a polished marble surface. When I look back up I realize that I am standing on top of a meeting room table in an office building. Surrounding me, seated in comfortable chairs, are men and women in business attire.

"See the faces of those who lead this world's nations," the silver-haired woman says. "See the faces of deceit as they convince themselves and others that they perform acts of restoration and revival as favour for a neglected and unloved mother. Greed falls into a false sense of pride and preservation, guarded by a fear and hatred of the incomprehensible."

The faces of the men and women in the room are blurred, but give off a clear sense of disgust and anger. Their voices are loud and aggressive, but their words are unclear. I look around the room at these people and attempt to make sense of what they are saying. I catch a glimpse of the faces of a man and a woman and my heart skips a beat as I try to figure out why I recognize them.

The table I'm standing on no longer supports my weight and I sink through it as it turns to sand. The sand blows around the room and tears apart everything it touches. Everyone in the room disintegrates into millions of little pieces as the sand whips past them. Sandy structures begin to form around me. They form into shelves and containers and plants.

I find myself standing next to the silver-haired woman in a very large warehouse. There are hundreds of thousands of boxes on the shelves, each with a different label and number. My feet shuffle along the floor as I strain to look at the label of the box closest to me.

It reads, "Orthetrum Luzonicum: M. and F. Reproductive Samples."

"They mock their Mother," the woman says, "by destroying Her precious gifts with promise of restoring them to fullness. A foolish and childish pursuit made by those who believe they can do as their loving Mother has done for them."

I let out a long breath and watch as condensation forms in front of me. The condensation rises, but

stops rising before it can dissipate and begins to freeze. The freezing condensation forms into a sort of ceiling, spreading outward, only a foot above my head. It forms a perfect square and then slowly extends down into four walls that encase me completely. I put my open palm against the wall of my frozen, ice prison and it begins to melt where I touched it.

All at once, the ice turns into smoke and a strong wind pushes it away to reveal a new landscape. Buildings surround me as I stand in the middle of a street in a hazy city. Shouts echo against the walls of the buildings and ring through my ears. On the ground, next to a store window, is a man with his small daughter, cradled in his arms. They look extremely malnourished and appear as though they are struggling to breathe. The shouting continues and grows louder.

The woman with the silver hair speaks again, saying, “No mercy is shown by leaders for brothers and sisters. Children are left to starve alongside their parents. A slow and painful death, for an evil cause.”

I hear soft whimpering. I turn around to see a woman in tears sitting on her knees, sobbing as she holds the motionless bodies of her husband and son.

“A mother bleeds as her children are destroyed,” the woman continues, “as, in fear, they turn to destroy others.”

The shouting has grown incredibly loud. The sound of feet pounding against pavement shakes my entire frame, causing me to turn around. I am face to

face with a charging horde of starving people, each one carrying a weapon. Something in my hands catches my attention and my heart sinks as I look down to see what it is. It's me the horde is coming for. I am holding an incredible amount of fresh food and they want it.

An elderly woman with white hair and a torn, velvet tracksuit reaches me first. She grabs me firmly by the arm and calmly stabs a twelve-inch blade through my chest. I take a step back. In the place where I was standing is a man, holding his bleeding chest with one hand and trying to hold on to all the food he has in his other hand as the horde aggressively snatches it from him.

The horde stops shouting. The buildings disintegrate and the particles smudge along the sky, leaving long grey streaks that turn lighter and brighter until they are rays of sunshine in a clear blue sky. The horde of hungry people shuffle to stand in many long, straight rows. Their arms extend and stretch high above them as their skin peels away from their bodies to reveal cornstalks.

A gentle breeze caresses my cheeks as I stand in a field of grass, looking toward a corn field. To my right, there are a few Zoo soldiers walking through the rows of corn. They are pointing at the stalks and talking among themselves. One of the soldiers retrieves a small plastic tube from his bag and places it in the soil in the middle of the corn field. He holds a “thumbs-up” gesture to the sky and the Zoo soldiers begin to run away.

A plane's engine can be heard in the distance, quickly growing louder and louder. My head feels heavy as I turn it upward to search the sky for the plane. As soon as I see the plane it is already flying directly over my head and releases a large white cloud from a hatch. The cloud slowly settles down onto the corn field. The corn instantly begins to shrivel and I hear voices shouting again. The ears of corn shed their husks, each one revealing a starving person inside. The people begin to fight each other again, this time over tiny morsels of food.

“Come with me,” the silver-haired woman says as she begins to take several steps into the air.

I follow her, taking careful steps onto what feels like an invisible staircase. As we climb higher and higher, I look down below and see many farms. Some of them have entire crops burning to the ground. Others have piles of rotting animal corpses.

“They take gifts of the earth and destroy them,” the woman says.

We keep walking higher up into the sky until we reach what looks like sand. I reach up to touch it and I'm surprised when I discover that it *is* sand.

The woman looks toward me and is suddenly upside-down with her feet on the sand. I'm quickly shifted into the same position and look up at the earth beneath us. It begins to break apart into small chunks and gradually falls up toward us. The pieces of earth move slowly at first, but then quickly speed up as they get closer to us. As the millions of pieces start to move higher and higher, gaining speed, I notice them

becoming semi-transparent and slightly blue. I realize the many pieces of earth are liquid and now the sound of rushing water fills the air. This gigantic waterfall is racing through the air towards us and I brace myself for impact.

Water crashes all around us, quickly filling up space for as far as the eye can see in every direction. We have been completely submerged. The pressure causes the air to escape from my lungs and they are quickly filled again as water rushes in to them while I gasp for air. My lungs are completely filled with water, but I am somehow still able to breathe.

“See the unwise and their foolish ways,” the woman says, pointing directly in front of us in the water.

My eyes strain to focus as I search in the direction the woman pointed. Suddenly there is a bright flash and I see an enormous pillar of molten lava shooting out of the ocean floor. The lava hardens as it cools and floats down to the sandy floor beneath it while huge bubbles of ash and gasses shoot upward in the water. The force from the explosion pushes its way through the water and speeds past us like a train.

A second flash then momentarily blinds me. When my vision returns, the water around a second volcano is violently reacting to an eruption of lava even bigger than the last one. Bubbles and cooling lava fill the ocean in front of me.

The woman points again and my eyes follow the direction of her finger. She is pointing to thick, dark, broken cables dancing in the water. Moving images

spring out from each end of the broken cables as though they were ghosts gliding across the ocean. Swaying in front of me are images of millions of people trying to contact each other by using the internet, but their connections have been lost. They hopelessly try phone signals, which have also been lost. Images of the Virulent float by. They're giving orders to the Zoo to begin using radio jammers, which they do. No one is able to contact each other.

As these images move around and float upward to the ocean's surface, I notice something happening to the fish. Millions of fish are floating upside-down in the water, motionless. Some are convulsing, struggling to breathe as though they were drowning. I notice a few fish swimming close to the bubbles that the volcanoes produce and see them biting at the bubbles. When their mouths touch the bubbles, they begin to twitch rapidly and contort their bodies. The gasses from the volcanoes are killing the fish.

“Wait,” I say worriedly. “The fish are the only thing people have left to eat! How badly did this affect them?”

The woman answers, “Only two-thirds of all the fish in the oceans and lakes remain.”

That's horrible. People are barely getting enough food as it is, now this? More people will die. More people will kill others for their food. The Virulent must be stopped.

“There is more,” the silver-haired woman says as she takes my hand. “You shall see.”

We begin to ascend at an unsettling speed, moving

from the ocean floor to the surface almost instantly. Dead fish, gas bubbles, ash and water shift aside as we speed through the ocean, bursting upward, out of the water into the sunlit sky. We continue to fly upward until we are about twenty-thousand feet from the surface of the water.

The woman lets my hand go and we both begin to fall, but too slowly to notice, as though we weren't falling at all. From this height, it seems as though I can see the entire world. I watch as giant pillars of smoke billow up from the surface of the ocean, forming huge, ominous ash clouds in the sky. The woman points again and I look in the indicated direction.

“The actions of the unwise echo much longer and louder than perhaps intended,” the woman says.

I watch as several more volcanoes, both subaquatic and coastal, erupt in a chain reaction as pillars of smoke carry upward, high into the sky. I look around to inspect the clouds in the sky, only to realize that we've moved beyond the atmosphere and are now looking down on earth from space. The smoke clouds spread out, far and wide, covering more than a third of the entire earth.

“Eight hours,” the woman says. “The sun will not be able to pass through these clouds as their darkness circles the Mother. The night shall grow longer by eight hours. Beware of the evil that shall take advantage of the growing night.”

She points and we are suddenly on land again.

With her finger still extended she says, “You have

not faced evil like this yet, but you will. Prepare yourself.”

My heart begins to beat faster as I look in the direction she is pointing. It's almost too dark to see anything, but I can hear whispered voices in different languages. A shadow moves in an irregular fashion as though it were the shadow of a tree blowing in the wind, only there is no tree or wind, but the shadow still sways. Something moves behind me and I turn around to look, but there is nothing. Suddenly a ghastly hand reaches up from beneath the ground and grabs hold of my leg. I reach for my gun to shoot it, but I am weaponless. It starts pulling me down into the earth.

“Help me,” I yell to the silver-haired woman, but she is nowhere to be seen.

The horrendous being continues to drag me downward as I feel the presence of even more of this darkness coming toward me. Shadows are moving from the walls of buildings down onto the ground and surrounding me. My heart is pounding.

Light flashes behind me and I turn to see what caused it. The silver-haired woman is standing there with her hand extended toward me. I quickly reach my hand out and clasp onto hers. As soon as I've grabbed her hand I am standing upright and we have changed locations. The shadows are gone and we are surrounded by lights pointing in every direction.

“Where are we?” I ask.

“We remain in the same place,” the woman answers. “But you are experiencing a sample of what

I see. These lights are people. Men and women that need to be marked.”

“What do you mean *marked*?” I ask.

“There are two symbols,” she replies. “They have different meanings. One represents goodness. The other represents evil. Each person will receive one symbol.”

She points to one of the lights and says, “Like this.”

The light is moved closer to us and is slowly changed into the form of a bright and semi-transparent man. The woman reaches her hand toward the man's head and speaks something in a language that I do not understand. I begin to see something appearing on the inside of the man's skull, close to the front, between his eyes. A fiery, amber-coloured shape forms and emits a small amount of light.

“The symbol for goodness,” the woman explains. “Goodness will be preserved. Evil will be destroyed.”

“Who's going to be doing the preserving and destroying?” I ask. “You?”

The silver-haired woman smiles and answers, “I have not been asked to do so. I am to simply mark. Three others will aid in this extensive task. We are to begin tomorrow.”

“When will the destroying take place?” I demand.

“You have time yet to learn these things,” she answers. “Those of us with tasks must complete them. You have been tasked with both the

preparation of those who would follow and the cessation of those who would take the lives of others for their evil cause. These things you must do.”

“You could help me,” I suggest. “I’ve seen you do impossible things, it would be no trouble on your part to help us with this task. The Virulent are an enormous force, we would stand a greater chance with you by our side.”

“This is not my task,” the woman answers. “Please do not let this trouble you.”

“Please,” I repeat. “Help me with these evil people. You could save so many lives.”

The silver-haired woman smiles again and says, “As you have done and will continue to do.”

Everything becomes silent. I close my eyes for a second and when I open them the woman is gone. The earth is no longer beneath my feet. I look up and see nothing but the absence of light. I am surrounded by darkness.

Something appears directly in front of me in the distance. My body remains frozen, motionless. For a minute, I am afraid, but that quickly disappears when I see a fire begin to grow. I am suspended in the darkness, while straight ahead of me a fire grows and bursts, only to shrink down and explode larger once again. This dance continues as the fire collapses and expands, larger each time. The fire is now a glowing ball of lava, floating in a perfect sphere. It begins to spin, increasing in speed every second. As it speeds up it glows brighter and brighter. Suddenly it stops.

The glowing ball is cooled off as it lessens in

brightness. Once it is completely cooled off I realize it is the earth. It slowly spins on its axis for a few minutes as I take in the beauty of the planet. It then begins to spin again and as it spins pieces of it fall off and crumble into the darkness. The earth spins faster and begins to melt. The surface is completely removed and the earth is now made of gold, burning as it quickly spins in circles.

I feel a pull as I am suddenly being drawn toward the glowing, fiery, spinning earth. It grows larger and larger as I get closer to it. The fire is burning wildly and I reach out to touch it as I am pulled toward it. I am consumed by the fire and pulled into the center of the earth. Everything is covered in gold and light is shining off of every surface. The light grows brighter until I can not see and am forced to shut my eyes.

My eyes open and I see Kendall lying motionless on the ground beside me, rain tapping against his visor. My eye lids are still heavy, so I close them again. This time when I open them I am surrounded by gold again. Light shining off of every surface. The silver-haired woman is standing above me.

“Woven,” she says. “You must complete your task.”

My eyes close slowly as I nod in agreement. I open them again and Kendall is being picked up by his arms and pulled onto a gurney. My vision begins to blur and everything shrinks into a tiny square surrounded by blackness. I feel hands against my arms, picking me up. Soft, muffled voices speak words I can't comprehend. My tiny square of vision

shrinks smaller and smaller until I can't see anything anymore. I lose consciousness.

Chapter 11

“Woven.”

I am lying on my back. My head rests on a pillow and a blanket covers my body. The air smells like metal and soap.

“Woven. Are you awake yet?”

Someone's trying to talk to me, but I don't have the energy to respond. I listen carefully to my surroundings. It's really quiet. The only things I can hear are the slight shuffling of cloth, a gentle humming sound, and someone breathing. When I'm finally able to open my eyes, I squint my eyelids, shielding from the brightness of fluorescent lights.

“Woven? You *are* awake!”

“Sort of,” I reply with a groggy voice.

My arms are heavy as I pull them back and prop myself upright against the bed's headboard. I open my eyes a little more as they adjust to the light and try to look around the room. It's a small room with a window and a bunch of medical supplies. I look at the other person in the room and instantly recognize her.

“Abigail,” I say.

She smiles and responds, “Hey, you remember

me!”

I do remember her. Abigail was one of the very first dreamers to join the RSD crew.

“We went to school together,” I reply. “Of course I remember you. You were probably the only person at the time other than Bongo and Co-Z that didn't think I was crazy when I told you about my dreams.”

“Oh, I definitely thought you were crazy,” Abigail jokes. “I just didn't want to hurt your feelings.”

I laugh and say, “Well, thank you for that. I'll just slip back into unconsciousness here.”

“No, no!” Abigail laughs. “I was just kidding! How are you feeling though?”

“I'm alright,” I answer. “I don't feel like I got injured or anything. Did I?”

“Don't look now,” she replies. “But you lost both of your legs and all of your hair.”

Abigail laughs as I throw the blanket away from my body to check.

“Oh my gosh! I am so sorry,” she says through muffled laughter. “That was a horrible joke!”

I shake my head as I laugh and reply, “You are a terrible doctor. You do that with all of your patients?”

“Oh, I'm not a doctor,” Abigail replies. “I just came in to check up on you. I heard you were back and I wanted to make sure you were alright.”

Suddenly I remember seeing Kendall being lifted onto a gurney.

“Kendall,” I begin. “My friend I was brought in here with, is he okay?”

Abigail nods her head and says, “Mhm, he's okay. I checked on him as well. He woke up a little while ago, but went back to sleep. He definitely needs some rest. So do you. I'll leave you be. There's some food on the side table there. Press the buzzer if you need someone who actually knows stuff about medical emergencies. I don't know how you got here, but I'm glad you're back in Kentucky, Woven.”

“Me too,” I say with a smile.

Abigail leaves through the door to my left and I rest my eyes again. I think about the things the silver-haired woman showed me as I picture the volcanoes erupting and huge ash clouds blocking the sunlight. What a nightmare. As soon as I figure out what kind of preparation is needed here I am going to set a time for this attack and we are going to take down the Virulent.

I look over at the food on the table and realize how hungry I am. I sit on the edge of the bed and begin to eat. As I'm eating, I hear a knock on the door and someone pokes their head in.

“Kendall!” I exclaim. “How are you doing?”

“I'm doing alright, man,” Kendall says with a big smile on his face. “Just finished up eating, I see you're digging in, too.”

“Yup,” I reply with a mouth full of food. “Starving.”

“So,” Kendall says. “That was wild, huh?”

“The helicopter fight or the dream?” I ask.

“Both. All of it,” Kendall answers. “That silver-haired woman is amazing. The things she can do!”

“I know,” I say. “It's a shame she can't help us take down the Virulent. This would all be over so soon.”

“What did she tell you?” Kendall asks.

“She told me I have to complete my task,” I answer. “You know, take down the Virulent, save the world. All that good stuff. What did she tell you?”

“Pretty much the same thing as the giants,” Kendall answers. “Keep helping you, keep people safe, bring back disco music. The usual.”

We both laugh and I say, “Well, we should get on that ASAP. Let's find someone to talk to and get organized. The sooner the RSDs know about what the Virulent is doing and about our plan, the sooner we can, uh, bring back disco music.”

I finish up my food and get up to stretch.

“Hey,” Kendall says. “Do you know where our suits are?”

I shake my head and answer, “No, but I'm sure they're somewhere safe.”

We both leave through the door and begin to walk down the hallway. As we're walking toward the head offices we pass the living quarters, where families run to their doors as we pass by.

“That's Woven!”

“He's going to save us all.”

“Dad, is that one of the Prophets?”

“Yes, Cody. That is Woven. A very brave man.”

“Woven! I've got your back. You say the word and I'm there.”

“Me too, Woven. I'll fight with you no matter

what.”

“Look! It's him!”

“I know you! You're a Prophet!”

“Woven's back! Is it time?”

“Welcome home, Woven.”

“See that man? He saved us, dear. He can save everyone.”

Tears begin to swell in my eyes as I listen to these people and the courage and hope in their voices. After all they've been through, after everything that's happening, they are still positive. They continue to remember what we fight for. They still support me.

I stop walking and use the back of my hand to wipe my eyes. I turn to face these families in their homes as their voices fill the hallways. My heart feels like it's going to burst with love for them.

“Friends,” I say loudly as everyone pauses to listen. “Thank you for everything you have done for this earth we live on, for your brothers and sisters. Thank you for who you are. I hear these kind things you say about me, but I am just one man. You are the ones who are going to save us all, people like you who live to love one another. That love will save us. Not me, but you and your courage to fight for what is right. The time is close at hand. Much sooner than you may think. But this is going to come to an end very soon. We are on our way to speak with the Disciples about our plan of action. There will be an enormous battle, but this does not make me afraid, because I know who is on our side. I have all of you next to me and because of that, I know that we can

not and will not fail. The Virulent have destroyed so much already, but that ends now. Prepare yourselves for what is to come, and know that we will succeed.”

The hallways flood with the sound of applause and cheering. These people are ready. This world is ready for the chaos to end.

Kendall and I continue to walk down the hallway toward the head offices. As we reach the offices we are greeted by a tall, light-haired man with glasses and rolled up sleeves.

“Marcus!” I exclaim as I run to him and throw my arms around him.

He embraces me and says, “It’s good to see you again, Woven. Abigail told me you were up.”

Marcus points down the hallway and says with a smile, “I thought I heard your name a few times. The people here love you.”

I smile and respond, “Well, I love them too.”

I point to Kendall and say, “This is my friend, Kendall. We’ve been tackling the distress signals up in Canada for the past while together.”

Kendall and Marcus shake hands and greet each other.

“I’d love to spend some time chatting and catching up,” I say. “But I’ve got a lot to talk about with everyone here. Think we can gather everyone together for a meeting?”

“Of course,” Marcus replies. “We were actually already in the boardroom conversing about the current state of things. Why don’t you two come on in and we can discuss what you’ve got on your mind.”

“Awesome,” I respond. “That’s perfect.”

“Great,” Marcus says. “Follow me. I’m sure everyone’s going to be ecstatic seeing you here.”

We follow Marcus down the hallway and through a couple doors.

“Everyone’s just in here,” Marcus says as he holds a door open for us.

We step inside and I instantly recognize the faces of many of my colleagues from when I first opened this RSD. We are greeted with many smiles and hugs as we go around the room, shaking hands and exchanging brief stories.

“It’s so good to see everyone here again,” I say to everyone in the room. “I can’t begin to express my gratitude for every single one of you and everything you have done for the dreamers all over the world.”

Marcus invites everyone to sit down and we take our seats.

“Woven and our friend Kendall have some things they’d like to share with us,” Marcus says. “So, let’s give them some well deserved attention and listen to what they have to say. Woven, Kendall, please, the floor is yours.”

“Thanks Marcus,” I say. “We don’t have a lot to talk about, but what do have to say is a big deal. So, we know the Virulent are a nasty force and they’ve done a lot of evil things over the last little while, right? Well, we’ve all experience their madness, and some of us have been shown other evils they’ve accomplished. Kendall and I were just recently shown some things in a vision by this silver-haired

woman who claims she is a servant of the Light, whatever that means, and who has also saved our life on two separate occasions now. I'm just going to recap so we know exactly what we're up against.

“The Virulent have destroyed our forests and farms, making it impossible for livestock or wild-life to flourish and have in fact almost completely eliminated animals altogether. They've captured, tortured, and killed millions of innocent people, which they plan on continuing to eventually wipe out everyone on earth. They've executed two controlled explosions underneath two supervolcanoes in the Pacific Ocean. These explosions destroyed internet connections, killed a third of all the fish, and caused all this acid rain. Next, they used radio jammers to block all other means of communication. They've taken away our food, our communication, and they've poisoned our water. They've also made it dangerous to even step foot outside without proper protection.”

“Maybe you've witnessed it,” Kendall adds.

“They left their own soldiers to die in the acid rain. Ruthless.”

“I'm pretty sure their soldiers are no longer of use to them,” I continue. “People are killing each other for food and water. The supply of which is diminishing faster than anyone could have ever imagined. Simply put, everyone is going to either kill each other or die from starvation or thirst very soon. If the Virulent are already at this stage in their evil plan, then I'm positive they are almost ready or are completely ready to end us all. We have food and

water at the RSDs, but even that is limited. Also, in this vision we were shown, we learned that the volcanic eruptions resulted in a chain reaction, erupting several more volcanoes, which has led to a copious amount of ash in the sky. These ash clouds will block the sun for an additional eight hours every day, which means less daylight for doing what we need to. We have to do something about the Virulent now before they conclude their evil plot.

“I have come up with a plan to put an end to this, but I need to know how we are doing for supplies and numbers before we can put it into action. Here's the thing, we will need aircrafts to carry out the message to the other RSDs. We'll give them a time, and all at once, we will attack the Zoo bases with everything we have, all over the world. We'll take as many prisoners as we can and get as much information as possible about the Virulent headquarters. This information won't be too hard to get with the genuine promise of food, water, and shelter, which they are now running out of, in exchange for intel. Once we get the information, I will lead a team, with myself, Co-Z, and Bongo at the forefront of the attack, and we will take the Virulent down once and for all.

“So, how are we doing for aircrafts? Can we manage to deliver the message to all RSDs around the same time?”

Marcus points to an old friend of mine named Daniel, and says, “Dan, I know we have the choppers, but do we have the pilots?”

Daniel replies, “Definitely, I personally trained

twenty-eight of them. The message will get out, Woven, you have my word.”

I smile and say, “That's what I like to hear. Thanks, Daniel. Alright, what about disciples, who can fight?”

A hand shoots up and my friend, Zoe says, “Last count before the communication loss was just over one hundred fifty thousand disciples worldwide.”

That's almost one hundred Zoo soldiers per disciple.

“They probably have a hundred times more soldiers than we do,” I say. “But honestly, I know those odds are meaningless with the kind of people we have. Plus, we are recruiting more soldiers as we prepare for this attack. The RSD in BC has already begun training every able-bodied person, which will be part of the message we will relay to each RSD. Every willing person will be trained and will fight. They have to. We fight or we sit by as the Virulent blows our planet to pieces, taking everyone with it.”

“I'd like to mention,” Zoe adds, “that we also finish production on the new suits later this evening.”

“New suits?” I ask.

“Yup,” Zoe answers. “The same ones you guys have, but upgraded, we were trying to aim for enough that every disciple could have one, but we came up short with the material that we had. It will take us a lot longer now to get the material with the acid rain and what not. That's where your guys' suits are, by the way. I got my guys working on them right now. They'll be fully repaired and they'll even have some

sweet retractable wrist guns on them.”

“That is excellent news!” I exclaim. “How many did you end up producing?”

“Well, we started around a month ago and had about one hundred and thirty-nine thousand as of last night,” Zoe answers. “And we usually produce about five thousand a day, so we’ll have quite a few.”

My jaw almost hits the floor.

“That is amazing,” I say excitedly. “This is huge. Wow, you guys are awesome! I was sure we could do it before, but now I am one hundred and ten percent sure. Geniuses, you guys. We’ll split them up evenly and deliver them to the RSDs when we send the pilots out.”

Marcus smiles and says, “So, Woven. You’ve got the numbers. When are you thinking this attack should take place?”

“In six days,” I answer. “We give the pilots the gear and messages to deliver tonight, they leave tomorrow morning. That gives each RSD four days to prepare and train able-bodies. We attack on the sixth day. Exactly one hundred and forty-four hours from the top of the hour. Set your timers. Get the pilots prepared with the exact same time.”

“Consider it done, Woven,” Marcus says confidently. “This will be a day they talk about for the entire future of mankind.”

“Thank you,” I reply. “All of you. Your help in this ensures our future on this beautiful planet. Now, let’s get ready.”

We all stand up out of our seats and make our way

to the doors.

Kendall turns to me and says, “You sure know how to get the ball rolling. I’m pumped!”

I smile and we continue to walk down the hallway. Many of us from the meeting are walking the same direction and we share conversation about the many things to come.

“It will be interesting to watch everything start to grow again,” Abigail states. “It’s so dreary with all these forest fires and ash wastelands. I’d love to be able to start seeing wildlife flourish again like the way it used to.”

“With the Virulent out of the way,” Marcus replies, “that certainly won’t be a problem.”

“I’m mostly interested in seeing the look on everyone’s face when they realize they don’t have to hide from the Zoo anymore,” Kendall chimes in.

“That will be nice,” Zoe says. “As of right now, everyone’s terrified to even walk out their front door. Imagine people just going out for walks again. Wouldn’t that just feel so right after all of this?”

I nod my head and reply, “Definitely. I really miss seeing the peaceful look of contentment on everyone’s face as I walked down the street. Before all this started happening. You know? Even just children having a good time on the playground, laughing and shouting.”

Everyone is silent.

I stop walking and turn around to look at the others. They are all motionless, like someone pressed pause on a remote that controlled them.

“Guys? What's going on?” I ask.

“Woven,” says a silky-smooth, airy voice, like a hundred whispers blowing over soft grass.

Chills run up my spine and I turn around to see who spoke. In front of me, a woman is standing a few inches off the floor and she is looking directly at me. She is extremely beautiful and her skin looks like it is made of sculpted ice. Her hair is long, down to her hips, and a bright cerulean colour that seems to shine its colour in an aura around her head.

She speaks again, saying, “Woven. You shall know these things before you proceed.”

Her hand is extended toward me and I ask, “Who are you?”

“I serve the Light,” she answers. “Now, come. I shall show you.”

I turn to look at the others, who are still motionless, and I turn back to the cerulean-haired woman. My steps are slightly hesitant as I walk toward her. I extend my hand outward to reach hers. As soon as my fingers touch her palm she disappears, along with my surroundings and I am transported elsewhere. I hear water rushing, then silence. More water rushing, then explosions and rocks crashing. Everything goes silent again and the world around me is pitch black.

I feel pressure against my palm and realize that my hand is being held.

“What are you showing me?” I ask.

“Woven?”

No way, it couldn't be.

“Co-Z?”

Suddenly there is light all around me and I can see Co-Z standing next to me, holding my hand.

“Woven!” she shouts as she jumps at me, wrapping her arms around my shoulders and her legs around my hips.

I catch her in my arms and we embrace each other. Feelings of peace rush over my entire body as I hold her against me.

“I missed you so much!” Co-Z says as she grabs the back of my head and pulls my face toward hers for a kiss.

“I missed you too!” I reply and we kiss again. “What's going on though? Is this a dream?”

“I don't know,” Co-Z answers. “But right now, I don't care!”

We kiss one more time and she hops down, back onto her feet. We stand there, in each others arms, for a couple seconds until we are interrupted.

“Um, am I interrupting something here?”

“Bongo!!” Co-Z and I both shout.

We run over to him and wrap our arms around him.

“Oh, hey guys, whatchya been up to?” Bongo says jokingly. “For real though, what the heck is going on? Blue-haired lady bring you here?”

Co-Z and I both nod our heads and I say, “Yeah. Pretty sure this is another vision or something. Still haven't quite figured it out. Either way, this is still awesome seeing you guys here.”

“I would agree with that,” Bongo replies. “Any

idea when the next showing is? Did we miss the vision or something?"

We all laugh and Co-Z says, "Come on, the blue-haired woman is probably watching us right now, shaking her head, thinking, "Why did I even bother with these people?""

"Nah," I reply. "I'm sure she's just caught up in dreamer traffic or something."

Suddenly gunshots explode all around us. We drop to the ground, which is now dusty pavement. Bullets are smashing into the concrete buildings all around us. Soldiers I don't recognize sprint out from around the corner and run right past us, their guns extended in front of them. They're returning fire as bullets whip past them from every direction.

"Stand," the cerulean-haired woman instructs. "You will not be harmed."

"Whoa!" Bongo shouts. "You came out of nowhere! Scared the crap out of me!"

"Where are we?" I ask.

The woman answers, "This is the city of Jerusalem, located in Israel. Look and see as they fight."

We look back to the soldiers and notice who they are fighting.

"That's the Zoo!" Co-Z says. "What are they wearing?"

"Probably for the acid rain," I reply.

They're wearing these white, plastic-covered suits.

The cerulean-haired woman points to a building a short way off in the distance and says, "See what they

protect.”

“They're fighting the Zoo, trying to protect something,” I exclaim. “Kendall and I overheard a couple of Zoo soldiers talking about Israel not being on the same page with the rest of the world. Maybe they can help us.”

“Maybe,” Bongo replies. “Let's find out what they're protecting first. Who knows? It could be a bunch of nukes or something and the only reason they're not with the Virulent is because they want the power themselves.”

We continue to walk toward the building with the cerulean-haired woman by our side. Shells are dropping and exploding around us as both Zoo and Israeli soldiers are knocked around by enemy fire. As we get closer, we weave through hundreds of armed Israeli soldiers. This place is heavily guarded, that's for sure.

“Do these people not see us?” Co-Z asks. “What's the deal?”

“I don't know,” Bongo replies. “But it's kind of fun.”

We approach the front gates of the building and the cerulean-haired woman motions for us to continue forward.

“Do we knock or something?” I ask, but the woman just stands there with her hand extended toward the gates.

I put my hands up to push the gates open, but instead of making contact with the long, thin bars, my hands just move right through them. My eyes are

wide as I turn back to look at Co-Z and Bongo.

“Weird,” I say.

My focus shifts back to the gates and I continue to move through them as though they weren't even there. Co-Z and Bongo quickly follow. We are now on the other side of the gates and the cerulean-haired woman is nowhere to be seen.

“Let's get inside, quick,” I say. “I want to see what these guys are protecting that's so important.”

We begin to move swiftly across the court-yard area toward the front doors. As we are walking, Co-Z and Bongo stop in their tracks.

“Did you see that?” Co-Z asks.

“I think so,” Bongo replies. “That felt really weird.”

“What is it?” I ask.

“I don't know,” Co-Z answers. “I thought I saw someone falling down in front of me, but they just vanished.”

“I saw the same thing,” Bongo adds.

Co-Z runs her fingers through her hair and says, “It was weird. They looked like me.”

“What? I thought they looked like me,” Bongo replies.

I shrug my shoulders and say, “Well, either you guys are having some kind of identity crisis, or this vision is messing with your heads.”

“Whatever,” Co-Z says. “Let's keep going.”

Our feet pound the dirt as we run toward the doors. When we reach them, I put my hands up to touch the handle, only to find the same thing happens again.

My hands go through the door and I slowly ease the rest of my body through the doorway. Co-Z and Bongo do the same and we find ourselves inside a very well-lit foyer. We read the signs on the walls that point to different locations in the building.

“Where do we go?” Bongo asks.

There's a sign that reads, “Library” and it is glowing.

I point to the sign and say, “Well, that seems like the obvious choice.”

“Why's that the obvious choice?” Co-Z asks.

“Um, it's glowing,” I answer. “Makes sense that we're supposed to go that way.”

“Weird,” Co-Z replies. “I don't see it glowing.”

“Me neither,” Bongo says. “But there's probably a reason you see it glowing. Let's go.”

We follow the signs and eventually make our way to the library. In the library, there is a small group of people standing next to a vault door. They're arguing about something. We walk over to them and listen to what they are saying. Unfortunately, none of us can understand Hebrew or Arabic and we have no idea what they're saying.

“Why isn't my Flye Lids translator working?” Co-Z asks.

“Something tells me our equipment didn't necessarily come along for this vision,” I answer.

“I just wanna know what's in the vault,” Bongo says. “Shall we?”

“Definitely,” I answer.

We walk past the people arguing and effortlessly

make our way through the vault door.

“It did not look this big from the outside,” Co-Z says.

The vault is huge. There are stairs leading up to three different floors, with each floor covered in shelves full of books, boxes, and safes.

“Up there!” I say, pointing to the cerulean-haired woman.

She is standing at the top of the staircase, waiting for us. We run over to the stairs and quickly begin to climb three steps at a time. When we reach the top, the woman has already moved away from the stairs and is standing next to a bookshelf. On either side of the aisle next to the bookshelf, a soldier stands with an automatic rifle resting on his shoulder. We move past the soldiers and down the aisle between the bookshelves.

I look back at the woman as we reach the end of the aisle.

“Some things are well hidden,” she says as she walks toward us and then past us. “Some things simply need to be.”

The cerulean-haired woman raises her hand, causing the wall at the end of the aisle to open along previously unseen creases. The door in the wall swings away from us and reveals another staircase. This one spirals downward for an unknown distance. We step through the doorway and begin walking down the stairs. As we make our way down the stairs we begin to hear voices. The further down we travel, the clearer the voices become.

The end of the stair case opens outward into a wide corridor. We walk toward an open door at the end of the corridor and as we approach it I can hear a man and a woman talking to each other. We reach the doorway and step through it into an extremely large warehouse. I immediately recognize many of the thousands of different pieces of art. The entire warehouse is full of famous paintings, statues, sculptures, blueprints for beautiful works of architecture, books, photographs, drawings, and many other forms of art, history, and literature.

A man and a woman are seated at a large wooden table in the center of the room. They quietly converse with each other. Co-Z, Bongo, and I walk over to them to listen to what they are talking about.

“I just don't think that these should be kept here. It's not safe,” the woman says.

“This is the safest place for them,” the man says. “There is nowhere else we can keep them.”

The woman shakes her head and replies, “These soldiers are at our doorstep, destroying everything in their path and they are coming for the blueprints.”

“Well,” the man replies. “We certainly don't have to worry about them destroying the blueprints. Their plans for starting over will never work without them.”

“I'm still worried,” the woman says. “Sure, this place is well-hidden, but what if they decide they've had enough? What if they just start dropping bombs? We saw what they've done even to their own. I believe that they are prepared to suffer many great losses, including all these beautiful things that make

life worth living, just to see their plan through. Don't think they won't burn this place to the ground if they don't get what they want."

"They'll have to," the man responds. "They simply must not get their hands on any of the instructions. It'll all be over the minute they do. Everything we've been fighting for will be lost."

"You don't think they'll figure it out on their own?" the woman asks. "What makes you so sure they don't have extremely well-paid scientists working on their own methods and processes of restoring the earth to its integral state?" The man smiles and answers, "The same reason I'm sure they will never get their hands on all this art and the blueprints they so badly desire: all the true great minds are still here and are still fighting for what's right."

"That may be so," the woman replies. "But they are a brute force and look how far they've already come by bashing skulls. I believe these evil people will do whatever it takes to get what they want."

She looks over at the paintings piled alongside the walls and sadly says, "Even if that means destroying all forms of humanity and our history."

"It won't come to that," the man says reassuringly. "I am certain we'll be able to stop them. And if we don't, then we'll barricade the place and never let them lay their filthy hands on any of this. Such evil people do not deserve to hold the beauty of our history and expression."

The ground begins to shake and loud cracking

sounds ring throughout the warehouse. Co-Z, Bongo and I begin to move back toward the door we entered earlier. A loud sizzling catches my attention and I look to the far wall to see a fire burning through it, melting all the surrounding artwork and literature. The warehouse begins to sag toward the center as all the walls and ceiling melt away.

The three of us are stopped in our tracks as the floor beneath us cracks apart and molten lava begins to pour out from the openings.

“Okay,” I say worriedly. “This vision can end any second now. That would be awesome.”

The cerulean-haired woman appears from the door we entered through earlier and points to the man and woman in the center of the room, saying, “They keep secret the knowledge of restoration and rebirth. They hold safe the beauty of mankind's expression. Aid them in their quest to keep these things from those who would use them for evil purposes.”

She points to the melting wall, which explodes away from us and causes us to be sucked out of the warehouse and back onto the ground-level battlefield. “These,” she says, still pointing, this time at the Israeli soldiers, “are your allies. This is the last nation to remain that hasn't joined the evil union or been destroyed. Help them stand their ground.”

I watch as the cerulean-haired woman ascends into the sky, parting the ash clouds before her, leaving a clear, blue sky in her wake.

“Whoa!” Co-Z exclaims. “Look at that!”

She points toward the sky and we stare in awe as

we experience a very surreal sight. Large planets I do not recognize are extremely close to Earth, growing in size as they slowly approach us. Our view becomes obstructed by the returning ash clouds, leaving us to return to our senses. The firefight continues to rage on around us.

“Guess we're going to Israel,” I say to Co-Z and Bongo.

“We'll meet you there,” Bongo says. “Good luck getting there, it's gonna be a lot tougher for you than us. You know, since we're already on this hemisphere and what not.”

Co-Z turns to me and says, “Please be safe. I love you. See you soon.”

They begin to fade from my view and so do the battling soldiers. The sound of gunfire and shouting eventually dies down and I am left in silence and darkness.

My mind is at ease and my body feels weightless. The darkness remains for quite a while and it feels like time has completely stopped. I wonder if Co-Z and Bongo are experiencing the same thing.

Suddenly a small, dim glow appears far off in front of me. I try to move to get to it, but I can't feel my body. A quick pang of panic hits me, but quickly fades away as I realize my thoughts can propel me forward. I use my mind to push myself closer to the dim glow. The glow gets brighter as I move toward it and it sounds as though there are voices coming from it.

Soon I am near enough to the glow that it is now a

shining sphere. It begins to move toward me and starts to form a more oblong shape. As it reaches me, it moves itself around me like a hug and then slowly squeezes me. With each passing second, I am able to feel the senses returning to different parts of my body. The shining light envelops me and I am pulled completely through it.

“Woven! Hey, welcome back, buddy,” Kendall says as he stands up from the chair he was sitting in.

I'm back. I'm not sure where I am though.

“Hey Kendall,” I reply. “Where are the others?”

“Who do you mean by “the others”?” he asks.

I look around and see that I am no longer in the hallway where I last saw those from the meeting and answer, “Everyone else from the meeting. How long was I out?”

Kendall sighs and answers, “Day and a half.”

I jump up out of the bed I was lying in and shout, “A day and a half? That's so much time wasted!”

Kendall puts his hands on my shoulders to calm me down and says, “Easy, Woven, it's all good! The helicopters were sent and they all managed to deliver your messages to the other RSDs. They dropped off the suits as well. Things are in motion; people are getting ready for the attack.”

He takes his hands off my shoulders and takes a step back then asks, “Where did you go? We were all walking, then you just stopped mid-sentence and fell over.”

“I was shown something new,” I reply. “We need to get to Israel right now.”

“Does this have anything to do with what we heard those Zoo talking about?” Kendall asks.

“Yes, it does,” I answer. “They have art, literature, historical texts, and blueprints all being kept safe in this underground shelter. Another crazy-haired woman appeared and told Co-Z, Bongo, and I to help protect those in Israel fighting against the Virulent and to keep those pieces of humanity safe. I guess they also have instructions on restoring the earth to its complete state, which is what I'm assuming the Virulent are trying to get their hands on. I don't really know too much about it other than the fact that we have to get there as soon as possible. Co-Z and Bongo are already on their way there.”

“That's crazy,” Kendall says. “Well, let's get on it then.”

“You said the pilots already returned, right?” I ask.

“Yes, but I don't think we're going to be able to use the helicopters,” Kendall answers.

“Why not?” I ask.

Kendall shakes his head and replies, “They all came back in pretty horrible shape. The ash tore away at the exterior and damaged quite a large portion of each helicopter. One of the helicopters almost didn't make it back at all. The pilot got into an air fight with the Zoo and came back with her helicopter looking like Swiss cheese. They shot her up good. She's alright though.”

“Nothing's easy these days,” I respond. “Alright, well, how are we going to get to Israel then?”

We both stand in silence as we try to think of a

solution to our problem.

“Well,” I begin. “There's an entire ocean between here and there. We can't really take a boat with all that acid rain and ash all over the place, without sinking before we even get there.”

“Hovercraft?” Kendall asks.

“No,” I say as I shake my head. “It's over six thousand kilometers. Our hovercrafts couldn't manage that without a couple of recharges, which simply isn't an option in the middle of the ocean.”

“Well,” Kendall replies. “We have an entire team of smart people here, let's ask them.”

I laugh and say, “Excellent point. Let's go.”

“Hold up,” Kendall says. “Put this on. The upgraded suit. It's pretty dang awesome.”

He walks to the side of the room and grabs the suit off a chair. He hands it to me and I put it on.

“That's a nice fit,” I say with a smile as I slide the gloves over my hands. “And how does this work?”

I point to the barrels on my forearm and Kendall explains, “Clench your fist quickly to release and to retract. Try it out.”

Both my fists clench and the two barrels on each forearm spring slightly outward and forward.

“There are three settings. For semi-automatic just touch your thumb to the inside of the tip of your index finger. For automatic, touch your thumb up to the inside of the knuckle closest to the tip of your index finger. For a constant stream, just move up one knuckle.”

“Awesome,” I respond. “I'll be sure to try it out

when I'm not inside the RSD.”

I clench my fists again and the barrels retract into their original position.

“It comes with a user's manual,” Kendall says. “No joke. Check it out in the visor's storage if you need to know anything about it.”

“I'll keep that in mind,” I reply. “Thanks.”

We leave the room and begin walking down the hall in search for our friends. After about a minute of walking I remember something.

“Wait a minute,” I say. “Didn't we have a transatlantic trade relationship with Morocco? We were getting supplies from them, weren't we?”

Kendall slowly nods his head and says, “I think I remember some kind of info like that being shared.”

“Perfect!” I exclaim. “Let's find out if that's still happening.”

Only a few seconds later, we come across Marcus in one of the hallways.

“Marcus!” I say excitedly as he stops in his tracks and smiles.

“Woven,” he says. “You're up! You definitely needed that nap. Boy, you were some kind of grumpy.”

We laugh and I pretend to raise my fists at him to fight.

“You better watch it!” I joke. “But seriously, I have a question for you.”

“Fire away,” Marcus says.

“Do we still have that transatlantic transport agreement with Morocco?” I ask. “I know things

might be a little shaken up since the whole communication breakdown, but do you have any info on that?"

"Of course," Marcus answers. "We've kept in contact and are still receiving shipments via Virginia Beach."

"Yes!" I reply. "This is excellent news."

"Why do you ask, Woven?" Marcus asks.

"I need to get to Israel as soon as possible," I answer. "I don't have many options for transportation right now and I remember there being a pretty sweet supersub for getting between continents."

Marcus' eyebrows furrow and his smile drops to a slight frown.

"Sorry to disappoint, Woven," he replies. "But those supersubs aren't functional anymore. With the loss of radio, satellites, and internet, we can't safely navigate them across the ocean. Well, not at the speeds we're accustomed to anyway."

I rub my head in frustration.

"Things just aren't going our way these days," I angrily say.

"We still have subs going to and from Morocco," Marcus says. "But they only travel at about forty-five knots. At that rate, it would take you about three days to get there."

"Three days?" I complain. "Well, I suppose I've run out of options. I told everyone six days and that was a day and a half ago. That leaves me four and a half days until we attack. If we take a hovercraft now, we can get to Virginia Beach in five hours. We

get to Morocco with a day remaining, leaving me with that much time to get to Israel and help protect the remaining piece of the Virulent's evil plot while the rest of the disciples attack the Zoo bases. Hopefully that will cause those attacking Israel's safe house to retreat, which would then give us the opportunity we need to get to Antarctica and finally end this."

"Sounds like a decent plan, Woven," Marcus says. "We better get you moving then. It seems as though this is very time-sensitive."

"It is," I say with a smile. "I basically can't make any mistakes and everything has to go exactly as planned. I don't really have any other options at this point."

"Well," Kendall adds. "Look how far you've already come. Certainly doesn't sound like something you can't handle."

I pat Kendall on his back and say, "Thanks."

"Alright," Marcus says. "Follow me and I'll show you where the hovercrafts are kept."

We follow Marcus down the hallway and I can't help but worry about how the next few days are going to play out. I keep thinking about what the silver-haired woman told me about having a task to complete. Who decided it was my task to have all this responsibility? I don't mean that in a self-pitying "why me?" sort of way, I just feel that whoever decided it was up to me to ensure the safety of mankind from the Virulent probably didn't think it through all that well. Why don't the crazy-haired

ladies just take them out? Or even the giants? I've spent all this time doing my best to do what I've been told to do yet things just keep getting worse and worse. If these giants or crazy-haired people or the "Light" want these things to play out a certain way, why aren't they here now, doing it themselves?

"What's up, Woven?" Kendall asks.

I shake my head and say, "Just worrying up a storm, you know, the usual."

"I don't blame you," Kendall replies. "It'll work out though. I know you know that too."

My smile temporarily masks my worry and I respond, "That's true. These dreams and visions gotta be happening for a reason. We're definitely being looked out for."

"That brings up a good point," Marcus interjects. "Some of the crew and myself were talking about our task forces for this attack and were meaning to talk to you and Kendall about leadership in this area. With you, Woven, leaving to Israel, this changes things a little bit, but we still plan on including Kendall as a leader for the disciples here. Ideally, it would have been the two of you, but I still believe that having Kendall here to lead the disciples in the attack will prove to be an immeasurable aid to the cause."

I turn to Kendall and ask, "What do you think of this?"

"I was just about to ask you the same thing," Kendall replies. "They mentioned it to me while you were in dreamland, but it was a little different then, assuming it'd be the two of us."

“I could definitely use your help along the way to Israel,” I say. “But these guys do need someone as familiar with the Zoo as you are. As much as I don't want us to part ways, I think this might be a good idea. Kentucky has the largest RSD in the world, which means you will be leading the largest attack. I wouldn't have it any other way and can't think of a better leader.”

Kendall smiles and says, “Thanks, Woven. I won't let you down.”

We arrive at the warehouse that houses the hovercrafts and Marcus says, “Alright. Big things are on the way. Thank you for allowing us access to your good friend, Kendall. Here are the crafts. Take your pick and have a safe journey, Woven. We are all rooting for you. Remember, when you get to Virginia Beach, you'll have to speak with Edward. He has been the submarine coordinator for years now, you'll remember him. He'll let you know the travelling arrangements. Good luck.”

The hovercrafts are all neatly lined up around the warehouse. I walk to the nearest one and turn to say my goodbyes.

“Kendall,” I begin. “I'm proud of you. Thank you for all the help, support, and encouragement. I honestly don't think I'd still be alive if it weren't for you.”

We hug for a few seconds and Kendall replies, “It was all you, Woven. It's honestly been an honour fighting by your side. Go help Co-Z and Bongo, then let's end this thing for good. Make us proud, man.”

I nod, put my helmet on and open the door to the hovercraft. I step inside, strap up, and start the craft.

“Take care,” I shout back to Kendall and Marcus as I wave goodbye.

They wave back as the warehouse door slowly climbs upward. I slam the accelerator down and speed out of the warehouse.

It's time to head for the coast.

Chapter 12

Local Flye Lids Storage – Woven – Journal Entries June 11, 2061 – Transatlantic Submarine Journey – Day 1

Not a big fan of submarines to be completely honest. I'm not usually one to feel claustrophobic, but there's just something about being stuck in the ocean in a titanium bubble with a few other people that leaves me feeling like I don't have enough space to stretch my legs.

The sub left on time, which was perfect. I was afraid that when I showed up to Virginia Beach I'd have to wait around for a day or something, but that wasn't the case. I did almost miss it though. Had I showed up any later, I wouldn't be on this sub right now and I actually might have had to wait for a day. That would have really derailed all my plans. Maybe I really *am* being looked after. Hopefully for a lot longer. I'm still pretty worried about the next few days, though. Well, not pretty worried, extremely worried. What worries me the most is that Co-Z and Bongo are probably already fighting in Israel. If the fight is anything like it appeared in the vision, then I

am justified in my worrying.

I was able to bring the hovercraft on board the submarine, which is pretty much the best thing that could have happened, because I was pretty sure I was going to have to beg for or steal a vehicle when I got to Morocco. It's even being charged while we travel. That still leaves me with the issue of having to recharge somewhere in Libya, but I'll deal with that when I get there.

I'm not really sure why yet, no one has been able to give me a straight answer, but this sub is carrying a few Zoo prisoners. I recognized one of them, I'm pretty sure he was an old friend of my parents' back in the day and I'm interested in speaking with him. I wonder if he remembers me. I'll find out tomorrow, and hopefully find out why we are even transporting prisoners.

So, something pretty weird happened while we were descending. Probably forty-five minutes into our descent, we all heard some kind of boom, which had me pretty scared. I was reassured that because of the change of pressure those kinds of noises were common and nothing to be worried about. That still didn't set me at ease, though. It especially didn't help when the entire submarine shifted like it was going to roll over on itself. I thought I was going to throw up. I don't know if a piece of the ship broke and we're slowly sinking or something, or maybe the pilot is just having a fun time, but either way, I didn't like it and it's still kind of bugging me.

Anyway, not a completely horrible first day in the

ocean and we're that much closer to Morocco, so all is well. I figure I'd keep a record of some of these things so that when this is all over I'd have something to share with my grandchildren or whoever may be interested. Besides, it keeps me from going crazy in here. Alright, that's all I got for now.

***Local Flye Lids Storage – Woven – Journal Entries
June 12, 2061 – Transatlantic Submarine Journey –
Day 2***

Things got pretty crazy today. One of the Zoo prisoners somehow got out of his cell and tried to kill one of the crew members with a knife he stole from the kitchen. The on-board medic saved his life, while I chased down the Zoo and dealt with the situation. It took me a little while, but I finally managed to get an answer from the crew as to why there were prisoners on the sub. I can't even believe these guys. They are going to let them go free in Morocco in exchange for information they gave to the RSD. We established strict rules at the RSDs that prisoners were to be kept within the walls of the RSDs until this war was over. It's probably the best outcome for the Zoo anyway. They are definitely running low on food out there if they haven't run out already. Water is not easy to come by either these days. We keep the prisoners at the RSDs in their cells and they get food, shelter, clothing, water, and protection from any of the other attacks by the Virulent. Why would you even want to return to the Zoo with a setup like that? I also have

no idea what this Zoo was trying to accomplish by trying to kill a crew member. Did he think he was going to take us all on? What if he did kill us all? Then what? Does he know how to drive a submarine? Can he find his way back to shore? People these days really confuse me. I just don't get it. Whatever.

Another crazy thing. I spoke to that prisoner who I recognized from before. He was all apologetic about the other Zoo who tried to kill us. His name is Eric and he did know my parents. Well, he apparently still knows my parents. He knew me by name before I even spoke to him. I don't really know if I should believe him or not, he could just be lying to try to pull some kind of escape or something, but if he's telling the truth, then things are worse than I thought. He said that my parents basically *are* the Virulent.

He calls the Virulent the NCE, which stands for the New Conscript of the Elected. According to him, my parents had some dreams of their own, apparently before I had mine. He wouldn't specify what the dreams were about or who they were from, just that after the dreams they came up with a plan for creating a better human race. Eric then told me that he was one of the first people they recruited. Before this all started, he was the sixteenth wealthiest man in the world, who used his money for extremely charitable purposes, which he was probably lying about, but I do remember him being really wealthy. Eric told me that he aided them in what he thought was a completely

different project. He was under the impression that the Virulent would be collecting reproductive samples from all life forms on earth in order to further the understanding of how life began on earth. He was told that this information would be used to aid in the colonization of Mars and possibly other planets.

I asked him about what part he had in all the devastation that occurred in the last few years, to which he answered that he had very little to do with any of it. Eric told me that after my parents had gained the trust of all these wealthy and powerful people, they began to convince them that they needed to isolate themselves from the rest of the world. According to him, my parents convinced these “elite” that there was a group of people trying to destroy everything they worked for. This group of people were calling themselves prophets and disciples and would lie and convince others to join them.

Once my parents got the support of the different military forces from around the world, they organized the largest task force this planet has ever seen: the Zoo, although they call themselves something else. My parents apparently asked Eric if he would lead the Zoo and help change humanity for the better, but he declined, saying that he would not suit the position. He said that he was a little bit frightened by them since he had seen them achieve things that he did not know were possible to achieve by any two people. He also said that at times it seemed as though they were not acting alone. Again, he wouldn't clarify what he meant by that, but instead warned me to stay

out of this whole thing. I told him it was a little late for that.

After he declined the offer from my parents, he was apparently sent to the front lines as a lead interrogator. It was his job to question people's involvement with the RSD in situations where they set off the beacons that we use to find them. Eric was the guy who we were saving people from. I asked him what they did with the people they questioned and he told me that I already knew what they did with the people they questioned. I almost punched him in the face. He told me that I did not understand what was taking place and that if I wanted to survive, the best thing to do would be to hide. But I told him that I can take care of myself.

If any of the things he told me are true, then I'm looking forward to a horrible family reunion. If my parents really are the Virulent's leaders, then that doesn't change anything. I will still take them down. I know they'd know that.

We're getting closer and closer to Morocco, which means we're that much closer to ending this thing for good. My worry has slowly been fading away into excitement for the last little while. It's time to begin again.

***Local Flye Lids Storage – Woven – Journal Entries
June 13, 2061 – Transatlantic Submarine Journey –
Day 3***

The navigator says that we are just a couple of

hours from Morocco. I am pumped! I have never been more ready to kick some Zoo butt.

I tried to get some more information out of Eric today, but he refuses to say anything more. He says that he has already said too much and that he is probably better off dead now. I told him that he should just find the nearest RSD when we get to Morocco and turn himself in. He didn't care too much for that.

So, I had a pretty terrifying experience last night after yesterday's entry. I was lying in my bed just minding my own business when I started hearing this long, screeching sound, like metal on metal. It wasn't very clear though, kind of muffled like it was from outside the submarine. So, I got a little worried and decided to get up to go let the pilot know, you know, in case we were scraping up against something. But as soon as I stood up out of my bed it stopped. I got back into bed and tried to sleep, but a few minutes later, it was there again. I got out of bed again and it stopped, but I had decided that I would tell the pilot anyway. When I told the pilot, he said that he hadn't heard anything, but thanked me for letting him know. So, I went back to bed and felt a little better about it. I was just drifting off to sleep when I heard it again, but this time it was followed by really loud banging against the side of the submarine. I jumped from fear and as I got out of bed to investigate, the banging stopped. I looked out through the little window at the end of my room and stared into the darkness of the ocean. There wasn't anything there, but as soon as I

was about to go back to my bed, something outside the window caught my attention from the corner of my eye.

I saw someone walking out there.

I know it sounds crazy, but I saw someone walking alongside the submarine, which is insane, because we are travelling at like forty-five knots, and how does someone even walk in the ocean like that? But I know what I saw. The person wasn't close enough for me to see their face or if it were a man or a woman, but there they were, walking in the ocean. I decided to avoid seeming like a crazy person and I went back to bed. Fortunately, nothing happened after that and I was able to go to sleep. This morning, I asked if anyone had heard anything last night, even a little sound, but no one had heard a thing. So, I have no idea what that was about.

Well, other than having to stop a murderous Zoo prisoner, finding out my parents are the leaders of mass genocide and are destroying our planet, and having some weird paranormal experience last night, I'd say this submarine trip was a success. We reach Morocco soon. I need to get a few things ready for arrival, so this is it for now. I'll update this journal another time.

Chapter 13

It's been a while since I've been to Morocco, but I don't remember there being any snow here. Especially not on the coast, and definitely not this much of it.

“What's going on with all this snow?” I ask out loud.

The crew from the submarine shrug their shoulders as they unload their things.

“I really don't know,” the pilot says. “This is new for us. I have never seen snow here in Morocco. It is never this cold.”

We had to break through thin sheets of ice that were on the surface of the water to get to the coast. I wonder what's going on. As I look around I can see that everything is covered in snow for as far as the eye can see. This is not what I had expected. A thick, grey sludge blankets the snow. I'm assuming it's ash from the volcanoes. I'm just confused as to how there is so much of it. The volcanoes were from the Pacific, not the Atlantic, there seems to just be too much ash on the ground here. The sky is masked in dark clouds. Thunder roars as lightning lights up bits and pieces of the sky.

The crew helps me offload my hovercraft and we pull it to shore.

“Thank you for your help,” I say to the crew. “This is where we go our separate ways. You've been a huge help. Keep up the good work you're doing and remember to keep an eye on those prisoners. Let them go if you must, but make sure they are far away from people they could harm. Stay safe out there. This is almost over.”

The crew starts chanting some kind of classic maritime farewell song as I climb into the hovercraft. Co-Z and Bongo have probably been expecting me for a while now. I better get going. I start the hovercraft and it pushes itself off the ground. I look over the map on my Flye Lids and get my bearings. It's going to be a long journey, I want to make sure I'm doing this right. I set my course and I slam the accelerator down. The craft quickly picks up speed and I am just flying past buildings through the snowy, slushy streets of the Souss-Massa region. My mind is racing almost as fast as my craft is drifting while I think about the events to come. It won't be long before I am next to Co-Z and Bongo, protecting some of the most valuable parts of humanity. If everything goes according to plan, I'll be face to face with my parents - or whoever is running the Virulent - and I'll be putting an end to this. The adrenaline is pumping through my body as I imagine what it will be like to finally put this behind us and start rebuilding.

There has been a lot of damage done to this beautiful planet of ours, but she's come back from

worse. When we rebuild, I will make sure she is taken care of. We have the technology we need to keep her safe, we were almost there before the Virulent ruined everything.

Suddenly, I notice something in my peripheral. Were all the other buildings like this? I stop the hovercraft and open the door to get a better look. The buildings along the streets lie in ruin. Some are lying on their sides, windows smashed, walls and roofs collapsed. Snow covered beams and foundations stand exposed to the cold air. What has happened here? Did the Zoo do this? I notice a bent and broken wheel peeking out of the snow on the side of the road. My feet slip a little in the snowy sludge as I make my way over to uncover what turns out to be an overturned car. This looks awful. Something really bad happened here.

I get back into my hovercraft and start moving again. The sooner I get to Israel, the sooner I can start solving all these crazy problems. Building after destroyed building zip past as I speed along down the road. I don't see a single person as I drift along, which isn't entirely unusual since the acid rain started, but I don't see any signs of people in their homes either. Maybe that will change as I leave the more crowded city area. Whatever happened here must have been a horrible thing to witness.

About an hour into my journey, I reach a small rural town where the homes seem to be a little more intact. There aren't any people visible or lights on in the houses here either, but I decide to make a quick

stop and try to find out some information about what happened. It's really bothering me. The house I'm closest to when my craft stops is the house I decide to try. The hovercraft door shuts behind me and the sound echoes throughout the town. I listen for the sound of someone or something, but all I hear is the rumble of the distant thunder.

I approach the front door of the house and notice that there used to be a fence surrounding the yard, but now it's scattered about and covered by a layer of snow. A bit of snow falls from the roof as I knock on the door. No one answers.

“Hello?” I call out. “Anyone home? My name is Woven, I'm with the dreamers.”

Nothing.

I put my hand on the doorknob and turn it. It's unlocked and swings open as I slowly push it forward. I poke my head in and call out again. Still no answer. The snow and sludge on my boots fall off onto the hardwood while I step into the dark house. I find the light switch and press it. The lights stay off. Something feels weird about this place. I take a few steps toward the center of the room and call out one more time. I hear something move in the next room.

“Hey, it's alright,” I say. “My name is Woven, I'm here to help.”

My night-vision is on, but I still don't see anyone. The dirt beneath my boots crunches against the hardwood as I make my way toward the source of the sound I heard. Standing in the doorway of the next room, I pause for a few seconds.

“I am on your side,” I begin. “So, don't try anything that might get either one of us hurt, okay? I just want to – ”

A blade shoots toward my face from my right side and is deflected off my visor. I put my hands up to defend myself and spin back around into the room I came from, throwing my back against the wall. I clench both my fists and my retractable guns lock into place.

“Take it easy!” I shout. “I'm trying to help.”

The same blade comes through the doorway, attached to a rope, and shoots outward in front of me. The rope catches the edge of the doorway, swinging the blade around toward my head. I duck just before the blade stabs through the wall where my head was. I grab the rope and pull on it with all the strength I have. A short scream is followed by a thud in the next room. I keep pulling on the rope, but it gets stuck. My hands move quickly as I follow the rope to the next room, pulling it as I go to keep it tight. When I'm in the next room I see a small, hairy man struggling to untie the rope from his ankle. We make eye contact and he stops pulling at the rope. He jumps and spins his body in the air toward me. His foot comes down hard on the top of my head and I fall to the ground. Quickly rolling onto my back, I put my hands up just in time to stop his foot from coming down on me again. I pull his leg toward me and he falls on top of me. We wrestle for a while as he tries to wrap the rope around my neck and I try to get a good shot lined up.

He's yelling now and I'm getting pretty tired of this. He finally manages to wrap the rope around my neck and I grab onto it with both hands. He is ridiculously strong for his size. I start coughing and decide I don't want to choke to death. Letting go of the rope, I spin us over so that he is now on my back and I push up off the ground with both my hands. I'm standing now and he's dangling off the ground, hanging on my back with his rope around my neck. He wraps his legs around my waist and tries to pull us back to the floor. I'm running out of oxygen and feel like I'm going to pass out any second now. I use my remaining energy to run at the doorway. My feet leave the ground as I jump and kick against the door frame, throwing us back onto the hardwood floor. My body weight seems to have done the trick as I land on him and he lets go of the rope. I quickly turn over and grab him by the neck, pulling my arm back behind me and turning my shoulder as I prepare to throw my fist at his face. As soon as the punch lands, it is accompanied by an electric pulse that knocks the small man unconscious.

“Whoa!” I shout as I pull my hand back away from his face.

What was that? I didn't think I had pressed the shoot button on my glove. Kendall said there was a guide for this suit. Standing up, I open my visor's navigation menu and quickly find the user's manual. I search hand-to-hand combat and begin to read.

Apparently, my suit recognizes when I'm punching and will add a nice little electric blast when my fist

comes into contact with whatever I'm punching. Awesome. That is always handy.

The navigation menu closes, and now with more questions than answers, I decided it's time to leave this house.

“Sorry about your pet,” I call out as I'm walking toward the front door. “I didn't mean to break your angry chimpanzee!”

I grab the handle on the door, turn it and pull it to leave.

Someone shouts something from beneath the floor. I look down at the floorboards under my feet.

Translating from Maghrebi Arabic:

“Wait!”

Flye Lids always proves useful in every situation. I kneel down and tap on the floor with my knuckles.

“Hello?” I respond.

The carpet to my left lifts up and I see two sets of eyes looking at me from underneath it. We look at each other for a few seconds then I extend my hand toward them.

“Come on out,” I say quietly. “It's all good now.”

Flye Lids connects to my visor and translates what I am saying into their language. It sounds a little robotic and the grammar is more than likely way off, but it's still better than nothing.

The two sets of eyes disappear for a minute and the carpet goes back down. A few seconds later, the carpet is lifted again, this time all the way, and two teenage kids come out of the floor. They slowly close the hatch behind them while maintaining eye contact

with me. The younger of the two is a boy and he stands behind the older girl.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” I say reassuringly. “That’s the opposite of what I do.”

Some whispered words are quickly exchanged between the two kids and then the older girl speaks.

“Who are you?” she asks.

I smile and reply, “My name is Woven. I help people who have had the dreams. I help them get to a safe place. What are your names?”

They hesitate, but the girl decides to answer me.

“I am Soukaina,” she says, then points to the boy. **“And this is my brother, Achraf. We are alone and very scared.”**

“Where are your parents?” I ask.

“They left before the earthquakes to find food,” Soukaina says with tears in her eyes. **“But now we don’t know where they are. We wanted to leave to find them, but that scary man came in and tried to hurt us.”**

“I am very sorry to hear that,” I respond.

“Everything will be okay soon, I promise. Did you say there were earthquakes?”

Both of them furrow their eyebrows and look at each other in confusion. They look back at me and Soukaina replies, **“I apologize, but are you being serious?”**

“I’m sorry,” I answer. “I was in a submarine for the last three days. Yes, I am being serious. Is that what caused all the destroyed buildings outside?”

Soukaina and Achraf both nod their heads and

Soukaina says, **“There was never an earthquake like this before. I am sure of it. It lasted so long. They just kept coming. My brother and I were outside, trying to collect water from our well when it started. There was a very loud sound and then we could hear the earth cracking and it sounded like the ground was exploding. Everything was shaking and the buildings started to fall.”**

She pauses to wipe away tears and takes a few deep breaths before continuing.

“We were so scared,” Soukaina says through shaky breaths. **“Achraf kept yelling for us to go inside the house, but I was afraid it was going to collapse on us. But then we remembered the cellar and we knew it would be safe there. So, we went inside and hid in the floor. We could hear all of our picture frames falling off the walls and our dishes smashing. I can only think of my parents! What happened to them?”**

I listen with a heavy heart as Soukaina sobs, holding on to her younger brother, who also has tears streaming down his face.

“Things are going to get better,” I say. “I promise. Now, I don't know where your parents are, but I do know that you two need to stay inside and keep each other safe. I need to go to Israel and help protect some very valuable things that the bad guys must not get their hands on.”

“Can we come with you?” Achraf asks.

“I'm sorry,” I say as I shake my head. “I do not think that will be safe for you. You are much safer

here than where I'm going. You two stay here, keep your doors locked and look out for each other. I will make things better soon, I promise. How long was it before that little man came into your house?"

"Maybe a day or so," Soukaina says while wiping tears away from her face. **"He just broke a window and came in. We were still in the cellar, and we couldn't see anything. It was so dark, not just in the cellar, but outside as well. It was dark until just half a day ago. The sun didn't come out for days. I don't think the small man knew we were here. We were very quiet and just waited for him to go away."**

"It's a good thing I arrived when I did then," I reply. "I don't think he had plans on leaving any time soon. Do you two have food and water?"

Soukaina hesitates and looks at Achraf before answering.

"We have very little left," she answers. **"But we can spare a little bit if you are hungry or thirsty."**

Tears instantly fill my eyes and I feel a lump in my throat.

"No, no," I manage to sputter. "You misunderstand me. I wanted to know if you had food or water so that I could give you some of mine if you did not. Thank you for your kindness. You are the reason this planet is worth saving."

Soukaina and Achraf watch as I raise my hand and say, "Wait here. I'll be right back."

I return to the kitchen and look at the little man's motionless body. That rope is going to prove useful

right now. I remove it from his leg and use it to tie his hands together. He weighs a lot for a little guy, I think to myself as I throw his unconscious body over my shoulder and walk toward the front door.

“Where are you going, Woven?” Achraf asks.

“I’ll be right back,” I reassure him.

The front door creaks as it opens and I push my way through it. The ground is slippery under my feet as I make my way back to my hovercraft. With one hand, I hold the door open and I slide the small man into the passenger seat with my other hand.

A shiver creeps down my spine. I stop what I’m doing and look around. It feels like someone is watching me. I put a hand up to my head as a dull pain throbs through it momentarily. I shake my head and the feeling goes away. My eyes dart around, scanning between houses as I check again for any sign of someone watching me. I shrug it off and go back to what I was doing.

The sound of the hovercraft door shutting is louder than expected on this empty street. I grab a few supplies from the back of the craft and return to the house. Soukaina and Achraf jump when I open the door, but are quickly relieved when they see that it’s me.

“Here you go,” I say as I hand them some food and water. “Use it sparingly. If everything goes according to plan, you’ll only need to ration it over a week, maybe two. But be careful, you never know.”

“Thank you so much, Woven!” Soukaina says.

“I don’t know what we would have done without

you.”

She begins to sob again. Achraf puts an arm over her and tries to comfort her.

“I need to go,” I say quietly. “I would stay if I could. I'm sorry. Take care of each other.”

“It's okay,” Soukaina says. “We understand. Thank you for your help. Please be safe.”

I nod my head and walk out the front door, closing it behind me. What a horrible scene. Poor kids. I hope their parents make it home.

As I step into the hovercraft, my gaze moves across the horizon. I glance over at the small, hairy man. This is one of those Tiny Arrow people. The people from that video feed from almost four years ago. What is he doing on the surface? I wonder if it has anything to do with the earthquakes Soukaina was talking about.

I start the hovercraft and speed off, out of the city, toward the east with my unconscious companion. As I drive across the snowy, sludge-splattered desert I notice something moving in the distance. It's a group of people. Quite a few of them. I blink my Flye Lids on and zoom in to get a closer look.

“Shoot,” I say to myself.

I zoom out and look over at the unconscious cave-dweller in the passenger seat and yell, “Hey! Wake up! Your buddies are here to pick you up.”

The pedal touches the floor of the hovercraft as I press it all the way down, accelerating at a ridiculous speed. I can see the group of Tiny Arrow people throwing their hands up in the air, getting extremely

agitated as I approach them. I'm assuming they've never seen anything move this fast and, judging by the fact that none of them are moving out of the way, probably have no idea that I could just mow them down. I'm only about two-hundred feet away from them now, so I pull back on the brake lever and angle my hovercraft so that it's parallel to the group of Tiny Arrow people with the passenger side facing them. We drift toward them and when we're about fifty feet away I throw the passenger door open. Still drifting toward them, I kick my unconscious buddy out of the door while spinning the hovercraft one-hundred eighty degrees. Then, slamming my foot back down on the accelerator, I release the brake lever, which sends me speeding off, away from the group of angry cave people.

In the rear-view mirror, I watch as the little man rolls to a stop in front of the rest of his pack. Not my problem anymore. Now, where was I? Right, off to Israel.

Chapter 14

Daylight is almost completely gone. As disastrous a state as this world is in, I can't help but admire the beauty of it all every now and then. Especially with a view like the one in front of me. The warm colours of the sun bounce around the giant, ominous ash clouds in the sky and sneak their way through the thick haze beneath.

I've been driving for about ten hours, non-stop, and I'm feeling it. My eyelids are feeling heavy and my body is extremely sore. I'm going to need to stop somewhere soon to stretch my legs and get my energy back. I'd really love to sleep right now, but I simply don't have time for that. My thoughts are littered with images of Co-Z and Bongo fighting in Israel without me. I wish I was there fighting alongside them now, instead of speeding through this cold desert, seeing countless homes and buildings lying in rubble. Not a person in sight in any direction. I look down at my battery display and notice that I'm already at four percent remaining. I can't go too much further on four percent.

I'm somewhere in the middle of Libya and it's getting dark. Not that it really matters, but the world

always just feels safer when there's light out. Suddenly, I remember the words of the silver-haired woman, that there would be an evil taking advantage of the growing nights. Could she have been referring to the Tiny Arrow people? They don't seem like a huge threat or anything. She did say I haven't seen evil like it before though.

What's that?

I think I see some light coming from inside a house. Maybe I'll finally see another person. After Soukaina, Achraf, and those Tiny Arrow people, I haven't seen a single person. I speed up a little and steer the hovercraft toward the house. I had no idea there were even houses out here. It's pretty much the middle of nowhere.

Once I'm a little closer to the source of light, I notice that there is more than just the one house. It appears to be a small community. There are about sixteen homes scattered about. A few of them have been destroyed by the earthquakes. Their roofs are collapsed and windows shattered. Some of the houses have their front doors hanging off their hinges. I feel a sudden anxiety for the inhabitants of these homes. I hope they are alright. Maybe they were like Soukaina and Achraf, with basements they could find shelter in.

I slow the hovercraft to an almost complete stop as I notice something move on the front steps to one of the houses. Someone's there. I can see a person's silhouette moving against the faint light coming from the house. The silhouette is moving oddly, as though this person is injured or disabled in some way. It's

probably best to see if I can help them. The hovercraft comes to a complete stop and I turn it off. My door swings open and I step outside into the quiet desert. The faint sound of something sliding is all I can hear and it's coming from the direction of the shadowy figure.

“Hello?” I call out to the figure. “Is someone there?”

The silhouette stops moving. A small amount of light is reflecting off of the person's eyes as I realize they are staring right at me.

“Hey there,” I call out again. “My name is Woven, are you hurt? I can help you.”

The shadowy figure looks away from me and begins to move again toward the door to the house. So, that's how this is going to be. Fine. I start walking toward the house. As I get closer to the house the shadowy figure becomes more visible. It is definitely a man and he's sort of hunched over. He's pulling something along the ground. Something pretty big. Something human-sized.

“Hey!” I shout at the man. “What is that you're dragging? Is that a person?”

My fists clench and my guns lock into place as I start running toward the man. He is inside the house now and has closed the door behind him. I pick up the pace as thoughts race through my mind. I reach the door, still running, and slam my shoulder against it. Little bits and pieces of wood break off the door as my body smashes through it. I fall through the doorway along with the door and crash against the

hard floor. Both my hands reach out beside me and I push myself up off the floor. As I stand I notice a warm glow coming from a room down the hall from the front entrance.

“Hey!” I shout. “Is there anyone in here? Is everyone okay?”

There is no reply, so I decide to check out the glow coming from the room down the hall. When I turn the corner and walk through the doorway my heart sinks down into my stomach. There are bodies lying all over the floor, arranged in weird positions around the room. In the center of the room, in the middle of all these dead people is a large, strange symbol, drawn in red. Around the large symbol are many smaller symbols arranged in a pattern. This is disgusting. Candles are placed along the walls and arranged around the symbols on the floor.

I hear something fall against the floor upstairs. It must be that person I saw earlier. With my guns still locked into place, I make my way to the stairwell and begin to climb up the stairs.

“Whatever you're doing,” I shout. “You're going to want to stop doing it right now! This will not end well for you. If you have a weapon, put it down now!”

When I get to the top of the stairs, I hear someone whispering. I don't understand what is being said and neither does Flye Lids.

Foreign Language Detected. Searching database...

Searching...

Search unsuccessful. No language match in database. Try again when closer to source of speech, or suggest a language to match similarities.

Probably just some crazy person gibberish. I am nearing the room where I can hear the whispering.

“I'm coming in,” I say calmly. “Don't do anything stupid to get either of us hurt.”

I turn the corner and see the man standing in the center of the room. He is levitating slightly off the floor and has his hands spread open beside him. I notice a cut on one of his hands and blood dripping from it. His head is facing up toward the ceiling and he is mumbling incoherent phrases to himself over and over again. Beneath him are more of those symbols I saw downstairs.

“What is this?” I ask angrily. “What are you doing?”

The levitating man looks at me while continuing his whispering, and then his eyes begin to roll around in their sockets. I don't like this at all. This is not what I was expecting, even in the least bit. I point one of my wrist-guns toward the man.

“Get down, now!” I demand. “Stop what you're doing or I *will* shoot you.”

The man stops his muttering and his eyes stop rolling. He slowly descends, back onto the floor. He stares directly at me and smiles. A chill runs down my back and I get ready to shoot. Suddenly, there is fire shooting up from around his feet toward the ceiling. He laughs in a shrill voice and continues to stare at me. The fire quickly burns a hole through the

floor and he falls down through it. I can hardly even comprehend what is happening right now. I hear voices from downstairs now, more than just the man's. There is moaning and short bursts of yelling. This can't be good. I walk toward the hole in the floor and look through into the room below. The dead bodies aren't dead anymore. They are limping around and falling over one another. Some are hitting each other and others are hitting themselves. There is a creaking sound, followed by footsteps on the stairs.

“Great,” I whisper to myself. “This is not going to be fun.”

I run over to the top of the staircase and aim my guns toward the woman moving up the stairs. She is hanging on to the handrail and dragging her feet. Our eyes meet and she begins to scream at me with what sounds like two or more voices. I shoot her in the chest with an electric pulse from my gun and she is forced backward down the stairs. Her head slams against the wall and she collapses on the floor. I take a few steps down the stairs but stop as she begins to move again. Her neck must have snapped when she hit the wall, because her head is hanging strangely on her shoulders as she picks herself up off the floor and begins to climb the stairs again. I shoot her again, twice this time. She slams against the wall again and this time doesn't get back up. My feet hurry down the steps as I try to make my escape. When I get to the bottom of the stairs, I am blocked by a crowd of angry, limping bodies.

The first one notices me and starts screaming with

several voices. A few others turn to look and also begin to scream. A man in the back starts climbing over the others as he claws in my direction. The whole crowd starts moving toward me, tripping over each other and screaming at the top of their lungs. I raise both my hands in front of me and press my thumbs to the insides of my index fingers. The crowd is hit by a shower of electricity as electrical pulses fly from the barrel of my guns. The screaming voices are chopped short as they are met with electricity. Bodies fly back and knock the others behind them down to the ground. But they continue to get back up and hurry toward me. I start taking steps back toward the stairs. As my foot touches the first step, I feel a pain in my thigh. The woman that I had shot, who had smashed against the wall, was back on her feet, flailing at my body with both of her hands. Her fists pound against me as I try to shove her off of me. My clenched fist meets her body, full-force, and an electrical pulse accompanies it, quickly sending her into a piled heap on the floor against the corner of the room.

The crowd has gotten too close for comfort and I start sprinting back up the stairs. They won't stop. This is insane! How am I supposed to get out of here?

I remember the hole in the floor and come up with an idea.

From the top of the stairs, I yell, "Come on! Come get me!"

My voice is barely audible over their harsh

screams and yelling. The crowd continues to fumble their way up the stairs toward me, climbing over each other and pushing others out of their way. What did I do to make these dead people so upset? A few of them are now at the top of the stairs and are moving toward me. I slowly walk backwards toward the hole in the floor. I shoot at the dead people a few times as they get too close, knocking them back into each other. It should be clear downstairs now. I wait a few more seconds for the rest of the crowd to make their way up the stairs then release another shower of electric bursts into the crowd.

I put my legs into the hole as I sit along its opening. I retract my guns and brace my hands against both sides of the hole. Lifting myself up, I dangle my legs underneath me, then drop to the next floor. My knees bend as I absorb the shock from landing and I push myself back upright. I start moving for the door.

A hand slams down on my shoulder and pulls me down onto the floor. I throw my hands up to block a leg coming down on me. I stop the foot and with one hand, holding it in place. With my other hand, I swing at the leg and punch it as hard as I can. The electric pulse that comes with it pushes the leg with so much force that the dead guy flips around and lands on his head, crumpling into a ball on the floor.

Rolling over onto my stomach, I push against the floor and stand myself back up. There are still a bunch of dead people down here. They must have been the ones that had fallen over or were thrown

back when I was shooting at the crowd of them. They run toward me while yelling at my face. I punch the first one in the face and he instantly collapses. The second one jumps at me and I catch her in the air, throwing her against the floor. She slides and hits the wall. My helmet is suddenly pulled off and I quickly turn around to get it back. I grab it from the man who took it and use it to smash across his face, spinning him around and nearly knocking him over. He turns back to fight me as I clench my right fist and point my gun at him. He takes a step toward me and I fire, pushing him back against the wall, which he slams into.

Turning back to face the door, I see the crowd of dead people from upstairs have now made their way back down the stairs, blocking my only escape. I quickly slip the helmet back on over my head. I clench my other fist and get ready for a fight I am simply not prepared for.

I look up as I hear an explosion upstairs. I hear the roof collapse and things slamming against the floor. The hole in the ceiling that I dropped down through lights up as the crowd of dead people begin to run toward me. I raise my hands to defend myself.

Something crashes onto the floor behind me. I turn around to see a beautiful, emerald-haired woman standing, barefoot, behind me. She holds her hand out, her palm facing up, as a small glowing orb is produced and held in the air. The orb is spinning quickly, but she places her finger along the side of it and it slows down quite a bit. She leaves it there and

begins to walk toward the dead people, who have almost completely stopped moving. I suddenly realize that she has slowed time down. She puts her hands up, towards the crowd of dead people, and holds them together, palms touching. She slowly moves her hands apart and an extremely bright light appears from between her palms and spreads out toward the dead people. The light seems to pour into each of their eyes and fill their whole bodies.

The emerald-haired woman then turns to the few other dead people in the room and does the same thing to them. She walks back to the slowly spinning, floating orb and places her hand beneath it.

“I have something to show you,” she says, in the softest voice I have ever heard. “I have come to ask of your forgiveness.”

She reaches her other hand out toward me and says, “Please. You must observe these things.”

I take her hand in mine and she closes her fingers around mine. Her other hand closes around the orb and suddenly everything disappears.

I am swallowed up in complete darkness. I hear the emerald-haired woman's voice.

“Be still. Be silent. Behold what shall be seen,” she says.

A bright light surrounds me. Colours, more vibrant than I have ever seen, fill the world around me. But nothing is clear. Everything is just blurred, but vibrant colours. I feel an emotion being sent to me from my left. I can't turn to face the source of it, I feel immobile. The emotion is warm and calming.

It's very pleasant, but it's not complete. I can't fully comprehend it or appreciate it.

Something like words form vibrating shapes around me and lead me to an understanding that whoever sent that emotion to me sees us as best friends. They want us to be friends forever. I want us to be friends forever, too. More emotions are sent to me and I want to just roll around in them. Then, more shaky shapes that express happiness and contentment. This is great. I love this.

The colours slowly fade and then come back vibrant again. I am feeling a stream of emotions moving through me, coming from my left again. This time they are not pleasant. The vibrations are sharp and clear. Something big is happening and whoever is sending these emotions fears for our friendship. I am sad and fear the same. Again, the colours fade away for a short time then begin to brighten again. This time I recognize what I am seeing.

There is lots of light and very bright, semi-transparent people. I see the emerald-haired woman again. She is moving through crowds of these semi-transparent people. She whispers to them and their foreheads burn bright with the amber symbols. My feet are forced forward and I begin sprinting toward her. I stop a few feet away and call out her name, which I can't understand.

“Please,” I beg her, as my mouth is moved for me. “Allow me to aid you in this call.”

“It is forbidden,” the emerald-haired woman calmly replies. “Do not ask such a thing of me.”

“But you must remember,” I plead. “You must remember our joy, our friendship. Do this thing for me, let me be of service to you. Please allow this thing as gratitude on my behalf for the love thou hast shown unto me in all my days.”

“I can not allow this thing,” she replies. “What of a mistake or misdeed? From whence shall I regain form?”

“I promise with my very being,” I cry. “I shall not curse the name of my beloved! Allow this of me that I may repay you.”

She lets out a soft sigh and touches my face.

“See to it that you are filled with joy in performing this thing,” she says. “Find sorrow no more and may debt be lifted in gratitude.”

The emerald-haired woman lifts her hand to my eyes and fills them with a green light. I am taller now and feel stronger. The woman disappears from my view and I approach one of the semi-transparent people. I lean close to their face and begin to whisper words I don't understand. I feel sick, like I want to throw up. But I am also excited and angry. I watch as a red symbol begins to light up inside the skull of this semi-transparent man. This brings me an unnerving sense of joy and excitement. I move to the next person and repeat the same whispering as the red glow forms behind their eyes.

Suddenly I am standing face-to-face with myself. There I am, talking to Soukaina and Achraf. I stand as I watch myself converse with them. I see them sobbing and I watch as I walk toward the kitchen to

tie up the Tiny Arrow man. I watch myself walk toward the hovercraft with the little man on my shoulder. I walk toward myself and the world brightens and I become semi-transparent. I lean close to myself as I watch me put the little man into the hovercraft. I whisper something and see the red glow form within my skull.

The scene fades away and I am face-to-face again with the emerald-haired woman inside the house with all the dead people.

“I have failed you,” she says to me. “For this I ask of your forgiveness.”

“I’m sorry,” I reply. “I literally have no idea what you are talking about or what just happened. What did I just put in my own head?”

“You did nothing,” she replies. “What you experienced were thoughts and actions of a former friend of mine. I loved him. He loved me too, but he also loved the darkness. Greater than for me was his love of the darkness. In an attempt to show mercy, I have made a grave mistake. I was beguiled into allowing my friend access to the thing which I was tasked with. He fooled me. I wanted to believe there was still good in him, but I was mistaken. He has marked you with the mark of death. The symbol you have in you is for the destroyers.”

“Well what does that mean?” I ask. “Can you fix it?”

The emerald-haired woman looks away from me and says, “I am trying. He had marked many before I could stop him. This is a difficult thing to reverse,

but I am doing all in my power to correct my wrong. This will take time. When the destroyers come, you must protect yourself from them. They will not see you for thy true self or hear your words of reason. They will see the mark and they will complete their task. Defend yourself until I can remove this symbol from you.”

“Wow,” I say in disbelief. “Right when I thought things couldn’t get any more difficult. Thanks for the heads up, lady. I’ll be sure to keep my guard up.”

“Please,” the emerald-haired woman says. “Be safe.”

She slides her finger along the side of the floating orb in her hand, making it spin fast again. She shuts her hand on the orb and the room is filled with light as she disappears.

When the light fades, I turn back to the crowd of dead people and watch as they all collapse onto the floor. No time to waste. I sprint to the door and slam it shut behind me as I run back toward my hovercraft. I start the engine and look at the battery display. One-hundred percent. That woman must have done that for me. Awesome.

My foot presses down on the accelerator and I am speeding off toward the east once again.

Chapter 15

If this were a normal time in my life, I'd be having trouble keeping my eyes open at this point. I've been driving for seventeen hours since arriving in Morocco. Cairo is my next stop. They have two RSDs there and I want to check in to see how everything is going. I'm probably only about ten minutes away from Cairo now, but getting here was insanity. There were so many small villages and towns along the way overrun by either the Tiny Arrow people or those angry dead people. I even saw some of the two groups fighting each other. I'd be speeding through the desert, then next thing I know, there's a group of little acrobatic hairy people flinging their daggers at me. I'd speed past them, only to end up driving through a town full of oddly postured, limping people, attacking everything they can. This world has become a living nightmare. The sooner I can put a stop to this, the better. The Virulent have basically unleashed hell on earth.

The desert is barren as I speed past Qarun Lake toward Sixth of October City on my way to Cairo. I don't see anyone or anything after the lake and it's beginning to become rather unnerving. "Anyone

there?" I doubtfully attempt to message the local RSDs via Flye Lids.

Nothing. It was worth a shot, I guess.

Another few minutes and I'll be coming up on the closest RSD. It'll be nice to see some friendly faces after all of this. I try to remember the names of the disciples running this RSD. Co-Z told me who she put in charge at the Pyramids Gardens RSD, but I'm drawing a blank. I hope I don't offend whoever it is when I get there.

My hovercraft maneuvers through the dusty streets of the Al Fardoos city as I cut through to make it to my friends. I slow down and my heart drops as I approach the Pyramids Gardens area. The entire place has been shaken up horribly. My eyes scan through the ashes and dust as I notice countless buildings lying in ruin. Something else catches my eye as well. It looks like the desert is moving, like the ground has turned into a thick molasses and is encircling the entire city. I have no idea what it is. I slowly creep the hovercraft forward to take a closer look.

"Oh no," I groan to myself. "This is not good."

The molasses-like movement is a gigantic horde of dead people. They've been reanimated and are swarming around the city in a disgusting cluster of limping, crawling, tripping, and dragging. Some of them move toward the city with missing limbs, unfeigned. There are thousands of them.

My attention is turned further up the street as I scan for an opening in the swarm, somewhere I might

be able to pass through into the city. The RSD is in there and I need to get to them quickly, but this isn't looking promising. The swarm appears to be endless. They must be the inhabitants of the neighbouring cities. I can't tell if they're after anything in particular, but chances are they're on their way to the RSD as well. It's almost dead-center in the city and they've got the entire area encircled in their mass. This side of the city is definitely not working out, maybe I'll have more luck on the other side.

The pedal makes a loud clunk as I slam it onto the floor beneath me and speed along the street surrounding the city. I keep my eyes open for any sign of an entrance into the city. I'm contemplating just ramming this hovercraft through the crowd, but somehow, I feel like I wouldn't get very far in that scenario. As I imagine the horrible outcomes of driving through a horde of dead people, I see an opening. Just past the northwest corner of the city, I spot a small gap in the dead swarm about fifty meters in, and my heart starts pounding. This is it. If I manage to make it past the few stray limping nightmares, I'll be about a three-minute drive from the underground entrance to the RSD near Street Four. No problem. That is if the buildings haven't collapsed all over the road to get there. This might be pretty horrible. Only one way to find out.

The hum of the hovercraft is rhythmic, and I try to keep it that way as I ease toward the opening in the swarm.

I think about the pyramids to the east. The things that

mankind has made. Others only want to destroy. I'm close enough to the dead people now to really see them. They see me too. One quickly, but clumsily, approaches me on the driver-side door and starts to bang on the window. I shove the door open and slam my fist into his side. An electric pulse sends him flying back onto the dusty road. Two more that saw what happened begin stumbling toward me. I pick up the pace, looking around at all the bodies, bunched together, clawing and stomping. One of the armless ones turns around and lets out a high-pitched squeal as it sees me coming through.

"No! Be quiet!" I say in a harsh whisper.

It's too late to do anything about it. The squeal was enough to alert the others, and I see a whole lot of heads turn toward my direction.

"Alright," I say out loud, as I slam down the accelerator. "Here we go!"

My body jerks back and forth as the hovercraft begins to bump and slam against these reanimated dead bodies. Their screams are piercing and relentless. They awkwardly sprint toward me as quickly as they can, tripping on each other and flailing their arms at me before they're even within reach. They're getting really loud now. The hovercraft's roof begins to sag as bodies pile up on top of it. They're pounding on the roof, and all over the rest of the craft. It sounds like I'm at a sporting event with the volume they're screaming at. The hovercraft is slowing down, even with the accelerator all the way to the floor. It can't take this much

weight.

The swarm of dead people becomes too thick to maneuver through, and the hovercraft begins to attempt climbing over the bodies as they pile up in front of me. I hear the power begin to fail as it strains to mount the growing pile of aggressive bodies. The hovercraft is almost vertical now and I'm panicking. The passenger-side door is pulled off and a screaming woman tries to shove herself inside the craft. I clench my fist and aim the barrels at her face. Two blasts from my gun send her flying out of the vertical hovercraft, smashing against other dead people on the way out. With one hand, I hang on to the steering controls, and with the other I shoot at the disfigured creatures climbing in through the passenger door.

The weight of all these dead people becomes too much for the hovercraft to handle and it begins to collapse. As it starts to crush, I kick the driver-side door open and shoot through the dead people, clearing a path. I'm about to jump out into a pile of them when the hovercraft is hit by a wave of really angry and contorted people. It falls backward, and lands upside down, on top of a bunch of bodies. A bit shaken up, I attempt to crawl out through the door, but before I'm even halfway out, I am forcibly dragged out by the dead people. I am thrown across the road and hit the dirt incredibly hard. I slide up against the side of a destroyed home and scramble to pick myself up off the ground. With both wrist-guns extended, I begin to shoot wildly at the horde of dead people.

I'm trying to get my head sorted and figure out in which direction the RSD is located. I see the upside-down hovercraft and the road close by. I need to head that way before these things tear me apart. There isn't a clear path in any direction so I make a quick decision and start bashing my way through this wild horde. Electric arcs jump from one body to another as I send a constant barrage of shots throughout the crowd. Some of them are backing off, while others are pressing forward.

A broken arm comes down hard on the back of my head and I swing around to defend myself. A man stands there with his arm hanging limp from the elbow downward, clearly broken in several places. He swings it at me again while his mouth hangs open as he screams into my face. I shoot him in his nasty face and watch as his body ragdolls into several other dead people. I turn back around and continue to run over and through the crowd of nightmarish enemies. With my arms raised in front of me, electric pulses begin to fly again toward the many bodies.

My body is thrown to the ground. Someone has jumped on top of me. I shoot them off my back and attempt to pick myself up. Before I can even get to my knees, another body lands on my back and I collapse under the force. I quickly roll over and grab the woman's head as she cocks her arm back to hit me. Before she can swing her punch, my fist is already colliding with her jaw. She flips backward off of me and disappears from sight. I scramble back to my feet, only to be met by two large fists being

slammed onto my chest. The force sends me tumbling backward and I bounce against the bodies on the ground. I jump back up while coughing loudly. There's no way I can take much more of this. I shoot the ugly face to my left and then kick the gross man in front of me square in his chest. The first guy who slammed his fists on my chest is limping toward me; his large frame, torn and disfigured. I spray electrical blasts around me, knocking back flailing bodies, as I march toward my disgusting attacker. He lifts his mangled arms above his head and swings them down toward me. I dart to the side and watch him throw his own balance off. He stumbles and I take a quick step toward him as I throw a fist that collides with the side of his face. His head jerks away from me and his body follows as his massive body hits the ground.

I turn back to the direction of my destination and sprint toward it. I don't get very far before I am being held back by three dead people. Two of them have my arms in their grips and the third is wrapped around my chest. Others quickly approach at this opportunity. I shoot the two grabbing my arms right away and they fly off to the sides. The third remains in place, trying to wrestle me to the ground while a few others grab at me. I try to free my arms again, but the dead guys are wrapped around them and out of the gun's firing range. I watch helplessly as more and more of the horde grab on to me and swing their arms at me. I am taking a beating and it's getting pretty bad. My guns are firing non-stop as bodies fly

away from me.

Suddenly, a sharp pain shoots through my left shoulder. What's going on? They're pulling on my arms. This is not good at all. They're going to try to tear my arms off. I exert all my strength and manage to kick one of the dead people off me, while pushing myself back and onto the ground. The dead guy on my back lets go as I crush down on him, but now that we're on the ground, things just get worse. A dogpile is formed on top of me as the horde fights to tear me apart.

My mind is racing. I'm picturing Co-Z and Bongo in Israel, fighting the Zoo as they try to invade the safehouse. I see Kendall as he prepares to lead the disciples in Kentucky. Eric flashes through my mind, telling me my parents *are* the Virulent. I see the giants and their beautiful home. I watch as the Tiny Arrow people fight with the reanimated dead. I picture volcanoes erupting all around the world. I hear a voice calling out to me. "Woven!" It's loud and clear. My body is aching and I'm not sure if I'm even still able to breathe. I imagine what it would be like to lose this war. I watch the images in my mind as the Virulent destroy everyone I love. I feel a dark presence move close to me. It feels as though it's moving toward me again, but suddenly stops.

"Woven!" There's the voice from before.

I hear shouting and guns blasting among the screeching coming from the dead people.

"Get off him!"

I feel my body being jerked around. The dead

people are letting go of me and begin to screech even louder. My efforts to raise my arms to shoot go unnoticed as my body strains to regain feeling. I watch dead people fly backward as electricity arks from their bodies. I can feel my fingers again. A foot comes stomping down on my chest as one of the people from the angry horde rush by to fight whoever has caught their attention. I cough and breathe deeply, filling my lungs with as much air as possible. My vision blurs a bit, then every comes back into focus. I'm alright. I swing one arm over and move up to brace myself. A dead body is racing toward me. I lift my other hand and shoot a pulse that quickly collides with my enemy. My ears are ringing as I shake my head to clear it up a bit.

There is a group of disciples swiftly moving toward me. They have the new suits. Their wrist-guns are drawn and they are blasting away the horde that surrounded me. "Quickly, let's go!" one of them yells at me. "Can you move?"

"I'm good," I reply. "Let's go!"

I stumble a couple times before regaining my balance, but quickly move toward the disciples. They blast away the dead people chasing after me as I run toward them. When I reach them, they turn with me and we all sprint in the opposite direction of the horde. That was much more difficult than I had pictured it.

"We're just ahead," one of the disciples says to me. "Keep close!"

"Sounds good to me," I reply.

The bunch of us continue to sprint along the road, blasting dead people out of our way. My foot comes up as I jump toward an oncoming body. I kick him in the chest and he flies backward onto the ground.

“See that opening up ahead?” a disciple shouts, pointing his finger ahead of us. “The entrance to the RSD is between those buildings.”

I nod my head as we maintain our speed. The dead people are close behind us, running and screaming loudly after us. One of the disciples pulls out a flare gun and aims it at the sky. She shoots a bright orange flare into the air above us. A couple seconds later, disciples appear on the roof tops surrounding the area we are in. They have large electric pulse launchers on their shoulders. I watch as they aim them toward our angry pursuers and let loose an array of brightly coloured energy pulses at them. The blasts light up the night and cover quite a large area.

We reach the buildings and we quickly file in through a narrow gate, which the last disciple slams shut behind us. Our small group watches as the dead people are hit with the blasts from the rooftop launchers. It sends them flying and screaming in all directions.

“That was close,” a disciple says. “Let’s keep moving. This way.”

We follow as the disciple opens a thin, metal door on the side of the building. The group moves through the door and we stand around a metal hatch on the floor. One of the disciples leans down and lifts a

small cover, which reveals a keypad. He types in a code and the hatch unlocks.

“Almost home,” he says as he lifts the hatch door.

There is a staircase under the hatch door, which we all climb down, one at a time. The bottom of the staircase is illuminated and leads to a hallway. I follow the group of disciples down the hallway.

“What were you doing out there, Woven?” one of the disciples asks. “I honestly did not expect to see you out this way.”

I shake my head and reply, “Well, I was trying to get to the RSD, but seemed to be going about that in the worst way possible. Thanks for coming to my rescue, by the way.”

The disciple laughs and answers, “You’re very welcome. It’s the least we could do for the man who has done so much for us. What brings you out here?”

We continue to walk down the hallway together, our steps echoing against the walls. I can hear other voices coming from the other end of the hallway as well.

“I’m trying to get to Israel,” I answer. “There are some really important things I need to do there.”

One of the other disciples responds.

Translating from Modern Standard Arabic.

“Israel? I come from there. I was planning on returning there myself until we came across a big problem yesterday.”

I reply, “What kind of problem? Other than these crazy cadavers running all over the place of course. Is there something else?”

“Yes, I’m afraid, there is,” the disciple answers. “The massive earthquakes caused some unexpected difficulties in our communication and transportation. A mountainous wall has been formed across the Egyptian border. We were unable to cross into Israel and had to turn back to this RSD with the supplies we were to bring home.”

“How big is this wall?” I ask. “What were you using for transportation? Just hovercrafts?”

“Precisely,” he answers. “There were quite a few of us, too. When we arrived at the wall we thought we had gotten lost. But our navigator was certain that this was the usual route we had always taken. When we realized what had happened, something else horrible happened. We were attacked by a large group of a very aggressive people. They came out of a cave in the side of the mountain. They were small people, but very fast and strong. We lost some good people before we were able to escape.”

“That’s awful,” I say, apologetically. “I’m sorry that happened to you. I know these people, and I’ve had my fair share of troubles with them as well. What other means of transportation do you have at your RSD?”

“We have plenty of vehicles,” the first disciple answers. “There is a return trip planned for our friends here via helicopter. We are waiting for the darkness to lift before they depart. You are more than welcome to join.”

“I apologize,” I respond. “But, I really need to leave as soon as possible. Is there anyway we can arrange another helicopter trip out to Israel now?”

We turn the corner and walk through to a warehouse full of gear and storage units. Across the warehouse are double doors with a sign above them that reads “To Common Area”. We walk toward them.

“I think that is a possibility,” the disciple replies. “But it is not up to me. I’ll bring you to the head of operations around here. Her name is Abrar Hazem; a good friend of Co-Z. They fought side by side for some time. She will help you with this request.”

“Thank you,” I reply. “It is important that I speak with her as soon as possible.”

“Understood, my friend,” the disciple replies. “I will personally take you to her. Let us go now together.”

We pass through the double doors and separate from the rest of the group.

“Abrar is this way,” the disciple says. “When she is not completely overwhelmed by responsibilities, she likes to spend time with the children. She teaches them of the past and what the future holds for them. I think that is important, don’t you? If we are ever to make it through this nightmare, it is best our future generations are prepared for what is to come.”

I nod my head and say, “Definitely. There will not be a future if the children today do not no what to look to.”

I am lead through a few more doors and up some

stairs. We arrive at a colourful, wooden door and the disciple knocks twice. The door is opened by a small child who yells excitedly.

“Ms. Hazem! We have visitors!” he shouts.

“Through here, Woven,” the disciple instructs with a smile. “May you succeed in your journey. Take care.”

“Thank you,” I say as the disciple turns away and returns through the doors.

My hand is pulled as a little boy tugs on it. He leads me through the doorway and into a large, colourful room. There are children everywhere. Some are colouring, while others play tag. There are men and women, sitting cross-legged on the floor, playing with the children. Toys are strewn across the play space and I carefully step around them as the boy and I walk to the other side of the room. I see Abrar. She is sitting on a chair, holding a book in one hand and holding a small girl on her lap in the other. There is a group of kids sitting around her on the floor, listening intently as she reads to them.

The little boy holding my hand leads me to her and says, **“Sorry to interrupt, Ms. Hazem, but can I play with this new friend we have?”**

Abrar and I laugh as she replies, **“Perhaps later, Mido. Why don’t we let Woven rest for a few minutes first?”**

“Okay, Ms. Hazem,” he answers. **“I guess we can do that.”**

He skips away and joins another group of children.

“Hello, Woven,” Abrar greets me. “Welcome to

the Pyramids Gardens RSD. My name is Abrar, I am a good friend of Co-Z.”

“Hi, Abrar,” I respond. “Pleasure to meet you. Co-Z has told me about you quite a few times throughout her adventures. I hear you are pretty much running things here.”

“Well,” Abrar says humbly. “It’s not just me. We have many excellent people working around the clock to provide us with the safety and security we have here. Even in the midst of all the chaos that took place during those enormous earthquakes, the people here have remained high in spirits and continue to work hard at making things better. I am extremely grateful for the members of our society here.”

I smile and say, “That is good to hear. I’m happy that things are going well here, and feel honoured to be here. Your people saved me earlier from those hordes outside. They appear to be fearless and focused.”

“Our people have known war for some time,” Abrar replies. “It pains me to say that they have grown used to these conditions. That being said, they are still full of compassion for one another and hope in the victory of this war. With you here, Woven, things are looking even brighter. I’m happy to hear that we were able to serve you outside these walls. What do you make of these demons that walk among us?”

I shake my head and say, “I have never seen anything like that before. I was warned in a vision of evils that would emerge in the darkness, evils that I

had never seen. This is what she was talking about, I'm assuming."

Abrar's eyes widen and she says, "Amazing. You, Co-Z, and Bongo continue to have visions. Even after all this time. You truly are prophets who walk with us. What did the vision show you of these demons? What is their purpose?"

"I'm sorry," I answer. "I don't know what the demons are doing here. But I think it has something to do with these bright-haired women I have met in the visions. One of them appears to have made some kind of mistake that allowed an evil spirit to do something he wasn't supposed to. I'm guessing it triggered whatever is going on now. On my way to this RSD, I witnessed some kind of ritual that linked the evil spirits to dead bodies. I'm not sure how or why they're doing it, but it has to stop. I'm hoping that after we deal with the Virulent, we'll be able to deal with the dead people as well. Well, the demons, I should say. Makes more sense."

Abrar nods her head and responds, "The attack is soon. We are all very excited. Most of us are terrified, but that doesn't come without its excitement of the idea that this war may soon be over. What I would give to see these people free from the terrors of the Virulent."

"That's actually what I've come here to talk to you about," I reply. "You know that Co-Z has gone to Israel to help? Well, we have learned that the Israeli government is probably the last national group who is against the Virulent and there is excellent reason

behind that. They are guarding the world's treasures; art and literature, blueprints and scientific documents, things that make this world beautiful and will help build it all again once this war is over. They are defending these things and we have been tasked with helping them defend this from the Virulent. I need to go to Jerusalem to help in the defense and organization of the attack. Are you able to supply me with a helicopter to get there as soon as possible?"

Abrar smiles and says, "This is something I can help you with. Come with me and I will see to it that you are supplied with what you will need. You have an important task and I will gladly assist you on your way."

She lifts the little girl up off her lap and places her on the floor with the other children. She walks to the center of the room and says, "**Children! Remember, you are what we live for. Learn something new today, play with each other, and show kindness to one another. Your joy will be full if you share it with others. I will help our new friend here with his journey, help each other with your journeys as well.**"

Abrar turns back toward me and says, "Let's get you to Israel, Woven."

I smile and begin to walk with her out of the room. We continue back through a few of the doors I walked through earlier. Abrar points to a hallway and says, "This way. I have a few friends who will be willing to assist you on your trip to Israel."

"That's not necessary, Abrar," I reply. "It will be

dangerous and I do not want any of your family here getting hurt.”

“No, no,” Abrar replies. “I insist. These are trusted friends whose skills reach beyond those of many. They know the ways of this world and will not be in any more danger than yourself, Woven.”

“Fair enough,” I respond. “Thank you.”

Abrar opens a sliding door to a bright room where people are gathered together at tables, eating and talking. We walk through the room, between the rows of tables, where people are smiling at us and greeting us. When we get to the other side of the room, Abrar points to another door and says, “Through here. But wait a minute. I will collect my friends for you.”

She walks over to one of the tables and speaks with the three men sitting together. After a couple of seconds, they stand up and make their way over to me.

“Woven, we’re honoured to meet you,” the first one says. “We are ready and willing to leave with you at once.”

“Thank you very much for this,” I reply. “These are very important times we are in.”

Abrar smiles and says, “These are my trusted friends: Aly, Tarek, and Samir. They will prove excellent company.”

She then turns the handle on the door next to us. The door creaks as it opens and a cool breeze rushes past us. We step into a large hangar, where there are rows of helicopters and other aircrafts I haven’t seen

before.

“What are those?” I ask, pointing to one of the strange-looking aircrafts.

“Oh, you’ll like those, Woven,” Samir answers with a smile. “Those are drag-push drifters, and they’re my favourite.”

“They’re basically the love-child of a hovercraft and a helicopter,” Tarek explains. “But they’re a hundred times better than that makes them sound.”

“There are only seven of us in the entire world who can fly them as of right now,” Aly chimes in. “That’s how new they are. We have a lot of intelligent people here working hard to outsmart the Virulent. This is what we came up with. You’re not going to find a stronger or faster aircraft of this size anywhere in the world.”

“Alright,” I say excitedly. “I’m sold! Count me in.”

The four of us share a laugh as we move toward the drag-push drifters. We jump in and strap up. Aly gives me the run down of what to do and not do while in the craft. The engine starts up and the drifter lifts from the ground, bobbing up and down slightly.

“You ready?” Tarek asks.

“Game time,” I call back.

The drag-push drifter lifts away from the ground and lunges forward in the direction of a large illuminated tunnel. We speed through the tunnel and pull upward sharply as we reach a narrower corridor. The corridor leads us up toward the surface. As the craft passes through a large green light, a bell begins

to ring and the sound of pressurized air escaping begins to fill the corridor. The corridor's roof opens up to reveal the hazy night sky and the craft pushes its way out to the surface. We instantly attract the attention of hundreds of demons. They turn toward us and begin to sprint in our direction.

"Watch this," Samir says as the hangar door closes beneath us.

He pushes a few buttons and pulls a lever as the demons approach the craft.

"Press this button, Woven," Samir instructs me.

My hand eagerly stretches toward the orange button and I slam my open palm on top of it. A large electric pulse ring shoots out from around the drifter and spreads out through the crowd of demons in all directions. The demons fall over and flip backward as the pulse spreads through them for about a hundred feet.

"Whoa!" I exclaim. "That's amazing."

"We thought so too," Samir replies with a big grin on his face. "Always comes in handy."

Aly pulls on a cyclic and the craft quickly lifts high into the air. He pats the dashboard and yells, "Jerusalem, here we come!"

We speed off through the hazy night sky toward Israel.

"So," Tarek begins. "What's the game plan?"

"Good question," I answer. "Well, I need to find Co-Z and Bongo. I don't know their exact location, but once we're flying over Jerusalem, I should be able to tell you where to go, since I've already seen it."

When we find them, you can drop me down and I'll help defend the safe house until there's opportunity to organize the attack on the Virulent."

Samir nods his head and says, "Sounds like a pretty good plan to me. We'll have no problem dropping you down and giving you the cover you need to get to the Prophets."

"Thank you," I reply. "I really appreciate you guys helping out like this."

"Hey, Woven," Tarek says. "Don't mention it. It really is the least we can do for you. If you need us afterward, come find us, we will personally help you take down the Virulent."

I smile and pat Tarek on the shoulder. I can see the strength in these guys. Their countenance and personalities speak loudly.

"We'll be there in about fifteen minutes," Aly calls out to us.

My mind is racing. Images of Co-Z and Bongo are playing in my head. I imagine holding Co-Z in my arms again. Feelings of anxiety rush over me as I realize just how close we are to ending this war. With Co-Z, Bongo, and I fighting together, side-by-side, nothing can stop us. The three of us were put on this path for a reason. I know that reason was not to fail. We've been instructed to help defend at Jerusalem, so we will, and we will succeed. My focus now is to remain steady, keep my mind clear and concentrate on the tasks at hand. One step at a time and this will go as planned. The Virulent won't stand a chance.

"You look worried, Woven," Tarek carefully says.

“You must be. There must be a lot on your mind.”

“You know,” I reply. “I honestly feel great about this. I think this is going to work out better than expected. There’s just so much to fight for, and so many excellent people willing to fight for it. Things are going to get much better very soon.”

Tarek smiles and replies, “That’s what I like to hear! You are a great man, Woven. What you have been able to accomplish so far is no small thing. I am honoured to have you as our leader, and even more honoured to be able to assist you today.”

“The honour is mine, truly,” I respond.

A whirring sound is heard and I see lights zip past the drag-push drifter, followed by little whistling sounds.

“We’re coming up over Jerusalem now,” Aly says loudly. “It does not look friendly at all!”

Those are bullets zipping past the craft. We’re being shot at.

“This thing can hold up against the incoming fire,” Samir says. “As long as it’s not huge artillery. Woven, you just let us know where you want to be dropped off.”

I scan the battlefield below us and zoom in on the soldiers fighting below. I’m looking everywhere for Co-Z and Bongo, but can’t see them. I begin to recognize some of the buildings and call out to Aly.

“Can you circle around those building on your right?” I ask.

“Hold on,” Aly replies as bullets crash into the exterior of the craft.

He pulls on the cyclic and redirects the drifter toward the buildings I mentioned. As we approach them, I see an entire field of Israeli soldiers shooting toward the Zoo, who seem to be marching in waves against the soldiers.

“Looks like we’ve made it just in time,” Tarek says. “Samir, strap Woven up and get on that gun.”

Samir picks up a harness and throws it over my shoulders. He straps me in and explains it to me.

“When we get to where you need to be, you just jump,” he instructs. “Don’t worry about pulling a chute or anything. We’ll take care of that from up here. The harness is connected to the drifter, we’ll slow your fall as you get close to the ground.”

“Sounds good,” I say, while giving Samir a thumbs-up.

I continue searching the battlefield for Co-Z and Bongo. An image of the vision I had flashes in my mind and suddenly I know exactly where we are.

“Aly,” I call out. “Thirty degrees to the east, behind those triple buildings, quickly!”

Aly turns the drifter and pulls back on a lever, swiftly propelling us forward. Samir locks the craft’s gun controls into place and begins to fire at the Zoo. A large string of electric bursts shoot from the gun and light up the battlefield below us. I watch as Zoo scatter and collapse in place from the electric bursts.

“Are we close enough?” Aly calls out.

“Almost! Get closer,” I call back. “Over by that far wall.”

My heart suddenly sinks in my chest. I see the

gate from the vision, the one we walked through, but I also see Co-Z and Bongo. They're lying on the ground. They're not moving.

"Is that...?" I ask out loud as I zoom in on their motionless bodies.

A pool of blood soaks the earth around both of my best friends. A handful of dead Israeli soldiers lie next to them with bullet holes in their chests. The door behind them has been blown open. The Zoo have made their way into the safe house.

"NO!" I yell loudly. "This is impossible. NO!"

"Woven," Samir asks. "What is it? What happened?"

My hands are shaking. I can hear my heart beating loudly in my ears. My eyes are burning.

"OPEN THE DOOR!" I command.

The drifter gets hit by a rocket and the whole craft shakes as we crash against the walls inside. Aly maneuvers the craft back into a steady position and Samir shoots back at the incoming fire.

"OPEN THE DOOR!" I yell again. "MY FRIENDS ARE DOWN THERE!"

Tarek jumps back to where we are and begins undoing the door's lock mechanism.

"They're not moving," I mumble. "This can't be possible. They're not dead, they can't be."

Samir hears me and peers through to see where I was looking. He sees Co-Z and Bongo and shouts, "The two Prophets lie dead in the streets! Open the door, Tarek!"

Samir quickly straps himself into his harness as

well and shouts, “I got you covered, Woven.”

Tarek finally releases the locks and the door swings open. I clench my fists and jump out as my guns extend from my wrists. Samir jumps out behind me and we speed toward the earth. Our lines are pulled on and we begin to lose speed. I’m shooting at the Zoo, who are shooting at us and sprinting toward the safe house to take cover. I land on the ground and roll to soften the landing. Samir lands and rolls, a couple seconds behind me. The firing continues, back and forth between us and the Zoo.

“I need to get Co-Z and Bongo,” I shout. “Help me, Samir!”

We sprint toward their bodies while shooting at the Zoo. A large group of Israeli soldiers come running around the corner and over to Samir and I, who are crouched behind an overturned truck.

Translating from Hebrew.

“**We heard the explosion,**” one of the soldiers yells. “**They’re in the safe house?**”

“Yes, they are. Cover us,” I shout back. “We need to help our friends.”

The translation isn’t loud enough to be heard, so Samir repeats what I said to them in Hebrew. The soldiers run out from behind the truck and begin shooting at the Zoo near the entrance to the safe house. I jump over the truck and sprint over to Co-Z and Bongo’s motionless bodies. I lift Co-Z’s head in one hand and grab her hand in the other.

“Co-Z!” I say softly. “Co-Z, it’s me. Wake up!”

She’s not moving or responding in any way. I can

hardly see her face. There is blood covering most of the inside of her visor. Tears are forming in the corners of my eyes.

“Co-Z!” I say, louder this time. “Bongo?”

I shake Bongo’s limp body, but he doesn’t reply. My ears are ringing. Samir reverently bows his head and weeps.

“Please,” I barely manage to say. My voice is quivering. “Help me bring them back to the drifter.”

Samir nods his head and takes a step toward me. His foot stops just before touching the ground. He keeps it there, steady in the air. I look up at him.

“Samir?” I ask.

He doesn’t reply. I realize everything is quiet. My ears have stopped ringing. I stand up and look around. No one is moving. Bullets are frozen in mid-air. Soldiers are stuck in place with guns drawn and motionless fire flowing from their barrels.

A loud cracking sound explodes behind me and I spin around to look. A tall, beautiful, woman with hair that looks like golden fire, gently descends to the ground from where she appeared. As her bare feet touch the ground, the dirt lights up around her. She walks toward me, each step lighting up a piece of the earth. I take a step toward her as she moves closer and she raises a hand to me.

“Your friends,” she says with a voice that fills my body with warmth. “They are not meant to remain in this state. They fought bravely and will continue to do so.”

“You can help them?” I ask excitedly.

The woman smiles and says, “Yes, I can. And it shall be done.”

She moves toward Co-Z and Bongo. When she is beside them, she kneels on one knee and looks into Co-Z’s eyes. She slowly moves her hand in front of Co-Z’s face and a small fiery sphere appears in front of it. The golden-haired woman does the same thing to Bongo, then stands up and walks back toward me.

“This is not meant to happen again,” the woman says. “So, please, take care of them. For I have only been given in way of instruction to complete this task a single time.”

“I will,” I reply. “I promise.”

She smiles again and says, “Your actions are well-received.”

The golden-haired woman begins to walk away. She then turns back around and raises her hand. Both of the fiery spheres in front of Co-Z and Bongo’s faces lifts a few feet and then spreads upward in a thin line. She lowers her hand and the thin line goes into their heads. A loud explosion goes off and I turn back to see that the woman has disappeared.

Everything comes back into motion.

Co-Z and Bongo gasp, wheeze, and cough until their lungs are sufficiently filled again. I collapse on top of them and embrace them.

“Co-Z!” I shout with tears in my eyes. “Bongo!”

“It’s a miracle,” Samir shouts. “I can’t believe my eyes!”

Co-Z lifts her visor and I wipe the blood off of her face with my hands.

“It’s so good to see you, Co-Z,” I cry. “I love you.”

“I’m never letting you away from my side again,” Co-Z softly sighs.

We both reach over to Bongo and pull him toward us.

“Bongo!” I shout. “Get over here!”

“Five more minutes, I swear,” he grumbles. “Let me sleep!”

I laugh as I blink tears from my eyes and give Bongo a shove.

“Easy, Woven,” he grunts. “I’m a little tender.”

“Samir,” I call out. “Please, help me get them back to the drifter.”

“Of course,” Samir replies.

I stand as Samir and I help Co-Z and Bongo to their feet. The sounds of explosions are heard from the safe house. Another group of Israeli soldiers runs around the corner toward us as some of the soldiers from earlier come running back out of the safe house.

One of the soldiers who just came around the corner is yelling, **“Get back! We need to get into the safe house! They’re coming! There are too many!”**

Meanwhile, the soldiers running out of the safe house are yelling, **“There are too many in there, we need back up! They’re coming out!”**

“This isn’t good,” I say. “Let’s get back to the drifter now!”

The four of us start running back toward the cables still hanging from the drifter. We get to the cables

just as the Zoo come around the corner of the nearest building and start shooting at us.

I shoot back at them and yell, “Samir! Get us strapped up! I’ll fight them off!”

Samir begins to connect the cables back to our harnesses as I shoot at the oncoming Zoo. Co-Z and Bongo start shooting at the Zoo as well. Their bullets nearly miss us as we send them flying back into each other, electricity arcing between their bodies.

“We’re all good, Wo – ” Samir is cut off as the earth begins to shake. The ground is quaking beneath our feet and we can’t stand upright. The Zoo soldiers begin to panic and scatter as remaining bits of the buildings that are still standing begin to crumble and fall around them. The Israeli soldiers panic as well and everyone runs to cover. I see static electricity building up in the huge, ash clouds above us. Lightning strikes down on the other side of the buildings.

“Let’s go, now!” I shout as I shoot upward in front of the drifter.

Tarek sees us from the drifter and acknowledges our signal. The cables tighten and we begin to ascend toward the drifter. Tarek pulls us into the craft as we near the door and we all fall over each other into the drifter.

“This place is gone,” I tell Aly. “It’s too late, let’s get back to the RSD. We need to strike now. The Virulent have possession of the safe house now, if it hasn’t already caved in on the Zoo. Things are getting out of control. If we’re going to attack them,

it has to be right now. Let's get back and get everyone together – ”

The drag-push drifter is struck by lightning and all its systems fail. We quickly begin to fall to the ground.

“Brace yourselves,” Aly shouts out. “This isn't going to feel very nice!”

He pulls a lever on the ceiling of the drifter as we continue to spiral down to the earth and the walls of the drifter inflate around us until we are all motionless and squished between these giant airbags. The drifter slams hard against the ground and the bags pop as our weight is forced against them. The drifter rolls once and then comes to a complete stop.

“Everyone out,” I call out. “We need to get to cover.”

We rush toward the door as Tarek pries it open. The six of us pour out of the door and stumble out onto the dirt road. As I'm getting to my feet, Co-Z puts a hand on my shoulder and squeezes tight. We both raise our guns in front of us as a huge group of Zoo soldiers stand around the drifter with their guns in hand, pointed at us.

“It's been good,” Bongo says as he raises his guns toward the Zoo and begins to shoot.

Co-Z and I begin shooting as well, while Tarek, Samir, and Aly jump back into the drifter to grab their guns. Enemy bullets crash around us and I get hit in the ribcage with two bullets. I fall back against the drifter and see Bongo fall over as well. We get back to our feet and continue shooting. My arm is thrown

back as a bullet ricochets off my forearm. Co-Z's leg gets hit and she falls face first onto the ground. I bend over to help her back up and suddenly I can't see.

"Woven! Woven!" Co-Z yells. "I can't see! What's happening?"

"I can't see either, Co-Z," I reply.

"Same here," Bongo shouts.

I hear the Zoo yelling and shouting to each other as well. No one is shooting anymore. I don't think anyone can see anything right now.

"Tarek, Samir, Aly?" I call out. "Can you guys see anything?"

"Nothing!" Aly replies. "What's going on?"

Suddenly, everything goes white and extremely bright. It's too bright. I try to close my eyes to shut out the brightness, but that doesn't change a thing.

"You seeing this too?" Bongo asks.

"Yeah," I reply. "Super bright?"

"Yeah, man," Bongo responds. "This is messed up!"

"I have no idea what's going on," I call back.

Without warning, our vision is restored, but we are somewhere else. At least it looks like that. It looks like the dreams. Like we're inside the earth. A voice pierces through the air and we all look around to see where it's coming from. It speaks again.

"We are Anakim," it says. "Pay close attention to what you will be shown."

The world around me begins to fade away and

everything is bright again.

Chapter 16

My steps echo loudly as I sprint across a solid white floor. There isn't a single thing in sight; just white in every direction. My heart is beating quickly against my chest as I slow down to walking speed. I'm panting heavily.

"Hello?" I shout.

My voice echoes for what seems like forever. I look around again to see if anything has changed yet. My foot slips beneath me and I lose my balance, which causes me to fall. My arm extends outward to brace for impact, but it lands on ice and I collapse onto cold snow.

Where did all this snow come from?

I carefully climb back to my feet and look around again. There is snow everywhere. It's even falling from the sky, which has become darkened. The sound of rushing wind suddenly hits my eardrums and my entire body is encompassed by the bitter sting of frigid wind. My weight is being shifted as the wind whips against my body and I push to resist it. I begin to slide as my feet and the snow are pushed along the ice. My efforts are futile as I continue to push against the wind, struggling to remain upright. The wind

becomes stronger and louder with each passing second. It's too much for my weight and I begin to lift off the ground.

All at once, the wind stops and I drop onto my hands and knees. Silence rings through my ears. I stand up and brush the snow off my hands and legs. Suddenly, I hear a loud snapping noise and I am ripped off the ground and thrown up into the sky. I continue to ascend, gaining speed as I go; the sound of wind even louder than before. The bright, white snow disappears from view as I pass into the dark clouds. My vision is blurred, by both the clouds and the speed I'm travelling at. Everything keeps getting darker and darker, until I abruptly stop moving. My body feels weightless, like I'm floating in water.

The clouds start moving around me and are then quickly torn apart, spreading away from my line of sight, which reveals the world beneath me. I have no idea how high up I am, or if I'm even still in Earth's atmosphere. It reminds me of those online interactive world maps, looking down at Earth like this. I notice something strange as I begin to slowly descend back to the Earth. The Arctic looks very different and very strange. It's bigger. A lot bigger, actually. It's also connected to the North parts of Canada and Russia, as well as the whole upper half of Greenland. The entire Arctic Ocean is almost completely frozen over.

The rushing wind begins again and I am falling quickly toward the earth. The world rotates beneath me as I speedily descend. I am centered over the North Pole and continue to race downward. As I fall

toward the snow-covered ice, my mind begins to fill with wild thoughts. I notice an opening beneath me that grows larger as I fall closer toward it. Before smashing into the ground, some unknown force slows me down until I am able to gently plant my feet on the snow. I take careful steps toward the large opening in the ice. I have no idea how big this opening is, but I know that it is huge. While I was falling, I was amazed at the size of this thing. You could easily fit an entire city through this hole. As I reach the edge of the opening, I carefully lean forward to look down into it. As far as I can see there is only ice and darkness. It doesn't look like it has an end.

I hear the sound of a jet engine, like a plane far off in the distance. I spin around on my feet to see where the sound is coming from. My eyes shoot side to side as I search the skies, but there is nothing. The sound grows louder and my searching more frantic. Where is this plane? The ground begins to vibrate and I catch something out of the corner of my eye. The plane. Well, it's not really a plane at all, it's actually a rocket. It's speeding along, very close to the ground, directly toward me. I jump to the side, out of its way, and slide along the ice. I look back to watch as it continues past me. As it's passing, time slows down, enough for me to see that there is someone inside, piloting this rocket. They turn their head to look at me, while I stare back in confusion. The side of the rocket has thick black lettering written on it. It says, "**Dear Earth, Sorry For The Nuke. Hope It**

Cures Your Parasite Problem!”

Time shifts back into normal speed and the rocket rushes past me, dipping into the giant opening in the ice. I quickly scramble on my hands and knees to the edge of the opening to watch the rocket descend into the darkness. It disappears out of sight in just a few seconds. I wait for a couple minutes as nothing happens. Suddenly, I see a small orange glow in the darkness. It gets brighter and larger. I hear a loud cracking sound, which is quickly followed by a very loud explosion. An aggressive gust of wind pushes its way out of the opening, which throws me backward onto the snow.

The ground beneath me begins to shake and an extremely aggressive earthquake breaks out. I try to stand, but the shaking is too violent. My attention is drawn back to the opening as a giant pillar of flames and smoke from the explosion quickly come billowing out. In the distance, I see volcanoes erupting; pillars of smoke and lava bursting out from their openings. I look up toward the sky and watch as the clouds get darker and thicker, progressively covering more of the sky. Sunlight quickly begins to fade away as the clouds grow and stretch across the sky. Soon after, I am unable to see anything. I raise my hand up to my face and wave it there. I can't see it. The darkness is too encompassing.

All at once, the darkness vanishes and I am able to see again. I turn around to see the huge opening in the ice, taking a few steps toward it to get a good look. At about ten steps away from the edge of the

opening, I jump back from surprise. A giant has seemingly appeared from out of nowhere, directly in front of me. He extends one of his hands toward the opening in the ice, while keeping both eyes locked on mine. A hand grabs his, and another giant appears. There are instantly four or five more giants who appear at the edge of the opening, all of them looking directly at me. I take a couple steps backward and watch as more and more giants appear along the edge of the opening. They begin to be so numerous that I can no longer keep track of how many there are.

My body is then pulled up again, away from the snowy ground beneath me. I ascend into the air above, while moving toward the center of the opening. There are so many giants. I can't believe my eyes as I ascend into the sky and watch as the multitude of giants continues to grow. There are millions of them, tens of millions, hundreds of millions.

I stop ascending, while that feeling of weightlessness surprises my stomach. I begin to fall very quickly. My heart is racing as I speed past the giants and fall into the center of the opening. There's nothing I can do to control my body or the speed I'm falling at.

Suddenly, there is a flash of light and I am standing on grass. I can still feel my heart slamming against the inside of my chest. As I take in my surroundings, I realize that I am inside the Earth. Surrounded by both regular people and giants, I begin to walk around to figure what's going on. I notice

that everyone is looking the same direction. My eyes are drawn to an extremely bright light that appears in the direction that everyone else is looking. It looks human, but I can't tell for sure.

Another flash of light appears and all at once I am elsewhere. The sound of a crackling fire attracts my attention. My boots crunch the ash and gravel beneath me as I turn around to see where the fire is. To my dismay, I watch as the entire world burns before my eyes. Every direction I look, there is fire burning. Flames curl and spread upward into the sky. Buildings collapse and crumble to the ground. There isn't even one person in sight, just the world burning.

I notice the ground around and beneath me beginning to change colour. It changes from the dark, brown and grey gravel, ash, and pavement, to a glowing orange colour. I begin to slip as I try to walk over this newly coloured surface. My boots are melting. The orange ground begins to move slowly in all directions. It has become molten rock. My body is once again thrown from the surface of the Earth as I ascend into the sky. The molten ground becomes aggressive in its movement and starts to move even quicker. I watch as cars, buildings, houses, vegetation, mountains, everything being to melt into the molten ground.

My view of all these things shrinks as I am lifted higher into the sky until I am looking at the Earth from space. The entire globe is on fire and melting. I realize that it is spinning very quickly. I'm no spaceman, but it looks like it's spinning much faster

than it usually spins. Especially as it begins to change shape and appears as though it's about to be torn apart. I watch in horror as Earth is consumed in destruction. Then everything goes black.

I blink my eyes a few times and rub them with the back of my hands. When they reopen, I'm back in Israel. My hands clench into fists as I draw my wrist-guns, but the Zoo are scattering. They're all yelling at each other and sprinting away from us.

"What's going on?" Bongo shouts.

"I don't know," I shout back. "But let's get out of here!"

Samir, Tarek, and Aly come piling out of the drifter and the six of us start sprinting in the direction the Zoo went.

"The Disciples should have started their attack on the Zoo bases by now or should be close to it," I shout to the others as we chase the Zoo. "If we can steal a chopper and get back to the RSD to fuel up, we should be able to head to Antarctica and start the attack on the Virulent."

"We should take a drifter," Aly shouts back.

"They're quicker and don't use up as much fuel."

"Sounds good to me," I reply.

We can see the Zoo cramming into their helicopters. A few of the helicopters are parked on the ground, while others are airborne with ladders dangling from them.

"That one!" I shout, while pointing at a helicopter that hasn't started up yet.

There are about ten Zoo soldiers running toward

that particular helicopter and we begin to shoot at them. They jump aside and duck for cover behind some of the rubble from the collapsed buildings. The Zoo soldiers start firing back at us and we continue to sprint toward them, our guns lighting up the hazy air around us. We continue to advance on them as they fall back against the ground, our electric bursts arcing and pulsing. The helicopter is just a few steps away now.

“Everyone get in,” I shout. “Aly, start her up. I’ll cover you.”

The five others start piling into the helicopter while I continue shooting at the Zoo soldiers, who are now running out from behind the rubble and are sprinting toward us. The Zoo helicopters are lifting off the ground as others fly off into the distance toward the south. Meanwhile, hundreds of other Zoo soldiers continue to run toward this open area, where all the helicopters are. Our helicopter starts up as two Zoo soldiers sprint directly at me.

Suddenly, a giant appears in front of them, stopping them in their tracks. They begin to shoot at him, but he teleports between and slightly behind them, grabbing their heads, one in each hand. He quickly slams them both down into the ground, crushing their skulls with immense force. He then looks up at me with almost no expression on his face. Our eyes meet.

Chapter 17

At first, I can't move. I am stunned at what I just witnessed. But my senses quickly return and I raise my arm to shoot at the giant. He teleports before my first shot even gets close to where he was standing. I feel a heavy hand on my head and as I turn, I uppercut the giant's forearm with all the strength I have. The hit sends an electric pulse through the giant's arm and he stumbles back a few steps. Co-Z yells as she jumps onto his back. With one hand, she hangs on to the giant and with the other, she continuously punches his back with all her strength. He tries to teleport, but the electricity is evidently interfering with that. He falls to his hands and knees and I sprint over to him, shifting my weight as I swing a punch with full force at his jaw. The hit and the blast from the gun jerk his head to the side and he collapses underneath Co-Z.

“Goodness will be preserved. Evil will be destroyed.” I remember what the silver-haired woman told me, followed quickly by the memory of what the emerald-haired woman said.

“There will be more. You guys need to leave,” I say to my friends. “The giants have been given a job to do. I was told that they will only look for the

marks that they can see and will either destroy you or preserve you, whatever that means. I was incorrectly marked by someone, so they will try to destroy me. I can't have you guys get involved in that. Please go, get back to the RSD and keep it safe. I gotta deal with this."

"Yeah right," Co-Z says. "Not a chance we're leaving you alone."

Zoo soldiers begin to scream as a giant appears by their helicopter and starts pulling them out and smashing their heads, one by one. Guns fire from every direction and the shouts of Zoo soldiers fill the night air. Another giant appears close to the helicopters and starts fighting the Zoo.

"Please," I shout. "Just go!"

Bongo grabs me from the helicopter and pulls me in.

"Yeah right, buddy," he says. "Get in here, let's get out of the open. Co-Z, get in and shut that door, let's go."

I shake my head and say, "If any of you get hurt, it's my fault. So, don't get hurt, or I will personally hurt you."

Co-Z jumps back into the helicopter and sits next to me as Aly lifts the helicopter off the ground.

"We'll be back at the RSD in no time," Aly says.

I look out the window at the ground below and watch as the Zoo soldiers fight the giants. I feel pity for them, they don't stand a chance against the giants. They teleport and overturn helicopters, smashing soldiers like it's nothing. Once they're out of my

range of sight, I turn away from the window and put an arm around Co-Z.

“Thank you,” I say quietly. “You are wild, you know that?”

Co-Z laughs and says, “Yup, very aware. And you’re welcome. I was so confused, I thought they were on our side. I just reacted.”

“Yeah,” I reply. “Somebody somewhere screwed up, and now I have to deal with it.”

“What does this mean, though?” Bongo asks. “Are the Virulent marked? Are the giants going to take them out?”

“I was thinking the same thing,” Tarek chimes in. “If they can teleport, I’m sure they’d have no problem getting into their base in Antarctica. Right?”

“I’m not sure,” I reply. “I haven’t seen anything to do with the giants dealing with the Virulent in any of the visions. So, maybe they will deal with them, maybe they won’t. All I know is that I’m supposed to destroy them. So, once this mark thing gets figure out, I’m going to Antarctica and taking them down.”

“You know we’ve got your back, Woven,” Bongo says. “You say the word and we’re right there with you. Like always.”

“Thank you,” I reply. “I can’t wait for this to all be over.”

“Soon,” Co-Z reassures. “It’ll be over soon.”

As we fly over the outskirts of Israel, I look out the window again and notice something bizarre.

“Hey, guys,” I call out. “Look what’s going on down there.”

The others gather around the windows and look at the ground below. Among the earthquake-induced rubble and chaos littering the ground beneath us, giants are fighting with the demons.

“That is insane,” Co-Z mutters. “What a sight.”

“This is definitely the craziest thing I have ever witnessed,” Samir says. “My journal entry for the night is going to be quite amazing.”

We half-heartedly laugh as we stare at the chaos below us. A while later, we are flying back over the outskirts of Cairo.

“You guys seeing this?” Aly calls from the cockpit. “I haven’t really even seen the Zoo in Cairo since the acid rain started, but look at them down there now.”

“What in the world?” Co-Z exclaims. “They have tanks or something. And look! The disciples!”

Below us, on the ground, the Zoo are fighting the disciples. The Zoo are also fighting the giants, who are smashing people’s heads on the ground, while other giants seem to be taking people away by teleportation. Mixed up in all the fighting below us, I can see demons limping around and clawing at anyone that they can get their hands on.

“We should be down there, fighting,” Samir says. “These are our people.”

“We’ll join them soon, Samir,” Tarek replies.

“We need to get these three to the RSD first, so they can get to the drifter and fight the Virulent.”

“You won’t be joining us?” Bongo asks.

“No, my friend,” Tarek answers. “Aly will take

you there in the drag-push, but Samir and I will stay behind to protect our people and fight the Zoo.”

“Fair enough,” Bongo replies. “Just be safe. It’s not only the Zoo you’ll be fighting down there.”

“If they stick to what Woven said, then we shouldn’t have too much to worry about,” Samir responds. “I don’t think the giants will want to hurt any of the disciples. Not the majority of them anyway. And as for the demons, well, we’ve been through worse.”

“We’re coming up on the RSD,” Aly calls out. “It won’t be as easy to get into as it was getting out, since most of the disciples will be in on the attack against the Zoo, so, I don’t think anyone will be manning the hangar doors.”

“That’s alright,” I reply. “With the six of us, I don’t think getting to the RSD through the front door should be much of an issue.”

“That’s not good,” Tamir says as he points to the RSD. “The hangar door’s already open. So is the front gate. That earthquake was bad, but they’re designed for that, so, there’s no way it could have been that. Something bad is happening down there!”

“The Zoo could be in there!” Co-Z shouts. “Bring us down, now, Aly!”

“I’m going, I’m going,” Aly replies. “I’ll take us in through the hangar.”

“Good,” Co-Z responds. “That’s closer to the living quarters. We can check up on the children and anyone else who stayed behind.”

Aly navigates through the open hangar door,

which is surrounded by demons. Some are dropping into the hangar and crashing on the ground below. As we begin to descend below the surface, one of the demons jumps down into the hangar entrance. Aly jerks the helicopter to the side of the hangar corridor as the demon speeds past and crashes onto the hangar floor.

“If he landed on the blades,” Aly explains. “This would make a very nasty ending for us.”

“Nicely done,” Bongo says. “No demon smoothie for me, please.”

As we near the bottom of the corridor, Aly turns the helicopter and flies us over toward the drifters. The hangar is mostly empty, except for two drifters and another helicopter; the disciples would have taken what they could for the attack. I also notice a few demons limping around the hangar. Aly lands the helicopter safely, and we all jump out onto the hangar floor. I clench my fists as my wrist-guns extend. I shoot the demons one by one, and they collapse onto the ground.

“Alright,” I say. “Let’s go see if everyone’s alright. We need to stick together.”

Co-Z leads as we sprint toward the living quarters.

“It’s through here,” she says as she crashes through the first door with her shoulder.

We sprint down a long hallway and hear shouting. Furniture is overturned and pictures have fallen off the walls. As we turn the corner, we see dead bodies lying scattered all along the hallway. Some of them are Zoo soldiers, a few seem to be regular people,

either our own or demons that came in from outside, there's even a dead giant leaned against the wall, slouched over.

“Look at that,” Bongo says, pointing toward one of the bodies. “I’ve seen those guys all over the place. Those are the Tiny Arrow people, remember them?”

The man on the floor has a rope, with a blade on the end of it, tied to his ankle. His head has been smashed into the floor.

“Yeah,” I respond. “I remember them. I’ve seen them around as well. Not a fun time. Let’s keep moving.”

The shouts echo down the hallway, as do our footsteps as we continue to sprint toward the source of the shouting.

“The living quarters are just around this corner,” Co-Z shouts.

As we approach the corner, a Zoo soldier crashes through the double doors and against the hallway wall. Electricity arcs from his body. Almost simultaneously, all our guns are extended and we charge through the double doors.

“Abrar!” Co-Z shouts out.

Abrar is in one corner of the large common area with a group of children and a couple other disciples. There are giants, demons, Tiny Arrow people and Zoo soldiers all in here fighting each other. I have never seen a more frightening scene in real life. The children are screaming and crying as we sprint over to help Abrar and the other disciples.

“Abrar,” Co-Z repeats. “Get those children out of

here, we got you covered!”

Tarek, Aly, and Samir run toward the fight.

“Woven,” Bongo says. “Help them out, we’ll join you in a minute.”

“With pleasure,” I reply, as I begin to sprint toward a small group of Zoo soldiers.

A giant appears in front of me and slams the back of his hand against my chest, which sends me flying across the room. I crash on top of a table and slide backward off it, bumping into a demon, who spins around and instantly starts thrashing at my body. I put my hands up to block his arms. While on my back, I kick his knee, which snaps backward, and then shoot him in the face with my gun. His body stiffens and he falls onto the floor away from me.

I stand up, and the giant is in front of me again. My guns fire and he teleports before I can hit him. Co-Z and Bongo are running to my side to aid me. The giant appears behind me and I dive onto the floor in front of me. He disappears as I roll onto my back. He’s suddenly above me with his foot coming down at my head, but Bongo shoots at him, causing him to teleport again before his foot could reach me.

“This,” he says before teleporting again to a different part of the room. “Does not concern you two.”

The giant appears behind Co-Z and Bongo, he has a hand on each of them. He teleports somewhere with them and instantly returns to my side. His foot is coming down toward me and I quickly shoot it, which throws his foot back as he stumbles and trips over the

table. He teleports before he hits the ground. Co-Z and Bongo come sprinting back into the room.

“Woven!” Co-Z yells. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I reply as I stand up. “Let’s clear this room and lock up the RSD.”

“Consider it done, my friend,” Bongo replies.

We run into battle together.

“Who do we go for first?” Co-Z asks.

“The Tiny Arrow people or the giants,” I reply.

“Given our options, those two are definitely the deadliest. We clear them out first, we’re left with Zoo and demons, easy.”

“Let’s go,” Co-Z shouts.

I shoot at one of the two remaining giants in the room as he slams a Zoo soldier into the floor. His shoulder is hit by an electric blast and he turns on his feet to see me. He then disappears, only to reappear right behind me. I feel his hand on the back of my head, and as I spin around to attack, I see one of the Tiny Arrow people, from the corner of my eye, jumping at the giant. As he spins through the air, he extends his leg with the rope on it and it whips toward the giant. The giant teleports out of the way just in time as the blade cuts through the air where the giant was standing. He lands on one foot and spins his body around again, moving toward me. I throw my arm up to block his incoming punch, which collides with a surprising amount of force, almost throwing me off balance. Bongo runs to assist me, but is tackled by a Zoo soldier and begins to wrestle him on the ground.

I continue to block attacks from the small, hairy man and keep my eyes on the blade attached to his foot. In between blocking punches, I try to shoot him, but he slaps and punches my arms away from him. I manage to grab hold of him and begin to kick my knee into his chest. The giant reappears by my side and kicks both of us, sending us flying across the room, crashing into chairs and tables along the way. Co-Z shoots a bunch of electric blasts, hitting the giant three times, causing him to fall over. He shakes his head and pushes himself back up into a standing position. Co-Z fires at him again, while I block the attack of the Tiny Arrow man to my left. The giant disappears. I have the little, hairy man by the neck and I'm throwing his weight against the wall as he attempts to kick me. Co-Z runs over to help me out, but is tripped by the sliding, unconscious body of the Zoo soldier that Bongo had just shot.

“Sorry about that!” Bongo shouts out.

Just as I'm looking back to see what Bongo was apologizing for, the giant reappears behind me and I duck out of the way of his massive fist, which slams into the head of the Tiny Arrow man in my hands, crushing it instantly. I let go of the mangled, little man and jump to the side, shooting at the giant as I fall. He teleports out of the way of each shot and then completely disappears for a few seconds. I'm looking around for him frantically. I see Co-Z wrestling a demon, Bongo slamming a Zoo soldier into another, a giant stomping his foot on three demons while a Tiny Arrow person climbs on his back, Samir being

thrashed by a demon, Aly thrashing two demons, and Tarek shooting at some Tiny Arrow people who are cartwheeling and spinning away from each shot. A Zoo soldier sees me standing and looking and aims his gun at me. He quickly pulls the trigger. Just as he fires, the giant reappears in front of me with his arm pulled back, ready to punch me with everything he's got, but is stopped as the Zoo soldier's bullets enter his back. He lets out a yell and teleports out of the line of fire. He reappears behind the Zoo soldier, and snaps his neck. He teleports closer to me, but falls to one knee as blood drips from his back. He teleports again, directly in front of me, and I fire my guns at him. He teleports before he's hit and reappears behind me, which I was ready for, spinning around before he reappeared. I punch him in the stomach, which shoves him back into the table behind him. I throw my hand up to shoot, but he disappears again. He reappears about ten feet away from me and collapses onto his hands and knees, blood now pouring from his back. My arms are both raised, pointing at him, and I fire a steady stream of electric pulses at him. He is hit repeatedly and jerks and rolls until he is no longer moving.

That was not a pleasant sight.

“Woven!” Bongo shouts. “A little help?”

There are three demons approaching him as he wrestles a Tiny Arrow man against the far wall. I start running toward him and am stopped by a little, hairy man, who kicks me in the face. My body is thrown to the ground.

“I got it, Woven!” Co-Z shouts out. “You take care of that guy!”

My hands stop the Tiny Arrow’s leg as he flips toward me. I pull him to the ground and start punching his face. He’s knocked unconscious after the second punch. I climb to my feet and look around for my next target. Two demons stand still next to the body of the dead giant with their eyes rolled back into their heads. My arms raise toward them and I shoot as their eyes return to a normal position. I hit one in the face, throwing him backward into a crumpled heap, and I hit the other in the side, which spins him around as he screeches and claws at the air.

Suddenly, the dead giant’s arms begin to jerk to the sides. He lets out a loud growl and slams his hands onto the floor. He must have been reanimated by the demons. He picks himself up and stumbles, kicking a table and some chairs as he regains balance. I start shooting at him as he groans and begins to sprint toward me, stomping and stumbling.

The last normal giant in the room appears in front of the demon giant and shoves his hand in his face, stopping him in his tracks.

“NO!” the giant abruptly and aggressively shouts. “GET OUT!”

The giant slams the demon giant’s head against the floor, which seems to have only upset the demon giant. They begin to throw punches at each other. I take the opportunity to move away from them and I run to the side of Co-Z and Bongo, who are shooting at a group of Tiny Arrow people. I join them as the

Tiny Arrow people fall to the floor, paralyzed from the electric blasts.

Samir, Tarek, and Aly run to our side as well and we finish off the last of the Tiny Arrow people in the room. The only enemies left are the giants, and they're beating each other up.

"This should be interesting," I say, as we prepare to take them out.

We all aim our guns at the giants and begin to shoot. The normal giant throws the demon giant away from himself and teleports to the other side of the room. Our blasts hit the demon giant, who trips backward, then scrambles back up to his feet. He picks up a table and throws it at us. The other giant appears in front of the thrown table before it hits us and catches it. He then teleports behind the demon giant and slams the table over his head. The demon giant falls forward, but the other giant grabs his arm and teleports himself and the demon giant out of the room.

"Where'd they go?" Bongo asks.

"No idea," I reply. "But let's go check on the others and lock this place up."

The six of us begin to run toward the doors at the end of the room that lead toward the housing units. The doors are covered in bullet holes. I push against one of the doors, but it doesn't budge. I try the other. No luck. So, I pull on both doors with the same result.

"Co-Z, what's going on with these doors?" I ask.

"They probably have them barred on the other

side,” Co-Z replies. “I think Abrar went in there with the kids, I doubt she would have left them unlocked.”

Co-Z begins to bang on the door.

“Abrar!” she shouts. “Open up. It’s all clear.”

There are some shuffling and scraping sounds, followed by the door slowly opening. Abrar peeks through the opening between the doors.

“It’s all good out there?” she asks.

“All clear,” I reply.

Abrar opens the door completely and lets us pass into the housing units. We begin searching each room, checking on those who stayed behind, who were either unable to fight or unwilling. There doesn’t seem to be any harm done to the people living here.

Translating from Modern Standard Arabic.

“**Excuse me, sir,**” a small child says, pulling on my hand as I walk by one of the rooms.

I turn to her and kneel down to listen.

“What is it?” I quietly ask.

“**Do you know where they took my mommy?**” she asks, holding back tears.

“Who took your mommy?” I ask as I pull her close to hug her.

She begins to cry and says, “**The big man who moves like magic.**”

I turn to Abrar and ask, “The giants?”

She nods her head and replies, “Yes, they appeared throughout the RSD, and while I was gathering everyone together, they began to grab people and disappear with them. They got distracted with the Zoo soldiers and those small men, which is when I

tried to get the children back to the housing units.”

“Were they hurting anyone?” I ask.

“No,” Abrar answers. “None of our people, just those you were fighting earlier. They were careful with those they took, gently laying their hands on them, then disappearing. I’m not sure where they went.”

I look at the little girl again and say, “Don’t worry. We’re going to end this, and I’ll find your mommy.”

“**Thank you,**” the little girl says with a smile as she wipes back the tears from her eyes.

“Looks like everything’s cool beans around here, Woven,” Bongo says as he walks back from one of the hallways. “Everyone seems alright, a little shook up, but unharmed. Except for some missing people, I’d say things are looking good here.”

“Alright,” I reply. “I think it’s time. Let’s lock up and head out. Grab anything you might need. We’re ending this.”

I call out to Aly, “Let’s get that drifter ready.”

“I’m on it,” he replies.

“Samir, Tarek,” I say. “Thank you for everything. Take care when you head back out there. I know you guys will do big things for us all.”

“It has been an honour, Woven,” Tarek replies.

“You guys take care as well,” Samir says, as they turn around and run toward the hangar.

“Co-Z,” Abrar says. “I’ll stay with the RSD and make sure it stays locked up this time. You guys get moving and stay safe.”

Co-Z and Abrar share a hug as we say our

farewells. Co-Z, Bongo, and I begin to head back to the hangar to join Aly.

“So, this is it, huh?” Bongo asks. “We’re finally doing it.”

“On our way to take down the big guns of the Virulent,” Co-Z chimes in. “I’d say it’s been a long time coming, hey, Woven?”

“Oh yeah,” I say with a grin on my face. “I don’t think I could be more determined to accomplish this than I am right now. Nothing’s going to stop us. It’s on, and they won’t even know what hit them.”

“Well,” Bongo replies. “I’m pretty sure once they see the electricity booming and the bodies flying, they’ll know what hit them. Just saying.”

I laugh and respond, “You’re right, Bongo. My bad, I should have phrased that a little differently.”

“Figured out what we’re going to do about actually getting in to their base yet?” Co-Z asks.

“At this point,” I reply. “I’m not too worried. I’m more concerned with just getting there and I mean, we’ll crash the drifter through the front door if we have to. There will be a way. There has to be.”

We arrive at the hangar and see the two drifters hovering off the ground with their engines whirring.

“After you,” Samir shouts from the drifter.

Co-Z, Bongo, and I jump into the second drifter and Aly kicks it into motion.

“Everyone ready?” he asks.

“Let’s do this,” I reply.

“Game time!” Co-Z shouts.

“Are we there yet?” Bongo asks in his whining

voice.

“Alright, alright!” Aly responds as he pulls back on a lever, lifting us up through the vertical corridor, leading to the outside world. The hangar door begins to open as we ascend toward it.

“Oh no!” Aly shouts.

He pulls on the controls and shifts the drifter from side to side as a horde of demons falls through the opening door toward the drifter. Their bodies slam against the metal exterior of the drifter and it violently sways, fighting to stay balanced. The bodies begin to pile up on top of the drifter.

“This is really bad,” Aly says as we are about to pass through the hangar door. “I think we can shake them off though if we can get enough speed once we’ve gained some altitude. I might have to do some wild maneuvers, so be prepared.”

“Just do what you need to –” I am cut off as a loud cracking sound rings through the drifter.

“What was that?” Aly yells.

We look out the side of the drifter and see a Tiny Arrow man hanging by the foot, his rope blade apparatus seemingly caught in the blade system of the drifter. It is winding up around the rotor, quickly pulling him toward the blades.

“This is going to be really bad,” Bongo shouts. “Hold on to something!”

The Tiny Arrow man gets pulled into the blades, snapping various parts of his body, which brakes the rotor blades and causes the motor to make a loud exploding sound. Warning alarms begin to ring and

beep.

“We’re going down,” Aly shouts as the drifter begins to spin out of control.

Demons fly through the air as they lose grip of the spinning drifter and slide off onto the ground below, their bodies crashing onto other demons.

“I’ll do my best to land this thing,” Aly shouts. “It won’t be pretty, but we’ll survive. We’re not too far from the ground.”

We continue to spin as we fall closer toward the demon-littered ground. Right before we crash land, Aly pulls on some levers and controls, pushing the drifter forward and slightly upward before we hit the ground. It softens the blow, but we still hit pretty hard, crushing demons beneath us. We roll twice and slide across the desert sand for a couple seconds before coming to a complete stop.

There’s blood on the inside of my visor. I must have hit my head really hard. My knees feel weak as I stand to check on the others. Bongo’s helping Co-Z out of her seatbelts.

“Aly,” I call out. “You okay?”

He doesn’t respond. So, I move to the cockpit to check up on him. He’s unconscious, but otherwise uninjured.

“Aly’s out cold,” I call back to Co-Z and Bongo.

Demons begin to slam on the outside of the drifter, trying to get in.

“I got the door,” I say. “Get ready to clear a way out of here.”

“You got it,” Bongo replies.

“Ready when you are,” Co-Z says.

I clench my fists and my guns extend. Looking back at Co-Z and Bongo, I nod and then kick the door wide open, knocking a demon away from the drifter and onto its back. The three of us begin to fire rapidly at the demons, clearing an opening around the drifter. We jump out and continue to fire at the approaching demons. As the last one close by falls to the ground, I look around and see another horde running toward us. We have about forty-five seconds before they reach us.

“I’ll grab Aly,” I call out. “Cover me.”

I jump back into the drifter and unstrap Aly from his seat. He’s no longer fully unconscious, but he’s definitely not all there. He moans and mumbles a few things as I pull his arm over my shoulder and lift him to his feet. I proceed to drag him out the door of the drifter and Bongo runs over to help me lift him. The horde of demons is still sprinting toward us at full speed, their screeches and grunts sounding throughout the air. The three of us raise our guns and begin to shoot at them. Just then, the other drifter with Samir and Tarek flies by overhead and they begin to fire at the demons. The demons begin to drop like flies and are quickly gunned down.

Samir and Tarek land the drifter close by and sprint over to us.

“How’s Aly?” Samir asks, worriedly.

“He’s okay,” I reply. “He’s a tough one, that’s for sure. Let’s get him out of here.”

Samir and Tarek take Aly from us and hold him up

from under his shoulders. They begin to walk back to the drifter. Suddenly, giants begin to appear all around us. There are six of them.

“Cover Woven!” Co-Z shouts as she begins to fire at the giants while backing toward me.

Samir and Tarek lay Aly on the ground and crouch beside him. We all start shooting at the giants and they teleport out of the way of our electric blasts. Each time, they gradually move closer to us. One of the giants appears behind Samir and Tarek, quickly placing his hands on Tarek. We turn to shoot him, but the giant disappears with Tarek before our blasts can reach. Another giant appears right beside Co-Z and tries to put his hand on her. Co-Z elbows his hand out of the way and lunges to punch him in the stomach. Her fist collides with his ribs and he is pushed back by the electric pulse. He teleports out of the way before we can shoot him. Two giants appear beside Aly and Samir, quickly grabbing them both and then disappearing.

“Where are they taking them?” Bongo shouts.

“I have no idea,” I reply. “Just don’t let them touch you.”

The giants continue to teleport back and forth around us, trying to get close enough to reach us as we shoot at their repeatedly vanishing and reappearing bodies. Two more giants appear and also begin to teleport toward the three of us. One teleports behind Bongo and I slam my fist into his back, which instantly makes him teleport away from us. Another one teleports right up to my face, but gets shot by

Co-Z in the side of the head. He falls over and collapses onto the ground. Co-Z then turns to fire at a giant who is about to grab Bongo, and as she turns, a giant appears behind her and grabs both her shoulders.

“Co-Z!” I shout as my gun releases a stream of electric blasts toward the giant.

He disappears with her and another giant appears behind me, kicking me forward onto the ground. I roll once and put my hands out to brace myself. Bongo turns and shoots the giant in the back and he teleports away. At the same time, a different giant appears behind Bongo and grabs him, instantly teleporting away with him. I’m left on my own with the remaining five giants as they close in on me. I have one arm aimed in front of me and the other behind me as I slowly spin in a circle, ready to attack from both sides.

“What do you want?” I shout. “I’ve been improperly marked. I have a job to do, so, leave me be!”

I shoot the giant who appears behind me and the other who appears in front of me. A fist hits me from the side and I stumbled onto the ground, scrambling to get back up. A giant appears next to me and I punch him in the side of the leg, which makes him fall over onto one knee. I punch him in the face and as I’m about to land a second punch, my arm is caught by another giant and I am thrown onto the ground. Two giants appear beside me and they throw their bodies onto mine. I manage to shoot one off of

me, but the other grabs both my arms and holds them from moving. The one I shot returns and helps the other keep me from moving.

“Get off me!” I demand.

One of the other giants walks around to where my head is. He stops, turning to face me and I look at him upside down as I struggle to free myself from the tight grips of the giants holding me down.

“You bare the mark,” the giant says, calmly. “This is what shall come to pass.”

He raises his foot above my head and I begin to panic as he brings it down with all of his strength toward my face.

Chapter 18

“Do you understand this thing that has been?”

“Yes. Please, I beg of your forgiveness.”

“I understand your request for forgiveness, but do you? Tell me, what is it you request forgiveness from?”

“I have broken sacred promises made to you. I have indeed caused harm because of my actions. But you know my heart and the intent of my actions.”

“I know the love you once shared with a dear friend. I know your love continues to burn true. I understand that this thing is not something you can control. We have not been given that ability, it is never learned either, because it is contrary to purpose. I have watched you perform many great services and have seen the torment buried within your heart, which your countenance does well to conceal.”

“My efforts have been true. I have given in trial all my soul to the workings of progress and growth. But I feel as though this has not been enough, for I have still fallen to weakness, to softness for another soul, who has chosen misery, even when opportunity was given for change. Perhaps it is better to dwell on the other sphere, perhaps it is best to join what I am

unable to overcome than to ask for forgiveness, only to fall again. It is not my desire, but my fear. You know these things.”

“Take comfort and do not be weary. All things are in their proper place due to the aid of your courage and diligence. Remember those things and their weight in relation to what’s to come. Endure, for you are strong. Nothing is left incomplete. No one is left alone.”

“My gratitude for the fortification. I am lost in thought of the disparity in which I might be consumed if it were not for the constant mercy you’ve provided me with. Please, I beg of you, allow me to right the wrong I have allowed to take place. I only ask for thy aid in this thing, for I do not possess the power in doing so.”

“As you know, what is sealed can only be undone by the power of that which has sealed it in the beginning. For this cause, I will aid you. The wrong shall be corrected by your hand with the necessary power. Take this and hold it with great caution. You understand the temptation that comes with this responsibility. I understand the nature of your strengths, which is why I allow this thing. Your battle is not with any one thing but the constant battle within. Your heart burns greater than the fire of the opposition. Do not let it consume you. You have this opportunity to show true love. Your dear friend may enter spheres again. Be wise. Be learned.”

“I am forever in your debt, as I have always been. This life is yours, and I shall not disappoint you

again. The man needs to tend to his people as he has done thus far. The messengers attempt to complete their task, unknowing to err. Your aid is the antidote to the poison my heart's thief has polluted the Earth with. I will repair what has been done, so that what is to come may fulfill all things according to purpose."

"You will succeed. I have faith in you."

"Your faith is in your mercy, I am nothing without you. I promise I will not fail you again. Thank you, forever."

"Go, and fall no more."

Chapter 19

The sound of a large explosion shakes the air as time slows down. I watch the giant's huge foot slowly fall closer and closer to my face. So many thoughts are racing through my brain that I can't properly process a single one. Images, words, and feelings bounce around my consciousness. The giant's foot moves even more slowly as it presses against my visor. I watch a crack begin to spread across my visor as the weight of the giant's foot presses to crush my helmet. As the crack slowly reaches the top of my visor, time completely stops.

"Woven."

I recognize the voice and it brings tears to my eyes for some reason.

"Yes?" I reply.

"Woven, again, forgive me. I ask you to forgive me for any pains I have given you in the time since our last meeting."

It's the emerald-haired woman.

"Oh, no, it's all good," I reply sarcastically as my heart feels like it's beating out of my chest.

"Everything's actually been going quite smoothly."

I stare at the bottom of the giant's foot and the

huge crack it put in my visor as he attempts to crush my head.

“You are full of humour even in the face of death,” the emerald-haired woman replies. “You truly are worthy. I have come to inform you that I have replaced the mark; the messengers shall no longer seek to destroy you.”

“Well, that is a huge relief,” I say as I let out a long sigh.

“Again, I ask of your forgiveness,” the woman says, “and know that you will do well in fulfilling your purpose. Take care, Woven.”

She places her hand on the giant, whose foot is about to turn my head into a pancake, and gently pushes him away from me. She turns back to me and smiles. She then disappears and I am left on the ground, feeling overwhelmed and wanting to throw up.

A couple seconds later, time returns to its normal speed again. The giant’s foot slams ridiculously hard onto the desert gravel about ten feet from my head, sending bits of dirt and rock outward in all directions. The ground shakes beneath me as the impact spreads out around where the giant stomped. I shiver as I think about where that foot was previously going to land.

“The mark has changed,” says the giant holding one of my arms.

“Honour the seal,” the other one says.

Four of the giants instantly disappear. The fifth one, the one that tried to pop my head, approaches

me, bends over, and extends his hand toward me.

“Let’s go,” he says.

His hand touches my arm and we are teleported to a snowy patch of ice somewhere.

“There is a bridge,” he says as we teleport to another spot. “You must cross it. I can not take you. It is you who must choose to cross.”

We are teleported to another location and suddenly I see a huge sea of people at the opening to a large bridge made from ice that seems to go on forever toward the horizon. Everyone is funneling toward the entrance of the bridge, which is surrounded by water and what looks to be extremely thin ice.

“On the other side of the bridge,” the giant begins, “there is an opening into the Earth. Go there and wait for further instruction.”

“But the Virulent,” I inquire. “Don’t I have to make sure they’re taken down? I need to stop them from destroying anything else.”

“There will be time,” the giant responds, “to deal with those who spread evil. You will have the assistance of the Anakim, but this is not that time. Please, make your way across the bridge.”

I hesitate for a few seconds, then decide to follow the giant’s instructions. As I’m walking toward the bridge and the large group of people, I search for my friends. I turn back to ask the giant if he knows where they are.

“Hey,” I begin. “Do you know where –” He disappears before I can finish my question.

Well, that was rude.

He returns within a couple seconds and calmly states, “You must go now. They are coming.”

“Who’s coming?” I ask. “And where are Co-Z and Bongo?”

“Listen,” the giant says sternly. “There is much to learn, but you must heed my counsel or reap the consequences. You must cross the bridge now if you are to succeed in your task.”

“Fine,” I retort. “But you’re going to help me find them.”

“That, I can do,” the giant replies. “But let us hurry to the bridge, first.”

I turn toward the bridge and begin jogging to it. My eyes scan the crowd for Co-Z and Bongo as I reach the perimeter.

“Co-Z,” I shout into the crowd, while struggling to push through the crowd. “Bongo! Where are you guys?”

“Woven!”

I turn with excitement, but realize that it was someone else who has called my name.

“Woven!” a bearded man wearing pajamas exclaims. “I can’t believe it’s you. What’s going on? Why are we all here? What did the giants tell you?”

“I’m sorry, friend,” I reply. “But I can’t stop right now, just get to the bridge.”

“Hey, that’s Woven!”

“Co-Z!” I call out as I try to push through the crowded mass.

Giants continue to appear around the perimeter, dropping people off and giving them instructions,

only to disappear again. I hear shouting from the left side of the crowd, near the front, and the entire crowd begins to shift to the right, away from the screaming. I clench my fists and push my way through the scrambling people as my wrist-guns extended. I hear gunshots coming from the same direction as the screaming and I try to move back to the outside of the crowd to circle around. A giant appears in front of me and puts his hands out to stop me.

“Move away,” he directs. “Get back to the bridge. We’ll take care of this.”

“No,” I shout back. “People are in danger.”

I try to push him out of my way, but he teleports me further from where I was trying to go.

“More people will be in danger if you don’t get to the bridge and cross it now,” he says.

My frustration is clearly visible on my face, which causes the giant to let go of me.

He says, “Please, do not be foolish. If you want to accomplish your task, let us take care of this.”

The screaming continues and suddenly there are screams from the right side of the crowd as well. I hear gunshots and electric blasts being fired.

“Get out of my way,” I snarl at the giant. “Don’t bother trying to stop me.”

He teleports out of sight and I begin to run toward the right side of the crowd, my boots crunching and digging into the snow beneath me. In the distance, I can see an army of demons sprinting toward us. As I circle around the perimeter of the crowd, I see more and more demons already next to the crowd, fighting

with civilians, giants, and disciples. My electric blast hits a demon in the head, which throws her back into the snow. Another demon sprints toward me as I continue running toward the battle. He jumps to tackle me and I use his bodyweight to toss him out of the way behind me. I jump over a fallen civilian and my knee collides with a demon's face as it lunges to attack the fallen civilian. The demon's neck breaks as it collapses onto the snow. Within a few steps, I am now in the middle of the fight.

"We need to move these people out of here," I shout to one of the giants as she smashes two demons' heads together. "Do you see how many are approaching?"

"It is the same on the other side of these people," she replies. "The only option is to cross the bridge. You can help them do that while we fight these evil spirits."

"But there are too many of them," I shout. "There's no way we're all going to get to the bridge in time. Even you guys won't be able to hold them off."

The giant throws one of the demons aside and replies, "Then it's best that you get to that bridge and help as many people as possible along the way. Complete your task."

"Yeah right," I snort. "I'm just going to leave these people here to die and save myself? Let's see how that goes over."

I shoot an approaching demon and he collapses onto the ground, sliding toward me. My boots feel heavy as I jump over the sliding body and continue to

run toward the oncoming army. Giants appear on all sides and start pounding the demons' heads into the snow, while I keep shooting. One of the giants is tackled to the ground by several demons and disappears from sight.

"Where are they all coming from?" I shout to the nearest giant. "We're in the middle of nowhere, aren't we?"

"There are ships," he says between dodging punches and smashing demons. "They've been stationed a few kilometers from here. We just found out moments before the attack began. It was too late to do anything."

An electric blast whips past my head and collides with a flailing demon. I turn around to see Co-Z and Bongo running toward me. They jump toward me and wrap their arms around me as I embrace them.

"You're okay!" Co-Z shouts. "You're okay!"

"I'm glad you're alright, Woven," Bongo says.

"Thanks guys," I reply. "It's really good to see you right now."

Bongo shoots two demons who were sprinting toward us. We all shift back into gear and focus on the fight, punching, kicking, shooting, and dodging as demons push us back, closer to the crowd.

"There are way too many," Bongo shouts.

"Definitely," I call back. "I'm trying to come up with something. The giants seem to think they got this taken care of."

A giant suddenly appears on the snow about twenty feet in front of us, covered in demons, then

disappears again out of sight.

“Totally taken care of,” Co-Z says.

“That’s what I was thinking,” I reply as I look around, trying to come up with some way to help all these people onto the bridge.

The demons begin to push most of their force along the edge of the water, trying to cut their way to the entrance of the bridge.

“We have to stop them!” Co-Z shouts, while pointing at the charging horde.

Two giants sprint toward the horde and slam their bodies into the demons, shoving a large number of them into the freezing water. The giants reappear with ice cold water dripping off them onto the snow. They repeat this several times while Co-Z, Bongo, and I continue to fight off the rest of the horde with the other giants and few disciples. I can only imagine what’s going on at the other side of this crowd of terrified, rushing people. More giants appear further away from us, among the hordes of demons, and they fight with full force. There are many of us fighting, but we’re barely keeping this at bay. If anything, it feels like we’re losing.

In the distance, another giant falls to the ground and is buried beneath the thousands of charging demons. A few minutes later, she stands and begins to sprint toward us.

“She is no longer within the body,” a giant says as he teleports toward the demon giant.

Two other giants teleport toward her as well and the three of them begin to beat her to the ground.

While the giants are fighting their fallen friend, the demons climb on their backs and begin to slam their fists down on them, biting their exposed skin and clawing at their faces. The giants throw them off and they collide against the oncoming hordes of demons. We try to cover the giants as they fight in the heap of demons, but within a few seconds they are overcome and also collapse to the ground. Not even a minute later, the three giants return to their feet, with rage burning in their eyes. They run toward us, trampling their fellow demons beneath their feet. A giant appears in front of one of the demon giants, tackling him to the ground.

Co-Z, Bongo, and I are shooting at the other two demon giants in attempt to stop them from reaching the crowd of civilians trying to make it to the bridge. I notice that the giants who were tackling demons into the water are no longer there.

“Bongo,” I shout. “Cut the demons off by the water, they’re getting to the bridge! Co-Z and I got these two giants.”

Bongo nods, shoots off a couple more blasts, then sprints toward the edge of the water to fight off the oncoming demons.

“I got the legs,” I tell Co-Z. “You take ‘em out.”

We both fire a bunch of shots at the same demon giant and he stumbles, tripping over the other demons, and falling face-first onto the snow. As the other demon giant quickly approaches, Co-Z and I tackle the demons in front of us. I struggle to get the demon’s hands off my throat as it tries to suffocate

me. We roll for a couple seconds and another demon steps on us as it runs by, tripping onto the snow. I use one hand to shoot the fallen demon, then return to wrestling the one with its hands wrapped around my neck. I hear the heavy footsteps of the demon giant as it sprints closer toward us. I kick the demon in the side and push its body away from mine, as I try to position my hand below it to shoot. While I have the demon's body raised away from mine, an electric blast hits its body and Co-Z's boot stomps its gnarly face away from me and into the snow.

I quickly roll back up to my feet and shoot at the legs of the incoming demon giant. The electric blasts hit her in both shins and she struggles to stay upright. I jump toward her and throw my shoulder at her ankles, knocking her backward. As the demon giant is falling toward the snow, Co-Z jumps off a paralyzed demon and swings her arm at the face of the demon giant. Her fist collides with its face, accompanied by an electric pulse, throwing her head to the side, causing an audible snap in her neck. The demon giant collapses to the ground and Co-Z lands on top of her.

"You alright?" Co-Z asks as she helps me to my feet.

"I'm good," I reply. "Her knee got me pretty good though. Hurts wonderfully."

The other demon giant is being beaten by three regular giants as Co-Z and I continue to fight off the horde with the rest of the giants.

"More coming this way," one of the giants shouts.

“From the south.”

He teleports away and then reappears.

“We are too few to fight them off,” he says before disappearing again.

“Woven!” Bongo yells. “They’re too far along the water, I think they’re cutting off the entrance to the bridge!”

The giant reappears and says, “Our enemy has nearly cut off the entrance to the bridge. They will succeed in no more than a few minutes.”

“Just teleport everyone to the other side of the bridge,” I shout. “What are you waiting for?”

He shakes his head, “This can not be done, or I would cease to be.”

The thundering steps of tens of thousands of demons gently shake the earth beneath us. I see an ocean of demons from the south crashing toward us.

“Come on, man,” Bongo exclaims. “A lot of good people are going to die very soon if you don’t do something.”

“You brought us here,” Co-Z says. “Was this your plan? Whose side are you guys on?”

I aim my wrist-guns at the giant.

“You can not understand just yet,” he responds. “This is our task. We are to bring you to the bridge. You must cross. This is merely a stumbling block, an obstacle to overcome.”

“So, overcome it,” I bark. “They’re getting closer from every side. They have us surrounded. If you’re not going to help, then return us all to where we were and let us complete our own tasks!”

All at once, hundreds of giants appear behind the huge crowd of people.

“Anakim,” one of them yells. “Stand your ground. Do not let these evil spirits pass into the Earth. Destroy them all and protect the innocent.”

Hundreds of giants at a time continue to appear, forming a tight barrier around the huge crowd of people just as the horde finally reaches us on all sides. The most terrifying battle I have ever witnessed begins to unfold right before my eyes.

Chapter 20

I can hardly breathe.

The fight continues all around me. We've been fighting for at least an hour now. Giants stomping on demons, while demons overwhelm the giants. Many of the demons have fought their way through the barrier of bodies that the giants had formed. They are now thrashing their way through the huge crowd of civilians, dreamers, and disciples.

I'm crawling over the snow on my hands and knees, and my vision is blurry. I hunch over and cough blood onto the snow beneath me through my smashed visor. Blood drips from the jagged edges. My hands shake as I try to take a deep breath, but I just end up coughing again.

Seek them out and gather them together.

Protect them and lead them.

Change this world you live in, together with those who will fight along side you.

What have I changed? Nothing. I look around and see chaos surrounding me as the people of this world, people I care about, are being destroyed by

demons. Before this, it was the Zoo. Who have I ever protected? And from what? I've tried to accomplish what the giants have asked of me, but where has that gotten me? Where has that gotten the people I "saved"? We sit in this big crowd, waiting for the inevitable. What purpose does that serve?

Was I wrong in dedicating my life to this?

I cough again and fall to the ground. My face collides with the snow where my blood landed.

"Woven, get up!"

My head feels heavy as I turn to see Co-Z running toward me. She looks like she has been animated in a low-budget cartoon; her body tilting one way, and then in the next frame, she is closer and her other leg is forward. My head is throbbing.

"Get up!" She yells with tears in her eyes.

She reaches me and places her arm under mine. Pulling my other arm over her shoulder, she lifts me to my feet and begins to walk me toward the ice bridge.

"We need to get you over that bridge, Woven," Co-Z says as my senses slowly begin to return. "I don't even know how you're still alive right now."

She pulls her arm out from underneath mine and stops to shoot two demons who are ripping their way through the crowd.

"I definitely didn't see him coming," Co-Z continues as she aids me through the crowd again. "I think that one must know how to teleport. The others seem unable to, just occupying space. Was that a rotor blade? I don't even know."

“Where’s Bongo?” I manage to spit out, blood spilling down my chin.

Co-Z shakes her head and says, “I don’t know. I saw you get hit, you went flying, I just stopped and took off after you. He’s probably still fighting.”

I push against Co-Z’s guidance and say, “We need to go back. It’s not over.”

She wipes the blood from my mouth with the back of her gloved fingers.

“You’re in pretty rough shape, Woven,” she replies as tears roll down from the corners of her eyes. “If we can just get you through to the bridge, we’ll be alright. I can’t lose you, Woven.”

“I’m fine,” I respond as I pull my arm away from her shoulder. “We’ve seen worse, right?”

A demon tackles Co-Z from the side and she quickly spins it around as they fall to the ground. She has its arm pulled back and her knee on its back. With her free hand, she punches her fist into the back of its head, accompanied by an electric pulse. As she gets back up, another demon jumps onto my back and pushes me face first onto the snow. I cough out blood as I hit the ground and spin around onto my back to block the demon’s flailing arms. Co-Z shoots him in the head and he collapses onto the snow next to me. I raise my fist and shoot two electric blasts a few feet from Co-Z’s shoulder. The demon that was about to thrash her gets knocked back off his feet and lands on his side, twitching and jerking as the electricity arcs from his body.

“See,” I say, choking on my words as I clumsily

stand up. “Still got some fight in me.”

Co-Z shakes her head and smiles.

“Well,” she says calmly. “I guess if we’re going to die, it might as well be together, kicking some butt.”

We start heading back to the broken barrier of giants, shooting electric blasts in all directions as the demons push closer and closer to the rest of us. My body is shaking from pain. I must have a few broken ribs, there’s no way I don’t. I shout as I swing my clenched fist toward a demon’s face. The impact, combined with the electric pulse, shakes my body, causing me to cough blood again. I’m gasping for air as a demon giant begins to sprint toward Co-Z and I. We throw our hands up at it and start shooting. The blasts slow it down, but it continues to run at us. A giant appears in front of it and drives his knee into its stomach. The demon giant falls over, but quickly gets back up and wrestles with the giant. They disappear from sight.

“Woven!” Co-Z shouts. “There it is again!”

My eyes dart to where she’s pointing; the demon giant who apparently knows how to teleport. He’s carrying a broken rotor blade from a helicopter, which is what he used to bat me across the battlefield. He swings the blade at the leg of one of the giants, but the giant disappears before it can make contact. The giant reappears behind the demon giant and tries to pull the blade away from him. The demon giant pulls away from him and disappears.

I spin around as I hear screams coming from the

crowd. The demon giant has reappeared and is swiping the rotor blade back and forth through the crowd, sending bodies flying in all directions, both civilians and demons.

“Co-Z!” I yell. “We need to stop him!”

She nods her head and we start sprinting toward him. As we run I look around at the chaos. This fight is quickly becoming too much for the giants to handle. They’ve lost hundreds to the demons and continue to drop in number. The demons keep growing in number to the point where everywhere I look becomes a sea of demons, charging, flailing, and screeching.

“After this,” I shout. “We clear a path to the bridge for the others. There’s just too many.”

Co-Z shouts back, “If we had more giants on that side, it would’ve been the first thing to do, but they seem to have underestimated these demons and picked the wrong game plan. Do you think we’re going to make it?”

Without skipping a beat, I reply, “Yes. We’re going to make it.”

I wipe the blood, which I just finished coughing up, away from my mouth and spit onto the snow as we close in on the blade-wielding demon giant. We both start shooting at him and the blasts hit him square in the chest. He drops the rotor-blade and turns to the side. He disappears. I turn to the side and raise my arms to prepare for an attack on either side of me. The demon giant reappears in front of me and both arms swing toward him, shooting at the same

time as Co-Z. The blasts hit him again and he teleports out of sight. Co-Z and I both frantically search for him.

“Get down!” Co-Z shouts.

She pulls me down to the snow just as the rotor blade spins through the air and whips past just barely above our heads. The blade ricochets off the snow and swings upward, taking down at least ten civilians and demons. The demon giant appears in front of Co-Z and I and we shoot at him as we get back to our feet. He teleports behind us and slams the back of his arm against my body, sending me tumbling along the snow. Co-Z also gets launched away as he hits her with his other arm. Another giant appears and kicks the demon giant in the side of the knee, snapping it sideways. It lets out a loud screech and swings both fists at the giant’s head. The giant disappears before he’s hit and the demon giant throws himself off balance. He falls to the snow and I sprint toward the crowd to find Co-Z. I hear a loud snapping sound and turn back to see the demon giant putting his leg back in place.

“Woven!” Co-Z shouts.

I slam my elbow into a demon’s chest and it sends it flying backward onto the snow.

“Co-Z!” I shout. “Are you okay?”

“I think I broke my ankle,” she says, pointing to her busted foot.

The demon giant got hold of the rotor blade again and is smashing a giant to the ground with it.

“Help me up,” Co-Z requests. “I’ll see if I can

walk on it.”

I help her to her feet and she screams in pain, then clenches her jaw tight as I catch her from falling over.

“Not happening,” she says.

“I’ll get you out of here,” I say. “Just put your weight on me.”

I lean toward her as she shifts her weight against me.

“Woven, look out!” Co-Z shouts as she pushes me aside.

The demon giant swings the rotor blade down and it crashes right in between Co-Z and I, sending snow flying up into the air.

I got the wind knocked out of me as I landed and I’m gasping for air. I scramble to reach for Co-Z, who is sliding on her hips, trying to make her way to me. The demon giant opens his mouth wide and begins to laugh. It sounds like there are five or six people laughing, and it’s almost deafening.

“This,” he speaks with several voices all at once, “is who they chose to try and stop us? Us?”

He turns slightly side to side with his arms wipe open, gesturing toward the millions of demons closing in tightly around us.

“Pathetic,” he shouts loudly, “that you or even they could have believed that this would work. I expected at least –”

The demon giant is cut off mid-thought as a sharp, jagged steel rod comes sliding out through his stomach. He looks down at it with a blank expression, then turns to see who stabbed him.

Bongo stands with both his arms extended toward the demon giant. He starts shooting as the demon giant grabs the rod and pulls it from his stomach, tossing it aside. The electric blasts hardly seem to have an effect on the demon giant as he swings the rotor blade down toward Bongo. Another giant appears, grabbing onto the demon giant and disappearing with him before the blade can reach Bongo.

A second giant appears, shouting, "We must get you all to the bridge now! It's over. We can not hold them off any longer."

He helps Co-Z and I to our feet and I put my arm underneath Co-Z, pulling her to my side, where I'm thinking less ribs are probably broken. Bongo runs over and huddles with us as we slowly move toward the bridge with help from the giants. They've formed a sort of half circle around the crowd and are pushing us toward the bridge, shielding us from the demons, who are quickly picking them off one by one.

"We're not going to make it!" Bongo shouts.

"Woven, we gotta do something!"

"I'm thinking," I reply. "I'm thinking!"

The giants are being overpowered too quickly. They're dropping like flies and we're not even that much closer to reaching the bridge.

The demon giant with the rotor blade appears again, covered in blood from head to toe, shouting at the top of his lungs and swinging the blade at everyone. He's tearing his way through the crowd as Co-Z, Bongo, and I shoot at him.

"The Light shines brightly!" one of the giants

exclaims while pointing up at the sky.

The last time I looked, the sky was an ashy, dark haze. What is this giant talking about?

Everyone stops fighting. We all look toward the sky in amazement as a light, brighter than anything I've ever seen before, begins to illuminate the entire sky and the whole world from what looks like a single point above us. It's like the light is on fire, with burning, white flames. The light gets brighter and brighter until I almost can't open my eyes anymore. Wind is rushing around us violently, snow flying in every direction.

Suddenly, a pillar of flaming, white light comes crashing down on top of the crazy demon giant and I stare in disbelief as he instantly disintegrates. The flaming pillar continues to pour down onto the snow, enormous root-like patterns shooting beneath us in all directions along the ground, extending outward farther than I can see. The demons attempt to scatter, but the Earth begins to quake and everyone falls down to their hands and knees. Screeches from the demons pierce my ears as they cry out in terror.

My eyes fill with tears and my jaw drops open as I watch someone come speeding down through the center of the flaming light pillar. This person is travelling incredibly fast, but they seem to almost completely stop before hitting the ground, coming within inches of it. An extremely bright, white-bearded man wearing white, flowy clothing touches his foot to the snow and the sound of a thousand explosions fills the air as the ground shakes with so

much force that I think the whole Earth is going to cave-in on itself. The shaking stops, and so does time.

I look around to see what's going on and notice that all of the demons are slightly elevated off the ground. My mind races as I watch the root-like patterns, which run along the snow, shoot a soft light upward, like glowing smoke. As the light touches the demons, time returns to its normal speed and they all begin to catch fire. Each one of them burning with bright, white flames, almost instantly devouring them. I watch their bodies disappear, consumed by the light. The brightness begins to slowly fade away and I turn my head from side to side, looking at the emptied tundra, where millions of demons once stood.

All of the bright white light has disappeared except for the air surrounding the white-bearded man in the center of all of us. He looks toward Co-Z, Bongo, and I, and extends one of his hands toward us.

“Come,” he says. Then, turning the to everyone else, “There is much work to be done.”

The entire crowd is speechless as we all silently stare in awe. No one has even attempted to get up off their knees yet. The white-bearded man begins to walk through the crowd, toward the bridge. I suddenly feel extremely peaceful and my body is warm. My hands move over my ribs. There's no pain. I stand up and extend a hand to Co-Z. I help her to her feet and she holds my hand. Bongo comes to our side and the three of us begin walking toward the bridge. Others soon follow suit. Eventually,

everyone is on the bridge, following behind this bright, shining man, who saved our lives and is leading us to the opening in the Earth.

What's he going to show us once we're inside the Earth? I can only imagine. My thoughts begin to jump all over the place as I think about the RSDs, the dreamers, the disciples, the Virulent, the colourful-haired women, the giants, the demons, and now this person. My heart begins to pound as we approach the massive entrance into the Earth. I can't believe it. This is it, we're finally going in.

The illuminated, white-bearded man stands at the edge of the opening and looks back at everyone. He points with an open hand toward the opening as an ice staircase begins to form along the edge of the opening, spiralling down below.

“Follow me.”



