

Hand of Ares

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“Fear makes us feel our humanity.”

Benjamin Disraeli

“The most powerful weapon on earth is the human soul
on fire.”

George Eliot

“But with desperation comes a sense of clarity. Urgency
breeds ingenuity.”

Kacy Curtis

Prologue

In January 2014, a cataclysmic event largely known as Hell's Fissure overwhelmed mankind. Dark gray thunderheads that produced neither storm nor rain sealed away the sun by clotting the skies, creating a surprisingly warm atmosphere. All across the globe humanity was threatened by a variable breed of atrocious creatures whose origins remain unknown, although vastly theorized. Their mortality was their only weakness, but their numbers belittled the human race even in the face of all our technology, until a year later many of them went into hibernation.

This offered humanity a chance to recuperate; by February 2015, 80% of suburban civilians in the U.S. alone had evacuated to strongholds formed in the cities, where there was less enemy activity. In August a military project coded Hand of Ares was formed by NATO to scour the Earth—focusing on less-populated areas—and eliminate enemies. Operatives of HOA were named Guardians and included the military's choice soldiers across the world. They operated in pairs and would stay in the field for up to three months without extraction—most didn't even last that long.

When an enemy resurgence occurred in January 2016, a hefty number of Guardians were slaughtered. During their ambiguous hibernation a month later, NATO launched a cloning program as a subsidiary of HOA, and by August most active Guardians were replaced in the field by their cloned counterparts, named Seraphim.

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Dense grays and dark browns painted a dreary palette of war across the United States. It was seldom different elsewhere in the world, beneath bleak skies and a disturbingly warm atmosphere despite no sunlight. Civilians and military alike stirred rumors of heat leakage during and after Hell's Fissure, a name that automatically backed their superstitious theories. For Seraphim, there were no rumors to be spread or theories to be roused; they followed their plain orders to the letter with zero deviation. Conversation between Seraphim was minimal, but as clones of men they were not robotic to emotion. They felt fear, pain, excitement, and even pride.

Fatigue, however, wasn't a prominent factor. They could carry more and tire less, without crippling their nimbleness or speed, than any Guardian ever could.

Damien Ballard currently patrolled the perimeter of their camp, a temporary space usually no more than a hundred square-feet. They would stay for an entire day, through the night if they were comfortable with its location, then relocate in the morning. It was presently the afternoon of their first day here, on a high ridge two miles east of a rural highway in northern Virginia.

Clive Farrow, Damien's co-Seraph or partner to put it simply, was a sharpshooter with uncanny talent. He seldom did perimeter patrols because of this, preferring the highest vantage point with rifle in hand. It was currently so, to provide maximum efficacy while in the field, and Damien wasn't one to object, nor would he want to.

Unlike their 'true human' Guardian counterparts, Seraphim wore lighter gear simply because they could do without it. Their epidermis was far less susceptible to damage than any human's, and their bones less malleable, making them tougher targets for the enemy. Given, their enemies did not use projectile weapons, instead teeth and claws, but every so often a survivor would hassle them if encountered. With Guardians there was seldom any trouble, only support from survivors that couldn't or refused to evacuate, but when the Seraphim came in the antagonism rose.

One could only guess a handful of reasons.

Nonetheless, Seraphim were deployed by HOA with 50% less body armor than their Guardian counterparts, tripling agility and weapons handling, while doubling the amount of weaponry that could be carried.

The standard-issue assault rifle for Guardians had been the Remington ACR Carbine, but Seraphim were upgraded. The Remington R5 RGP provided a higher damage output with increased accuracy, and extended magazines were made standard. Foregrips, holographic sights, and rail-mounted flashlights were all included. For Seraphim like Clive whose Guardian records excelled at sniping, a lightweight but powerful scoped rifle was provided as their default weapon. The eleven-pound Blaser R93 LRS2 precision sniper rifle was chambered for .338 Lapua Magnum rounds, making it an ideal choice against their biological enemies. With no projectile weapons, their atrocious enemies relied on agility and sheer ferocity to kill; for survivors without proper weaponry, they faced certain death. For Guardians, the survival rate was a guaranteed 70%, but for Seraphim the odds were constantly improving.

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In addition to their primary weapons, Seraphim packed high-caliber handguns as their secondaries. The standard-issue by HOA was the IMI Desert Eagle XIX, chambered at .50-caliber AE, capable of rifle-grade penetration. In addition to their primaries, it was encouraged—especially for sharpshooters—to carry an automatic secondary. Choices were limited to three weapons, all manufactured by Heckler & Koch—the 9mm MP5A5 and compacter MP5K, or the .45-caliber UMP-45. The MP5A5 and UMP-45 were two-hand sub-machineguns, although capable of one-hand operation it wasn't advised for sake of accuracy, and offered retractable stocks. The UMP-45 and MP5K were fitted with foregrips, although aside from that modification the latter was a barebones machine-pistol efficient in one-handed operation. It was because of this that most R5-wielding Seraphim chose the MP5K because of its ease and compactness. Damien was among them, while Clive preferred the UMP-45 for a sub-assault rifle backup to his Blaser.

Last in their standard-issue equipment was an MTech Tactical sawback combat knife with a seven-inch carbon steel blade. Seraphim typically had these kept in their Kydex sheaths strapped to a thigh, but some men like Clive kept them on their chest rig for quicker drawing.

All of this gear on one man with minimal body armor, protected arms and legs, satchel pouches full of ammunition and backpacks with additional ordnance and MRE's, would've crippled a Guardian in the battlefield against these creatures. For the Seraphim, it was another walk in the park.

Most of them thoroughly enjoyed combat.

Many, however, preferred states of relaxation, even if it meant experiencing waves of fragmented memories in their sleep, thoughts that didn't necessarily belong to them. That was how civilians saw it at least, although all Seraphim were cloned from volunteered Guardians to help ensure a win in this awful war.

For Damien, it was a mixed bag. He enjoyed the adrenaline rush, the thrill and pride of killing these monsters so that the people of this planet could survive. Just the same, cloned or not, all Seraphim were prone to feel fear one way or another. And every one of the creatures that posed a threat to them and mankind, as ambiguous as their origins were, couldn't be seen without feeling some kind of fright. Most were downright appalling to look at, and a particular creature supposedly hunted by smelling hormonal secretions of fear in the air.

Clive, on the other hand, lived and breathed for Hand of Ares. Being clones of men, Guardians no less, the Seraphim were all as knowledgeable on mankind as their sources. To this extent Clive found it not only amusing but sincerely entertaining what NATO decided to call this military project intent on saving mankind from the enemy. Ares being the Greek god of war, an Olympian often representing the violent and untamed aspect of combat, made Clive think that humans were more prone to hostility than the creatures they fought. Given, he knew of the many wars fought throughout the history of mankind, and just how mercilessly brutal their present enemy was, but something still scratched that itch under Clive's surface.

Nonetheless, he fought and he fought stubbornly. He and Damien had been paired up since their genesis in August of 2016, and since have formed a respectable camaraderie as most Seraphim have in the field. If they survive beyond three months, it was seen as a sign of good fortune and solid faith, from which a brothers-in-arms sort of bond was grounded.

That second week of August last year they were deployed via helicopter in Greenville, South Carolina. Two months later, after numerous kills and survivor encounters, they reached Charlotte, North Carolina. A few weeks of scouring the areas outside of the city brought them a third of the way to Wilmington on the east coast, when they were extracted via helicopter. They were transferred to a HOA outpost in Raleigh, North Carolina, where food and showers awaited them, as well as a few days' rest before rearmament was ordered to send them

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back into the field. They went willingly as all Seraphim would, Clive more eager than most, and were deployed just north of Durham with a ten-mile hike to the southern Virginia border.

Since then they haven't been extracted, which puts them at an ongoing four months in the field without relief. Given, this didn't go to say that they were never replenished; on approach to spending all of their ammunition, they would radio in for an air-drop. Typically a couple of hours would pass before the air drop arrived at their provided coordinates, although without smoke-signaling them, the drop was often up to a quarter-mile off. Smoke-signaling was abandoned early on in the war, to the Guardian-era as it was called, because their enemies were so hugely drawn to it. Since the creatures only attacked other organisms, never inanimate objects unless containing a human, potential sabotage of air-dropped crates were never a concern.

Due to roadblocks caused by panic and chaos during Hell's Fissure back in January 2014, vehicular usage by HOA operatives was discouraged. While tanks could theoretically be utilized in largely rural areas, their size and noise drew too much attention from the bigger creatures, not to mention counterproductive since HOA's focus was civilian-occupied areas.

Aerial support by the military had proved considerably effective at first, until winged creatures—coded Imps by HOA—complicated their operations. Despite being no larger than an average teenager, Imps' wingspans extended to fourteen feet and their strength was startlingly imposing, even against fighter jets, and especially in swarms.

As many names that have been given to these atrocious creatures, a species that seems so different from one another so as to not be related, no one has stuck for the lot of them. The individual kinds, such as Imps, were quickly aliased by HOA in an attempt to facilitate combat communications. As of 2017 there remain five kinds of creature known to mankind, since Hell's Fissure in 2014. They are the Imps, Hounds, Skinners,

Roughnecks, and Hybrids, in order from the most common to least.

To Damien and Clive, they were all common enough to have encountered every kind at least five times in the span of two months.

Currently they were almost halfway through their ammunition reserves, having just had an air-drop last week. They were north of Burke, Virginia en route to D.C. but taking their getting there. Ultimately the two of them were hopeful for an extraction to the nearest HOA outpost prior to their infiltration of the nation's capital, knowing that it would be their greatest challenge yet. Despite the Seraphim order to focus on less populated areas because they held the highest enemy activity, the District of Columbia was a different story according to HOA. The criminal activity there peaked during Hell's Fissure, exacerbating the waves of panic already present, eventually turning it into a maelstrom of inexorable chaos.

The nearest urban stronghold outside of Washington, D.C. was Annapolis in Maryland. But the nearest HOA outpost, as far as Damien and Clive knew, was in the area of Alexandria this side of Virginia, though closer to the capital.

For the time being, Damien and Clive can only stick to their usual routine and proceed as planned. They would be calling in for an air-drop in four to five days, depending on enemy activity. There lingered the trepidation of being in the field when the creatures have one of their capricious resurgences, during which time even Seraphim are prone to great losses.

It was in a similar situation that Damien's source Guardian was recorded as KIA in July 2016. Apparently he had been en route to extraction when the resurgence caught him and his partner in the fray. Damien would occasionally let his mind drift and wondered if the 'true' Damien Ballard was glad that he had volunteered for the HOA cloning program before his death. And what of the man's family? Damien the Seraphim often had

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the urge to know more than he did, that was, know more than what the fragmented memories hinted to in his sleep.

And they were no more than that—fragmented.

Damien tried to keep a foothold on his thoughts. He needed absolute concentration to function without fault in the field, especially during engagement with the enemy. These were not gunmen or terrorists in the common sense that his source human apparently had experience fighting against overseas.

These were feral creatures of unknown origin and a merciless fierce nature. They were driven by a seemingly insatiable bloodlust, the hunger for human flesh, and often the intention of attacking to maim instead of kill. Except that they were well aware of their potential—victims typically faced a 30% chance of survival, and even then amputation was frequently required.

Civilians across the world called them monsters of the unknown, to which nobody could justly argue. Some Seraphim saw them simply as animals in a torn world with an abundant food supply. Others called them demons that had escaped—or been given freedom from—their infernal prisons. On this latter note, many called it the End of Days among other names, a trial by God to test the weak in preparation for the Second Coming.

Two full years have passed since the initial event.

And still was mankind proving themselves worthy of continued life out from under these abominations' hold.

Still did Damien and Clive fight.

The perimeter patrol was coming along as nicely as it could, so far as Damien was concerned. The trees in this area were mostly wooden skeletons, those not burnt to a crisp from a fire that had raged in the area not long ago. Was it a wildfire or something caused by a great explosion? There was no telling.

Corpses were few and far between these days, simply because the creatures tended to devour them or leave the remains for another creature. Imps and Hounds preferred smaller things, like children and animals of similar size, although the latter would frequently attack humans for the fun of it. Skinners,

Roughnecks, and Hybrids, however, preferred human flesh for satiation. Skinners were given their name simply because they had the tendency of skinning their victims prior to consumption, often leaving up to half of the remains behind for Hounds and Hybrids. Roughnecks, on the other hand, were the largest of creatures the enemy had to offer and as such devoured just about anything it could fit in its diesel-sized jaws. Hybrids, lastly, were the rarest of creatures and by far the most terrifying—even so, despite their size, their heads were humanoid so their mouths were as small as an Imp's, making consumption timely and difficult.

All of this taken under consideration left more fear to be managed and less carrion to be found.

Damien wasn't sure if this was good or bad, strategically. Good, in the sense that it posed less obstacles in the field for them, but bad because it left no indication of enemy activity in an area. Presently their surroundings were vastly visible for the immediate quarter-mile, before terrain encountered more hills like the one they occupied. Clive had the highest point for sniping, although for the past hour he's done nothing but sit still and watch, while Damien conducted the occasional perimeter check. When Damien was finished, he would return to the ridge upon which Clive rested to do so himself, possibly take a swig of water or bite of an MRE.

Damien made his rounds without spotting any sign of enemy activity, then began his ascent up the hill to where Clive sat and hummed to himself. It was a tune similar to the respiratory hum of Hounds when they sprinted or feasted, shrill but guttural.

In Damien's hands was his Remington R5 RGP, with its muzzle pointed at the ground and his finger off the trigger. Holstered to his side was the Desert Eagle, the single brightest item on his person. It had a stainless steel chrome finish, which under unobscured sunlight would shine beautifully, but ever since Hell's Fissure a clear sky was unheard of. For Seraphim, they knew nothing but shards of memories about actual sunlight,

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and even then it was monochromatic. With the skies constantly quilted in gray clouds like rolling thunderheads, one might assume night and day would melt together as one, but fortunately for the human race this wasn't the case. The clouds, however dense and all-encompassing they were, still couldn't mask the sun's rays in their entirety. Thus during the day the theoretical weatherman announced an overcast prediction, and at night it became most dark.

For Seraphim, a cloudy forecast was the only sunny day they ever knew. Some of them dreamed, when dreams they could conjure, of a time post-war when the skies cleared and the sun beat down beautifully. Some even dreamt that this day of days would render them blind, and they couldn't care less.

Every now and then Damien dreamt like that.

When sparking such a conversation with Clive, on the other hand, there was less agreement. Damien didn't see it as indifference in the man, only a different shift of priorities and focus. Perhaps it was Clive that Damien should be envying, not the man from whom he was cloned.

At this notion, Damien nodded to Clive as he plodded up the hill. He asked him if his eye had caught anything suspicious while he was doing the perimeter check.

Clive was a handsome, tall, strong but lean man in his upper thirties. Damien was a little more robust, two inches shorter, and about five years younger. They both shared an equal medium-cut dark brown hair and jawline stubble. Clive's source human had worn corrective lenses, but during the cloning process his eyesight was perfected. Only superficially physical flaws like eyesight, hearing, sinus clarity and olfactory senses could be permanently rectified during the cloning process. Now, Damien intermittently jeered Clive, everyone can see your pretty brown eyes. Clive would simply smirk and shrug it off, whenever he didn't jab back at Damien's ladylike green eyes.

"Nothing so far as I could tell," Clive replied without looking at Damien, only swiveling his head to continue

surveying the surrounding hills. He sighed, adding, “Nothing still.”

Damien nodded. “Good and bad, I suppose. Hopefully they aren’t in hiding.”

“Really?” Clive snorted, still not looking at Damien as he approached him, appearing as if he was avoiding eye contact. “If anything, I hope they *are* hiding. Fucking cowards, ya know? That means they’re *afraid* of us.”

“Well, then, allow me to correct myself,” Damien smirked briefly. “I hope they aren’t *sleeping*, resting up to come at us twofold.”

Clive nodded. “Yeah, I guess that’s better.”

“Hey, toss me a canteen.”

Clive sighed, dropped his gaze to the canteens at his feet, picked one up with his free hand and tossed it to Damien. He caught it with one hand and flipped up the cap when Clive snapped at him to get down. Damien closed the canteen cap and dropped into a prone position in the same motion. Clive brought his Blaser up to aim, bipod folded, fingered the trigger guard, and put his right eye to the lens. A breath left his lungs and his whole body stabilized with the rifle shouldered, elbow on his knee to stabilize its forend.

Three seconds had passed since Clive told Damien to drop. Three seconds before Damien heard the Blaser R93 LRS2 fire, a broad muzzle flash spreading from its birdcage compensator, heat splashing over the top of his head. As his ears adjusted Clive relaxed, smiling toothlessly at him, and laid the Blaser across his lap. Now he, too, reached for his canteen.

Damien got to his feet, at first a kneel enough to turn and look, then uncapped his canteen to take a relieved swig. He stared down the hill at a Hound that had apparently been stalking him since he turned his back to make the ascent. It was some eighty feet away. Unlike all of the other creatures, it reeked the least, making it far stealthier than its cohorts.

At least it was the most colorful.

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Imps, Hybrids, and Skinners were all an oily black color with minor variations of a dark purple or navy hue. Roughnecks were generally a pale brick red all over, except for their bone-white teeth and white eyes. Hounds, conversely, were the most mammalian. Their bodies were a light brown with darker splotches, a vividly blue chest and toes. Its claws and teeth were all an unsurprising ivory, but its tail—70% the length of its seven-foot-long body—was striped brown and yellow, while the twin nasal ridges from its snout to its brows were a multicolored pink and blue. At the tips of each were additional naval cavities, providing the creature with a terrifyingly acute sense of smell. Secondly prominent was the Hound's muzzle, retaining semblance to the male mandrill baboons, featuring blue and yellow ridges. Overall the creature was clearly a canine, despite its obvious mutations, although ultimately its callous ferocity puts to shame its beautiful colors.

For all of the creatures that emerged to terrorize humanity in 2014, variables were present. Some humanoid and bipedal, others strictly quadrupedal like the Hounds and Roughnecks. Some with amphibious-like skin, others reptilian and even collagenic.

Hounds, on the other hand, were entirely mammalian. Their fur was incredibly thin and close to the skin, especially closer to the feet and along the tail. Its neck was thick and burly, like that of a bear's, which a prominently yellow throat. With MRE's, Guardians and Seraphim never had to consume any creatures they killed for provisions, although it was opposite among survivors. Except that Hounds were the only creatures ever eaten, aside from an occasional Roughneck if one could be killed in the first place. Imps were far too grotesque for even the bravest man to consume, Skinners were among the most abhorred by humans, and the only people to ever survive a Hybrid attack were HOA operatives.

"Well would ya look at that?" Clive tilted his head as Damien erected to his feet and brushed off. "I bagged you dinner."

Damien shook his head. “Only you’d be a crazy enough Seraph to eat one of those things.”

“One of these days, I will,” Clive said solemnly.

Damien took another swig of water. After which he gasped with relief and recapped the canteen.

“I have no doubt about it, Clive, which disturbs me. It’s a damn good shot, though, I’ll give ya that much.”

“Right between the eyes, too.”

“Now you’re just making shit up.”

“Take a look for yourself, sonny.”

Damien rolled his eyes and turned on his heel to look downhill. He shouldered his Remington and peered down the holographic sight. He lifted the placement of the U-dot reticle to focus on the head of the slain creature. Sure enough, its nasal ridges were messily blown off, thanks to a bull’s eye .338 Lapua Magnum round. Damien lowered the weapon, set it down next to Clive’s UMP-45, and took a restful seat. He was considerably silent, as he’d just accused Clive of being wrong.

“Don’t act so surprised,” Clive boasted. “It is *me* we’re talking ‘bout here.”

“Yeah, yeah. Just keep it up. I’m gonna rest my eyes for a minute—”

“The hell you are, Ballard!” Clive exclaimed, brow furrowed. He immediately caught Damien’s solemn attention. Surnames were seldom used in the field with Seraphim, mostly because it reminded them too much of who and what they were, not entirely human but a byproduct of them. Clive nodded vigorously, his speech empowered. “Don’t act like you’re getting all weary on me, now! You ain’t *tired*, you don’t *get* tired!”

“Oh, trust me, Clive, I’m far from it!” Damien barked back. “I could sprint our perimeter five times over, come back here to kick your ass, in full gear and not so much as wheeze or feel sore, but I’ll be damned if my *eyes* ache from so much straining. There isn’t even anything out here! Except for a fucking rogue hound hopeful that we get lazy. So relax! I’m just

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closing my eyelids for *five minutes*—unless the great Clive Farrow can't handle it 'til the time's up."

"Alright, alright! For fuck's sake, man, rest your wimpy eyes, I'll keep watch 'til the war's end if I need to. Steadfast as stone!"

Damien ignored Clive ignorance just the same, closing his eyes and reclining against the bundle that was his backpack, albeit within reach of his partner's feet. As he crossed his ankles and overlapped his hands in his laps, Damien muttered "and just as responsive." It caught Clive's ears but not coherent enough to draw a response from him.

In two minutes' time a thin form of sleep overcame Damien. Tranquility settled in, the only kind for Seraphim that could be acquired by sleep. It was dark and ethereal, featureless but comforting.

In gentle waves came shards of memories that weren't his own—not in this life, at least. Living with the fact that he wasn't entirely human, but a replica of one, was knowledge not easily dealt with. A man can only be as strong as his mind. Damien's physical capabilities exceeded his source Guardian's, but beyond that he felt weaker. What was he fighting for? The persistence of mankind; for all their flaws and mistakes throughout history, their potential was colossal. Already, its achievements have at the very least given life to Damien, although he knew it was a contradiction in itself—had he not been created via the cloning, his consciousness would've never existed.

He tried to abstain from such contemplations.

Distractions.

Nonetheless, he fought so that these people could continue their existence as the dominant species of this planet, the only planet whereupon they exist. So far as they know, at least. Religion and aspects beyond himself of the sort had no effect on him; perhaps his source wasn't devout or perhaps the concept was beyond a clone's reach. If he could feel fear and joy than why not faith?

Again, extraneous thoughts.

He focused on his current struggle.

At present he focused on nothing at all. He opened his mental floodgates and let the vaguely foreign memories deluge him. They were monochromatic and jagged at the edges, as if ripped from clothing and then thrown into the air. He did not reach for any one in particular, just let them shower him however it happened.

Faces were distorted, but he saw a beautiful woman with whom he—that being, the true Damien—kissed and smiled with. And a child on a tire swing beneath a verdant oak tree, giggling buoyantly. His? There were other men in these memories, too, so who was to say which belonged to whom—no matter how familiar any of it might seem.

And then came the darker shards.

To no surprise, these were sharper and clearer. Firefights with human enemies, and not survivors, but men clad in clothes not uniforms. Shoulder-mounted explosive devices spiraling through the air. Combat helicopters swimming through the skies, dogfighting when their tails weren't exploding in plumes of flame. Tracers cutting the air, heat so thick on the horizon it looked palpable, sand in wounds, severed limbs from improvised explosive devices, screams of injured men and those diving for cover. Tremors in the ground, not earthquakes but explosions and tank battalions.

All of these mixed with the victorious cheers and on-base jubilations from Damien's wartime comrades. This wasn't the Hell's Fissure war but an overseas conflict pockmarking a vast desert. The resulting cacophony was both discordant and comforting, but for the most part it made Damien want to wake up.

And that was before *his* memories struck him. Circa late 2016 when he was experiencing heavy engagements for the first time against an enemy that had been programmed into his brain for knowledge and improved combat efficacy. His retention was

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brimmed with field reports and data compiled by HQ on the subject of the creatures.

Imps, Hounds, Skinners, Roughnecks, Hybrids.

Monsters, monsters, and more monsters. Abominations. Anomalies. ‘Creatures’ was just a simplified way to put it, and in some ways the most politically correct. But ultimately, Seraphim or not, Damien agreed that they were monsters. He knew the definition as any true human did; they were monstrous, atrocious, appalling, and cruel beyond any known word. They were always hungry and always angry, and they had been here for already too damn long.

Damien could agree with this.

He knew that Clive saw them as feral animals uglier than most and little else besides that, but at least the two of them had one thing in common. They both wanted the enemy gone from this planet for good, and the sooner the better.

Clive felt comfort in believing that he’d be used to fight in some other conflict once Hell’s Fissure had been ‘sealed,’ as people were calling an end-of-war these days. Damien had told him that it was unlikely; such a catastrophe apparently took from every nation the same as another, warranting a collaboration of governments to form HOA. Clive wouldn’t hear it; he believed in mankind’s need for war to live, whether they wanted to admit it or not, so Damien ultimately agreed to disagree.

Regardless, they fought still, and together.

In these dreams of memories, Damien found himself a little deeper than expected. His eyes had been closed for roughly five minutes now, an exact measure of time unbeknownst to him at the moment. His body shuddered briefly, sporadically, from the onslaught of Hell’s Fissure memories. A Hybrid too close for comfort, its face a grotesque mockery of man’s, lashing out at him with inhumanly long fingers and talons. The way its howl could make a grown man soil himself, the way it sent chills like powdered ice down his spine, no different than most other Seraphim.

These were just too damn lucid.

And the others—Imps swooping down to decapitate a survivor he and Clive had been trying to save. Get off the road, they kept yelling. The man had been distraught with panic, and the grief of witnessing his family be butchered by a pair of Hounds.

Damien and Clive once came across a scene that warranted regurgitation but they managed to hold their MRE's down. The thought alone made the two of them shudder, no matter how stone-cold Clive sometimes liked to act. The sight of a Skinner earning its alias on an overweight man that it had hung upside-down from a beam in a house was something the two of them could've lived without.

At last the churning images and blood-stained video reel inside Damien's mind began to peel away. The darkness, in its impenetrable fathoms, returned in waves to wash out those that had become far too bright for Damien's comfort. Then his body shook, from side to side, more like a roll.

Damien sprung up with a deep breath, eyes wide. The afternoon daylight that existed beneath these gray skies washed over him, and his eyes adjusted without the slightest of trouble. He caught his breath just as quickly, and tried to act that he was undisturbed, but Clive wasn't stupid or blind.

"Five minutes, huh?" Clive said with a shake of his head.

"Why, how long was I out for?"

"Seven, but that's not what I meant."

Damien stood to stretch and cocked an eyebrow.

Clive sighed. "You know as well as I do that five minutes is plenty of time for these brains to go to work on us. Lemme guess...you saw a lucid reiteration of that Skinner—"

"You can stop right there," Damien sighed. He scooped up his Remington, which helped comfort him all the more. "We needn't explore that memory any more than I already have."

Clive smirked, clicked his tongue. "Well," he said, looking up at Damien for once, "at least we killed it."

"Damn right we did. Burnt the shit out of it." Damien sighed again and regained full control of himself, from his brain

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down to his toes. Then he said something that made Clive itch. “But that’s not the least of it—I just wish the memories from our Guardians wouldn’t be so fleeting and obscure, in comparison.”

After a moment of thought, Clive spoke up.

“You telling me you got some just now?”

“Yeah, Clive. But just a little, ya know?”

“Sure, sure, but the thing is—we’re only supposed to experience those in REM sleep. I saw you moving a lil’ just now but you weren’t out long enough for Guardian memories.”

“Error, malfunction,” Damien joked in a robotic voice. Clive cracked and started laughing. Half of Damien’s face lit up to lighten the mood, and with that they simply put the matter behind them.

For the better.

As Damien walked away from Clive, however, something else was brought to their attention.

“You know, Damien,” Clive said, “that Hound down there is gonna stink up the place—we’ll probably have company by nightfall.”

Damien sighed gutturally. “Shit.”

“Yeah. So what do you wanna do?”

“Well, we have absolutely no cover up here—but you have a good crow’s nest.”

“Yeah, and we can at least see what’s coming for us.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s always comforting.”

“So, we’re staying put?”

“Sure. Just keep that ass on a swivel.”

“Trust me, come nightfall, I’ll be standing.”

“Just don’t fall.”

“Ah, you’re so thoughtful, Damien.”

“Yeah, I don’t think I could carry your gear in addition to mine. A lot of weight, ya know?”

“I’d throw something at you if I could.”

“There’re some rocks at your feet, don’t be a wimp.”

“I was thinking something along the lines of a gun.”

“You throw my MP5K and I’ll kill you with your own Blaser. How’d that be for ‘me and my rifle’?”

Their sarcasm lasts them a few minutes of silence as Damien returns to the perimeter to do a once-over with heightened vigilance. Clive was right, the dead Hound would bleed all over the soil and this dry heat would exacerbate the stink. Other Hounds would be here in time to investigate, Imps would be curious enough to scavenge, but aside from that they needn’t worry further. Skinners preferred doing the hunting and killing themselves, while Hybrids weren’t so different. Roughnecks slept at night, and although Hounds did too they wouldn’t ignore the dead scent from one of its own. The only creature nocturnal by nature was the Skinner, meaning that it was never seen during the day, making it all the more nightmarish to encounter. Hybrids typically hunted at night, but rare sightings during the day had been made.

Hounds at night were usually easy to engage because of their vivid colors and poor nocturnal eyesight. They were clumsy at night, especially when under the spell of voracity, often leading themselves into trees and tripping over each other when grouped.

Damien hoped for an easy night.

For now he just kept a watchful eye out. It would be another three hours until dusk, which meant a lot of camping around in case more were sighted until then. Theoretically he could try moving the Hound’s corpse to form a trap or simply push its scent away from the Seraphim, but over time its stench would permeate the air unavoidably. To boot, touching a dead creature was never a good idea unless a water source was nearby for thorough cleansing, otherwise the stink would stick like a skunk’s. Some creatures smelled worse than others, and despite their appealing colors Hounds were among the worst. Their nasal ridges secreted a very pungent odor and some believed that each color represented a uniquely foul scent.

Some of the rumors spread by survivors were simply stupid. Damien didn’t mind admitting so.

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In this case, he gave the Hound corpse a wide berth, but was grateful that Clive had killed it as he'd done so. There was a reason they were so good together, and a reason why variation in the field of combat was preferred. A sharpshooter and a pointman were most common among Seraphim pairs, although the occasional heavy-gunner was present, too.

Damien could actually taste the stench in the air. Or maybe that was just the arid atmosphere, so full of death and decay as it were.

He kept his head on a swivel, constantly changing his focus from one batch of gaunt trees to the next, a certain slope here or another knoll there. Fortunately no incline was higher than the one they occupied for over a quarter mile, so overall this was a decent place to stay. The openness was the only problem, but just the same it posed a strength, too.

Damien had already acknowledged this.

He kept the R5 firmly shouldered and his eyes never stopped moving for more than three seconds. His breathing was stable, paced, and calm. His heartbeat no different. It had been some time since their last engagement—he was actually itching to kill something. He wasn't alone in getting a smug thrill out of killing one of the larger creatures, especially a Skinner or Hybrid simply because they were the most feared.

As it were, Damien was a patient man.

Being a Seraphim practically called for it, and he wasn't even a sharpshooter. Now that called for an uncanny patience and vigilance, two virtues they couldn't do without.

Damien was pulling around the back end of the hill they occupied when he spotted movement in his right periphery. Ten feet to his left was the base of their hill, and ten more to his right marked the limits of their perimeter. His feet became cinderblocks where he stood, twisting his torso around as if it wasn't attached to his pelvis, washing his gaze over the area of interest.

There.

A Hound, in all its vibrancy, was darting between batches of trees, impossible to hide its colors amid the naturally bleak motif. It was circling the area, but not entirely the hill, in quick gallops so as to enclose on Damien without going headlong. But now Damien was on its case, and its options cut short.

“Contact, Hound!” Damien shouted, the volume of his voice telling Clive where to look so he wouldn’t have to specify. The R5 snapped up to aim, his left cheek on top of the stock with one eye peering through the EOTech sight. His left finger curled around the trigger while his right hand clutched the foregrip like a vise. His respiration never faltered.

The Hound finally announced itself, roaring shrilly and turning around a tree trunk to charge Damien. Its jaws widened terribly, two rows of fierce fangs dripping saliva. The canines alone were unnaturally massive, thrice the size of a gray wolf’s. Its skin shifted beautifully with every stride, shoulders prominently large and muscular.

In spite of its aesthetic appeal, the creature was pure monster. It sought to tear Damien limb from limb, eviscerate him and toy with his entrails. It would probably do its best to kill him slow, too, if it could manage.

Thing was, Hounds weren’t all too smart.

They listened too much to their gut, and not the instinctual part. This one juke every two seconds as it strode for Damien, who was a statue in the ground, Remington shouldered. The Hound closed the distance quickly—it was fifteen feet away when Damien squeezed the trigger. The Remington’s muzzle flashed and hammered out five curt shots, like a rabid wolf’s barks. The Hound’s shoulders erupted and one of its nasal ridges was shorn away in a spray of blood. It yelped as it plummeted headlong into the ground, coming to a stop three feet from Damien’s boots.

“Good shooting!” Clive called down.

“How’s it look up there?” Damien asked, spinning around and looking up.

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“Some Imp activity inbound,” he replied lackadaisically. “Nothing I can’t take care of.”

“How many, Clive?”

“Four by the looks of it.”

“Right. I’ll be up in a minute.”

“No worries.” Clive swiveled around to face forward again, and elevated the Blaser so that its slender barrel jutted skyward. He wouldn’t need the foldable bipod for this, or so he reassured himself. The four Imps fluttered toward the hill less than a quarter mile off, staying fairly close together.

Meanwhile Damien towered over the Hound to confirm the kill. It wasn’t just a judgment call by sight; one-handing the Remington at his side, he unholstered his Desert Eagle with the other hand. A single shot down into the Hound’s cranium finished it off for good. The gunshot was done echoing in the void by the time Damien was halfway up the hill again.

Except by then it was answered by other reports.

Clive was eliminating the inbound Imp problem. They were like pests of the sky, with vaguely humanoid heads and piranha-like fangs. Their eyes were always emanating a shimmering gold glow, as if their infernal souls were trying to escape through these small sockets. The appendages to their wings had the same oily black skin as the rest of their bodies, with mauve membranes ragged at the edges. Arms and legs present, their hands and feet however were far from humanoid, ending in four digits of talon-like flesh. Their feet were particularly savage, featuring scythes for toes that they’d use to scoop up prey. It was a disturbing miracle that they could be so agile in the air when they hauled with them a six-foot-long tail. It often just whipped through the air behind and around them like a loose string in the breeze, that being when they didn’t use it to lash at enemies or latch onto trees.

Their presence was always signaled by a swirling black atmosphere around their wings, as if they had passed through a haze of ink to get here. Or black death, thriving shadows, and a myriad of other wild theories concocted by survivors.

The strident screaming of banshees helped, too. As much an announcement of their coming as any, this could at least be detected before even sighting them.

In this case Damien never actually heard them. He must've been shooting the R5 at the time, and their range probably added to the silence. As it was at present, Damien heard them alright—especially with Clive knocking them out of the sky. Except now their screams were less fierce and more frantic, insinuating that they felt fear.

Or perhaps it was just rage.

Clive liked to believe it was fear. He had already killed two of the airborne creatures as they neared, and with three shots wasn't too bad. With his third he applied more patience than most would, then squeezed the trigger with his crosshairs leading the Imp by a few feet. The creature took a .338 to the chest, blowing a messy hole right through it. Black-speckled crimson blood was scarce but at the very least it misted the air where the Imp had once been flying. Now it cartwheeled down to the earth below, while its remaining cohort panicked about.

The sliding bolt snapped loudly out and back into the Blaser's barrel, loading the fifth and final .338 cartridge. Clive withdrew his knuckle-gloved hand from the bolt and returned it to the stock, where he helped steady his aim.

A shrill screech swept through the air like a violent breeze as the Imp made a spiraling descent for the hilltop. For Clive.

He waited until the creature was at its stillest, which wasn't an easy game to play since Imps never stopped fluttering about. But when it dive-bombed at Clive, he knew that waiting a second longer would yield bad results. So he fired and the Imp was blown out of the sky, not thirty feet away. It landed on the hill's slope, tumbling down to the base, resting lifelessly within reach of the Hound's corpse.

"Now we won't have to move the corpse," Clive smirked as he lowered the Blaser to reload it. The spent detachable

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magazine was tossed over his shoulder before being replaced by a fresh one from his pack.

Damien had reached the hilltop. He shook his head.

“You’re one helluva shot, Clive.”

“Likewise,” Clive replied casually. He then shrugged.

“Well, with an assault rifle anyway.”

Damien smirked briefly and stooped to take a swig of water from his canteen. He turned to look behind them, at the vast expanse of dull sky and equally bleak terrain.

“Nightfall’s en route,” Damien sighed. “And I have a feeling that she’s angry.”

Clive didn’t say anything at first. And then he slid the Blaser’s bolt into place, locking the next round for whatever action awaited it. He raised an eyebrow and looked up at Damien, Blaser lain across his lap.

“Well, then,” Clive said, “we’ll put her to sleep.”

2

3.8.2017

Clarity at night was key to anyone's survival, although the two words had their own innate struggle. For Seraphim it was provided with enhanced equipment—NV sights and flashlight mounts. Since they never went anywhere without their weapons, these usually sufficed. The rail-mounted tactical flashlights on their assault rifles and SMGs offered three-hundred lumens of illumination at night, while sharpshooters activated their NV lens filters. Due to the increased dangers of nighttime combat, Seraphim were encouraged to stay as near to one another as possible; in this case it was Clive at the top of the hill still with Damien sitting at his feet. The flashlight mount of Damien's R5 would remain off until Clive reported a proximate sighting; otherwise, to maintain a form of stealth, they stayed dark.

According to their clocks, it was approaching midnight.

They would keep as still as possible throughout the night, although with four Imp corpses in the area and two dead Hounds, they knew they wouldn't see dawn without any activity. Now it was just inevitable, so they waited ever so vigilant.

Knowing that an engagement was imminent at night was better than not expecting one, although as Seraphim they've been told to always suspect hostile activity.

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This way they were never unprepared.

“What time is it?” Clive whispered, his eye practically adhered to the telescopic NV sight on his Blaser. He scanned any and everything that surrounded them, high and low, for potential activity.

“Ten ‘til midnight.”

Clive sighed. “Nearly four hours of darkness and still nothing. This is—”

“Exhausting?” Damien said, just to irritate his partner.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Clive replied curtly. “I was going to say *unnerving*. All this time and no activity whatsoever. It’s *unnerving*.”

“I thought you had nerves of steel, Clive.”

“Fuck off.”

“No, I think I’ll stay put. Just in case something were to pop up and get the better of you—if only there was such a thing.”

They threw jabs at each other all the time. Tonight was no different. Only a little more heated since it was a quiet evening when it shouldn’t be by all means. The permeating decay of Hound and Imp odors was on the rise, if it made any sense. Their corpses’ decomposition was slower than any known animal on this planet, insinuating once again that they weren’t of the earth. Not terrestrially, at least.

“Son of a bitch,” Clive muttered.

Damien smirked. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Not you, asshole...I got a pair of Skinners inbound, your two o’clock, slaloming a frenzy.”

“Shouldered,” Damien replied, instantly bring his R5 up to aim but leaving the flashlight deactivated. “Can you engage?”

“Damn, they are fast. I can hit one before the other freaks out and homes in on us.”

There was no doubt that they knew the two Seraphim were atop the hill. Skinners had a configuration of four pitch black eyes on their humanoid faces, each pair tilted like an arachnid’s and never seeming to move. These tapered away from

its broad forehead, where two nasal openings were centered. The creatures had a tough oily black skin that shimmered when light fell upon it, and under direct illumination their eyesight scrambled. Far from blind, the creatures could still maneuver effectively in the face of light, so it wasn't exactly a weapon of neutralization for Seraphim.

At least the creatures were bipedal.

"Can you imagine if Skinners ran on all fours like a dog?" Damien once said. "They'd be faster than the speed of sound."

As it were, Skinners sprinted like men but with thrice the speed and agility. They stood eight feet tall and each limb ended in a configuration of five massive digits tipped with just as long claws. They used these to earn their name, while their ear-to-ear jaws seemed to always hang open, displaying fierce rows of needlelike teeth. Grinners was another common name for them because they always appeared to be smiling maliciously, as if expressing the extreme joy they got for mutilating their victims. Their pinkish gums were thus always exposed, making it the only slightly colorful feature on its entirely black body.

"Range?" Damien asked, his voice low. It always disturbed him that he couldn't even hear the creatures coming when they could be so close; their breathing was practically muted and they moved so quick that their toes might as well never touch the ground.

"Three-hundred feet and enclosing."

"Inline or parallel?"

"Inline. Easy pickings."

"Then let me hear what 'easy' sounds like."

"This." Clive exhaled and squeezed the trigger. The muzzle flash illuminated the two Seraphim for a millisecond, and the shot struck the leading Skinner in the left shoulder. Nearly half of its upper torso was blown away, blood splashing its cohort like black acrylic paint. There was a foul screech as the surviving creature hurdled over its slain comrade and banked hard left to zero in on the Seraphim's location.

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Clive bolted the rifle, ejecting a spent .338 casing before loading the next.

"I think I saw it fall," Damien lied, making up things before his eyes. They both knew that at night nothing could be seen, unless it was a vivid Hound, more than eighty feet away to the naked eye.

"I've always said you had a good imagination."

"Yeah, yeah. Where's the second?"

"Zigzagging toward us like a halfback on crack."

Damien shook his head with a mild smirk. He wondered just how necessary impeccable knowledge of Earth and its society was for Seraphim. Deep down he knew it was a package deal, and most of it was just residual from their source Guardians, but sometimes it seemed a bit much. Especially for men like Clive who extracted humor from everything and without a laugh.

This was somewhat bothersome.

Nonetheless, Damien got the picture.

"Tell me when to fire,"

"You won't need to." Clive stroked the trigger and exhaled, but this time words were strung along. "But I tell ya what, I got movement at my three o'clock, so give me a second—"

Damien all of a sudden swiveled on his knee, facing their three o'clock—a hard right—and thus putting Clive at his right. Damien immediately shut his eyes and felt a wave of heat wash over his head, simultaneous to a thunderous report that he was a little too close to. In his personal darkness he pictured the .338 Lapua Magnum do just what it did—strike the sprinting Skinner square in the forehead. Instead of forming an exit wound in the back of its skull, its entire head exploded in a plume of gore and brain matter. The severely lobotomized Skinner crumpled to the ground in a heap, by which time Clive had bolted the next round in and Damien's eyes opened.

"Light!" Clive suddenly barked.

Damien didn't need to be told twice, especially when he

saw a glimpse of movement roughly a hundred feet out. The flashlight mount on the side of his R5 illuminated, casting a focused beam directly in front of him. The instant that it lit up, at its end Damien saw a blur of colors stride past. His ears were residually ringing when Clive fired, and he heard a faint yelp in the distance. It sounded as if it was a quarter mile away, but he knew it was well within ninety feet.

“Two on you!” Clive announced, standing abruptly and taking a step back.

Damien’s hold on his rifle tightened. Suddenly a flash of bone-white fangs and ruddy gums snapped at him, less than fifty feet away. The beam of light made it seem much closer, and Damien didn’t hesitate to blow it away. The Remington’s muzzle flashed and it kicked securely against his shoulder, punching three rounds into the Hound’s mouth. It whined and tumbled around on the ground, in-and-out of the flashlight’s beam. A second Hound leapt over its fallen comrade, snarling with spittle to spare and enough ferocity to last three packs of wolves. Damien strafed ten rounds in front of him, some searing nothing but air and others striking only earth. Those that did hit their mark counted six, and did a number on the Hound’s unarmored flesh.

“That’s a hit, but he ain’t out!” Clive said, his voice loud. “I got the other!”

Damien had shot the ‘other’ Hound in the damn mouth, but apparently that hadn’t been enough. These things sure were tough, especially with the scent of a dead one of their kind pumping adrenaline into their veins.

Clive fired a shot that sounded—no, *felt*—louder at night than during the day, somehow. The initially wounded Hound had regained its footing, bleeding out the mouth, when Clive’s .338 removed the left side of its face. Half of its upper jaw struck the ground a few feet away, enveloped in gore. Its body dropped limply, while the other limped around with a great deal of strength left in it. One of its forelimbs was nearly incapacitated, though—Damien must’ve shot a nerve.

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“Good,” he thought aloud, and realigned his aim. The flashlight beam washed over its body as it clumsily loped toward him. Damien heard Clive bolt his rifle but wasn’t going to let him steal the kill. He’d already failed the first, when he knew he should’ve been more liberal with bullets. So this time he damn near emptied the clip into the creature, leaving less than a dozen rounds leftover. Each of the extended magazines topped at thirty-five 6.8mm SPC cartridges.

“Clear?” Damien asked, raising his voice. He lowered his R5 and waved through the thin gunsmoke.

“As far as I can tell.”

“Cover me for confirmation.”

“Wait—hold up.”

“What is it?”

“I thought I heard Imps.”

“I’d be damned if you could hear anything far off after using that thing.”

“Maybe they gave me an extra battery at HOA.”

Damien rolled his eyes. “Do you see anything or just hearing shit?”

Clive looked around pivotally for five seconds without confirmation. Finally he dropped his previous statement and told Damien he had him covered.

He turned off the flashlight mount then slung the R5 onto his back, and retrieved the MP5K with his left hand. He activated the compact flashlight on the right side of its stubby muzzle, and strode toward the two fresh Hound corpses. The night hugged him on all sides, like a creature with a taste for human flesh but the cowardice to stay at bay until a better opportunity presented itself. In this most cases that meant when Damien’s flashlight was diverted and he was far enough from his partner to be considered ‘isolated prey.’ At present this couldn’t be applied—Clive had a constant overview of the entire landscape surrounding Damien, he would at least be able to call it out first if not shoot it down prior to attack.

This comforted Damien for all that it was worth.

His boots stopped at the edge of the first Hound corpse, roughly thirty feet to the right of the decapitated Skinner. He stood some fifty feet from where the first Skinner had been taken out. But his focus wasn't them—it was the Hounds, although on second glance he realized the other one was already confirmed. He waved his flashlight at it, noticing how half of its entire skull had been blown off by Clive's Blaser. So he returned his focus to the one at his feet, noticing that its chest didn't heave with breath, but instead leaked blood from multiple entry wounds.

His Remington R5 had killed it, now he confirmed with the Desert Eagle. A quick draw and squeeze of the trigger later blew its brains all over the earth. He holstered the pistol and turned his back to the expanse of blackness behind him to look up at Clive. His heart sank and his eyelids gaped. He dropped his jaw to exclaim for Clive's sake, but fortunately he could read the warning on Damien's face through his NV scope before any sound was made.

Clive pirouetted and dove backwards just in time to evade a sweeping hand-claw from the Skinner that had snuck up on him. He fired the Blaser on his way down the slope, unable to properly aim at the moment. His shot clipped the Skinner's left shoulder, barely fazing it. The creature's jaws opened even wider and it screeched at the Seraphim, breath sibilating through the front row of needlelike teeth.

Damien fired as soon as Clive was clear, knowing that the MP5K wasn't known for its accuracy—especially without a stock. The Heckler & Koch sub-machinegun rattled in his left hand as it hosed out .40 rounds that sprayed the Skinner's body before it skidded down the side of the hill. The MP5K's flashlight had at least scrambled its vision, but now it was back in the dark where it was most at home.

It wasn't going to run off now, though.

Not at least until it had claimed one victim. Which, according to the two Seraphim, meant that it wasn't going to be running off at all tonight.

Damien emptied the SMG's clip into the night as the

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creature spun through the darkness, managing to evade the flashlight's beam. Then he doubled over to check on Clive, who was already springing to his feet and cursing under his breath.

"I'm alright, I'm alright!" he finally said to Damien, brushing him off as well as his clothes. "Go after it, I got you covered!"

Damien didn't second-guess Clive. He ejected the spent magazine and slammed a fresh one home under the MP5K as he pursued the Skinner. Normally this wouldn't be a wise idea, but out here in the open it was perhaps the best.

Clive shouldered the Blaser again, only this time far more vigilant about his surroundings than before, although it had only been because he was covering Damien. Although he was now, too, he gave himself some added cushion.

Damien understood, after that little brush with death.

A sharp hiss snagged his attention up ahead, jerked it right, then it became a growl that grew behind him. A report boomed not far off, which he recognized as the Blaser, punctuated by a wet explosion of flesh. Damien's flashlight washed over what he expected to be a dead Skinner, but instead saw a headless Hound ten feet off.

Hence the growl. Skinners don't growl. They only hiss—

And scream like banshees, which was the disharmony he heard next, coupled by the sound of something sharp slicing air. Damien backpedaled and jukeed right, evading swipes of the Skinner's terribly long claws. It had an equally terrible reach—nearly twice that of Damien's own—but at least its body wasn't bullet-proof. Damien sprayed its chest, again, with the MP5K—eight .40-caliber rounds punched into its flesh, the previous bunch undoubtedly weakening the hard hide of its torso. This time it shuddered from the bullets' impacts and skittered backward, losing balance. Its shrieking became a gurgling as its inhuman lungs filled with blood.

Clive satisfied himself with a .338 finalization.

Damien's flashlight mount gave him the pleasure of watching the Skinner's head explode outward. It was a gruesome

sight, and the amount of greenish brain matter was absurd, but at least it wasn't contained in the Skinner's skull anymore. The rest of its bloodied, nightmarishly humanoid body dropped to its knees then 'faceplanted' into the ground.

"You just had to, didn't ya!?" Damien called out as he straightened his knees and rolled his shoulders. He walked toward the headless Skinner corpse, his flashlight not wavering from it.

"Hey, technically it was my kill to begin with."

"Why, because it nearly took your head off?"

"Exactly. So, I had to return the favor—only, you know, follow through with it."

"Careful, it might hear you from beyond the grave."

"Doubtful. Now get up here."

"All in good time."

"No, now. Unless you want to deal with the Imps from all the way down there."

"Are you *sure* now?" Damien asked leisurely.

"Sure as you'll be shitting your pants if you don't hurry."

Damien sighed and jogged up the hill to meet by Clive's side, back at its summit. He held up the Blaser so Damien could take a peek through its NV scope. Suddenly his previously incredibly-dark world was replaced with an irradiated green filter. He immediately spotted five Imps—bright white through the lens—scattered below and ahead of them, using the skeletal trees as both physical and auditory cover. This way they could only glide between them, when they weren't simply hopping, so as to reduce the flapping of their wings.

"Well I'll be damned," Damien said as he pulled away from the Blaser and set his MP5K down. He returned the R5 to his hands, and made sure that an extra magazine was at the ready.

"I'd stop saying that if I were you," Clive muttered.

Damien rolled his eyes. "Let's get on with it, shall we?"

"Alright. I'll take care of the rightmost."

"There's an odd number of 'em, Clive."

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The Imps started whimpering and chattering their jaws as they neared. Less than a hundred feet out now.

“Wing it,” Clive said. “Pun intended.”

Damien rolled his eyes again and resumed aim. His flashlight could only stretch so far, but after Clive’s shot they should be coming in pretty fast, so for now he just waited. When Clive did fire, the report was thunderous but at least it was set behind Damien this time. The heat from the muzzle flash washed over him as he was expecting, and used to.

“Hit!” Clive clamped his teeth. He bolted the rifle and chuckled mildly. “Oh, man, they’re coming now!”

“They came at the scent of dead things, but in reality they’re coming for us.” Damien’s whispered monologue didn’t extend beyond him. He shook his head and focused on the far edge of his Remington’s flashlight beam. “Ironically enough, they’ll be dead by night’s end.”

“Oh, no,” Clive said, catching that last bit, “before then.”

The Blaser R93 LS2 kicked again, its bite somehow worse than its bark. Clive’s second Imp kill of the group, this one’s entire upper body disintegrated in a cloud of gore. Its body dropped like a nasty burlap sack with a few potatoes left in it. It hit a tree on its way down, wings caught up in the gaunt branches.

There. Damien spotted a winged shape glide through the air, across his illuminated field of view. Then it returned just as it had come, screaming and clawing at the night swathing the Seraphim. Damien responded with his own warcry, courtesy of the Remington R5 RGP. He emptied the clip into it, pelting wing membranes with bullets that sufficed to rip through its actual body alone. The eventually lifeless creature tumbled through the air before hitting the ground.

“Reloading!” Damien announced. It was a quick motion.

All the same, Clive acquired his third kill with a bullet that struck the creature at the base of its neck. The thin-bodied thing suffered a ragged decapitation and blood washed over where its head had been before misting the face of another.

“We got reinforcements!” Clive announced. “I count three of the fuckers!”

“Moving up,” Damien said, and advanced fifteen feet.

His flashlight beam bounced skyward and he had a better vantage from where he now stood, not to much a closer proximity. Two of the Imps continually crossed the edge of his beam, not knowing any better and consumed by their own frenzy to feed. Moreover, to maim and kill.

Damien made sure they never got closer to Clive than he himself was. And Clive did just as well a job on his own.

Twenty rounds of 6.8mm ammunition later lent two dead Imps thirty feet from Damien, while Clive eliminated the others with well-placed Blaser shots. He had missed only one shot in the lot of them, which was startlingly precise shooting for anyone—expected from a Seraph, not so much a Guardian.

Damien decided to reload and regroup with Clive. They established a firm perimeter, this time moving as one, Clive leaving the Blaser at the hilltop to take his UMP-45 instead. They did not speak much, so as to allow full perception of sounds in the night in case another Skinner wanted to lone wolf it. When they returned to the hilltop, Clive cradled his Blaser and Damien leaned back with his Remington.

They had earned themselves some cushion for the night.

The Seraphim hoped that it would last until morning. Closer to dawn was, for whatever reason, the safest time of day this battlefield offered. One to two hours tops, per each of them. Afterward they hoped to set out further west, in hopes of finding some kind of building they could rake in substantial sleep under its roof. As Seraphim they did not need much, but in lieu of their heavy activity and the dullness when there was none, it was certainly deserved.

For now, they upheld their vigilance.

And the night, in all its peril, capitulated to them.

3

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What little sunlight penetrated the clouded skies converted night into day for the region. The two Seraphim moved out after an hour of sleep from each of them leading through dawn, leaving behind them a hill surrounded by many corpses. The stink in the air clung to their clothes and skin like sweat from their own bodies, but at least as they marched a mile out it became less stifling. Three miles lent them with no enemy encounters and little said between them. Eventually they crested a ridge that stretched half a mile down their left and up their right, with a steady slope descending to a road. It was a two-lane rural highway with less curves in it than the surrounding terrain, so far as they could tell.

Most important was what sat against the horizon across the road, on a vast pasture of dry grass.

“I bet that has an actual bed or two,” Damien said.

“Probably. Hey, you can take the stables.”

Damien rolled his eyes. The farmhouse appeared too small for its massive property, in fact, the decrepit barn looked even bigger. Between a short fence and the barn was a small cornfield, brown-yellow in all its aridity. Range put the

residence at three miles, which wasn't too bad of a trek since most of that distance was flat land.

"Best we get going, then," Damien finally said, elbowing the idle Clive and proceeding down the hill.

"You go ahead."

"What are you waiting for?" Damien paused a few feet down the slope, looking up at Clive. He held his R5 at an oblique angle, barrel pointed down, whereas Clive dangled his Blaser at his right side. Despite this lazy appearance, his eyes were dancing about restlessly.

"Remember the wolf-in-sheep's-clothing plan we pulled last week?"

Damien sighed. "Aw, hell. *Now?*"

Clive shrugged. "It's a lot of open space. I see...literally nowhere to hide, except that billboard over there. And there's a ditch on the other side of the road we can't even see into from here. So, besides that..."

"Alright, alright. I'll go. Just don't get butterfingers on me with that bolt."

"Never do."

A guttural sigh escaped Damien's lips as he relaxed his body and descended the hill. His boots scuffed the earthy shoulder this side of the road, then he leisurely crossed the asphalt. Cracked white lines wept under his feet and he looked all around him—still, nothing. But looking out wasn't exactly his job at the moment—that was up to Clive, although it didn't mean Damien was just going to drop his vigilance.

Unlike other roads that saw higher activity after Hell's Fissure, this one was completely empty. No abandoned or wrecked vehicles so far as their eyes could see.

Clive remained at the peak of the ridge while his partner traversed the rural highway. The billboard he mentioned earlier was on the other side of the road, 120 feet away and stood at least thirty feet high, nearly twice as long. It faced them, but whatever it had once advertised was now a peeling mess of paint and wood. Clive shouldered the Blaser and put his eye to the

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lens, investigating its base from here—he couldn't spot anything through the small space provided, as the billboard was considerably low to the ground. Relaxing his shoulders, he lowered the rifle to scan their surroundings once more with naked eyes.

The last time Clive wanted to pull this plan was last week, and naturally Damien remember it all too well. How he walked out into the open, on a pasture with as little obstacles as a few haybales. From around these emerged Hounds lying in wait to attack Damien, who managed to kill one of the four immediately with his Remington. Clive was set up in a crow's nest position atop a halved radio tower; he narrowly saved Damien with two quick kills, leaving the last Hound to play cat-and-mouse with Damien amid the bales which Clive couldn't see around. Ultimately Damien suffered a few claw gashes in the Kevlar protecting his chest, but aside from that they were unscathed.

Both Seraphim had a hand in killing the last Hound.

Now this was far more open, with flatter terrain—aside from the ditch across the road—and virtually no obstacles. Despite this, Damien maintained a high sense of vigilance. He especially heeded that billboard to his far right, but was sure that Clive had already scanned it. If anything was hiding amid the latticework of its steel framework, however, they wouldn't be able to see it from here.

The only possibility that Damien could think of would be an Imp or group of them, no different than birds nesting in a structure. A Skinner could, theoretically, have climbed up in there for shelter during 'daylight,' but this was doubtful. The quadrupedal likes of Hounds and Roughnecks were far from possible, and considering a Hybrid to be up there was downright foolish.

Imps he could take care of without Clive's superior coverage. He never minded having the extra hand to assist him, but unless there were more than half a dozen in the group or it was nighttime, Imps were seldom a problem for them.

Just more ammunition to spend.

“Seems clear,” Damien breathed as he reached the other side of the road, his boots scuffing off the asphalt and onto the low shoulder. Muddy earth was packed dry but still squished under his soles; he maintained his footing as he proceeded to the edge of the ditch, just in time to smell something horrid. Along with it came a sound that wasn’t immediately proximate, suggesting the presence of a creature at least twenty feet away.

Damien regretted prematurely clearing the area by voice.

Settled in the ditch below him were a pair of napping Hounds, seemingly unaware of his presence. He snapped his head to the right, staring down the length of the ditch in the direction of the billboard. Roughly fifty feet from him and seventy from the billboard’s base was a third Hound, this one awake but preoccupied with the carrion it feasted on. Damien couldn’t identify what the carrion had once been, but at this rate it didn’t really matter.

The Hound held the carcass down with its front paws, claws hooking decomposed flesh while jerks of its head brought up large chunks of flesh and muscle in its jaws.

Damien swallowed and shouldered his gun. He raised his right hand and pointed his three middlemost fingers skyward. Then he turned his hand sideways and imitated a chomping mouth the way a child might when playing with their shadow.

“Three Hounds, great,” Clive muttered. He briefly studied Damien’s stance through his scope before hearing something far off. It was a squawking sound, like a flock of chirping birds. Clive pulled his eye from the lens to glance skyward, spotting only the same stretch of gray clouds as ever before. Then he pirouetted to see an inbound flock of blackbirds, their formation haphazard. His eyes widened, his voice clear under his breath. “Imps.”

They weren’t visible—yet—but the sign was clear enough. He spun back to face the road, finding Damien under his crosshairs, then zoomed out so that he could get a broader view.

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Damien, meanwhile, heard the chirping too. But he didn't turn around, didn't take his eyes off the napping Hounds six feet below him. That was all the drop into the ditch was, nothing too perilous. Given, the presence of three local Hounds made everything instantly dangerous.

If the third Hound didn't have a face-full of carrion at the moment, it would've smelled Damien coming from across the road. Fortunately it was no fresh corpse, and the rotting flesh of whatever it was happened to be enough to even cloud the senses of its nasal ridges. But with the chirping birds incoming, which probably meant Imps in tow, Damien didn't have much time.

With Clive incapable of seeing what he was, at least he'd been signaled. Now Damien just needed to act on his own accord.

"Dying in your sleep," he sighed, angling his R5 down at the napping Hounds. "What a way to go."

He squeezed the trigger, spitting close to twenty rounds into the unsuspecting creatures below. The first report from the gun awoke them, but in that same instant the ensuing bullets put them to sleep...permanently. It was a brief massacre of sorts, brutal in most senses but to Damien he was saving lives here. When he looked to his right after expending more than half his magazine to ensure the two creatures were dead, he saw the third Hound bounding towards him.

Damien dropped to his knee and aimed in that direction, feeling suddenly his traction on the muddy ledge loosen. He didn't pause, however, just aimed down his holographic sight and fired when ready. The red U-dot reticle dropped right over the approaching creature's colorful face, then Damien added a few colors of his own. A four-round burst of 6.8mm SPC rounds caught it in the snot, rupturing its skull down the middle. The nasal ridges were torn off, and a small fountain of brain matter splashed backward as it fell headlong into the ditch.

When he stood, he looked behind him to see Clive's back turned and his rifle angled skyward. Damien squinted but could only see black spots against the high gray ceiling. The

blackbirds, meanwhile, fluttered frenziedly overhead, chirping and squawking in panic. They fled with swift wings, more or less, lucky to have escaped the agiler imps—although, who knew how many they'd already lost?

Damien was certain that they could thank Clive, if only they could.

He headed back across the road, thankful that he hadn't entirely lost his footing and plummeted into the ditch. He left that mess behind him for now, so that he could get closer to Clive in case he needed assistance—his R5, however powerful, was no sniper's rifle. As he hustled over there, he did intermittently shoulder it to peer through the sight. Each time he got closer, each time he aimed, he got a clearer view of the enemy.

Eight Imps charging through the sky, higher up than usual. They seemed to use the stratus clouds as cover, unable to fly up into them but still utilizing their denser color as camouflage. Nobody knew why they couldn't fly higher than the clouds, much less into their lower layers, except for the common rumors theorizing that the creatures were bound to the Earth by them after Hell's Fissure. Regardless of the reason, the eight Imps were clearly more of a threat than usual.

Damien had reached the base of the ridge on top of which Clive stood when he heard the first report from the Blaser. It rolled and echoes across the land like fleeting thunder, curtly followed by loud screeches from the Imps.

At this angle, Damien could no longer see the Imps. So he worked at climbing the hill when all of a sudden a scream caught his ears. It was not Clive's, nor any creature that he'd heard before—that being, it wasn't inhuman. He turned around at the base of the hill, steadying himself against the incline with a raised hand, and spotted a man standing at the base of the billboard. He was yelling and waving his arms above his head.

Damien rushed across the road, weapon shouldered but lowered. As he neared, the man—who didn't appear endangered, only shouting to be heard—started to look uneasy. He stopped

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calling out, stopped waving his arms, but started treading in place. Maybe Damien was making him uneasy, or perhaps the Imp problem in the skies was nearing uncomfortable.

At last Damien reached the other side of the road, hearing sporadic gunshots from Clive's Blaser far behind him, and skidded to a stop. His boots scuffed across asphalt to make the transition onto packed mud just opposite the billboard. The man stood in front of its base, four feet down and away from the ditch so as to be visible from afar.

He was about six feet tall himself, with disheveled brown hair and tan skin, long since dirtied from whatever terrible experiences he's endured. Grime caked his cheeks and arms, exposed from a pale blue shirt that was in shreds. Damien spotted lines of red through these gashes in his shirt, but nothing severe. Blood matted his bottom lip and left brow. His jeans had a few holes in them but at least he still had his shoes. He smelt awful, looked it too, and his eyes were wet with terror.

In spite of all this, he was pleased to see Damien.

"Where did you come from!?" Damien asked.

"Uh...I...from?" the man, probably in his mid-thirties, started pointing down the road but looked considerably baffled.

"Sir," Damien sighed, and heard another shot from Clive, at which the man flinched, "where, just now, had you been hiding? Were you up there?"

The man turned to look up at the billboard which Damien nodded to in inquisition.

"Yeah, I-I climbed up there when the Hounds w-were chasing me...they, well, one of 'em...got me...b-but I made it! I-I just stayed up there 'til they s-s-stopped trying to get me. I-I made it!"

Through quite a bit of stammering, the man started getting joyous about his survival. Damien could understand why but he immediately began comforting the man the best he could, then asked if he had originally come from the farmhouse in the distance. The man shook his head fervently, saying he'd come from the next town over, southbound, but it was a far ways off.

He started stammering a lot again and losing hold on his breath so Damien stopped him short.

“What’s your name?” he requested.

“Cameron. Y-You?”

“My name is Damien, I’m a Seraph. My partner needs help, I need you to stay put until we return. Stay in plain sight.”

Cameron started begging Damien to stay, but as he turned his back to cross the road yet again for Clive, insults were thrown through the air. Damien heard a variety of slurs common among intolerant survivors, disparaging to Seraphim. He simply shook his head at it and proceeded up the hill to reach Clive, by which time Cameron’s verbal antagonism was out of earshot.

Clive was reloading when Damien reached his side.

The Imps skyward passed right over them, those that remained in flight. Damien glimpsed several of them shot up and bloody, strewn across the field ahead.

“I got most of ‘em,” Clive said, aggravated. He secured the new box magazine before turning around to look across the road. He immediately spotted a man now fleeing across the pasture, toward the distant farmhouse.

“You got *half* of them,” Damien said solemnly, noting that four had been killed.

“Good enough,” Clive grunted, shouldering the Blaser. “Mind telling me who the hell that is?”

“Survivor. His name’s Cameron. Shaken up quite a bit, was hiding up in the billboard from the Hounds I just killed.”

“They’re gonna go for him.”

“No shit. Keep up the good shooting. Thought you might need help, so I told him to stay in the open.”

“Good advice.”

Half of Clive’s remark was sarcastic, but in reality at the moment it was the best order Damien could’ve given. If Cameron had returned to the billboard, they wouldn’t be able to cover him from here, not as well at least.

Running as frantically as possible toward the farmhouse was, however, not quite as expected.

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“Don’t make me have to steal your kills,” Damien said as he descended the hill for the second time already. He sprinted across the road, slowed as he reached the ledge, then dropped into the ditch. He alighted stably, boots sinking into wet earth, about ten feet to the right of the carrion. He glanced skyward to see the four remaining Imps scatter and start their descent upon Cameron, who now screamed in bursts. He then looked over at the carrion, and wished he hadn’t.

It was a sizable man’s torso, or what was left of it. The shoulders and arms were nearly chewed off, and there was nothing but a ragged stump of flesh where the neck had been. Nothing existed below the waist, except a pile of rank entrails.

A gunshot from Clive’s rifle returned him to reality. Damien resumed his stride toward Cameron, this time across dry grass. A slain Imp dropped from the sky and hit the ground a few feet in front of him and to his left, which he juked away from by impulse. Another gunshot sounded far behind him, but this time nothing fell.

“C’m on, Clive,” Damien muttered. He raised his R5 to aim midstride, the reticle bouncing all over the place thanks to his motion. He used the foregrip to stabilize it and caught a descending Imp in the stomach with a well-placed burst. The bullets ripped through its gaunt torso, out its back, misting the air with blood. The creature hissed in pain as it tumbled through the air, wings flapping in panic. Damien finished it off with two more well-placed rounds, watching it hit the ground fifty feet ahead of him. He quickly enclosed on this location, passing the Imp corpse and keeping his eyes glued on Cameron.

He was nearing a split-rail fence bordering the edge of property surrounding the barn. In about thirty seconds he would reach it, and in less that time so would the remaining two Imps.

Then another gunshot from the Blaser, and an Imp plummeted to the grass. It rolled several times screeching, one of its wings a hot mess. Its clawed hands reached out, swiping at the air, as if it was larger than it really was and could actually

grab Damien. He shot it as he passed by, punching a few rounds into its face. That terrible screeching it made finally ceased.

Damien suspected that his Remington was about empty. He fleetingly pondered switching to his Desert Eagle or the MP5K slung onto his back. And then the last Imp dive-bombed Cameron, its jaws agape to release a blood-curdling shriek. Cameron screamed similarly, only his voice cracked and wavered in all its fearful humanity.

The muzzle on the R5 lit up, shooting two bullets before the clip went dry. One round clipped the creature's wing without notice, but the other slammed into its abdomen, decaying its speed. Its wings spread out to catch wind and keep it from hitting the ground shy of its target, buying Cameron at least five seconds longer.

Moreover, buying the Seraphim another chance.

Clive had reached the other side of the road when Cameron clumsily vaulted over the wooden split-rail fence. Laid out between him and the barn was the dry cornfield, featuring chest-high stalks and decrepit scarecrows. The Imp, also clumsily reorienting itself midair, still proceeded for Cameron.

Damien was about to yell 'reloading' when he impulsively reached for his Desert Eagle instead. The hefty pistol was unholstered with his right hand and fired without putting both on the grip. He handled the recoil professionally, but his motion kept its accuracy off. The Imp screeched as it homed in on Cameron, just now breaching the cornfield.

Clive stopped abruptly, his back to the ditch and slain Hounds. The Blaser's stock planted firmly against his right shoulder and he fired two seconds later. The Imp was halved at the waist, its upper portion hurtling through the air trailing entrails and globules of blood. Its legs and tail flopped to the ground, while its upper half struck the fence just behind Cameron.

"Cameron, *stop!*" Damien shouted, holstering his pistol and reloading his R5 on-the-go. Cameron didn't seem to listen—fear and panic drove him toward the nearest form of shelter, in

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this case the barn. It wasn't too terrible an idea, but the Seraphim didn't know how secure of threats the property was, especially under a roof.

Last time they stepped foot in a barn it had a Skinner in it, at midday, devouring two suspended victims.

"Cameron!" Damien drawled, his voice high. He reached the fence, slung the reloaded R5, and put the MP5K in his hands.

"I got movement!" Clive suddenly bellowed.

Damien pirouetted to stare, wide-eyed and quizzical.

"In the barn, the barn, there's movement in the barn!" Clive hollered. He had been observing the barn and cornfield through his scope after delivering the kill-shot to the Imp. He knew he couldn't see through the barn's exterior, but its wall facing them was so decrepit that the wooden panels had substantial gaps between many of them. He had spotted some kind of movement inside the barn, something taller than a Hound but too long to be a Skinner, as its obscure shadow had suggested.

Damien spun on his heel again to face the cornfield, then climbed it to balance on one of its posts. He had a greater vantage point from there, and saw that Clive was right—the barn was two-hundred feet away, but he could still see something moving inside...

"Cameron, come *back*!" Damien barked.

Cameron was three-quarters of the way through the cornfield when the wall of the barn facing them exploded outward in a spray of wood and hay. Charging through it and into the cornfield was a creature as large as a rhinoceros and with similar skin, only it was brick-red with eyes of white fury. It lumbered on all fours, with limbs and a neck like small tree trunks, a rectangular muzzle featuring three rigid protrusions from its chin that matches those above its brow. Its feet ended in four hoof-like claws that were the same color as the rest of its body, save bone-white teeth that fitted together like a terrible puzzle at the front of its lipless mouth. It had a slight under-bite,

with massive tusk-like bottom canines and upper incisors that were as long as a grown man's forearm.

"Roughneck!" Damien drawled, shouting and pointing as he turned to face Clive.

The beast charged into the cornfield, where a now genuinely terrified Cameron turned to hightail back toward Damien, its shoulders clearing the stalks by a good few feet. When its jaws did open, it released a guttural roar that swept the cornfield with the stench of death and rejuvenated hunger.

No use in the MP5K here...

Damien returned the R5 to his hands although he knew it could serve little purpose aside from hoping for a bullet in the eye. As large as Roughnecks were, their eyes—one on either side of the head—were considerably small. The rest of its collagenic hide was essentially hard-plated Kevlar, including a virtually impenetrable crown. Obviously its weaker region was the underbelly, but getting a Roughneck to showcase it was between extremely difficult and impossible.

Even for a pair of experienced Seraphim.

With the R5 shouldered, Damien fired in short bursts. Two, three rounds each time. The first few just bounced off its nasal ridge, aggravating it furthermore. It was coming for Cameron head-on, which meant that was the only angle Damien had at the moment. Meanwhile, Clive ran for the far right end of the fence, hoping for a better one.

The Roughneck had a lumbering gait, but it ran nonetheless, and each stride was four times that of Cameron's. It was gaining on him quickly, Damien could hope at the very least he might slow it down. A few more rounds battered its snout, which it replied with a shake of its head like a wet dog drying off. Its breaths became louder and throatier as it enclosed on Cameron—

Clive mounted a corner fencepost and bent his knees, hooking one foot around the lowest railing for stability. He shouldered the Blaser, eye to scope, traced his crosshairs across the Roughneck's left side, and squeezed the trigger.

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The .338 walloped the beast in the area of its ribcage, penetrating skin but lodging into its muscle. It bellowed with an upward swing of its jaws, slowing but proceeding nonetheless. Cameron suddenly tripped, for he vanished from the Seraphim's sight amid the stalks. The Roughneck plowed over a scarecrow as if it were just a stalk, and would eventually do the same to Cameron—foreboding worse things—if he didn't get up.

"Dammit, Cameron," Damien muttered under his breath. He hopped down from the fence and jogged into the cornfield.

"Shit!" Clive cursed, sliding the bolt and watching his partner wade into the sea of dry stalks. He was grateful as it was that the cornfield was shallower than most, all of the stalks dilapidated from the absence of direct sunlight and lacking rainfall. Now a Roughneck was plowing through it, and the distance was closing fast between it and where Cameron had fallen.

Fortunately Damien wasn't too far, either.

"You're not trading your life for his, Damien," Clive said to himself, teeth gritted. He fired again, this time lagging his aim, and struck the large target in its hindquarters. The Roughneck's back left hip felt a surge of pain and it slowed dramatically. It even turned slightly to the left, swinging its huge head to the side and opening its jaws. They clamped down on a scarecrow, probably out of sheer exasperation, crushing it to twigs and scattered hay. Steamy breath snorted from the nostrils above its upper incisors, then it grinded its jaws until the demolished scarecrow rested in pieces among the standing stalks. The Roughneck left its jaws ajar, saliva glistening along its bottom gumline, and its tongueless mouth sought satiation for its hunger.

The three humans in its vicinity would prove savory.

For now it focused on the two nearest it, less than five full strides away if it got moving again. So, it did, with large lumbering steps.

Damien had reached Cameron. The Seraph was suffering from a shot of panic himself, not sure what to do at the moment.

Cameron hadn't quite tripped as it were, but stepped on a beartrap. There was a myriad of reasons why the owner might've set them in the field, and there was no telling where else they were. The trap wasn't large enough to snag a Roughneck's foot, unfortunately, but any other creature—except a Hybrid—it could. The steel trap was largely toothed and heavy as it was, not to mention a tight hold it had on Cameron's leg, clamped through his shin and calf. He wasn't going anywhere, even if it was opened, which Damien didn't have the time to do.

The Roughneck was so close Damien could feel its strides quake the earth beneath him. Cameron had bit through his own tongue when he stepped into it, leaving to just moan and choke on his own blood. His eyes were glassed with tears and he trembled severely as Damien stood to walk away. The Seraph almost tripped on himself, then began minding where he walked more carefully, but alas there was nothing more he could do.

"Damien!" Clive's voice caught his ear. "Get the fuck out of there!"

Damien paused to look up, over the top of the stalks, and saw the Roughneck grind to a halt as it reached Cameron. It was less than twenty feet from Damien, at its feet where Cameron groaned out loud, painfully incoherent, reaching a hand out. Damien swallowed, shouldered his weapon, and put two rounds where Cameron's heart was. Then he turned to peel out of there.

Clive watched through his scope as the Roughneck's head bowed down into the stalks before lifting again, only now it had something more substantial than a scarecrow in its jaws. The body of Cameron was limp between its imposing teeth, which punctured his abdomen and locked together through his unprotected flesh. Clive noticed though that the man was limp—dead—before the creature had even seized him. There was hardly any scream earlier than that, either; he wondered what had happened to him down in the stalks...and just realized that Damien hadn't fired two rounds at the Roughneck just then, but at Cameron.

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He cocked his eyebrow, then returned to aim with the Blaser. The Roughneck relentlessly shook its head to the side, mangling Cameron's corpse to the point where blood smeared its fangs and his head popped off like a bottlecap. The sight was gruesome, and it warranted similar ruthlessness from Clive. He fired into its neck, puncturing flesh and snagging its attention. He bolted the rifle and fired again, but was too fast in doing so and simply lodged one in its crown plate, doing no harm. The Roughneck swiveled to face where Clive stood on the fencepost, threw Cameron's mutilated corpse out of its mouth in one terrible roar, and then lowered its head to charge.

"I'm out, Clive! Back up, back up!" Damien shouted, vaulting over the split-rail fence and alighting on the other side. He watched Clive fire off another shot into the beast's face as it charged, but had no effect. Then he reeled backward, off of the fencepost and stumbling across the grass. Damien rushed over to meet with him over there, voicing part of an idea as quickly as it came to him. "Get to the barn, Clive! Go, go, *go*!"

Damien caught up with Clive when they had less than fifty feet to go, the end of the barn feeling as if it was within reach. Just then the Roughneck busted through the fence, its head lowered and then thrown up, pieces of wood flying around its face. It bellowed, lost its footing briefly, massive claws digging troughs through the earth. It then realigned itself and continued its pursuit of the two Seraphim.

"Mind filling me in on this plan of yours?" Clive yelled.

"Not much of a plan, really," Damien panted, dropping behind his partner and waving a hand above his head to draw more of the Roughneck's attention. "Just get your ass on the other side of that barn, back to the wall, ready to shoot!"

"Shoot? At what!?"

"Left eye!"

By now they had reached the end of the barn, still bordered by the low split-rail fence. Clive leapt over it, stumbling briefly before putting his back to the wall and shouldering the Blaser. He checked the bolt then turned on his

heels to face the pasture toward the road from whence they'd come. At that instant Damien rushed past, picking up speed, holding his Remington to the side.

Clive held steady, eye to the scope, finger on trigger.

"Two seconds!" Damien shouted up ahead, to Clive's far left, and just about the time his last syllable was uttered the Roughneck's rectangular jaws passed the barn in front of Clive.

There was no time like the present. He fired the Blaser and heard something for once louder than the report of the rifle. The Roughneck bayed out in pain, the bullet having passed through one eye socket and out the other, rendering it blind for starters. The amount of searing agony it felt reverberating inside its skull at the moment was probably close to unbearable. The rhinoceros-sized creature veered to the right all of a sudden, its forelimbs buckling and its chin plowing through the earth. It came to a rest only after a violent roll that left it lying on its right side, feet facing the barn.

More importantly, its underside.

"Finish it!" Damien shouted, jogging back to the area from afar. His R5 was shouldered and once within range he didn't hesitate. The Roughneck was still breathing, and its legs began kicking to brick itself back up again. But Damien's sudden barrage of gunfire kept it down; his bullets tore into the Roughneck's stomach with ease, spewing blood the color and consistency of banana pudding. The odor would be surprisingly weak compared to other creatures, but after a few days it would stink to high hell.

"This still counts as my kill," Clive muttered, and bolted the Blaser to fire again. This one struck the dying Roughneck right in its jugular, spilling a curtain of blood onto the previously dry grass. The beast took its last breath, gurgling its own blood until its entire body slackened lifelessly.

Damien felt full of smug excitement, but the sight and reality of Cameron's demise kept him from jumping up and down. Nonetheless, that didn't stop Clive from doing it, especially when Damien returned to him by backside of the barn.

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“Lighten up, man, that was a good plan. Still my kill though.”

“You bet,” Damien sighed. His gaze drifted past Clive so as to hint at the other side of the barn. More importantly, the corpse in the cornfield. Damien’s voice became low and raspy. “I was supposed to protect him.”

“Aw, shit,” Clive said upon remembering. He shook his head and grabbed Damien’s shoulder in an impassive gesture of comfort. He helped Damien over the fence and then asked to satisfy his curiosity. “What happened to him?”

“Beartrap, just below the knee. Couldn’t free him in time.” Damien released a rough breath. “So I suggest we bypass the cornfield, keep to the open and watch our step.”

“Solid copy there,” Clive said, his voice thin. He patted Damien on the back and they proceeded around the cornfield and across the open pasture. They headed straight for the house, figuring that the barn might as well be declared clear after all of that.

“Let’s clear this fucking house then get some solid sleep, eh?” Clive said.

“I hear that. You wanna go first?” Damien asked. “I don’t think I could pass out just yet.”

“Adrenaline, right. Yeah, I’ll hit the pillow first.”

So it was agreed upon. After they cleared the house, which—seeing as how it was only one story—they hoped wouldn’t be as difficult as the barn, Damien would take first watch while Clive slept. Two to three hours each ought to do, leaving them to still have a great deal of the day before nightfall.

They reached the house in good time, having spotted no other beartraps, assuming they’d just been in the cornfield. Damien was lucky enough to have not stepped on any. As tough as a Seraph’s skin was, such a device was beyond question. It would be a nasty, painful experience alright. Damien tried to ignore the guilty thoughts of Cameron dying on his watch.

The farmhouse featured a subtle Carpenter Gothic style with a small spire at the roof’s tip above the front door. Many of

the shingles were MIA and the door itself was on its last fiber, but still appeared sturdy. They didn't have to kick it in for it was already ajar, suggesting someone—or *something*—might be inside.

Damien nodded to Clive before entering on point, swapping his R5 with the MP5K for close-quarters efficacy. Clive, who had slung his Blaser in exchange for the UMP-45, followed a few steps behind him.

The house's interior was very dim, lights off. The first two switches he tried were futile, which was fine—they didn't need power, especially during the day. As overcast as it was outside, out here in the open it was sufficient. Through the unveiled windows the dim daylight filtered through, enough to keep the Seraphim from walking blind. At any other point in time it would be considered a beautifully comforting radiance, a subtly natural aura. Now, with Hell's Fissure and its consequences, there was hardly anything beautiful left to savor.

Damien crossed the small den, making note of the red brick mantle and framed pictures knocked over on wooden shelves. The inhabitants still had a Christmas tree erected in the corner of the room, nearest a bay window that looked into the seemingly infinite backyard. There were no corpses, although signs of struggle were impossible to ignore. The couch opposite the fireplace had been shredded and presumably not by human hands. Damien met Clive, who detached from him to secure the other side of the house, around by the backdoor.

"All clear," Clive murmured.

"Same," Damien said, and then nodded to a door in the wall to their left, opposite the back entrance. "Did you see any bedrooms over there?"

"Nothing. A pretty big kitchen with a table in the middle and a washroom."

"No bathroom?"

Clive shook his head and then nodded to the door. "Wanna go first?"

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“Oh, why not?” Damien sighed. He opened the door and stared down a dim set of spaced wooden steps. “Well, this is comforting.”

“Steady, now.”

Damien gingerly descended the staircase, MP5K poised. He touched down with ease, glad to see rectangular windows along the edge of the ceiling where ground level cut off. Through these small windows shone daylight from outside, in all its dimness as it were, better than nothing still. This basement was much darker than the rest of the house, but not to the point where they couldn’t see anything.

“There’s your bed,” Clive motioned at the queen-sized four-poster bed against the far wall. Thirty feet from it, set against a brick wall, was a small furnace. The staircase they came down was up against a wall of wooden panels and insulation, revealing no other side to the basement.

“And the bathroom,” Damien added, stepping into what might as well be a closet with toilet, corner shower, and pedestal sink beyond the bed.

“Damn, can we fit?” Clive asked.

“It’s cramped, just don’t bring your gear.” Damien set down his weapons and backpack against the wall leading into the bathroom. “Make yourself comfortable, I’ll keep watch for the first two hours if you sleep that long.”

“Gotta take a shit?”

“That, too.”

Damien shut the door behind him while Clive removed his gear, all the way down to the Kevlar vest, and climbed onto the bed. He rested on top of the covers, on his back, fingers laced under his head and ankles crossed.

Ten minutes later Damien emerged with a freshly washed face and cleared bowels. The toilet wouldn’t flush completely, which he should have expected, but at least the failed attempts hadn’t woken Clive. To his surprise he was out like a rock on the bed. He picked up his Remington and quietly ascended the stairs, shut the door behind him, then posted

himself in front of it. He opened the backdoor so that he had a clearer view of the pasture beyond it, and might be able to hear anything coming.

Damien tried to clear his head, a feat best accomplished prior to going to sleep, which was something he had to avoid for the next hour or two.

His greatest obstacle at the moment was cleaning his brain of images plastered by Cameron's pain-stricken face and the cries that echoed in his skull. It wasn't the first time the Seraphim had failed to protect a survivor under extreme circumstances, but usually it was an event of being outnumbered.

Damien found himself staring at the dry grass outside and the shadows cast by the suspended dark clouds until he was forcing his imagination to see the beauty of this land as it once was.

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3.9.2017

Sweet dreams, to put it lightly. Clive woke under fluttering eyelids and a vision quickly corrected. With an hour and forty minutes of sleep under his belt, he felt refreshed and ready for another two days' worth of engagements uninterrupted. As it were, Clive exaggerated his own energy to himself, before he even mentioned a word to his partner. Fact was, it helped him stay focused and optimistic in a world that dug for the cynic hiding inside himself.

Reorientation after waking and standing was quick, but attending the bathroom helped finalize things. He washed his hands with water that wasn't as crystalline as he was hoping for, smeared some across his face, and took a deep breath. He exited the bathroom and ascended the stairs, exiting the basement to find Damien leaning against a jamb in the open doorway leading to the backyard.

"Your turn, buddy," Clive said, startling Damien less than he had hoped for.

"Excellent," Damien replied sarcastically, turning his back on the doorway and walking past Clive. He asked if he had slept well.

"It sufficed," Clive replied simply enough.

"That's good. I'm gonna try to do the same."

“I’ll be here...or around.”

“Yeah, just don’t leave the house,” Damien said lackadaisically as he descended the stairs. “I’d hate to wake up to a Hound eating my face.”

“I imagine that’d be rather unpleasant,” Clive muttered, then raised his voice a little. “You can count on me, asshole.”

Damien mock-saluted Clive as he shut the door at the top of the stairs. Damien reached the base, set his weapons and gear down by the wall between the furnace and bed. He collapsed on the bed, feeling more mentally worn than he ought to be, crossing his ankles and letting his head sink into the pillow. He laced his fingers together over his stomach and didn’t bother removing his sheathed combat knife or holstered Desert Eagle. If he were to sleep on his side, or roll over, it would be rather uncomfortable. At the time the notion never passed through his head.

He just shut his eyes and welcomed the calm darkness.

Except that, of course, it was only calm for the first few minutes. Then after that time became irrelevant and largely oblivious to Damien’s subconscious. Before anything regarding his source Guardian’s memories were reeled out of the shadows, there came a video reel of the cornfield nightmare and Cameron’s demise. At first it was just a picture show, like a blood-splattered flipbook, with no sound or actual motion. And then the din of metal snapping metal resounded in Damien’s skull, and instead of bolting awake he only sank further down into his sleep.

Then the screams ruptured a previously eerie silence and, in all of his human terror, Damien felt stabs of pain surrounding a leg. He looked down, in this awful dream sequence, and saw that a beartrap had seized him below the knee. When he shot a look up and in front of him, he saw Cameron backing away with a grin on his face.

Roughneck jaws closed in on Damien an instant before the whole scene dissipated into the gray clouds hanging high above them. This same bleak sky fell a second later, enveloping Damien’s subconscious in a sea of thunderheads and beams of

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sunlight, the latter which never graced his skin. Instead he was pitted into this bottomless shadow pit, where images of his source's family came crashing in like flesh-colored waves. Everything had too much saturation, even the blues and greens leaning toward a rubescent shade.

Damien fought for control of his subconscious but lost time and time again.

When he finally gave up, the thunderheads receded in a riptide that cleared the sky to reveal that it was nighttime. Damien felt as if his whole body was adrift in the atmosphere, unseen as he was able to observe the events unfold below.

A faceless woman with long flowing hair wore a sundress and frolicked through a garden with a child holding her hand. The child was a young girl with a ponytail, no older than ten. She giggled with a jubilation unknown to Damien, and the woman seemed to enhance it all the more.

Then a door swung open from a house off to the side, which was incomplete as if under construction, and out rushed a man. Damien could not discern his features, except for a broad smile on his face. The woman and girl cheered excitedly, but in Damien's terror the distance between them suddenly tripled. They grew further apart still, as if the earth itself wished for them to be in separate exile. The man's smile upturned and tears struck the grass at his feet to form massive puddles that ate away the soil. The girl, who infinitely rushed toward him, began weeping hysterically. Behind her was the woman, who was suddenly seized by a shapeless shadow that appeared behind her. She screamed and the sound rattled Damien's brain; the entire scene quivered and the garden was set ablaze.

That clear night sky, in all its beauty, became darker yet and completely lightless. Then clouds started crawling back across the troposphere, in serrated gray stretches.

"Daddy!" cried out the little girl, arms outstretched.

The faceless man opened his mouth to call after her as he continued to run, that distance never shortening, but no sound came out. Every time his teeth clamped together, however,

Damien heard it as if a series of gunshots.

“Daddy!” the girl cried again, and a jagged fissure shot across the distance between them like an earthbound lightning bolt. Her voice rang out again, this time incoherently.

Still the man opened his mouth and still only silence was screamed.

Then the woman far behind the girl, her silhouette fading into the clawing shadow, shot out an arm in one final attempt. Her fingers spread apart but the distance might as well have been miles apart. Her mouth gaped and a single word escaped her tumultuous throat, which sounded as if it might bleed.

“Damien!”

The word, the name, the man became one cacophony that erupted through holes in the sky and earth and bodies of everyone present. The Seraph who was caught up in the dream no longer felt like he was observing or just experiencing, but suffering every ounce of pain these three people felt.

When the clouds quilted the sky again, all became thickets of blackness. The girl vanished into the sky, the woman had been vacuumed through shadows as if into a blackhole, and the man—Damien Ballard—plummeted through a tear-stricken crater beneath his feet. And so he fell, indefinitely, his skin and limbs peeling away as he involuntarily traversed fathoms of misery.

What seemed to last less than fifteen minutes in Damien’s head was in fact a few seconds over two hours of sleep. He woke up with a violent gasp, feeling like his lungs were being wrung out, and clawed at the air before him for several seconds. When he finally regained control of his respiration, he leapt off the bed and made a beeline for the bathroom. He vomited into the toilet, adding to the mess it had accrued since their arrival.

Damien resumed the composure a Seraph was never supposed to lose, and began to exit the bathroom when he stopped in front of the mirror. It was hung above the sink but had certainly seen better days, not unlike Damien.

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“What the...” his words trailed off. He splashed some less-than-clear water onto his face to clear away the sweat. The glass of the mirror was cracked from one corner to the other, thus distorting Damien’s face in addition to the thick grime caking its surface. What Damien saw in the reflection was a replica of a man who had died painfully and been deprived of his family sooner than that.

What he really knew about his source Guardian’s family was next to nothing. But for the sake of his efficacy in the field, he did his absolute best to banish those thought to the back of his mind. So far doing so had helped immensely, but these past couple of days were proving more difficult than expected. And that just now—such a lucid dream of sorts—was not supposed to happen with Seraphim.

The clarity was beyond Damien’s grasp.

He picked up his gear, secured his backpack, and began walking up the stairs. He wouldn’t say a word about it to Clive.

“Sleep well?” his partner asked as he exited the basement. Clive was peering out the bay window in the den, standing, Blaser leaning against his right leg with his hand on the muzzle.

“More or less,” Damien said. He motioned toward the backyard with his R5. “Ready to put this place in our rearview?”

“Damn straight. Follow the road?”

“Follow the road,” Damien nodded.

They exited the farmhouse, circled back around to the front, and proceeded toward the rural highway they crossed earlier. As they neared the Roughneck corpse, a pair of Imps rose from a crater in its belly to hiss at them. Their wanton faces were smeared with blood and one shot skyward to leave but the other was insistent on staying.

Damien shot it out of the air without hesitation, to their surprise luring the other back to the area. It glided through the sky, banking left and right to dodge Damien’s shots, which he only took a few before Clive stepped forward. He blew a hole through the Imp’s chest with a well-placed .338, and the dead

creature plopped to the grass below.

“Should’ve kept on going,” Clive said, shaking his head.

Damien nodded silently and they continued. As they passed the cornfield on their right, Damien fleetingly thought about giving Cameron a proper burial; it didn’t occur to him earlier because they never have done it before. He wanted to, but was afraid of stepping on another beartrap, and then Clive squeezed his shoulder. He gestured up ahead, along the split-rail fence, where something dangled over it like on a clothesline. As they neared Clive clenched his jaw and shook his head, then deviated to cross the pasture toward the road.

Damien, however, paused. A grimace occupied his face.

It was Cameron’s leg, from the knee down to the foot, with the beartrap still pinching bone. The rest of Cameron’s corpse was nowhere in sight. Damien guessed something had come to claim it, leaving behind what it didn’t feel like messing with. Probably a Hound or two, doubtfully any Imps.

After a moment of silence Damien turned his back on the gruesome sight and jogged to catch up to Clive. Together they advanced across the pasture in silence, under the dimly clouded sky, eventually reaching the ditch on the side of the road.

“Imps have clearly taken to these,” Clive muttered.

The Hound corpses were hardly left. Now they were the carrion, with nearly five hours of decay on what remained after a probably flock of Imps picked them apart. The place reeked with a strength that could seep into clothing if gotten too close. So the two Seraphim kept their distance and then elaborated on it by returning to the asphalt and walking down the center of the road. They trekked northbound, toward the nearest town according to Cameron.

Four miles in rendered no dialogue between the two. They tended to keep away from it when they were on the move, so as to limit focal multitasking, although for Seraphim it wasn’t really an issue. Nearing their fifth mile walking along the highway brought them to their first underpass, beneath a concrete bridge fourteen feet above their heads with a hollow

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belly. Off to the sides of the road were sloped concrete barriers leading to either abutment.

“Wanna keep going straight?” Clive raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah. Town shouldn’t be much further. This here probably just leads to a rest stop or round-trip exit.”

“Right,” Clive nodded nonchalantly. He continued walking, as Damien had briefly paused. His gaze scanned the underside of the bridge above them, and the sloped barriers. There was hardly any place for hiding, unless an Imp or two had folded itself away under the bridge the way a bat might.

“There’s nothing here, Damien,” Clive said, already approaching the other side. The shadow the bridge casted onto the road whereupon they walked was denser than Damien expected, simply because of the already clouded sky.

With a sigh Damien passed under the bridge in a quick shuffle, catching up to Clive on the other side without conflict.

“Told ya,” Clive simpered.

“Yeah, yeah.” Damien shook his head and routinely checked his Remington; the magazine was full and he had enough ammunition for another couple of days’ engagements. The MP5K slung onto his back weighed the same as his Desert Eagle handgun, four-and-a-half pounds, but neither proved cumbersome. Overall it was simply reassurance of power and defense—the Seraphim were well-armed.

Clive couldn’t argue that.

“Say, what’s that ahead—see it on the horizon?” Damien asked after another mile had been walked, pointing down the road.

“Just a second.” Clive shouldered the Blaser and put his eye to the scope. He adjusted magnification and grunted. “It’s a city bus, parked across the width of the street.”

“Parked?”

“Well,” Clive shrugged, “it doesn’t have any wheels.”

The entire wheels were missing from the axels, which wasn’t an uncommon sight in urban areas. Survivors would salvage anything they could; chances were the glass panes from

the windows were missing too.

“Anything else noteworthy?” Damien asked.

“Windows are gone, too, for the most part. Bus itself looks like shit, no surprise. I think...I think I see cars on the other side of it, some pulled off onto the shoulder.”

“We’re getting close, then.”

“Yeah, real close.”

“Range?”

Clive checked his scope. “To the bus, half a mile.”

“Good. Let’s hope it’s empty.”

The last time they had come across a stagnant bus it had a pair of Hounds napping between the seats. That had been a most unpleasant surprise. Nobody got hurt, as Seraphim handled chaos pretty well, but things got heavily turbulent nonetheless.

Anything could happen these days.

“Are the doors facing us?” Damien asked.

“No, other side.”

“Which way you wanna take?”

“Rear.”

Damien sighed. “Guess I’ll get doors, then.”

They reached the bus in good time. Its white paint was for the most part weathered and chipped away, exposing its rust-encroached steel frame. Nearly every window on the bus was missing or shattered away, except for the splintered windshield. The area reeked of rust, gasoline, and something they couldn’t put their finger on. Either the decay of human flesh or, somehow worse, the presence of Hounds.

Or even worse yet...

“Let’s go,” Damien murmured as he replaced the R5 in his hands with the MP5K. Likewise, Clive swapped out his Blaser for the Heckler & Koch as they separated on approach of the bus’s left side. It blocked off the road, except for the narrow shoulders, and when the Seraphim circumvented it they saw its effect. Abandoned cars were scattered across the highway in fluctuating clusters for miles, some overturned on the median as they drivers probably tried bypassing the bus in a frenzy. Others

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had simply wrecked into one another, their frontends accordion-style with shattered windshields and missing doors. A few of the vehicles' hoods and roofs wore fresher blood than Damien liked to see.

Then he approached the bus's halfway-open doors. One of the door panels appeared jammed open, the other just the opposite. Dried blood now the color and consistency of old burgundy paint caked the glass panel on one of the doors. Damien raised the MP5K in both hands as he entered the bus, ducking slightly.

He snapped the SMG to aim, but saw close to nothing. There were two corpses in separate seats, their bodies decomposed beyond recognition or care. Damien repressed bile and his nostrils flared from the stench as strong as ever. He spotted Clive as he entered the bus seconds later from the rear exit, and saw his face immediately contort from the smell.

"Yeah," Damien nodded, slowly proceeding down the aisle to check the seats. "We've got two KIA's."

"You could say that," Clive said, nose wrinkled back.

"Bus is clear."

"Good as it well ever be," Clive remarked, turning to exit just as quickly as he had entered.

Damien nodded soberly and turned to leave out the front door. When he spun the full one-eighty, something blurred in front of him. It wasn't movement so much as it was something materializing before him. A face in the distorted light and shadow under the bus's roof—a woman's face, scowling with distress. Damien's breath cut short and he staggered back a couple of steps. It all happened so fast he barely had time to assess the situation. His MP5K rose to aim, but just as quickly as it had appeared the blurred visage evaporated like steam.

A few curt breaths later led Damien outside, and his brow creased as he struggled to regain stability. Not to mention the general puzzlement regarding what the hell he'd just seen, or experienced.

Clive, meanwhile, wasn't even paying attention. He

walked down the street with his UMP-45 shouldered, barrel down.

Damien rubbed his eyes with his bare fingers, then licked his gums and proceeded after Clive. He was fifteen feet from the bus when he spotted a corpse sitting in the backseat of a wrecked SUV. It was a child, but it wasn't in a state of decay—its head turned to look at Damien, a small mouth opened and stuck its tongue out. He heard a child's laughter from somewhere behind him, and felt the urge to face it when he spotted a blur of movement materialize into a humanoid figure just outside the SUV. As it had been the woman's face in the bus, this figure was manifested like a silhouette of steam somehow with colored features. A blue shirt and jeans, the humanoid apparition reached into the SUV to retrieve the girl, whose giggling now circled Damien in a swirling vortex.

And then a deep roar overwhelmed the mirth, putting expressions of shock onto their faces. The SUV's frame rattled and the two apparitions struggled briefly in what felt like an inescapable situation.

"No!" Damien suddenly barked, slamming the base of his fist onto the warped hood of the SUV, causing a loud clang.

Clive, thirty feet up ahead, abruptly turned on his heel and started jogging back to where Damien stood. He now practically leaned against the SUV, which Damien saw as empty and couldn't imagine how anyone might've survived.

Damien flinched when Clive put a hand on his shoulder, but eventually exhaled gutturally and turned to look at his partner. Clive saw grave concern in Damien's eyes, and could feel his body shudder briefly under the hand he'd placed on his shoulder.

"Damien," Clive said slowly, "what the fuck?"

"Memories," Damien said, shaking his head. He returned his gaze to the SUV, which he saw it was, totaled and empty. "Memories from my source Guardian. I had a scene play out—*lucidly*—in my sleep just earlier. And then in the bus...a woman's face. And just now—in this vehicle—a man and his

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child.”

“Dammit, Damien, you should’ve said something.”

“I was hoping it was nothing. Just...a fluke in my sleep. But now, out here. I mean—” Damien threw his attention back to Clive “—that shit’s *guaranteed* impossible. One-hundred-percent, Clive. Tell me I’m wrong.”

“You aren’t.”

“Then what the fuck!?” Damien demanded.

“Calm down, man. Look...maybe they weren’t memories, just some sort of psychotic effect all this death has on you. Humans are prone to it, why not us?”

“I could give you a hundred reasons *why not us*,” Damien said firmly, as he knew Clive was already aware. “And what’s worse, I *recognize* these people from my sleep earlier. The woman was calling the man, her husband, *Damien*. And the little girl—‘daddy, daddy.’ And just now...that wasn’t just any little girl who might’ve died here, it was *Damien Ballard*’s daughter. And the woman’s face on the bus—fuck, their features are always so blurred, but...it was *her*, Clive. His *wife*. I’m fucking *sure* of it!”

Clive clearly wasn’t taking a liking to this. He tried to calm Damien down and after a few minutes it actually helped. Damien leaned against the fender of a vehicle that wasn’t the SUV, until his head cleared.

“We can’t be having this shit on the field, Damien,” Clive finally said, grasping Damien’s shoulders with both hands. “Now straighten up, and let’s get off this damn road. Signs say we’re a mile from the edge of town.”

Damien indolently nodded.

“I need more than that, Seraph. Get up, solidify your footing, and stop your bitching. We’re better than this. What’s done is done. Get a hold of the present so we can protect the *future*.”

Clive’s words bolster Damien and he erects his posture. He checks his weapon and gradually regains stability, both physical and mental. He shunts the memories and any of their

associated images to the back of his head, into a tomb where they'll be locked away for all the time he cares for.

"Thanks, Clive," Damien said, clearing his throat. Clive returned the UMP-45 to his hands and turned to lead the way with a proud nod. Damien followed him close, his voice less raspy now. "I'm at your heels."

"Good. Let's keep going."

So, they did. Damien became as a robot might, utterly ignoring what he had just experienced, despite its lucidity during wakened hours. Something, like he had mentioned, that was 100% guaranteed to never happen. It was even laughed at by HOA officials as being vaguely possible.

And yet now...

Damien focused on the present—to protect the future. His and Clive's, for one, but more importantly the human race's. The fluctuations in the creatures' activity and dormancy as of late was the only sign of their potential cessation. Ultimately, though, there was hardly any relent. Even with them as dormant as they were now—when compared to their greater resurgences—calling them idle was a joke. The creatures remained quite a force to be reckoned with by any survivors and even Guardians had their hands full with them. For Seraphim, as it was, things were tolerable.

"Well, here we are, then," Clive said, indicating the 'welcome to' sign centered in the median. It was missing a post so it stood lopsided and a corner of the steel sign itself had bent backward. "Apparently the town of Vienna greets us."

"Apparently," Damien grunted. "Let's hope it has a warmer welcome than this road did."

"Doubtful."

Damien shot Clive a critical look.

"Just saying," Clive shrugged.

Damien shook his head. He was a little perplexed how there were fewer cars on the streets as they entered town than there were leaving it. Then again, most were probably trying to escape the clutches of the monsters as they permeated the streets

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and raided buildings when Hell's Fissure struck.

Or 'opened' as some have put it.

Now, walking into Vienna down the center of the main road, it felt more like a ghost town than anything else. The quieter, the better—more or less. With less activity, it usually meant less survivors, unless they were in hiding. Less audible activity didn't necessarily mean less creatures, however—they tended to keep on the furtive side themselves, unless a Roughneck was in town. But they seemed to prefer rural environments more, probably because of their size. Hounds permeated small towns like rats would a sewer, and Skinners had the propensity to lurk indoors until nightfall. Imps often occupied roofing and occasionally high awnings, when they weren't flying about.

Hybrids were the only genuinely capricious creature when it came to location, especially in urban surroundings.

"Sounds like nobody's home," Clive said.

"So it appears. But let's not be fooled, eh?"

"Never."

The brick walls of privately-owned shops at the edge of town were still standing but many bore holes in them. The insides were full of decay and every now and then a corpse or two could be seen sprawled across the floor. There were even some dangling from the telephone lines, those unfallen. Fissures in the road were common, but never more than a foot wide, and not actually leading far down. Vehicular wreckage was minimal, as Damien had noticed earlier. It was never so bad that the road was completely blocked off, either, which was good for the Seraphim. The sidewalks were typically impeded with a variety of obstacles, like post-apocalyptic tumbleweeds, from mangled bicycles to overturned newsstands.

Here and there dried blood splatter could be spotted.

Overall the air was crisp and bitter, but not unbearably so. It was a stink that had permeated many regions across the globe, especially more urban areas where structural decay was present. What few corpses hadn't been salvaged and devoured

by the creatures but were around since 2014 had sunken into the asphalt and concrete like mortar of the macabre.

“You hear that?” Clive asked, raising a hand.

“Rustling,” Damien said, standing on Clive’s left. He raised the MP5K in anticipation.

Clive shouldered his UMP-45 and raised it to half-mast. He signaled for Damien to follow close, which was already a given. They crossed the road toward the peculiar noise, which carried through the air ever so subtly like a passing breeze.

This rustling sound, like clothes and paper occasionally tearing, came from a hole in the side of a white brick building. They proceeded toward it with vigilant strides, heeding their immediate surroundings as they did so. The two Seraphim reached the building, whose lettered sign was missing a few characters but could be discerned as a generic thrift shop. The hole through which they slowly entered accompanied the front of the building, having replaced the proper door with a much larger one.

Large enough to fit a Roughneck.

Upon their admission, however, they found two Hounds ransacking the place. The store’s interior was small but high-ceilinged, and the racks whereupon clothes hung were for the most part wrecked. If not previously ransacked by survivors, they were now being mangled and torn through by bored Hounds.

Or did they have someone’s scent on their snouts?

Clive suddenly whistled, and the two hounds jerked their heads upright to stare at the Seraphim by the hole leading outside. Dim daylight filtered in through it, creating a subliminal backdrop to the men. Pantlegs draped lazily over one of the Hound’s head, covering its nasal ridges. The other had a few shirts lain across its back, and a leather jacket in its jaws.

Hoarse growling came next.

A third Hound suddenly burst through the swinging doors to Damien’s far left, which probably led into the warehouse. The beast loped toward him, closing the forty-foot

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distance quickly. Damien dropped to a knee and hosed out ten rounds from the SMG's stubby muzzle. The snarling Hound took the .40-caliber bullets to the face and throat, splashing blood across the white tile floor, whereupon it slid across.

Clive, meanwhile, spat out five-round bursts from his own sub-machinegun. Each cluster of .45 ACP rounds hit their mark, eventually killing one of the two Hounds before it even rid the jacket from its mouth. Then the second clumsily tumbled over it, snapping its jaws wetly and snarling out of irate frustration. Clive approached it gallantly and punched two rounds into its left temple before relaxing his muscles. The creature rested in Death's embrace and when Clive turned to face Damien, he was conducting his routine confirmation. Instead of unholstering his Desert Eagle, though, he just used the MP5K to double-tap the Hound in its temple as Clive had.

"Clear," Damien said, looking back at Clive.

"And in there?" Clive asked, nodding toward the residually swaying doors.

"Allow me to check."

"Don't go too far. Gonna check the register area."

They knew they weren't going to clear and secure every single building in the area, but it was their duty to sweep any area in its entirety that posed a threat to them.

Damien entered the tiny warehouse to conduct a quick check on his own. At first glance it would be quite a sweep to do alone, as it was no less than a labyrinth of palletized boxes and miscellaneous items. Damien sighed and glanced over his shoulder, holding open one door to locate Clive across the broad room. He was leaving the register area already to make his way back to the front of the thrift shop.

"Need a hand?" Clive asked.

"It'd be dandy of you."

"Big room?"

"See for yourself," Damien said, holding the door open. Clive stepped in and rolled his shoulders.

"Let's get to it, then."

“Let’s,” Damien said, and together they fanned out into the warehouse. The ceiling was high and metallic beams crisscrossed under it, around which a ventilation shaft snaked the frame of the building. The walls were a tattered sawn, probably once well white, but time and neglect had taken its heavy toll. The high heat, no sunlight, and presence of atrocious creatures probably had its own effects on things, too, even buildings.

Death adhered to the air like dust particles with viral legs. It was rancid and bitter even to the taste, on one’s lips or tongue as they spoke, or in most cases screamed only to be unanswered.

Unsaved.

Damien and Clive were halfway through the warehouse when a blur of movement caught the prior’s eye. Damien turned to swing his MP5K in its direction, but it quickly circled a stack of boxes to his right to come around and loom on his left. It was an Imp struggling to maintain flight with a little girl wrapped up in its tail. It was clawing down at her and snapping its jaws, not at Damien but at the air surrounding it.

He was so close to pulling the trigger that he hated himself for even touching it.

The Imp was not real, per se, no more than the girl was. It was another apparition, a memory from his source Guardian malformed and resurrected to this plane. It toyed with his eyes until a more tangible screech caught his ears from above. A dark shape plunged down from a beam, mauve wings spread with a sound similar to a sheet pulling taut against the wind, and Damien flung backwards. He opened fire, this time no hesitation at his fingertips. The more-than-real Imp screeched and tried to divert its path when a volley of gunfire pelted its torso. By the time Damien had spent the remaining half-dozen rounds in his clip, his heels caught a pallet and boxes kept him from falling. Simultaneously the Imp struck the concrete floor ten feet away with a wet smack, slinging gobbets of blood in every direction.

Clive rushed over to meet with Damien and was halfway there, grinning, when a strong smell barreled into him. At the

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same instant he heard claws tap concrete and a box crumble against the pressing weight of something. All of this happened at once, and then Clive was tackled off his feet.

Damien was straightening himself out when he heard Clive call his name, his voice wavering. Damien spotted a palletized stack of boxes topple, heard something scrape the concrete floor, then smelled an awful stench.

“Hound!” he exclaimed under his breath, and reloaded on the go. He weaved around stacked boxes and miscellaneous items like neglected furniture until he reached the site of struggle. The Hound was on top of Clive, wrestling him for topside control, jaws snapping down toward his face and tail whipping around. Just shy of a miracle, Clive hadn’t been bitten yet, but clawed was another story.

Damien had just finished reloading his MP5K when the creature’s tail broadsided him, drawing blood along his right cheek and knocking the gun loose. He was forced into a vanity whose mirror was missing, and toppled with it. He heard the creature snarl fiercely and Clive cursing through a mouthful of spit and perhaps blood.

“Hang in there!” Damien hollered, dropping to all fours so the creature’s tail would miss him. He crawled toward the lopsided brawl, then heard the Hound release a quivering howl of pain. He spotted its head flung backward, snout pointed up, and an arc of blood spurt onto a nearby box. Damien unholstered his Desert Eagle and stood halfway, with his knees bent, dodging another swing of its tail. He two-handed the hefty pistol and fired a shot that blew through its left thigh, forcing the creature off of Clive, who then struggled to his feet. Damien saw his MTech knife in one hand, its carbon steel blade coiled in blood, and an expression of sheer resentment on his face.

“Motherfucker!” Clive roared, kicking the fallen Hound despite its lively state. Its forelimbs lashed out, claws protracted, but it didn’t last long. There was a nasty wound in its jugular, and it still oozed blood. The Hound growled but it quickly became a gurgle that rendered it nearly incapacitated. Then Clive

doubled over it and began stabbing its left temple with the semi-serrated combat knife.

Damien holstered the Desert Eagle—no further confirmation necessary here—and picked up his MP5K. He looked at Clive, who knelt beside the dead Hound with knife gripped tightly in his right hand. He breathed heavily and to Damien's surprise didn't resist when he offered a hand. Together Damien and Clive stood, but fortunately there was nothing that kept him from walking on his own.

"Next time a survivor calls mocks the Seraph name," Clive heaved, eyes wide, "I'm gonna laugh in their face."

Damien smirked uneasily and patted his partner's back. He quickly observed his body for wounds. Some Hound claws had reached Clive's shoulder blades, drawing blood where part of the vest tapered without coverage. Deep gashes marked the front of Kevlar across his chest, but nothing had gone through. Ruddy gashes striped parts of his legs, but fortunately no one claw had punctured anything beyond tissue.

Clive limped ever so slightly, admitting to 'a minor sting' in his legs and shoulders, but ultimately didn't keep that from restricting his duty as a Seraph. He scooped up his UMP-45 and put a single round into the dead Hound's chest just for his satisfaction, then turned to Damien.

"I trust you're good over there?"

"Yeah, Clive, just...just an Imp."

"Right, well...why don't we finish clearing this warehouse, then haul ass outta here?" Clive grunted and proceeded through the warehouse with Damien close at his side. They cleared it and turned to head back to the street. On their way, Clive spat on the Hound corpse and Damien gave it a good kick.

"I tell you what," Clive said as they returned to the pavement, faking a rustic accent. "I fucking hate close-quarters."

5

3.9.2017

Midafternoon beckoned the atmosphere of night already. Daylight had begun to fade behind the clouds, leaving an even deeper shade to settle over Vienna. Whatever the town had in store for the Seraphim, they were quickly beginning to hold up their hands to display their disapproval. Clive nearly died back there, although he wouldn't admit that it came so close, and Damien was beginning to truly despise his 'condition.' Since leaving the thrift shop he's glimpsed apparitions of a giggling daughter and screaming wife to a man he'd been replicated after.

He hoped they wouldn't occur again during combat. He could deal with a variety of things at once, but this was new and as far as he knew unprecedented. With Clive experiencing no such thing, but now wounded, Damien grew all the more concerned.

They proceeded down empty roads and swept three buildings since the thrift shop, coming across nothing hostile. Every place looked the same—abandoned and full of contradictive smells that wrought battle against their senses. Eventually they reached a small shopping center with a large parking lot that was half-occupied with desolate vehicles, some overturned and others just sitting there neglectfully.

“What of this?” Damien asked.

“Best we check it, at least the awnings down there.”

Damien agreed. The line of stores, including a few locally-owned restaurants, a McDonald’s at the corner, a flower shop, and a CVS pharmacy comprising nearly half of it were all fronted by a continuous awning. At intervals were large cylindrical columns nearest the sidewalk’s curb, providing even more cover for potential Imps or Hounds.

As they descended down the slight slope of the parking lot, they hoped there was nothing worse down there than what they already expected.

Damien armed himself with the Remington R5 RGP again, despite potential close-quarters that awaited them. Unlike Damien, Clive couldn’t as easily swap out his secondary for his primary, since the Blaser was strictly long-range. He kept the UMP-45 shouldered, satisfied at least with its performance compared to the compacter MP5K.

“Where are we starting?” Clive asked.

“McDonald’s,” Damien replied. “Far right corner, then move left. There are some apartments across the street at the other end, looks like a pretty capacious district. One thing’s for sure—no more splitting up. Not if we can help it.”

“That’s a solid copy.”

They reached the McDonald’s, peering around the corner of the first column. They could see perfectly only fifty feet before the shadows thickened around a slight bend in the sidewalk. After that it became vaguer to the eye.

“Steady, now,” Damien muttered, and they advanced down the sidewalk, peering through the grime-caked glass—where it wasn’t in shards on the ground—leading into each store. The fast foot joint appeared empty, and smelled something awful. Next was the flower shop, also seemingly empty. As they reached the bend in the sidewalk, Damien thought he saw a flash of color like a Hound’s fur slink around the corner of a column. He straightened out, solidified his stance, and shouldered the Remington.

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“What is it?” Clive asked, pausing similarly.

“Hound, possibly. Thirty feet down, around the column with the toppled trashcan in front of it.”

“Proceed?”

“Yeah. Stay at my eight o’clock.”

“You got it.”

Together, in their particular formation, they huddled down the sidewalk. They disregarded checking each window into every store they passed in lieu of having a possible Hound threat ahead. As they neared the column with the toppled trashcan in front of it, Damien spotted—

It wasn’t a Hound. The color belonged to a floral pattern on a woman’s dress. It was his source’s wife, her hair flowing freely behind her as if by a wind. And then he felt it, too, that same wind. It chilled his bones with an unbeknownst fear, and when he saw her smile fade from his featureless face all of his comfort banished to the shadows as well. A pall set over her head and her frown melted into the column as gelatinously as the rest of her sheer body, which began to obscure—colors became faded grays and whites, one with the sallow column. The pall broadened to fit her entire silhouette, and take from her core something else. It was a figure, a small child, in fetal position. It wept prematurely as a shapeless shadow latched tendrils of blackness around it and like a blotch of ink it seeped into the ground, disappearing.

Damien snapped back to reality when Clive grabbed his shoulder for the third time, this instance raising his voice too. Damien cleared his throat and shook his eyes to the left and right.

“What is it?” he asked Clive blankly.

“What do you mean *what is it?*” Clive exclaimed in a whisper. “You just drifted off on me! Was it another one of your...hallucinations?”

“For fuck’s sake, it’s not a *hallucination*. It’s a memory, but distorted. It’s like...I dunno, but...do you feel that wind?”

Clive sighed, rolling his eyes. “Yeah, I felt it. So what?”

“Be quiet for a moment, and tell me that’s not thunder in the distance.”

Clive quieted and heard the gentle rumble encroach. Except that it wasn’t so much in the skies as it was simply in the air, like all around them and yet so far away.

“Oh, shit,” Clive croaked.

“Yeah. We need to get *inside*.”

They knew what it meant—especially when an opus of Hound howls erupted into the sky far from them. The sounds filled the air with their terrible discordance, and the two Seraphim felt a very human chill run the course of their spines.

Resurgence.

“Where?” Clive snapped.

“Pharmacy,” Damien said with a jerk of his head. They were on its approach anyway, and it was the largest establishment at this local shopping center. Clive followed Damien to the double-door entrance, not pleased when they saw that the glass was missing. What remained of it laid in puddles of splinters and shards across the carpeted floor inside the CVS.

“Let’s use some of these carts to help barricade the entrance,” Clive suggested, and Damien helped him pile a bunch of shopping carts already present in the foyer all around the doors. Something could still get through by the time they were done, but not easily and not without making a whole lot of noise.

This at least helped comfort them.

They cleared the register area then decided it wasn’t a bad idea to refill their canteens with bottled water. As they rushed to the far end of the CVS, they noticed that most of the aisles were considerably intact. As small as this town was, at least in this area, most people had probably flocked to the grocery stores instead for supplies during Hell’s Fissure. So they were thankful that less than half of the bottled waters present in the dead refrigeration cabinets were still there—more than enough. They immediately began refilling their canteens, and taking swigs straight from the bottles because they could.

They knew most of the perishables stocked on the

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shelves were either beyond stale or simply not there, be they gotten by rats or survivors in the earlier days. Besides, they ultimately preferred their MRE's.

After refilling their canteens and hydrating, the two Seraphim turned to explore the rest of the CVS when a sudden tremor passed beneath them like fingers of a buried giant. It passed quickly but by the time it did more howling occurred outside, and a lot closer than their levels of comfort preferred.

"Fuck this," Clive scowled, and slung the UMP-45. He put the Blaser R93 LS2 in his hands again, as it had been far too long since he'd fired it. He checked the bolt and adjusted the scope's magnification so that he could see the front entrance in its entirety. He unfolded the bipod so that it rested on a top shelf, which he towered over thanks to a sturdy stepladder.

Meanwhile, Damien rubbed his eyes with the back of his gloved hand and pulled sweat from his forehead with it. He coughed into his mouth and flexed his muscles. Respiration exercises aside, he felt prepared. He set himself up at the far end of the cashier's counter, nearest the refrigeration cabinets, which were to his back. To his right and up one aisle was Clive, who was set in his sharpshooter's stance like stone.

Vigilant stone.

Damien stood with his right elbow propped up on the high countertop where a checkout monitor once sat, hand holding the R5's foregrip. His left shoulder pocketed the assault rifle's buttstock, and that hand wrapped around the main grip. A forefinger curled around the trigger, itchy to kill something, but just as patient to hold off if this was in fact a resurgence of the creatures.

They were emerging from their random hibernation, but why now? Perhaps it was just as random. Or perhaps, Damien imagined, nothing about it was random—HOA just didn't know everything about everything as they pretended to.

None of this came as comforting, but nor a surprise.

Damien and Clive would just have to defend themselves as they always had. This, however, came with wings of

intimidation. They now sought to cut said wings off and burn its ashes beneath their boots.

For now, they waited.

Two and a half minutes passed before anything happened. Clive was more than itching to squeeze the Blaser's trigger but Damien wouldn't have minded waiting a little longer. When the first Hound breached the CVS, it had a hard time crawling over the barricade of shopping carts at the front entrance. Halfway over it got a leg stuck, but its momentum carried it onward, breaking it at the elbow. It let out a terrible howl, and then a second Hound backed by a third came vaulting over the carts, tumbling into the first. The Hound's pain tripled and then the leg tore free entirely, but not without knocking one cart loose, carrying the creature off the pile and down aisle one. It knocked down a bunch of shelves as it struggled to regain footing, yelping and snapping its jaws simply out of exasperation.

The second and third Hounds eventually bypassed the mound of metal and plastic shopping carts with less conflict.

And then Clive fired the Blaser. Inside the store, under a ceiling within his reach and walls not far away, the report reverberated greatly. Damien's skull bounced about but he didn't wince the slightest. He enjoyed the sight of the first Hound's head spraying the walls, while the second skittered through the red mist. It snarled out loud, a sibilation in its throat, before Damien put five rounds into the right side of its neck. The exit wounds splashed blood on the wall and it regurgitated nothing less.

Clive readjusted his aim to track the first creature now limping toward the back of the store. Damien took care of the third with two more well-placed rounds to the crippled creature's right temple. Brain matter floated through the thick air as its body sprawled lifelessly on the carpet.

"Tracking the first Hound," Clive raised his voice. Damien didn't deviate his eyes from the entrance. "Stay on that entrance."

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“Taken care of.”

Clive pivoted on his stepstool until he lifted the rifle’s bipod off the shelf and steadied it with his own hand. He stopped moving when he was focused on the back of the store, where the actual pharmacy was located, and had spotted the wounded Hound. Blood leaked from the compound fracture in its front limb, and it moved sluggishly with a bad limp. Clive ended its pain with what HOA would call a clean headshot, despite how messy the consequence was.

“Clear!” Clive called out, bolting the Blaser and spinning back to his original position.

Damien was busy himself. While the entrance was clear of activity in his sights, he heard an abundance of growling and barking just outside the store. Most of the large glass windows to his left, behind the cashier’s counter, were largely covered by shelved cabinets for cigarette packs. But when a fourth Hound breached the store, it did so without using the front entrance. It had literally flung itself into a wall of glass, nearest the ceiling, causing it to shatter and give way to the creature’s rolling body. It crashed through the window, barreled across the top of a cigarette cabinet, and landed chaotically on the cashier’s counter.

Damien’s eyelids had flung open in surprise and Clive was no different, however, neither one of them flinched the slightest.

As the creature was reorienting itself on the floor in front of the counter, Damien put five solid rounds through its head. Its burly body went flaccid on the carpet but was quickly succeeded by two more Hounds through the glass, including a third that was too low and simply crashed into the back of a cabinet. The cabinet swayed but did not fall. The two Hounds that made it through were all susceptible to equally turbulent landings, giving the Seraphim ample opportunity to neutralize them.

Damien took care of one rather quickly while Clive blew the head off another.

“Main entrance!” Damien bellowed, and adjusted his aim. A pair of Imps and one Hound were making their way

through. The Hound snapped its jaws at one of the Imps as it passed easily over it and through the foyer, unaffected by the carts. Damien practically nailed the first Imp to the wall, firing in bursts that seemed to dance around the second.

Clive heard him alright. He glimpsed a cigarette cabinet sway again but not fall as he redirected his aim to the foyer. He fired a shot that narrowly missed the second Imp as it rose to the ceiling inside the store, but walloped the Hound in the right shoulder. Bone shattered and blood painted the foyer's glass barrier. The Hound roared through the pain and crashed through a shopping cart on its way into the store, leaving behind one after the other which tumbled after it.

Their makeshift barricade had been dismantled.

The Hound roared at the Seraphim's direction and began running when Damien dropped his aim to descend a few rounds into its head. Its nasal ridges were demolished and blood ran into its eyes, temporarily blinding the creature.

And then the R5 clicked dry.

"Magazine!" Damien called out as he reloaded.

Clive nodded more to himself than to Damien and aligned for a killshot. A single .338 blew the Hound's skull in half where the upper jaw met with its eye sockets, making quite the mess. He bolted the Blaser then swung it around to focus on the cigarette cabinets behind the counter.

"Pull back, Damien!"

There was no hesitation. Damien scrambled away from the cashier's counter, glancing hard left to see the Hound corpses by the foyer and the fallen carts. He also spotted a fluttering shape towards the back left corner of the store, to Clive's far five o'clock.

Damien ducked right past Clive and skidded to a stop in the main aisle that cut down the center of the CVS. His reloaded R5 was raised, his eye to the EOTech sight, and his finger around the trigger. He spotted the Imp drop out of his view briefly before rising again near the pharmacy. He took off its head and shoulders with a few well-placed shots. He then turned

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around to hear a loud crash and rushed back to where Clive stood.

“We need to get outta here,” Clive muttered, barely audible enough for Damien. Clive fired the Blaser at what Damien could tell was three or four Hounds barreling *through* the cigarette cabinets, toppling them entirely. As the report faded enough to speak again, Clive did just that. “It’s a fucking deathtrap in here. We need to book it.”

“I’ll find us an exit in the back. No matter what, meet me at your eight o’clock in twenty seconds.”

“Copy.” Clive fired the Blaser again. Damien ran toward the back of the CVS, hearing a painful howl erupt far behind him. He focused on the unlit exit sign hanging from the ceiling—literally, by its mess of wiring—in the left corner of the store. He hurdled over a Hound corpse en route, minding his feet by a dead Imp too, then barged through the door. It wasn’t even on its hinges, so he nearly fell on the other side. He felt a breeze somewhere in the shadows back there, as there was no lighting whatsoever.

His mental timer set off.

Twenty seconds, check.

He heard the Blaser go off again, then a smaller crash, and hoped it was Clive kicking down the stepstool as he hauled ass to the back. Meanwhile Damien felt around in this rear area, wishing he would find the actual exit sooner than he might a lurking creature. When he glimpsed a shaft of daylight that seemed so radiant in this pitch blackness, he called out Clive’s name then lowered his shoulder.

This door gave way with a loud buzzing sound. It was an alarm of sorts, and just as alarmingly discordant. Even Clive’s skull hurt from the noise as he met Damien on the other side, under the dense gray skies behind the CVS. There were dumpsters, wrecked vans, and a toppled eighteen-wheeler blocking off one way. The black pavement was war-torn and tattered, but not a single corpse could be spotted.

If they lingered any longer, two would be added.

“Shut that damn door, and let’s haul ass,” Clive said, keeping the Blaser equipped. Damien slammed the door shut, and it clicked, but the alarm continued ringing.

“Thing’s gonna attract attention like nobody’s business,” Damien griped.

“As if we need any more heat. Where to?”

“Dammit, man, I thought you had a plan?”

“Hey, you picked the exit.”

“Shit!” Damien cursed, spittle frothing at his lips. “Okay, okay! Here...follow me.”

Clive didn’t object or question his partner. They moved quickly, sharply, attentive but far from cautious. Damien led them across the street to where a 7-11 and gas station were. Once crossed, they stopped in front of the convenience store to look over the small shopping center where they’d just been. The 7-11 and gas station were located up on a paved hill, at the corner of a T-intersection. They saw a horde of Hounds and Imps flocking around like confused birds along the length of the CVS, many piling into the store.

“Hopefully they remain distracted for a little while,” Clive said. “Maybe that door alarm will hold their attention as we’d expected.”

“Yeah, that’d be a trip.” Damien looked around.

“Where to, Columbus?”

“As far from here as possible. I can see school buses from here—” Damien pointed under the gas station, past the pumps, and across the street “—so maybe that’d be a good idea to hold up for a little while.”

“A school bus?” Clive said dubiously.

“No, the school itself. C’mon, man.”

Clive shrugged. “Alright, well, it’s still a building that’ll block us in.”

“True as that might be, better we have more ways to funnel them in and possibly even better barricades.”

“Okay, okay. I’m with you. Let’s.”

Damien nodded, leading the way. They crossed under the

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gas station, past a few overturned trucks, and hit the main road again. This time they crossed it, reaching a huge parking lot with two standing school buses and several further in that were toppled and wrecked. One was split in half, arguably by a Roughneck or two at some point in time, as no other vehicles were present.

The lack of activity in the area didn't sustain for long.

Trees surrounding a small parking lot to a church to their far right suddenly buckled against a pressing force. A throaty roar ripped through the air and a Roughneck plowed through them, feet tearing up chunks of soil as it made the transition between parking lots.

Damien and Clive spun to face it, a good eighty feet away. Clive fired a steady round that broke off a tip of its brow crest, bolted, and fired another. This one did no damage to the front of its skull, just anger it more. Damien fired a few rounds from a kneeling position, pelting the front of its forelimbs but having no luck in slowing or stopping it.

"Get to that bus!" Clive shouted, and Damien bolted.

"Clive!" Damien snapped as he ran, shouldering the R5 again. "Hounds on your six!"

Clive took a deep breath and juked to his right, dropping to a knee and steadying his aim on the back corner of a parked school bus. He fired a shot that blasted off the upper ridge of the Roughneck's left nostril, splashing blood up onto its forehead. The beast bellowed and shook its head, suddenly deviating its path. It took a hard right, unfortunately, making way instead for Damien and the halved bus.

The Blaser's bolt slid smoothly, loading another round into the chamber. Clive stood and spun just in time to spot the nearest Hound leap for him. He fired before his eye reached the scope, and the bullet passed through the Hound's chest only to exit out its back. Blood hit the pavement two seconds before its body did, tumbling on past him. The creature was not dead but it was certainly minutes from it, sooner if it kept struggling as it did. Clive turned his back on the second inbound Hound,

knowing that it wasn't going to slow and he wouldn't catch another break so easily. He wanted to board the bus but the doors were unyieldingly shut, so he skidded around the protruding front end instead.

The Hound snapped its jaws a steady ten feet behind him and swiftly enclosing. Instead of circumnavigating the bus's front end, it leapt up onto the hood and alighted within reach of Clive's feet. It lashed out at him, jaws snapping with inches to spare. Clive bounced off the side of the bus, caught between two of them, then turned and drew his Desert Eagle with his only free hand. The gun went off as the Hound pounced upon him. A half-inch slug broke through the creature's right breast, blowing out one of its shoulder blades. It landed lazily, but rabidly, its right forelimb useless but the other three very lively.

Clive tucked his head in like a crippled turtle to evade the Hound's first lunge of its jaws, then buried the pistol's muzzle into its shoulder wound. He twisted it around and the beast howled before coming back down onto Clive, whence he squeezed the trigger three times in abrupt succession. The bullets tore through its chest at chaotic angles, blowing out its other shoulder and eventually cutting through its heart.

A few seconds later, Clive pushed the dead creature off of him, just in time to hear at least a dozen others howl somewhere dangerously nearby. He also heard Damien shouting and the Roughneck bellowing like thunder.

Clive got to his feet, feeling sorer than ever, and rushed across the parking lot toward Damien. He had reached the halved bus and was now circling it to evade the lumbering Roughneck. Gunfire spat at it from his R5 in staccato bursts, clapping through the air here and there. Clive turned his head on a swivel halfway there to see a horde of Hounds and Imps swarming through the skies close in on the parking lot from across the street.

Damien, meanwhile, reloaded for the second time since he and Clive separated just minutes ago. He wasn't doing a whole lot of damage to the Roughneck, just aggravating it more

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but at least managing to draw blood along its limbs' joints. He'd pockmarked it a few places along the tree trunk of a neck, but nothing quite as effective as calling them worthwhile.

"Damn, this thing is *not* giving up, and I'm—" Damien stopped short as he heard another roar emerge somewhere behind him. He was circling the bus a third time, facing its front end, when the sound turned him around. He saw a Roughneck sided by two Hounds galloping across the parking lot in his direction.

"Get down!" Clive yelled at the top of his lungs, seeing what Damien clearly didn't. To his partner's far left, across a road stretching in front of the school, a Type C school bus with shattered windows and a dark-skinned driver rushed toward him. Clive neared just as the Roughneck chasing Damien around the wreckage reached the front, so he swiftly shouldered the Blaser. The shot he fired caught the Roughneck square in the rump, snagging its attention ever so tersely.

Damien pulled back along the left side of the wreckage just as the school bus drove out in front. It veered left, teetering on its right wheels briefly before settling with a chassis lurch. The horn blared and it played chicken with the inbound Roughneck. The two Hounds dropped back behind their larger cohort, hoping it would either absorb most of the bus's impact or tear through it entirely.

Clive lowered the rifle and spotted a group of people—survivors!—rush from the school's front doors across the parking lot. There appeared to be at least ten of them, eighty percent wielding firearms. They were huddled close together and reached Damien quicker than Clive did. Their volley of gunfire drove the Roughneck back and their beckoning hands brought Damien into their huddle. Clive circled the back of the halved bus to meet with them, seemingly led by a middle-aged man with long dark hair and a scraggly goatee.

Judging by their similarly tattered clothes and generally basic weapons, they were in fact survivors.

Stranded here, the lot of them, in this school? It wasn't

too farfetched, but at the moment Clive wasn't about to argue. However, as they were ushered back to the school, they watched the bus take a violent turn to sideswipe the Roughneck. The front doors slid open and the driver dove out wearing a bulky suit that Clive hadn't noticed before. He must have just put it on, as it helped cushion his fall from the bus. He rolled a couple of times before rising to his feet and making the awkward run toward their group.

"Hurry up, Jesse!" someone within the group called out.

Far behind him, the bus barrel-rolled into the Roughneck, driving it headlong into the pavement. One of the two hounds managed to dodge it entirely, but the other was crushed completely. There was an ensuing explosion that rocked the ground and killed the Roughneck that could've potentially survived the initial collision.

Not anymore.

Clive exclaimed in awe, and the fireball scorching the sky was enough to make the inbound horde of Hounds more reluctant. This bought the group precious seconds, although their distance already had an excellent cushion.

They pulled back to the school, where double-doors were swung open from the inside to welcome the survivors and their Seraphim guests. Damien and Clive found themselves reuniting outside of the throng which brought them to safety, as startling and unexpected as it was. Their reorientation took a few seconds longer as they absorbed more than a dozen heavy stares in the school's lobby alone.

The air was rank but it smelled better than a putrefied Hound. For their sake, it smelled a lot better than death, which would've been likely had they stayed out there.

After the group by the double-doors finished securing them with fresh barricades, the Seraphim approached the longhaired leader with bountiful appreciation.

"We cannot thank you all enough," Damien started.

"Well, to be quite honest, you were causing quite a racket on our doorstep and things would've gotten a lot worse if

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you'd stayed."

"Even if you'd just, oh, let us die?" Clive sneered.

"Yes, actually," the longhaired man said. "Your corpses would've drawn even more attention."

"So you saved us out of self-preservation?" Damien said.

"As odd as that sounds, yes." He looked over his shoulder at the group dissipating among the others standing at the edges of the lobby. He cleared his throat and looked back at the guests. "I assume you two are Seraphim?"

"Correct," Clive said sternly.

"My name's Damien Ballard." He extended his hand.

The man's face took a turn with an ounce of surprise. He seemed to smile, then, if not for an instant. He ultimately shook Damien's hand, and then Clive introduced himself and the man practically ignored him. Clive didn't offer his hand as we was feeling a little spiteful at the moment.

"Well," he said, "my name's Willem Crayton. We welcome you to our stronghold. There are many of us, and have been for some weeks now."

"You all have been held up here for *weeks* without trouble?" Clive asked skeptically.

"Oh, I wouldn't say quite that."

"So you *have* engaged the enemy during your stay here?" Damien asked.

"Intermittently, especially when we've needed to cross the street for provisions."

"Right, so, you have weapons?" Clive said.

"As you can see, yes."

"I meant *more* than this...?"

"Indeed. There are roughly seventy of us here. I'd say every fourth person is armed. A lot of women and some children, but not many. Though most of our women are armed, too."

"That's good," Damien said. "The more the better."

"Right, well...ah, might I introduce the man who probably saved you all for the better?" Willem turned to

welcome Jesse forward. He was a tall man with dark skin, bald, fit, bushy eyebrows and light brown eyes. He had shed the suit he wore earlier upon exiting the bus.

“That was quite a stunt you pulled, Jesse,” Damien said, extending his hand. Jesse shook it ardently.

“It’s quite an honor to actually *meet* a Seraph, ya know?”

“Well, we aren’t too familiar with warm welcomes.”

“That’s a damn shame, Damien. But...I’m Jesse Fisher, if you need anything.”

“Say, what was with that suit you were in?” Clive asked.

“Oh, that? Just an improvised suit for hard times.”

“Like jumping out of school buses?”

“Yeah,” Jesse laughed. He was probably in his twenties. “That, too.”

“Could I offer you two any food or beverages?” Willem stepped in to ask.

“No, we’re fine...Clive?”

“We appreciate it, though.”

“Ah, that’s right. Military provisions and canteens, eh?”

“All we need in this world,” Damien half-smirked.

“I bet you have his smile,” Willem said. “I know, as strange as it is, but I’d put money on the dimple.”

“I’m sorry,” Damien said with a shake of his head, looking as puzzled as he was. “What do you mean? Who?”

Willem scratched his head. “How rude of me. Why don’t we get you two situated in the cafeteria? It’s no warm-and-cozy den but we’ve got an abundance of chairs.”

“Uh...okay, sure.” Damien said it with partial inquisition. He and Clive followed Willem down a hallway to their right, past a boarded-up front office. Nearly every wall was lined with red and blue steel lockers, but not the one they currently took, which eventually turned left and opened up into the cafeteria. It was huge, probably a quarter of the entire school. Tables were rectangular and enough to seat fifteen on each side. That said, the seating arrangement currently offered twelve out of forty-five vacant seats. There were small rectangular windows

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along the sides of the cafeteria, but were all boarded-up.

“Why don’t you sit here, Damien,” Willem said, guiding him to an empty said with the most vacancy surrounding it. He sat by the head of one table nearest the doors. He then patted Clive on the back, which gave him a stir, and said, “How ‘bout we sit you somewhere else...Damien has some personal matters to discuss.”

“*Personal?*” Clive raised a brow. “Like I said, Willem, we’re Seraphim. The only personal matters regarding us is each other.”

“On the contrary.”

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Three anticipative minutes passed as Damien sat there in a hard plastic seat with his hands up on the wooden table waiting for an answer to his unasked question. Clive had been walked off to a more secluded seat, at least one far from him. There were plenty of empties surrounding him, but Willem had insisted on some privacy. Why? Damien's mind at the moment was still coping with this—so many survivors under one roof, and such a large one at that. They were lucky to have survived this long without any major engagements. But with the recent resurgence, who was to say it would last? Damien tried to rest and focus on something of a lighter tone.

In this life, this world in this time, few things struck him as lightweight. Everything hit hard and heavy and took their time lifting from his shoulders. But he was a Seraph, he could take it when others could not.

Even his source Guardian. Even—

“Damien?” the voice said his name, and yet it did not. He turned in his seat to look to his right, where a woman had been approaching. She stopped in her tracks ten feet away. Her face was a palette of mixed emotions. Happy, sad, skeptical, even angry. Her eyes glassed over. Damien abruptly stood, knocking the chair over, grabbing more attention than he might have liked,

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but at this moment there wasn't anybody else.

Damien focused on the woman.

She looked familiar, yet so foreign.

"Oh my God," she said, and covered her mouth. Her voice thinned and she suddenly turned to face Willem. He stood hunkered over Clive at the moment, talking to him some forty feet away. She dropped her hand and gave him a hostile look, then stormed out of the cafeteria, right past Damien.

Of all the intense engagements he had experienced yet on the field, this proved to be the most challenging and baffling.

Damien pursued her out into the empty hallway, its white tile walls and white floor feeling unnaturally bright. With the windows boarded up, it would've been very dark if it weren't for intermittently lit fluorescent fixtures in the ceiling, suggesting a power source somewhere. But at the moment this wasn't what rode on Damien's mind. He tracked the woman down at the end of the hall, catching her just before the corner. His hand grabbed her bicep, gently tugging her back.

The woman slapped him across the face, pushed away, and started to turn the corner. Then she stopped, her back to him, and a raspy breath rose through her.

"Please," Damien said. "Talk to me."

She turned on her heel to face him. Long light brown hair, past her shoulders. Defined but not burly arms. She was a little top-heavy but had a very fit physique. She was a few inches shorter than Damien, with a soft face but hard eyes. Her lips were then, her mouth somehow the most familiar to him. Their corners began to curl up into a smile, but it was short-lived.

The woman wore a white tanktop tied above the navel and fitted blue jeans. Her skin donned a perspired sheen to it, as most of the people in here seemed to. Power source or not, their air-conditioning did not work.

"My name," she said, her voice sounding vaguely familiar too, "is Devon Eckle. When I married, I took my husband's last name, which isn't Eckle."

Damien felt a very human palpitation.

“It was Ballard. Damien Ballard was my husband, before he...before he *died*, killed-in-action. July 2016. Are you to tell me otherwise?”

“No, ma’am. He was KIA. I am his replica, a Seraph, manufactured and deployed by NATO’s Hand of Ares cloning program.”

Devon laughed uneasily, tears streaking her cheeks. “Replica, oh okay.” She trailed off, mumbling. “Manufactured...”

Damien took a step forward, raising his palms in a surrendering gesture. His lips moved to speak but he wasn’t too sure what to say. Why wasn’t he prepared, as a Seraph, for a situation like this? It couldn’t be all too farfetched, just nobody ever really paid much attention to the possibility.

Seraphim certainly did not.

“I’m sorry,” he finally said. “I...apologize.”

Devon laughed again, this time her voice cracking. She put a hand to her mouth, then raised it to wipe off her tears.

“For what?” she asked quietly.

“We shouldn’t have met. I...shouldn’t have come here.”

“Did you know I was in here?”

“No, ma’am. I—”

“You have my name, I suggest you use it.”

“I’m sorry, Devon.”

She shuddered when he said his name. Damien realized it was probably icing on the cake for her, except with a few drops of blood.

“Are you sure I should be calling you by your name?”

Devon shook her head but said “yes.”

“Look...I didn’t know you were in here. I didn’t even realize this was a possibility. I never knew details about my source’s relatives, relationships, etcetera.”

“So I’ve heard. Seraphim are supposedly ‘amnesiac’ about their *source*’s families.”

“Yes, well, we aren’t *amnesiac* to memories.”

“What?”

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"We are susceptible to memories in fragmented form during REM sleep."

"Oh, yeah. That. But I hear they're supposed to be so vague you might as well not even have them."

"Supposed to be, yes. Early this afternoon, though...I had vivid nightmares. You, your husband, and your daughter were in them. And then today—"

"Did you say my *daughter*?" Devon asked, fresh tears welling beneath her eyes.

"Yes. Ten, maybe eleven years old."

Devon touched her stomach as if she were feeling sick and shook her head.

"My daughter died...before she was born."

Damien's eyes widened. "I'm sorry. It is what I've been seeing, though."

"What you've been *seeing*? What does that mean?"

"Earlier today, just hours ago, I began experiencing...hallucinations. Apparitions of you, your daughter, and even your husband, right before my eyes. While I'm *awake*. They were never very clear...but I knew they were Ballard's family."

"That's...that's supposed to be impossible."

"Tell me about it."

Devon's hand on her stomach began trembling. Her fingers curled inward and she suddenly turned away from Damien. She rushed to a pair of doors to her far right, up a wheelchair-accessible ramp. She barged through one of them and began vomiting somewhere behind it; a 'restrooms' sign hung above the doors. The sounds were awful, and continuous, as was the weeping that ensued.

Damien put his back to the wall and sunk down until he sat with his legs extended before him. His Remington and MP5K rested on the floor beside him. His eyes stung and before the minute was over he tasted something salty and wet on his lips.

When Devon emerged eight minutes later, her face was white from water and the collar of her shirt damp. She walked

over to where Damien sat, with his head bowed, and spoke with a hoarse voice that took his attention.

“May I?” she asked, pointing down at the floor.

“As long as you don’t slap me again.”

Devon smirked briefly. She sat down next to him, with about ten inches between them. Her legs tucked into a pretzel and her hands fidgeted in her lap.

“I’m sorry,” she sighed. “I didn’t know how to react.”

“Don’t apologize. In fact, I’m surprised you didn’t punch me. Good thing you don’t have a gun.”

“It’s in my locker, actually.”

Damien’s head lifted for the first time since she had returned and raised an eyebrow.

She smirked. “Yeah, those of us that were given weapons or already had them have our own lockers for storage. My personal belongings are there, too. Photos, clothes, stuff like that.”

“Well, then. Seems to me like you all have it figured out here. Is Willem your leader?”

“Leader?” Devon tittered awkwardly. “Sure, one of ‘em. He’s ex-military, a Veteran. No, not a Guardian. When he and a local policeman joined forces at a hideout a few miles east of here they decided to relocate and help any other survivors along the way. Eventually they picked me up and a few others I was hiding with, just neighbors.”

“You lived in this area?”

“About a ten minute drive from here.”

Damien nodded. “And this policeman?”

“His name’s Darrel Preston. He can be an asshole sometimes but when the going gets tough he buckles down real well. You’ll meet him soon enough, I imagine.”

“Good.” Damien took a deep breath. “Have you used your gun before? I mean, on any of the things out there?”

“I’ve killed two Hounds and a handful of Imps in the past three weeks.”

“Well, then.”

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“Impressed?”

“Sure am.”

“I’m not all looks, ya know.”

“Ballard married you—I can’t say I wasn’t expecting it. You’re a strong enough woman to have lasted this long, with or without him. And now you’re talking to me. Stronger than I thought, perhaps.”

Devon took her eyes off of the Seraph and nodded to herself. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. When she opened them again she looked back over at him and spoke up.

“So what’s your story?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Where were you originally...*deployed*...and when? Where did you go from there? And is that guy in the cafeteria...Willem said his name’s Clive...he your original partner?”

“Yeah, Clive Farrow. We were deployed second week of August last year, in South Carolina. After that we made our way, on foot, northward. We were extracted via helicopter twice before coming this far for respite.”

“Wow...that’s quite a long ways.”

“Yeah. A lot seen and endured.”

“What’re you carrying over there?” she nodded to his weapons.

“Just the HOA standard-issue. Remington R5 RGP assault rifle, 6.8mm SPC.” Damien spoke like an automaton reading out data. “Heckler & Koch MP5K sub-machinegun, .40 caliber. Flashlight mounts and foregrip modifications. EOTech holographic sight on the R5. MRI Desert Eagle pistol, .50 Action Express. And an MTech Tactical sawback combat knife.”

He looked over at Devon, whose eyes were wide.

“That’s about it. Clive’s arsenal varies slightly because he’s a sharpshooter.”

“Ah, I see. Always has your back?”

“I would’ve died back in Greenville if it weren’t for him.”

“So you two are...friends?”

“As much as any two men could be.” Damien cleared his throat and lowered his voice. “Like your, uh, Darrel though—Clive can be quite an asshole, but under duress he proves himself through and through.”

“Quite a pair, you two, then.” Devon smiled. It was fleeting, but Damien would be lying if he said he didn’t enjoy it.

“What about you?”

“Well, all of them are friends. We’re all here to stay alive and help each other. But I, uh...I don’t have anyone *close*, not since Damien died. I mean...I’m sorry, I’m sure the names are messing with you.”

Damien shrugged. “You can call me Seraph if it suits you better. I don’t mind.”

“No, no. I just meant...nevermind.”

Damien’s eyes meandered. “Well, honestly, I was just asking about your gun. But I wasn’t about to interrupt you.”

Devon laughed awkwardly. “Well, shit.”

“You alright?” Damien asked.

“Yeah, yeah. Say...how many survivors have you met along your way up here?”

“A handful here and there. More often than not stragglers by themselves. We try to help who we can. Never take them along with us, though. Not for long, if we can manage to help them find someplace safe, usually, with other survivors.”

“Right, right.”

“Why do you ask?”

“Well, mostly because you just have these awkward mannerisms. Like the way you perceive things I say or laugh at.”

“Am I being robotic?” Damien said in a robotic voice.

Devon laughed uncomfortably. “Uh, no, but...yes, kind of. Not that I don’t expect it. I mean...I’ve heard that Seraphim can feel most emotions, but they don’t usually come as easily as humans. I mean, as *we* do...”

“My humor is a little jagged, I agree. I think spending so much time with Clive has made me that way. Don’t tell him I

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said so, though.”

Devon smirked. “Scout’s honor.”

Damien mimicked the raising of the hand.

“Wow, they really kept you guys up-to-date, huh? Global knowledge, the like.”

“Yeah, we’re all-knowing and shit. Sometimes I feel more clueless than an infant, though.”

“You don’t say?” Devon nodded.

“This war, the creatures’ origins, *Hell’s Fissure*, I mean everyone has their own opinions and theories. Even Seraphim do...I guess we just aren’t as candid about them as survivors.”

“Why do you think that is?”

“A façade of secrecy to protect our veneer of superiority,” Damien said fast-tongued.

“Wow. You hit that on the nose.”

Damien sighed. “I’m not belittling Seraphim, now. I just believe many of my kind aren’t on-par with why exactly we’re doing this. A lot of them enjoy the killing too much, like Clive. But Clive is a good man, I mean...his heart’s in the right place. And me? I have my moments. I love killing the creatures, because I know it’s purposeful, and perhaps Seraphim were manufactured to get the most joy out of it. I don’t know. But I also think that sometimes we get looked down on too much by...well, by humans.”

Devon imbibed everything he said, breaking it down to respond as honestly as she could. There was no challenge in this.

“So, what *is* your purpose?”

“To help preserve and prolong the existence of mankind on this planet. That’s the big picture, anyway.”

“And you really believe this ‘war’ is going to end?”

“Eventually. I can’t say I know when or how, but it will.”

Damien paused. “You don’t?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. I have my theories, as any person does these days.”

“What do they entail, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Those things out there, those monsters,” she said,

starting to rise to her feet. “They’re a strain of evil. They probably aren’t numbered. If they were, that would insinuate we could win this conflict just by killing them off. And I dunno, I just doubt that. If they were pure evil, they’d probably never stop. But if they’re just a manifestation of it, then their weaknesses are as varied as ours. I think that in time, if we stay strong, they’ll recede. They’ll fall back into their ‘fissure’ or whatever and just fade. They’ll become history, the kind that’s better to forget about than document.”

Damien cocked an eyebrow and stood up.

“That’s quite the theory,” he said soberly.

“Would you agree?”

“I could. I think I at least want to.”

Devon nodded. “That’s a start.”

“Yeah. So...what now? Do you have some kind of routine here, every night?”

“It is getting pretty late, isn’t it?” Devon sighed. “Well, two hours after nightfall we usually group in the cafeteria and eat dinner. Things tend to stay pretty quiet here, as you can imagine, for our safety. Conversations en masse carry in whispers.”

“I understand.”

“But as it seems, we aren’t there just yet. Two hours after nightfall, that is.”

“No, that’s probably right about now...” Damien checked his watch.

“They sure did strap you Seraphim with reliable tech.”

“Sure did.” Damien looked around. “Say, what’s keeping these lights on?”

“Electricity.”

Damien smirked. “Good one.”

Devon shrugged. “Had to try. A lot of these people are really scarce with humor. I understand, but sometimes it’s the best way to cope with shit. Especially as heavy as all of this is.”

“Yeah, well, I can agree to an extent.”

“The school has a backup generator we managed to

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reboot when we moved in here a few weeks ago. We're running out of ballasts, though, so only about half of the ceiling fixtures function properly. Eventually none of them will, and we'll be in the dark. A little harrowing, but bound to happen as everyone knows."

"Better than being out *there* in the pitch black of the night. Clive and I can attest to that."

"I bet." Devon moved around the corner. She stopped a few feet away then returned to Damien and raised an eyebrow. "You wanna see my gun or not?"

"Of course," Damien said. "Lemme get mine."

"Safeties on, right?"

"What? No. We never toggle the safeties."

Devon stopped abruptly and lowered her voice. "Put the safeties on, please. These people get nervous like you wouldn't believe. It's a custom in here to arm your weapon's safety as soon as you're under the roof. We've had a couple of misfires over the past few weeks, and one suicide. I'm not saying flipping a switch on your gun will change that, but—"

"No worries, I can respect it. Not too sure about Clive, though." Damien toggled the safety switches on his weapons to 'off.' "Done."

"Okay. Thanks. Hopefully Willem and Clive can settle things on their end. Maybe the introduction of Darrel will help Clive."

"Doubtful, but we can definitely hope."

Devon smiled small and shook her head. "This way. Just stick close to me and don't look at them. Most of the people here aren't too amicable toward Seraphim. You're lucky Willem and I are."

"And Darrel?"

"Well, not so much."

"That stands to object to what you just said about Clive."

"Willem's pretty persuasive, and friendly. He hugely supports HOA's efforts and the Seraphim program. One of very, very few. Like I said...we can only hope."

Damien kept quiet and followed Devon to her locker, which was down a hallway that cut through the center of the school. The lockers were all dark blue down here. She stopped at one whose number plaque, as worn as it was, legibly read 208. She put in a combination and popped it open.

Looking around, Damien noticed that most of the lockers didn't have combination locks. Most were actually open, or missing their doors entirely, some warped as if a heavy weight had been thrown into them.

"What's with the lock?" he decided to ask. "So many of these don't have any."

"If you carry anything larger than a handgun, you're given a combination lock. We have so few of each to the point where we have more guns than locks, believe it or not, so some of the guys have to carry theirs around on their backs all the time."

"Oh, I see." Damien cleared his throat. "So what've you got in there?"

"I shouldn't take it out unless we're leaving for supplies or there's an emergency, like I said—people lose their shit fast in here. But take a look."

Damien peered inside. It was dim but he could see well enough. He recognized the black Colt M4, fitted with an underbarrel flashlight mount and lasersight. It had a basic retractable buttstock and standard iron sights for aiming.

"Very nice," he said. He knew that survivors weren't bound to get their hands on anything military-grade. He assumed this was gotten from a police station's armory, perhaps Darrel's. Worst-case scenario, a wrecked SWAT truck in town or she'd inherited it from a corpse. He didn't ask about any of that, though. "Extended magazine?"

"Ten rounds more."

"Excellent. Makes all the difference in the field. Fifty-six, I assume."

Devon nodded. She then indicated the semiautomatic pistol resting on the locker's top shelf. She withdrew it but kept

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it between them so only he could see.

"Glock 22, .40 cal," she said. "Standard-issue for local police. Most common sidearm around here. Big clip, decent punch. Reliable."

"And the M4?" Damien couldn't help it.

Devon returned the Glock. "Overturned armored truck. Wherever they had come from, or were going, had a big load in the back. Lot of money, too bad it's worthless now."

Damien snickered under his breath. "Don't tell that to Clive. He's a damn Seraph and would still take some."

"Yeah, not so different from a lot of the people I was with at the time."

"So," Damien sighed. "M4 and Glock, that's a pretty good setup. Anyone around here with military firepower?"

Devon shook her head. "A few more Colt M4's and some modified AR15's from home ownership. Apparently a lot of people around here like their guns. This is a small town, afterall. Got Mossberg pumps and Colt .45's, some Winchester double-barrels and six-shot revolvers. You'll see some sawed-off shotguns here and there. Most of the women who are armed, as few as there might be, only have handguns. Me and a couple of others seem fit enough to handle an AR. Unfortunately, no scoped rifles among us. Except for Clive, now."

Damien nodded. "Still, impressive. Most survivors, even those in groups, well, we've never crossed paths with any as large as this. And organized, docile."

"When a threat comes our way, we'll see about docile." Devon shut the door and secured the combination lock.

"I bet. Arsenal, though, even more impressive. Looks like we came to the right school."

"Sure did. Where, before this, were you guys?"

"CVS across the street. Before that, a few shops down the road. First stop was a thrift store that had more hostile activity than we bargained for."

"I noticed Clive was scratched up a bit. That happen there, or just outside?"

“Mostly there, but I think he had another close call in your front yard earlier. I haven’t had a chance to talk with him since y’all brought us in.”

“Right. I think you two should get together again, then. Wanna introduce me?”

“As who, my source’s wife?”

“I’m a widow, Damien, but I still hold his name true to mine and I’m human for what it’s worth. You live to help us; you have enough feeling and mind of your own to do whatever the hell you please. But you still insist on helping this species preserve its life. That makes us comrades. In a way, we’re still family. My husband’s *DNA* is inside of you. But...best we remain comrades. So yeah, introduce me as your source’s wife if you want. Introduce me as another able survivor here to help you as you help us, I’d prefer.”

Damien nodded, and offered his hand to Devon. He could tell that she would rather hug him, and even started to, but folded halfway for the handshake.

She had a firm grip, a firm gaze. Her voice was steadfast, her stance and composure strong. After their initial breakdown things had solidified in Devon Eckle Ballard. She prioritized things much like he had done earlier after his hallucinations intensified.

He certainly hoped they would go away now.

“Let’s go back to the cafeteria,” Devon said, and Damien followed at her heels. He had slung both of his weapons, so every few steps he strode there was a clatter of them knocking together on his back. It was a lick of discomfort but he didn’t tire from it.

When they reentered the cafeteria, most of the survivors present put their eyes to them. Devon patted the shoulders and backs of a few people as they walked by. Many of them regarded Damien with hard stares, but small handfuls offered courteous nods. Damien responded likewise to every one of them.

They reached the far end of one table, where Willem sat to Clive’s left and another man just opposite him. There were a

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few empty seats around them, as there had been with Damien earlier. Upon their arrival, Clive stood from his seat.

"Clive Farrow," Damien said, "this is Devon Eckle *Ballard*. Wife of the late Damien Ballard, my source Guardian, but more importantly a survivor amicable to us and our cause to help one another."

"It's a pleasure," Clive said, his voice raspy. They shook hands briefly, then the three of them took their seats. Damien sat to Clive's right and Devon opposite him, to the other man's left. This man was tall, with a rectangular face and spacious forehead. He had a widow's peak of high-cut hair and looked 'cleaner' than most of the survivors Damien had ever met. He had pale skin like porcelain and stubble along his jawline but bare under his nose. He was more muscular than Willem, wore a tarnished fitted white T-shirt and bore some tattoos around his bicep.

"Darrel Preston," the man said, his voice lighter than expected. Sitting, he offered his hand to Damien, who shook it with a nod.

"Damien Ballard," he replied. The assumption was made that Willem already informed Darrel, and probably Clive too, the relation between Damien and Devon, as it might be called, for there was no shock or surprise in either of them.

"Damien, I'm glad you two could get acquainted, and put any troubles behind you. We have a serious problem at hand."

Willem had an imperious, assertive voice. It was neither belittling nor haughty, which was already the impression Damien got from Darrel, but fact was Willem had his utmost attention. Furthermore, his respect. Devon's words had helped him take that leap already.

"I think I know what you're referring to," Damien replied. "If I may?"

"Just keep your voice down, Seraph," Darrel said.

"Respectfully, of course," Damien said, nodding at the terse Darrel with as little hostility in his voice as possible. He quieted as he spoke amongst them, and likewise they did as well.

Initially he sparked it with a single word, which carried its weight accordingly. “Resurgence.”

Their faces, save for Clive of course, distorted for the worse. Darrel leaned forward and expressed his disapproval of what Damien had to say, as if it was a fabrication. He formed a white fist but Willem kept him from slamming it into the table.

“You think I’m making the shit up?” Damien retorted.

“He’s right, Darrel,” Willem said. “As unnerving as it is, Damien is right. Me and the others were just out there, and when we grabbed the Seraphim it was rather obvious that something was a bit...off. The amount of hostile activity was *surging*—and there was nothing normal about it. A frenzy of Hounds and Imps, sure, but not to those numbers and certainly never two Roughnecks at once.”

“We’ve seen it before,” Clive said, thinking out loud.

“Yes, but that was out in the country.” Damien sighed shook his head. “Look, I know you all don’t want to hear it, but as truth it comes heavy nonetheless. Trust us, we were barricaded in that CVS across the street for as long as we could before the howling started. Hounds in the *dozens*. Imps all over their backs, might as well have been remora. Place was *crawling* with activity, to the amounts of which even *we* haven’t experienced before.”

“Not to mention the tremors,” Clive mentioned.

“Yeah, we felt them, too,” Devon said with a shake of her head. “Fleeting, but palpable still.”

“What’ve you told the others?” Damien asked Willem.

“Nothing,” Darrel replied first.

Willem sighed. “Not yet.”

“Well, I suggest you do. What do your defenses look like? Clearly y’all are well-organized. Do you have an escape route if things get too hot?”

“Defenses?” Willem practically chuckled. “Damien, this isn’t exactly a fortress. It’s an abandoned school we use as a temporary safe haven for survivors. We don’t have turrets and slats for guns in the windows. *Everything* that goes to the outside

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is heavily boarded-up. If we need to leave, we pry them off and nail ‘em shut upon return, sometimes sooner. Hell, even the A/C ducts leading to the roof are sealed off.”

Damien shook his head. A solemn expression washed over his face. He looked to Clive, who appeared ready to stand up and leave altogether. Damien gestured for some patience from his partner.

“What would you rather do, Willem,” Damien asked quietly. “Stay here and defend it for all your worth, or haul ass and *leave*, find some other place?”

“Christ, Damien! Look around you! We’re not *all* fit for combat. And I’m not about to leave behind those who aren’t for my own safety.”

“So you stay. Defend. Fight ‘til your hands bleed, unless they get to you first.” Damien nodded irresolutely. He was losing his patience now. “When this resurgence *really* hits, and it will come for this building, everyone here will feel it. *Everyone*. Now, I know what you’re saying—so hear me out. There’s a HOA outpost in Alexandria, that’s not too far east of here.”

“*Alexandria!*?” Devon exclaimed under her breath, a sharp whisper. “That’s a thirty minute drive!”

“So, three to four hours walking?” Damien said casually. “I don’t see the problem. It’s a lot better than your alternatives.”

“Which are?”

“Stay here and die.”

Darrel suddenly sprung to his feet, knocking over the chair he’d been sitting on.

“I’m gonna crack your head open,” he seethed, “make sure there’s just brains in there and not wiring.”

Clive sprung to counter Darrel’s intimidating glare, but Damien hadn’t flinched the slightest. He extended his left arm in front of Clive’s legs and motioned him to withdraw.

“We’re not cyborgs, you fucking weasel,” Clive growled under his breath. He eventually sat down, and Willem managed to persuade Darrel to do the same. Darrel picked up his chair and sat, burly arms crossed. He was borderline foaming at the mouth.

All eyes were on them.

"I didn't mean to offend any of you," Damien spoke calmly. "I've just assessed the situation to the best of my ability." He turned to face Willem. "Look, you have to believe me. You think two Roughnecks are bad? If this resurgence catches wind, you'll be seeing half a dozen of 'em running amok. One of 'em could ram through your barricaded doors with ease. A few with a couple of tries, through one of your brick walls. The Hounds would *overflow* these hallways. Imps would come down like acid rain. And Hybrids...as rare as they are, in the wake of a resurgence, no more."

"Let's not forget the Skinners," Clive grunted.

"Especially now, after nightfall." Damien sighed gutturally. "We both want to help you, but I tell you what...as much as I want to leave, it's best not to. Not right away, at least. Way I see it, we fend off for as long as we can. Calculate our chances depending on the populace outside—hell, maybe we'll get lucky with how many of 'em there are. Then we book it."

Willem nodded, stared at Darrel for a while, then over at Devon. Although bitter about leaving, Devon wasn't nearly as stubborn as Darrel.

"Let me show you Plan C," Willem finally said, standing. He gestured for the lot of them to follow him out of the cafeteria. All the while his words remained a mystery on the Seraphim's minds. Behind Willem were Damien and Clive, and trailing them were Devon and Darrel.

They took a right once out of the cafeteria, walking toward the gymnasium. It was about the size of the cafeteria, with an even higher ceiling. They entered it and to the Seraphim's surprise found supplies in bulk. There were even ammunition crates, some marked with local police insignia and others with HOA's own. The latter were probably salvaged from old Guardian drops either empty and then filled or residually occupied. Sleeping bags, gathered provisions, and toiletries were all present. Most of the packaged items were still sealed, awaiting usage.

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It was like a shelter in here.

"This is where we keep most of our miscellaneous supplies, and spare ammunition, a lot of which will never be used simply because they don't carry compatible weapons. So, you're welcome to help yourselves if you need any."

The Seraphim weren't about to decline the offer of 'free' ammunition outside of their own air-drops. But there was a time for that, and it wasn't right now. They followed Willem across the center of the once-polished oak basketball court to one corner of the gymnasium. Of the four sets of steel bleachers still protracted, one was withdrawn. They walked over to it, and Willem stopped beside it. Damien and Clive inched forward to peer down a large crater in the floor, blown through concrete and clay. A premade tunnel appeared to snake its way beneath the gymnasium. Its circumference was smooth concrete and could fit three people side-by-side with a few feet of extra head clearance.

"Plan C," Willem explained, "was just a name we gave this tunnel. According to the blueprints, there was an old tunnel beneath these bleachers, so we worked on unearthing it. Using gunpowder from ammo we'd never use and flares to boot, Darrel helped us blast through. We've explored the tunnel twice, and it needs no map. It's a direct shot to the outside, with only a couple of barriers we had to blast through."

"Outside?" Clive asked. "Where outside?"

"At the back of the soccer field behind the school," Darrel replied firmly. "It emerges and appears as a storm drain. There is a steel grating fencing it off, and we've kept it that way to keep things from coming in."

"How wide are the bars?"

"An Imp couldn't get through."

Clive nodded, impressed.

"If you guys could blast through concrete," Damien said, "I imagine some steel grating shouldn't be a problem."

"None the least." Darrel crossed his arms.

"So," Clive asked, "why Plan 'C'?"

"Well," Willem shrugged, "whenever things don't work

out the way you wanted, you go to Plan B. But when does Plan B ever actually serve its purpose properly?”

Damien nodded with a smirk. “Smart.”

“And this plan of yours, if we could go so far as calling it that,” Willem replied, “could it incorporate this tunnel?”

“There’s really no option. Way I see it, it’s our best shot. But our only other issue is transportation out of here. A school bus would be ideal. Is there a parking lot anywhere back there?”

“No, just suburbia surrounding the field.”

Damien ruminated briefly. He and Clive put their heads together, figuratively, while Devon paced around akimbo.

“How did Jesse get in that school bus?” Damien asked. “Did he just hop into one y’all had parked out front when you decided to help us earlier?”

“Yes, in fact, he did,” Willem said. “He’s kind of crazy.”

“Excellent. It’s just what we need. I suggest you contact him immediately, yourself, and ask if he’d be interested taking a school bus across the field for later use.”

“Are you serious?” Willem asked through an uneasy chuckle. “Now?”

“Better now than later, when they really kick up a fuss out there. Fact is, we need transportation; fortunately the creatures don’t attack inanimate objects, so the bus should be fine once there. What we do is, after defending ourselves inside for as long as we can, we go to Plan C for the escape. We pile out of the end, board the bus, and drive it through someone’s backyard to the nearest road. Go from there.”

Darrel gave Willem a strange look.

“Willem,” he finally said. “I don’t like these guys...especially that one—” Darrel nodded at Clive “—but I don’t think there’s a better plan than this. Especially if this resurgence shit is for real.”

“Told ya,” Devon whispered in Damien’s ear as Willem and Darrel spoke briefly amongst themselves. Damien smirked furtively and elbowed Clive, getting an indecisive smile out of him. They were a bit taken aback by Darrel’s sudden

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accordance, especially Damien.

It made him more confident about this reckless plan.

"Chances are Jesse won't do it without someone at his side," Willem finally said. "And, seeing as how he doesn't like Darrel much—"

"I can't imagine why," Clive muttered.

"—I think it'd be best if one of you two go with him. Afterall, it is your plan, and he does fancy Seraphim something fierce."

"I'll go," Clive said without hesitation.

"You sure?" Damien asked.

"Yeah. I could do with a new friend."

Damien smirked. "Alright, asshole, you got it."

"And in the meantime?" Willem asked.

"Devon, if you don't mind," Damien turned to her, "find Jesse—and Clive, follow her. That needs to be done sooner rather than later. Willem?"

"That's fine, Devon. Go on, and hurry."

Devon nodded to Willem, then beckoned Clive. He and Damien patted each other on the back as he leaved to follow Devon out of the gymnasium.

"Now," he sighed, "I suggest you and Darrel get armed. Go to the cafeteria, make the announcement. You'll probably get panic, but who wouldn't? At this rate, time is crucial. The later it gets in the night, the worse. Roughnecks are bound to sleep through 'til early morning, but I wouldn't be surprised if one or two make a special appearance. Chances are we'll face mostly Hounds and Skinners."

"And Imps," Darrel said.

"Yeah, of course. They're almost a given, but not to be forgotten." Damien cleared his throat. "I think that with all the entrances boarded up, you should appoint groups of armed men by each in preparation for a breach. It might be slow, but it's bound to eventually happen. Lay out a basic plan for withdrawal when shit hits the fan, set up improvised barricades for use when they fall back. And they will fall back, us that is, eventually.

Have this gymnasium the primary location, where you should appoint your armed women to help protect those who aren't, and the children. Once everyone has fallen back, we siphon out of this tunnel and board that bus."

"You forget one thing," Darrel said.

"What's that?"

"There are over seventy of us in this building. I don't reckon a school bus can fit that many people."

"Seventy, including the children?" Damien asked.

"Yeah, total headcount."

"I beg to differ, then," Damien said. "The average school bus seats thirty-six people, and that's not including the aisle. Children can occupy vacant laps to free seats for adults, and act as their manual safety belts. Aisles for adults, because we can handle it. Should be enough room."

Darrel nodded without saying a word.

"Alright? Anything else?" Damien asked, seeming ready to kick into sixth gear.

Willem extended his hand. "I appreciate your forwardness. I know we can be difficult people to work with sometimes, but we're hardheaded for a damned good reason."

"I'm not criticizing any one of you, Willem," Damien said, and gave a courteous nod to Darrel. "I understand, it's why Clive and I do what we do. Sure, we were cloned to do it, but who were we cloned from? Great men. *Brave* men, with good hearts. Humans, no less. We don't just ditch those virtues because we're clones."

Willem shook his head. "We're glad to have you aboard."

"Likewise," Damien said with an off smirk. "We couldn't have picked a better school."

He and Willem shared a fleeting laugh that led Darrel to loosen up with a smirk and shake of his head. Together the three men fast-walked back to the cafeteria, where Damien broke off from them to inspect the boarded-up entrances. He heard Willem's voice over the intercom moments later, calling

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everyone to the cafeteria for an emergency meeting.

After inspecting most of the entrances and confirming their stability, Damien met with Clive and Jesse in the gymnasium. They collected ammunition, Jesse with his own Colt M4, and bid farewell to Damien individually. He wished them both truckloads of luck, then saw them out through a side door in the gym leading to the parking lot.

The night was surprisingly still, lending them a cushion of time in their plan. Damien, meanwhile, set his back against the wall and waiting in nervous anticipation of his partner's return.

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Jesse Fisher got Clive's vote as a survivor favorite pretty fast. He drove a mean school bus, boasted about it, and actually looked upon Seraphim fondly. His confidence was substantial and in a world as war-torn as this, that counted for a lot. During their armament Clive had noticed Jesse's dexterity with his firearm and although he hadn't seen him actually use it yet, he already had good faith on the matter. He trusted Jesse more than he did any other survivor he had ever met, and told him this much.

Jesse was, for lack of a better word, honored.

They rode the Type C school bus across the surprisingly empty parking lot in the deep night toward the soccer field. It was basically a vast expanse of dry grass with very little terrain fluctuations. There were decrepit soccer goals on either end, as the field was disproportionally between a rectangle and square. Fortunately they had the shorter width to travel in the bus, and Jesse handled the few bumps it had to offer like a man.

Although the two spoke very little on their trip, the bond had already been formed. It was solid, bound to snap eventually, but its substance helped rejuvenate any decaying energies inside either of them.

"So you really think we can fit everyone in here?"

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“Sure thing!” Jesse replied almost too buoyantly. “We could force eighty people if we needed to.”

As the bus bounced along some of the ridges along the field, its chassis a bit too rubbery for Clive’s liking, he looked behind him. Clive sat firmly in the seat opposite the driver’s, his feet in the aisle. The Blaser’s buttstock rested on his feet and his left hand never left it, while his right held onto a vertical bar nearest the steps. His gaze studied ever so briefly the rows of tattered brown leather seats and the narrow aisle with a ribbed metal floor. Packing seventy-odd people in here wouldn’t be the most comfortable thing, but Jesse was right—it was possible.

“Just won’t be a Caddy, right?” Clive suggested.

“Sacrifice luxury for efficacy.”

“I can abide by that.”

“We’re gonna have to!” Jesse said, raising his voice as the bus neared the far edge of the field. They drove over a big dip, rocking the bus on its chassis to the point where Jesse’s head came inches from touching the ceiling. He started howling excitedly. Good thing this bus had windows—most of them, at least.

“Not much fazes you, does it?” Clive asked.

“Not really,” Jesse said, stopping the bus with a hard lurch at the edge of the field. He had turned it so that its right side, with the doors, faced the edge where the tunnel exit emerged below. The front of the bus therefore faced the backs of some houses less than a hundred feet away. Jesse exhaled with a whistle and keyed off the engine, then stood to face Clive. “Do I make you nervous?”

“Not if you know how to use that thing.”

Jesse brandished his sightless M4 and said, “Her name’s Linda—two Hounds and three Imps has fallen to her power. Yeah, I know how to use it.”

Jesse didn’t explain why he was so comical and sarcastic about everything, nor elaborate on his jubilant nature, but Clive figured he didn’t need to. Like Clive, except far more ‘unstable’ in his eyes, Jesse was this way to better cope with the heaviness

of everything lately. For Clive, it was all he knew in a sense. For Jesse and the other survivors, it was newer than a 2016 Lamborghini Veneno in a poor kid's driveway. Most of them just didn't know how to react to most of it, often panicking even when they had a weapon in their hands. He could only bring himself to understand it to an extent.

Clive, as a smug Seraph, liked to believe he always had everything under control. He has never once lied to Damien, but to himself was another story altogether.

"You're a good guy, Jesse," Clive said.

"You too, Clive. Just don't try to kiss me."

Clive laughed. "Oh, man. You're good."

"So, you ready?"

"Always. You?"

"Not really. But let's do it."

Clive exited the bus first, then Jesse after him so he could seal the doors. They didn't want any Hounds nesting in there for when they leave later.

"How's it look?" Jesse asked without turning around.

"Surprisingly clear."

"For now. Alright, I'm done." Jesse turned to occupy Clive's side. "Fuck me, it's dark."

"Yeah. I've got an NV scope on this thing, so how about you run out in front of me and I'll keep my distance to cover."

"Sounds risky, but what isn't these days?"

"Pretty much."

Jesse set out ahead of Clive, running without sprinting. He was carrying two extra magazines for his M4 and they were in separate pockets so as to minimize noise.

Clive watched him through his NV scope as well as their surroundings. Jesse crossed the field without problem, reaching the door where three raps later brought him inside. Damien held it open and stared outside, his gaze sweeping the darkness. He glimpsed a brief glare off the Blaser's scope, too subtle for anyone else to notice. He beckoned Clive to hurry, signaling that it was all clear.

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Yet Damien couldn't see what Clive was right now.

Across the street from the school, under the gas station, herded a horde of Hounds and above it fluttering Imps. At the moment the Hounds' speed was lackadaisical, but he knew it wouldn't remain that way for long. So he picked up speed, briefly lowered the Blaser so that he could run faster and more safely. More than halfway across the field lent him a clearer sight of Damien without the aid of the rifle. Now he was curling himself around the brick corner of the school, stepped out of the doorway, which was a dimly lit rectangle to Clive.

Damien's eyes seized the sight that Clive had ingested just seconds earlier.

Hounds in the double-digits, and a pair of Skinners sprinting down the street. They practically blended into the night, and would be invisible to anyone else at this range, but Damien was a Seraph. While his vision was not nocturnally perfected, it certainly excelled above any human's.

Clive noticed Damien suddenly recoil and slip back inside. He returned with his Remington shouldered, but Clive waved him off. He did not want to yell, hoping to draw as little attention as possible—especially with 'Plan C' inside—although he had a greater urge to fire the Blaser. Finally he reached the side-door into the partially lit gymnasium and was welcomed inside by Jesse. Damien slapped him on the back and pulled the door shut, sealing it as quietly as it would go.

Jesse was panting but Clive could hardly be called out-of-breath. He and Damien reunited as if it had been hours. Clive praised Jesse's combat-readiness and enthusiasm to Damien, which immediately rejuvenated the young man. Damien smirked briefly and said that it was a beautiful thing, unexpected camaraderie.

"By now Willem's broken the bad news to everyone," Damien sighed. "I suggest we get to our posts."

They exited the gymnasium, passing through a sort of recess area between it and the main halls. There was a small television set suspended from the ceiling twenty feet from the

double-doors, facing the far side of the wall. The space was about fifty feet wide from wall-to-wall, allowing a lot of space for students to gather during their lunch break and afterschool. For their execution of Plan C later, it would provide plenty of space for survivors to reach the gymnasium without overcrowding.

Damien and Clive hoped that the survivors would handle themselves better than others they've witnessed. With their great numbers, leadership, structural fortification and weaponry, they assumed panic wouldn't be such an impulsive reaction.

As they reached the long hallway outside of the cafeteria, they had to slalom between idle survivors. There were at least fifteen strewn throughout the hall just standing there, like loiterers. Others were still filing out of the cafeteria doorways, lethargically with a bleached fear on their faces.

Damien bumped into Willem as he exited the cafeteria. His hands found the lapels to his brown leather jacket and pulled him aside.

"What the hell's going on here?" Damien asked quietly, his voice like sandpaper on cotton.

"We're getting ready," Willem said, disappointment already tangible in his tone. "But so many of 'em are scared outta their minds."

"I don't get it," Clive stepped forward, shaking his head. "You guys have a sound building, decent barricades, more guns than any other group o' survivors we've ever seen, a good many of you and actual *leadership*. Or...was I mistaken?"

Willem suddenly pushed off of Damien and Darrel came in to throw Clive against the wall. Jesse wormed between them just before things got potentially ugly.

"Hey, hey!" Jesse barked, grabbing Willem and Damien's attention as well. "Let's remember what the fuck we're up against, okay? It's *us* versus *them*," Jesse pointed a furious finger at the nearest boarded-up entrance. "So unless you wanna die divided, I suggest we fight together." He stepped up real close and lifted his chin, bearing his teeth and widening his

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eyes, sporting a maniacal grin. “Get your war paint on, boys. It’s game time.”

They watched Jesse pump his M4 into the air and howl out, rallying a group of survivors—men and women alike—down the hallway. They disappeared around the corner leading to the lobby, leaving a rather baffled crowd.

“Now,” Clive huffed, straightening himself out, “if only *all of us* had that kind of attitude. Myself included.”

Damien smirked and slapped Clive on the back, squeezing his shoulder and shaking him. Damien regarded Darrel with dark eyes and Willem with lighter ones. Then he and Clive turned their backs to the men, heading down the hallway. As they went they tried persuading others to join in guarding the entrances, while telling those unarmed to meet in the gymnasium.

“Hey!” a woman’s voice caught the Seraphim just before they turned the corner. They turned to look around, and eventually saw Devon jogging toward them. Her tanktop wasn’t tied up anymore, instead falling down around the top of her jeans, and her hair bound into a ponytail. Her Colt M4 was clutched firmly in her left hand. She panted as she stopped in front of them.

“Devon,” Damien nodded. He imagined she still hadn’t gotten entirely comfortable with calling him by name, no matter what she had said. He didn’t blame her.

“I’m gathering the unarmed women and children for the gym,” she said. “Where are you two headed?”

The nearest entrance was a pair of double-doors thirty feet behind them. It was densely boarded up and surrounded by a group of six armed survivors, including one woman. All of a sudden the doors rattled shrilly, and something glass shattered on the other side of the boards. The survivors were startled, flinching back, and couple of them yelping. The wooden boards started shuddering, but not buckling.

That would come once the outside doors were ripped off, or pushed heavily forward.

“Willem!” Damien shouted, waving his arm over his head. “Willem, Darrel, they’re here!”

“We’re heading to the lobby,” Clive said to Devon. “It’s got the most doors per one entrance, so it’ll receive the most hits. Probably mostly Hounds. Hopefully no Roughnecks—I didn’t see any outside.”

“You *saw* them coming?” Devon asked.

“From across the street, yeah,” Clive said. “Just after Jesse parked the bus and we pulled back to gym.”

Devon swallowed and fervently nodded. She looked to Damien, who was still waving Willem over. He and Darrel were now advancing through the finally-moving crowd of people—some elusive, others purposeful.

“Be careful, alright?” She snagged Damien’s bicep to get his attention. “I’ll see you at the tunnel.”

“Okay, you too. We’ll try to hold down the fort as long as we can.”

They shared a final nod between each other, then part. The Seraphim were just around the corner when Willem and Darrel caught up.

“You two heading for the lobby?” Willem asked.

A loud smashing sound coupled with metallic rattling and panicked shouts erupted down the hallway. A similar chorus repeated itself intermittently at the side entrance they just passed.

“Speaking of which,” Clive muttered.

“Yeah, that’d be the lobby,” Damien nodded. “You two?”

“Backdoors,” Willem said.

“Both of you?” Clive asked.

Darrel nodded once. “It’s almost as big as this one. There should already be others there. We’ll reinforce ‘em.”

“Be careful, guys,” Damien said.

“When aren’t we, Darrel?” Willem asked with a twisted comicality. Darrel smirked wryly and they shuffled past the Seraphim, hooking a right down the central hallway from the

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lobby.

Damien and Clive branched off from behind them to guard the front doors, which consisted of three sets of doubles. The six doors on the other side of the boards and even some piping were being slammed relentlessly. The first row were probably Hounds. Behind them waited the leaner Skinners, anticipating the rush once a single inlet was achieved. Any airborne Imps, meanwhile, probably worked their way toward single-door emergency exits and anything on the roof. Damien hoped that everything was properly secured up there, for what little remained of the building.

“Hey, Willem!” Clive pirouetted to shout.

Halfway down the long hallway that essentially gutted the school, Willem paused while Darrel continued forward. He turned and shouted inquisitively.

“Where’s Jesse stationed!?” Clive asked.

“Back-side exit, far left of us under stairwell!”

“Copy!” Clive replied with a thumbs-up, and Willem pressed onward. He then turned to face a slightly quizzical Damien. “So we got three of our boys backing us, some at the emergency exit that way,” Clive pointed down the hallway to their right, where two people guarded a steel door under a busted ‘exit’ sign, “Devon with the defenseless in the gym, us right here, and some others nearest the cafeteria. Am I missing any?”

“You got it all, Clive Farrow.”

“Don’t I always, Ballard?”

Damien sighed and shook his head. “When you aren’t being a total dick.”

Clive clicked his tongue. “It’s my nature.”

“Excuses.”

The ramming on the other side of the lobby entrance suddenly stopped, unnerving them more than when it had been going ruthlessly for nearly five minutes. Some of the boards here and there had begun to shudder off their nails or vice versa, but nothing popped off just yet. Now an eerie silence settled over the lobby, although the same couldn’t be said elsewhere.

There was a howling next, and more silence before the ramming returned. When it did, however, it was isolated. The double-door furthest to the right—what would be the creature's far left—made a twisting metal sound and two boards along the top frame busted loose. Splinters skidded across the floor and two survivors screamed as they recoiled.

Damien counted twelve survivors plus he and Clive in the lobby. Most of the men wielded Ithaca and Remington shotguns, these appearing the most fortified survivors present. Others held revolvers and sawed-off shotguns. One of the women had an MP5A4, a few others Glock 22's. He assumed the men with M4's and AR15's were at the backdoor or by the cafeteria. He immediately regretted not rallying more well-armed survivors into the lobby.

Then another walloping blow to that area of the entrance, and this time the top frame buckled violently inward. A few rebars that had been strapped to boards for greater fortification suddenly groaned, glass shattered on the other side, and nails popped loose.

"They're focusing on one area for quicker ingress," Damien grunted. He told Clive to set up just around the corner, with his back to the hallway leading down to the exit door at its end, and train his Blaser on this certain spot. Clive complied with pleasure, while Damien set his feet as if stone at the lobby's center, heels grinding into decrepit tiles. His Remington was shouldered and he waited for the terribly inevitable. He raised his voice to incite strength and willpower into the flakier survivors around him. "Hold your positions! Whatever comes through those doors, mow it the fuck down!"

"Steady!" Clive added, his voice raspy but imperious.

Those previously weak in the knees now solidified their composes, or at least pretended to. Their weapons raised, hands and arms shaking less noticeably, hammers were cocked and slides pumped.

There was a brief pause as Damien imagined at least three Hounds withdrawing from the particular double-doors like

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a band to a slingshot. Then they charged forward, heads and shoulders lowered, probably a fourth barreling on top of them for added impact. The mammalian battering ram made progress—the doorframe buckled, boards were snapped off, and one Hound actually busted through. Fortunately one of the doors snapped in instead of out, pinching the creature’s hindquarters in the jagged hole made. It yelped out and within a heartbeat of its penetration the top of its head was blown off by buckshot.

To Damien’s surprise, it wasn’t Clive who killed it.

A middle-aged man in ragged clothes holding a black Mossberg 590 pumped the sliding stock with a shit-eating grin on his face.

Unfortunately, the emotional triumph was short-lived.

The Hounds behind the dead one only used their comrade’s corpse as a wedge, applying force to it until more boards snapped off. Eventually its slackened body tumbled through, scratched up and bloody, while its much livelier brethren gained admission.

Two Hounds managed to squeeze through a widening hole in the weakened barrier, entering the lobby at once albeit clumsily. They skidded and received multiple gunshot wounds from the surrounding survivors, killing them fast.

Clive, furthest from the group and apparently the tallest, heard gunfire echo through the halls behind him. He glanced down his right and spotted no activity at the exit door, but the two survivors there were staring down the hallway to their right. Clive held Jesse in his thoughts but returned to affix his focus on the lobby predicament.

Everybody had funneled their attention to the far right, where the enemy had breached first. Damien spotted to his left a pair of boards buckle and part of an entire board suddenly punch inward, breaking through a spacious piece of barrier. A vibrant arm reached in, its clawed paw swiping at air.

Damien put a few bullets into it, eliciting a painful howl on the other side of the doors, and the arm withdrew.

“Spread out, feet and focus, feet and focus!” Damien

shouted.

Another Hound burst through the main hole to their right, followed by a second and third, and two Imps that managed to wiggle through. Clive brain-splattered the first, the second was riddled with buckshot and small arms fire, marking two more dead on the floor. Their rank blood formed an ever-expanding puddle that managed to alarm the survivors more than the creatures themselves.

The third hound leapt past one of its dead kin to snap at the nearest survivor getting too close with his shotgun. There were too many survivors scattering around the area for Clive to get a clear shot. The Hound's jaws clamped down around the man's left arm, taking it off below the shoulder, spewing blood across the floor and spraying a comrade's face. She shrieked in fear, dropped his Glock and turned tail. Her shoe lost traction in a puddle of human blood on the floor and she fell forward. Her face struck tile with a nasty crack of cheekbone and teeth.

Damien went forward to help, yelling at the survivors to move because most were either reloading or locking-up. Then a woman pushed forward, short brown hair and fierce eyes, wearing a bruise on her cheek and gauze around her left forearm. She let her MP5A4 rip across the Hound's left side as it gnashed through the poor man's arm. The man was supine on the floor, shotgun out of reach, in shock from the enormous pain.

The woman emptied the clip into the Hound, eventually putting it down. A man opposite her approached with a black Colt Python revolver and capped the creature for good measure.

"Away from the hole, pull back!" Clive hollered.

Damien redirected his attention from the dead Hound to the jagged hole that had dangerously widened, and the freshly forming one at the other end of the entrance.

A few other survivors that had backed up were firing their handguns at the Imps bouncing around the ceiling like lost bats. One of the creatures was clipped in the wing and plummeted, but not weakly. It barreled into a woman with a Glock 22, breaking one of her arms and ripping an ear off with a

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swipe of its hand. Along with it the creature took half of her face, spraying the floor with more blood. She collapsed under its weight and her head bounced on the tile. The Imp was on top of her clawing and gnashing for all but two seconds. Too many of the survivors were backing away instead of shooting, perhaps afraid they'd hit the woman instead.

Clive took the shot. He had a narrow vantage but he was sick of waiting. The Imp's head exploded and the bullet smacked into a wall near the front office afterward. The woman beneath was dead, and soon so was the armless man when two more Hounds piled in. One of them grabbed his right foot in its jaws and pulled him away swifter than even Damien had expected. His own bursts from the R5 were proving fruitless with so many survivors overlapping their routes, so he decided to push past them.

A shotgun-wielding man, though a different one from before, pumped a few loads of 12-gauge buckshot into the other Hound. It took the scattered shots across the shoulders and chest before lunging at him. Damien stepped in to pelt its face with a volley of 6.8mm ammunition, taking out one eye and a shapely chunk of skull. As it whimpered and recoiled, others funneled in but two more survivors acted on Damien's strength. A revolver bucket and kneecapped the creature, a Glock 22 spat half a clip into its hindquarters.

The Hound was dead and done for in a matter of seven seconds.

Unfortunately this was sufficient time for the others.

Two survivors were attacked just as quickly, one of them collapsing under the weight of a Hound with rapid-fire jaws. His throat was in the back of its own in a heartbeat and it lapped at the arterial gush of blood like a dehydrated kid at the water fountain. Another was the woman with the MP5A4, whose muzzle was illuminating beneath the belly of the creature. It had tackled her to the ground, but she didn't give up. Nearly twenty 9mm bullets had punched through the Hound's internal organs and out its back by the time she died under its claws. They had

dug into both shoulders to pin her down, despite the tenacity of an irate trigger finger. The creature lumbered off of her, near-death, and a survivor with a revolver finished it off, albeit too late for the woman.

Clive was frustrated, and furious.

He had never quite felt like this before. He started weaving his aim between people, making risky calls and firing with minimal hesitation. He managed to lobotomize two successive Hounds as they entered the lobby, but by the third the hole in the boarded-up doors doubled in size. A vertical frame beam burst inward, causing this. The amount of pressure outside was immense, and ruthless.

Clive frighteningly pictured at least twice as many Hounds as he had seen earlier. His skin crawled at the prospect of them getting in here and permeating these halls with their callous atrocities. He then remembered the gymnasium, filled with clusters of unarmed women and some children, with but Devon E. Ballard to safeguard them.

He did not doubt her capabilities, but in the current situation none of them were exactly up to par with what came.

This resurgence was more than a test. It was a final solution to their human enemy. An onslaught after so much reprieve.

“Get back!” Damien barked at a man with an Ithaca 37 shotgun, inching toward the buckling doors to the left of the entrance. He flinched and withdrew, rising the shotgun’s buttstock to his shoulder. Damien knelt and waited. It came faster and stronger than he was expecting.

Two Hounds charged not only into the double-door but through them. One slid into the lobby on top of an unhinged door, its frame scraping along the tile. The other’s left leg was crushed and broken, crippling it with a slow reorientation. The shotgun-wielding man waived its fate on his own accord, killing it with two shots. Its flesh ripped and poured blood all over the tile. The other slid right past Damien, nearly knocking him over, but he caught himself and swept a stream of gunfire in its

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direction. Eight shots put its left shoulder out of commission and it lurched forward, then rolled off of the door. It crashed into the far wall, shattering tile and dizzying its senses.

Damien finished it off quicker than he liked.

Meanwhile, Clive reloaded and called it out.

With a curt sigh Damien realized he would need to soon as well. But not yet. He helped the shotgun man to his feet and back further. During a brief pause of gunfire in the lobby Damien heard shots ring out down the hall toward the cafeteria, and screams and further back into the building.

“Go see it cafeteria needs help,” Damien said, having grabbed the shotgun man by the arm. He coughed and mumbled, the nodded and shuffled off. He had dark curly brown hair with a deep southern accent and twenty-something face. He acted with some jitters but overall appeared a strong candidate for reinforcement.

Damien didn’t catch his name. He began to regret not knowing more of their names.

He wouldn’t forget ‘Cameron,’ though.

“Skinners!” someone bawled, one of the survivors. He turned to run and a pair of large hands sizeable enough to palm Sylvester Stallone’s skull curled around his shoulders. Impossibly long claws sunk into his flesh and the black creature towering behind him grinned evilly, nightmare incarnate.

Others started screaming and several bolted entirely. One woman was caught by a lashing Hound’s paw, ripping through her calf and slowing her down for a penultimate pounce.

The man who cried wolf for a damn good reason died quicker, the only thing to be thankful for at the moment. The Skinner’s upper-jawed needlelike teeth slammed down into his cranium, puncturing brain and killing him instantly. It then took his head clean off with a spiraling swirl of blood, an instant before Clive stepped up to put a .338 between its arachnid eyes. Its own brain matter splashed the face of another as two more Skinners and a pair of Hounds entered the lobby. One of the Skinners just stood and grinned for a moment, ingesting the

beautiful chaos of the scene. The other leapt around swifter than should be possible, eviscerating two survivors in a matter of three seconds.

“Hounds!” somebody drawled in a hoarse scream.

Clive turned to stare down the hallway he was previously occupying to see Jesse yelling and sprinting. Behind him, at the end of the hallway where the corner turned away from the exit door to join with another, three Hounds careened into view. One tumbled into a survivor by the unyielding steel emergency exit door, immediate wipeout. The other survivor ran, clearly having not heard Jesse’s former shouts or simply in shock.

Clive brought the Blaser to aim, and managed to kill one with a rough headshot. But the other evaded his next one, and leapt onto the only other human trailing Jesse. The Hound’s jaws enclosed on the back of his skull, canines sinking into his scalp. He had only a few seconds to scream.

By the time Clive had bolted another round for action, Jesse reached him at the lobby’s edge. He slowed, but did not stop. He only kept yelling “Hounds, run, to the gym!”

Cockeyed, Clive slowly turned to stare down the hallway. A literal wave of Hounds poured around the corner, many tumbling over each other. His eyes widened and his heart skipped a beat. He shouted Damien’s name as he blindly ran for him.

Damien emptied a magazine into an agile Skinner before turning to face a pair of Hounds breaking through the second makeshift entrance.

“Run, Damien, go!” Clive’s voice hooked his cheek as he secured a fresh clip. Damien swung his head to realize that Clive just ran past him and what few survivors remained in the lobby were peeling out after him.

As if he needed another invitation, Damien glanced down the hallway leading to the nearest emergency exit. He glimpsed the stampeding Hounds and broke into a sprint down the opposite hallway. He trailed Clive by a good twenty paces or so, running amongst other survivors. Eighty percent of the lobby’s

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original force had already been killed, and it sadly seemed that those who fell first were mostly the strongest.

Damien cursed under his breath as he ran.

Clive pulled a hard left around the corner on approach to the cafeteria, and bumped into someone idling back-and-forth. He stood in the middle of the hallway, lazily clutching a ragged crimson stump that used to be his left arm, bitten off below the shoulder. Blood rilled down his lips and there was a dark melancholy in his eyes that would never be removed. Clive slowed and returned to him, trying to help the man but then he glimpsed three Hounds by the nearest entrance feeding on two survivors. One of them abruptly lifted its head, eyes narrowing on him and the wounded survivor, blood and saliva dripping from its fangs.

And then Damien rounded the corner, running into Clive and nearly knocking him over. They caught each other and Clive was essentially dragged by Damien midstride to continue down the hall. They passed the cafeteria, where a few survivors with less brains than an Imp piled into as if it would be a safe refuge. Jesse, far ahead, continued shouting “Plan C! To the gym!” but these few were beyond persuasion.

“We’re gonna get to that gymnasium and have nobody left to *fucking* evacuate!” Damien snapped at Clive, feeling like he might do so mentally if it were possible for a Seraph.

“Hold on, man, we’re almost there! At least Devon’s got all the women and kids in—”

Something tall and black suddenly collided with the few survivors between them and Jesse up ahead. It had emerged from the hallway to their right, which—if taken—wrapped around the back of the school and returned to the lobby. Two survivors suffered broken bones and a third was actually seized by the black figure, which was an abomination of a thing everyone simply knew as a ‘Hybrid.’

It had gotten its name aptly as it were, because of its humanoid figure from the waist-up. The face was more like an emaciated orangutan than man, with spiny white hair protruding

backwards across its scalp and jagged teeth. Its shoulders were broad, arms defined, and hands ended in three-fingered claws. Its abdomen was severely bloated to shape to its bulkier lower half, which was arguably reptilian despite a slick blue-black skin. Its burly legs were hocked to provide greater stability, and each foot was grounded by three toes of a sharp nature. The thick tail was more powerful than a Hound's and was probably effective in adding balance during faster strides.

Overall the Hybrid was by far the fiercest creature for a variety of reasons, although it tended to lumber more than Hounds and sometimes even Roughnecks. Its versatility was heightened by its capability to smell hormonal fear in the air, which some theorized was connected to the detection of secretive sweat glands.

The creature stood seven feet tall during its normal stance, where its torso leaned forward slightly. When it erected its back to align its neck and sniff the air, it could be measured at nine and a half feet.

At present it loomed over its current victim, and wasted little time in consuming the survivor's face.

"Get down!" Damien yelled, waving his arms at the two people wobbling around it like extras in a monster movie. Once he had a clear shot he took it, knowing nonetheless that the man in its clutches was long dead. Or at least he hoped so, glimpsing what the creature had done. His rising burst caught the Hybrid in the right shoulder and then that side of its face, splashing an oily blood onto the ceiling its scalp nearly touched.

Clive shouldered the Blaser and took a shot that blindsided it with a gruesome effect. The nearly headless creature sunk to the ground, its lifeless victim like a ragdoll in its arms. The injured survivors shuffled forward, and the Seraphim followed, but as they passed the hallway to their left zero comfort was restored.

More creatures were en route, among them one Hybrid, three Skinners, and two Hounds.

Most of the survivors that had made it this far were

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beyond that hallway and scrambling now through this open area before the gymnasium.

And then Clive glimpsed a flash of long hair and a face left of it that he didn't care for much. Nonetheless he loomed forward to Damien's surprise and shouldered his Blaser. He was low on ammunition, but had the UMP-45 on his back and Desert Eagle at his hip.

"Willem, Darrel, *c'mon!*" Clive yelled.

Damien's eyes widened. He stepped forward, too, then felt a hand tug at his shoulder. He turned to see Jesse's distraught face. It was far from jovial or energetic. He looked as if near-death, but Damien saw no wounds. Although there was a light sheen of crimson on his face, like sweat, but it wasn't his—

"Stare less, speak more," Damien growled.

"They got into the gymnasium." Jesse's voice was hollow. He didn't even blink, barely moved his lips.

Damien felt his heart sink.

A clap of gunfire rang out behind Jesse, through the gaping double-doors, echoing in the gymnasium. Damien lurched past Jesse, who started in the opposite direction.

"C'mon!" Clive barked, standing at the base of three steps leading down to the area in front of the gymnasium. He was waving his hand toward himself, beckoning Willem and Darrel's haste. Willem tripped down the stairs, Clive catching him and staggering until their backs aligned with the wall. Darrel came next, Jesse skidding to a stop to help him if he needed it. Any and all hostilities between the individuals were lost to oblivion in this moment; their willpower drove them toward survival, which meant proper cooperation.

Meanwhile, Damien took in the sight set before him.

Imps had broken through boarded-up windows high above the bleachers and just under the ceiling of the gymnasium. They were now swarming about, at least eight still airborne, although about that same number littered the hardwood floor. A few survivors had managed to reach the gymnasium earlier and they immediately lent Devon a hand with the repelling of the

creatures. Unfortunately, the Imps were persistent and less careless of killing than they were maiming.

A mauled survivor became a dead one rather quickly.

Devon had her hands full, and nearly half of the defenseless survivors were already dead. Damien spotted children's corpses strewn across the bleachers, probably from Imps that had managed to scoop them up only to drop once the deed was done. That being said, none of them appeared to be moving the slightest.

The term 'survivor' no longer applied to them.

Damien took all of this in within a few intense seconds. He then rushed into the bowels of the gymnasium, hating that the armed survivors' numbers were drastically dwindling because they kept scattering. To his proud surprise, the women and children kept to a close-knitted cluster nearest Devon towards the back of the gymnasium. Given, it was evident that this hadn't been the case earlier. The panic of intruding Imps had probably caused them to disperse, resulting in a lot of casualties no one or few people could prevent.

Damien began shooting at the Imps, putting two down quicker than others could even clip one. Although they were human survivors with little to no weapons training, it wasn't the worst reason for their futility. They were left to the likes of revolvers and shotguns, greatly crippling their accuracy.

Outside of the gymnasium, a worse threat posed itself.

Two Hounds skittered around the corner above the steps by the hallway they'd just emerged from. Their claws scraped along the tile, back ends swung out behind them. Their jaws salivated profusely and snapped prematurely, snarls filling the hallway with both sound and rankness. The one nearest the hallway leapt down first, but was blown away by the pair of guns that were Clive and Willem right off the bat. The other faced a hip-firing Jesse, which pattered its chest and shoulders with bullets before it touched down. Darrel skittered back with only a Glock 22 in his hand, since a Hound had snagged his rifle when he and Willem were defending the back entrance. He fired

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a few shots that caught the Hound in the mouth and throat, killing it before it could reach a reloading Jesse.

The respite that came was gone just as quickly.

An obsidian Hybrid marched around the corner, its long clawed strides more methodical than hurried. At its sides reeled two more Hounds, and out from behind it a pair of Skinners dashed into view. They moved rapidly but with a smoothness only apt to satin in the breeze. Their evilly grinning mugs glistened with needle teeth and pinkish gums. The single lit fixture above them provided only half the illumination needed to fully light the area, making its furthest walls more prone to shadows' embrace.

This is where the Skinners headed.

Darrel was further back from the group, but kneeling and relentless on his pistol. He took timely, accurate shots.

Jesse was off to his left but in front of him by about ten feet. More centered in the white-tiled area were Clive and Willem, UMP-45 in the Seraph's hand. His Blaser bounced on his back as his feet pivoted with every movement of the enemy. The Skinners were like oil-slicked shadows, but the Hounds were vivid and skulking. There was not much room to move around in here but they did try to distract the four humans from the Skinners and Hybrid, the lattermost just speculating. It paced back and forth at the top of the steps, its chest heaving with contemplative breaths.

One of the Hounds was slain shortly after its introduction, but the other proved less easy. It juked frequently, keeping low to the ground when it wasn't bouncing and lashing out. At one point its claws drew jagged gashes across Jesse's left arm when he got too close. Its paw slapped his M4 onto the ground, damaging the receiver beyond use. The creature was taking a lot of bullets, but when it turned its back on Jesse and Darrel, Willem finished it with a sawed-off shotgun. Both barrels expunged simultaneously, blasting off the top of the Hound's vibrant skull, adding deeper colors to the mix.

The Skinners finally came into play, done with their

toying. One of them seemed to materialize out of the dark like an apparition to Willem's left. Its fillet knife-claws swept across his chest, shredding leather and gouging skin in a flash. His reloading shotgun hit the floor and a terrible stinging pain washed over his torso. He staggered back, Clive latching an arm around him. With his right hand Clive gripped the UMP-45 and held the buttstock firmly to his shoulder. His body absorbed the recoil like a vehicular chassis as he hosed out the rest of the magazine into the passing Skinner. It somehow evaded most of the shots but a few punched holes into its abdomen like lethal awls.

A sharp screech pierced Clive's ears as it fled into a corner, disappearing like it sunk into the wall when he knew it didn't.

As if on cue, the Hybrid bellowed with a sound of both torment and rage, chilling the blood in even Clive's veins. It descended the steps in one long stride, a clawed hand reaching for the Seraph's head. He ducked and withdrew, but the wounded Skinner slashed into his back and threw him against a wall.

Clive groaned out in pain, gun falling to the floor.

Willem was forced into a weak stumble, awry and disoriented. He reached into the tail of his jeans to withdraw a Smith & Wesson revolver. Its chrome finish was scratched and washed gray, but the fluted four-inch barrel and six-shot cylinder still functioned as well as it ever could. The textured black grip felt at home against his calloused palm, and he didn't hesitate to use it. The gun barked nearly as loud as Clive's Blaser, especially under a low ceiling and walls on either side of them. The Hybrid took two shots in the left side of his chest, swinging its torso around and redirecting its path entirely.

This bought him and Clive a few seconds longer.

Darrel, however, was coping with a rogue Skinner that effectively toyed with him. It circled him multiple times, drawing his panicked shots until his Glock's slide locked back and then it honed in. Disarmed of his M4, Jesse was left to his

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own Glock 22, but could never get a bead on the Skinner until it had stopped—right up in Darrel's face. Its right hand punched through Darrel's sternum, throwing a mess of bludgeoned organs out of his ruptured back. They splashed onto the floor, chunks of vertebrae skittering across tile. An eruption of blood was cast from his mouth and splashed the Skinner's chest. Its body shuddered as it appeared to bask in the gore. Its jaws chattered while its victim convulsed on its own arm for all but two seconds.

White marbles became Darrel's eyes as they rolled back and his skin paled.

All of this in the matter of five seconds.

Jesse was unloading into the Skinner's back by the third, and yet the creature took its time even as bullets riddled its humanoid back. Alas, the creature spun on its heel to face Jesse, releasing Darrel with a flick of its arm. Darrel's corpse slid off of the Skinner's arm like a bloodied ragdoll, crashing into Jesse. The two hit the ground in a heap and Jesse was pinned.

Meanwhile, the other Skinner helped the Hybrid with Clive and Willem. The latter had spent four .357 cartridges on the Hybrid, its chest packed with lead, but still it pressed. The gun jammed on the fifth shot, and the remaining Skinner emerged from behind Clive to throw its shoulders into his back. Clive bounced along the wall, shattering a scapula and breaking his lips open to howl out in pain. The Skinner was only on its way, however. It wrapped its arms around Willem like a linebacker and lowered its aberrant face to his own.

Willem would never have to smell the creatures' stench permeate the air ever again.

"Clive!" Damien's voice exploded from inside the gymnasium. He emerged from the double doors with Remington shouldered. When he saw the terror that had been wrought here he felt guilty and afraid and furious to say the least. He put his eye behind the holographic sight and squeezed the trigger, having aimed a tad high. The Skinner currently ravaging Willem's face with its awful jaws took two rounds to the

forehead. Its neck jerked and the creature shrieked, peeling back. Once Willem fell to the floor, his back still to Damien, he finished the Skinner with a few shots from the R5. The Skinner's brains plumed around its face and shoulders like an inverted crown of gore.

Willem groaned and wept in unimaginable pain.

Damien rushed forward, soles slick on bloodied tile. Wet scraps of Willem's face stuck to the floor. He breathed nothing but a gelatinous blend of saliva and blood. Damien looked down at him and put a hand under his neck, a brief cradle from comrade to comrade. Human to human? What remained of Willem Crayton's pulpy eyes and scarred brow asked for mercy without words—and Damien read it in bold print. He heard Clive's voice scratch the air and a few gunshots ring out ahead of him. He bolted to his feet and shot a 6.8mm round into Willem's glabella.

His corpse went limp, and Damien advanced.

Up ahead and to his left was Jesse, spattered with blood but only wounded on the arm. He was crawling to his feet, out from under the gruesome corpse of Darrel Preston.

Far opposite him, across the corpses of several Hounds, was a Hybrid and Clive Farrow. Damien's eyes locked on him; he felt as if his senses and limbs were submerged in molasses. The Remington assault rifle elevated to aim, finger taut on the trigger. His lips moved to scream Clive's name, or some kind of invective at the Hybrid, as if it could understand or really care. But the Hybrid had already disarmed Clive and had his legs pinned—*crushed*—under one sizable foot. Those nasty toe claws had become one with Clive's thighs, sunken and bloodied. It towered over Clive with its primitive mouth agape and pitch blade eyes holding him captive.

One arm was raised above the creature's own hand, curved at the elbow and ending in a crane-like gesture of clawed fingers.

Damien fired. Clive's eyes fell shut in a stillness of his own accord. The Hybrid swung downward.

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All at once.

The bellow could be argued to have resonated from the Hybrid's throat as its talons ripped Clive's face off and onto the floor. However, in Jesse's dismayed perspective it came from Damien's own, as he fired the R5 without an ounce of stability or composure. All of the rawness of human emotion roared from his cloned mouth and his vision blurred greatly, eyes stinging.

Damien fumbled to reload but eventually he and Jesse put the Hybrid out of their misery, until it collapsed opposite Clive. Damien rushed forward, Jesse meeting him there. They had killed of their enemies at present, except for a second Skinner which had eluded them. Jesse was beyond speechless and Damien knew nothing of it, nor did he seem to care. He reloaded the Remington and put five more rounds into the Hybrid's skull, obliterating its face as much as it had done to Clive. He would have spent more ammunition into the dead creature had Jesse not been there to hold him back.

"We need to *go*, Damien," Jesse said, tears and phlegm tarnishing his once jubilant face. He put a trembling hand on Damien's shoulder, but he just shrugged it off.

"Go," Damien croaked, but Jesse was unmoving. Still focusing on Clive's corpse, Damien raised his voice. "Just *go*!"

Jesse flinched. He nodded once then turned to leave. As he reached the gymnasium doors, the sound of chattering people but no more gunfire coming from inside, he paused and turned.

"Preservation of the human race on this planet," Jesse said out loud, his voice like gravel. "Clive did a hell of a damn-fine job. I forgot he was even a clone...Finish the fucking job."

With that, Jesse turned his back and rushed through the double-doors. Damien heard his steps echo out of earshot. He put his hand on Clive's chest and felt no sign of respiration. He withdrew his hand and clenched it into a tight fist.

Then he took Clive's Blaser rifle and slung it.

A hoarse but effeminate scream, terse and impulsive, caught Damien's attention. He bolted to his feet and turned to face Devon, thirty feet away just outside the gymnasium's

entrance. Her hand rose to her face, trembling as she gawked at Willem and Darrel's corpses. Her eyes rose to Clive, and then found Damien.

"W-We need to go," she said, barely audible.

A roaring and scratching discordance came from down the hallway past the cafeteria. Shadows were cast along the walls as another wave of Hounds and Skinners flooded the school's passages. They were so packed that some creatures were even thrown up against the lockers to add a metallic sound to the array.

"Now," she punctuated, already backpedaling.

Like a machine operating under strict programming, Damien swiftly drew his Desert Eagle and fired a single round into Clive's forehead. The action and gunshot were almost simultaneous, and Devon flinched at it. Her expression was no different than it was before, distraught with grief and fear and anger.

The three simplest and most dangerous human emotions.

Damien broke into a jog that met with Devon and helped her along with him. They shut the double-doors once inside, barricading them with rebars at the ready, crossing through the handle loops. They then turned to cross the expanse of the gymnasium, which warranted a pause to someone who wasn't ready for the sight.

So many horrible tableaux witnessed by Damien and Clive since their deployment last July.

Even yet, this one felt fresh and new, in the worst of ways for Damien. The children, the women, all defenseless and scattered like mutilated balloons after a birthday party. The fetor was all-encompassing and beyond stifling. As Devon led Damien to the tunnel entrance, he noticed that the backdoor had been breached and Hound corpses were strewn about.

Jesse and a gray-bearded male survivor were currently piling some of these bodies in front of the door as a temporary blockade. They crammed the Hounds between the jambs and piled from there, making it more effective.

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They were just about done.

“Plan C,” Damien sighed as he and Devon towered over the mouth of the subterranean tunnel. He looked over at Devon. “How many made it?”

“What you see is what you get,” Devon said through a shaky voice and curtain of tears.

Damien put his arm around her, and felt pain drip down his back. He called to Jesse, saying that was enough, and the long-haired bearded survivor rushed over too. He had a slight limp, but upon inquisition revealed that it was just a leg brace.

“I won’t slow you down...Please don’t leave me.”

“What’s your name?” Damien asked.

“Abe Shepard,” he said, his voice infinitely raspy.

“Don’t be rash, Abe,” Damien said. “Nobody’s getting left behind. I’ll carry you if I have to. Now let’s go. Keys, Jesse?”

Jesse jingled them in his pocket. “Trusty Levi’s.”

“Good,” Damien sighed. “Watch your step. Let’s hurry.”

They descended into the broad tunnel, cold concrete under the soles of their shoes. The atmosphere was neither wintry nor Saharan, but a rough in between. There was a strange breeze that was caught shifting through the tunnel, undoubtedly from the opening at the far end.

Damien led, with Devon at his side and the other two behind them. They hurried on point, almost to a run, but not to board the bus sooner than Jesse and Abe. Jesse kept to Abe’s pace, frequently turning to confirm the safety of their six. The steel grating still had to be blasted through, and the necessary equipment awaited their manipulation at the tunnel’s end.

Damien moved out in front of Damien once they were at its end, immediately preparing the gathered munitions. He was shocked to see a block of C4, and briefly thought of Darrel. Must be from the precinct’s stash, or perhaps the SWAT vehicle Devon mentioned, using as a breaching charge. He didn’t question, just prepared it and twisted the flare to light, since it didn’t have a detonator.

“Back up, back up!” Damien said, waving behind him and doing no different. He put his arms around Devon like a fire blanket and waited for the explosion. It was disappointingly delayed, and Jesse could hear seconds before the explosion sounds from inside the gymnasium. It was a great distance but down here sounds travelled quickly and with high resonation.

Flames rolled red-orange with twisted black smoke and crumbling concrete at the tunnel’s outlet. The steel grating had not only been blasted away, but the entire lip of the tunnel itself detached in a crumbling heap.

As the smoke was clearing in billowing gray clouds, Devon and the others coughed into their hands while Damien held his breath and waved them forward.

“Jesse, you first. Once everyone’s on the ground, get in the bus,” Damien finally coughed once. His lungs fared better than theirs. “Devon and Abe, cover him.”

Less than a minute later everyone but Damien was outside of the tunnel and moving about. Damien was mildly content at the very least that he heard neither screaming nor gunfire, which suggested that it was clear.

For now.

He shuffled out of the tunnel, ignoring an offered hand from Abe, and alighting easily than they had done. He proceeded up a sharp hill, since the tunnel essentially opened into a ditch below the ground-level field. He helped Abe up to where the earth flattened at the same level, whence they boarded the bus.

Damien was last. He stared out at the school, what had once been so many survivors’ stronghold. Survivors...the word burrowed its way deep into Damien’s conscience and toyed with his every notion.

He had failed, and so much of it was on his shoulders. Wasn’t it? He thought, at this moment, that it was nobody else’s burden to carry, and that his pressing made them follow his plan. He knew that it was a joint decision, but ultimately Plan C proved to be the best aspect of the whole strategy.

Damien spotted shapes starting to disgorge through the

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gymnasium's side doorway, Hounds tumbling over the corpses of their slain brethren.

With a hock of what tasted like blood and bile, Damien spit onto the dry grass of the field and turned to the bus. He entered, Jesse shutting the doors behind him with a strain of the lever. He didn't wait for Damien to sit before driving off, accelerating toward the backyard of a house up ahead. It appeared to be the most open, with a decrepit chainlink fence at its perimeter and a doghouse in the back.

"Gonna be a lil' bumpy, hang on," Jesse said.

Damien had sat in a seat nearest the back of the bus, five spots away from Devon on the left side. He was on the right, his shoulder pressed into the corner of the stiff seat and metallic wall. His concentration fluttered, but his eyelids were steeled open. Devon glanced back at him but he didn't return the gaze. Abe, meanwhile, sat chattering to himself with a double-barrel shotgun lain across his lap.

"Here we go!" Jesse announced, and powered the school bus forward. It crushed the fence like a shred of cardboard, although it made quite the racket, and then plowed through the doghouse. Empty, obviously, and not firmly constructed, it burst into shards of wood to be out of their way. The bus bounced on its chassis before it reached the road, rolling over the curb before Jesse wildly spun the wheel to correct his path. Doubled tired spun and screeched against asphalt, stirring up quite the commotion.

"Hopefully we don't attract more of those things," Devon muttered audibly. "Engine's not too discreet, either."

"I didn't see a speck of them outside of the school," Damien said. He set Clive's rifle across the seat and his lap. The MP5K added severe discomfort between his back and the seat, but fortunately he was without wounds. An exasperated exhalation transgressed his lips. "I think they receded for the most part. They failed, and they know it."

"They f-f-failed!?" Abe stammered, raising his voice in disbelief. "How do you come to *that* conclusion? Everybody

fucking *died!*”

“Not everybody,” Damien growled, putting his eyes on Abe hard and relentless. Abe seemed to shrivel, especially as Damien spoke resolutely. “We didn’t, you see, and next time you face one of those creatures I want you to remember that. Remember *why* you did!”

“‘Why’?” Devon asked, not with as much skepticism as Abe but curiosity at its purest.

Damien subtly relaxed. “To serve a purpose. We survived to make it count. Strive to preserve our existence. Imagine there is no world outside of this group. You really want to surrender this planet, that your species has fought so long and so hard for, to those *abominations*? I personally want to see the ocean, in person. I want to feel the sunlight on my face, snow on my skin. And if not me, then the children of generations to come. Just remember, Abe. You didn’t go through all of that hell so that you could survive and gripe. You survived to sustain survival. Serve your purpose, because the rest of us will with or without you, but we’re incomplete the less we become.”

“Would you die for me?” Abe asked, voice thin.

“For anyone in this bus, yes, and the others out there, hiding or fighting.” Damien’s fingers tightened around the Blaser rifle. “A part of me already has.”

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3.10.2017

Grayness the color of rusted steel coated Damien's subconscious. It was so thick and blemished that he not only swam in it like quicksand but breathed it. He felt a constriction of his lungs, tingling across his skin—and not the good kind—finalized with a kick to the gut. It was an overall burdensome sensation, and despite all of the things Damien had overcome these past months, this muddy gray oblivion was inescapable. He reached up, he called out, but his muscles stung and his mouth deluged with the rank emptiness, as thick as it was.

Only when a woman's voice and dirtied but distantly smooth hands graced his cheeks did he emerge from it. His body shook, his head tossed, and the urge to vomit struck him hard. But when he did come to, he suppressed the bile and calmed his stomach. His skull swam with some kind of migraine, and as if earlier wasn't enough he began to feel more human than before.

At least his vision cleared quickly, and corrected.

"You sounded like you were...drowning," Devon said.

She was sitting on his same seat, hands withdrawn from his face to grab his shoulders. She had shaken him the rest of the way awake, and now put those same dirtied hands in her lap. A few fingers trembled by themselves.

Her gaze dropped to them and she fidgeted briefly.

Damien cleared his throat and found his voice, apologizing. He sat up, as he had been rather slouched, and slightly panicked when he couldn't find the Blaser. Devon immediately realized what he was looking for and told him that she'd put it in the seat opposite the aisle, its sling thrown over the back so it wouldn't go anywhere.

"Did...did I drop it in my sleep?" Damien asked.

"Not quite, but the backend did hit the floor. I came over here to secure it. And that's when you started...making those sounds."

"I never said anything?"

"Not coherently, at least."

Damien nodded, sighed, and stretched.

"Any more of those visions?" Devon asked. "I mean...the memories from my husband?"

Damien shook his head. "No, for once in a long time I didn't really dream."

"Oh...that's good," she replied hesitantly.

"Not in this case." Damien looked around, not only the bus but their surroundings. Inside Abe occupied the seat to Jesse's right, who still drove the bus. Abe appeared awake and hunched forward, although the two men were equally mute. Only the hum of the engine could be heard inside, and although it filled the bus it wasn't overwhelming.

Outside, they coasted through Virginian suburbia.

Damien took a gander through the window but could barely make out anything but blackness. Most but not all of the windows were still intact, some cracked but nonetheless present in their frames. Those that were MIA let in a gentle air that was somewhat soothing on the face but to the lips and tongue most unsavory.

"Where are we going?" Damien asked. "Or...is Jesse just 'winging it'?"

Devon forced a smirk. "No, not exactly. If anything, *I'm* 'winging it.'"

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Damien cocked an eyebrow.

"I mentioned, while you were out, that there's a pair of gas stations about five minutes away from the school. I figure it's a decent distance, on a main road so less obstacles, and if we can barricade ourselves inside we could have a go at any worthwhile perishables. Bottled water, at least."

Damien nodded and considered the plan. Among the best he had heard in a while, at least considering their current situation. He deliberated sharing his canteen water, but knew that it alone wouldn't last beyond himself. Besides, they would need more to help cleanse Jesse's wounds, and any other minor cuts if need be.

Also, they could—

"We need gas, too, ya know?" Devon added, taking the thought right out of Damien's head. She shrugged. "So I figured it would be a smart start."

"That's quite a brain you have," Damien said. "You're a damn fine strategist."

Devon chuckled weakly. "Improvisation had always been my strong suit." Her terse mirth faded quickly.

"How far off should we be?"

Devon looked around. She could see even less than Damien, although it helped that Jesse drove with the parking lights on. He went slowly, fifteen miles-an-hour, which was at least ten under the speed limit on this main road, the same one that had separated the school from the shopping center earlier. Every time he passed a street, if its sign still stood the reflective lettering would catch her eye.

Finally she spotted a hint as to their location.

"Shouldn't be more than a minute, at this speed," Devon said, a vague eagerness in her voice surfacing. "Should I inform Jesse?"

"Yeah, I think it'd be wise. I'll be up there in a minute."

After Devon left, Damien rubbed at his eyes with the backs of his hands and readjusted himself. His back ached the slightest, his shoulders and arms sore. That headache was

unforgiving, but at least he could think clearly. He transferred to the seat opposite the aisle and returned Clive's rifle to his back via the sling. Altogether slung across his torso and onto his back were his R5, MP5K, and now the Blaser R93 LRS2. Yet their weight didn't even begin to compare to the guilt of Clive's death occupying his conscious shoulders.

"We're about there!" Devon said in a loud whisper.

"Coming," Damien said, and moved down the aisle with hands on the surrounding seats for added balance. The bus began lurching to and fro as it slowed down the road they occupied. Jesse appeared to be having trouble controlling it despite their slow speed. Then Damien realized why—the bus was rolling on its chassis, wheels bumping up and down, not because of fissures in the asphalt or simply poor driving.

Corpses littered the road.

To Damien's dismay, he could smell the rankness seep in through the windows from outside. Human flesh putrefied in the humidity of the night.

As he reached the front of the bus, standing while Devon and Abe sat close behind wheelman Jesse, his eyes found proof. The bus's parking lots, as dim as they were, still provided sufficient illumination before them. Enough to at least drive safely, more or less. And now the lot of them were victim to the sight of human carcasses arraying the asphalt and sidewalks. It was a four-lane road, broad, with few cars left. Many were crowded around the pumps in the gas stations' forecourts, to the point where getting gas would be borderline impossible.

"We might have to pass on gas," Damien murmured.

"Can't we just *push* them other cars aside?" Abe said.

Damien shook his head. "Not unless you wanna attract more attention than might already be headed this way. I can't imagine all of these bodies aren't within range of Hounds' olfactory senses."

Abe looked confused.

"They can *smell* rotting flesh from *miles* away," Damien said gravely. His fingers tightly clutched the seats at his sides,

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the left occupied by Devon and to his right Abe. He sighed. "So which one?"

The four-way intersection they approached, close enough to warrant applying the brakes completely, yielded stoplights on every side. This was a major conjunction, although street signs were beyond incoherently weathered. There was no vegetation in the area, just an open sky now veiled by dark clouds. The only forms of shelter were small business buildings and a local church behind the gas stations, places they already passed.

Two gas stations, oddly enough both Sunoco, parallel.

"Left or right?" Jesse said. "We'll go left. Seems to be less vehicles...by the store, I mean."

Hardly the case, but Jesse seemed to have a trained eye. They gingerly turned left, rolling onto the forecourt of the Sunoco. Jesse circumvented a throng of quizzically parked vehicles, damaged and abandoned, to the left of the gas station by the vacuuming area.

"Patience is a virtue, now," Jesse muttered.

Parking the bus as slyly as he intended warranted nothing less. It took him three tries, which was a lot less than Damien expected from someone who didn't have the day job of a bus driver. When he did get it, it was virtually perfect. The bus was parallel to the front of the gas station's convenience store, its doors flush with the bus's. As large as the vehicle was, it aligned to barricade the shattered glass windows to provide complete coverage.

Jesse keyed the engine off at last. He turned to face the others, raising an eyebrow with less humor and more honesty.

"Not bad, right?" he said.

"Better," Damien said, patting him on the shoulder. He turned to face Abe with a kind look. "Abe, would you mind going first? That double-barrel is the perfect clearing weapon. I'll be right behind you."

Abe swallowed and nodded, taking the responsibility like a brave man. He cocked one of the shotgun's hammers and put the padded oak buttstock to his shoulder but kept the barrels low

as he lumbered down the steps. Jesse opened the doors with a painfully loud groan that made everyone except Damien wince.

Out of the frying pan and into the fire, Damien hoped not. He activated his MP5K's flashlight mount, casting an immaculate beam before him, aiding Abe as well. They entered the convenience store of the Sunoco, favoring the prior word in correlation with their current situation. Devon was right—they could do well with some bottled water and any foodstuff not yet ransacked.

“Eyes wide, Abe, slow steps,” Damien advised, his voice a whisper behind Abe.

The interior of the Sunoco was incredibly dark, but a lone fluorescent fixture above the register to their left survived in flickers. In addition, the walled refrigerator units along the back still ran with a quiet hum amid an otherwise thick silence, with their own subtle illumination.

They cleared the gas station quickly, both astonished and relieved to find no creatures lurking in the aisles or employees-only area. No survivors, either, which wasn't too surprising considering the postmortem massacre outside. Also worth their contentment were occupied shelves; snack food remained mostly, the canned goods and bagged chips long since ransacked.

Better than nothing.

Once declared secure, Abe returned to the bus as per Damien's request. He helped Devon and Jesse exit the bus, keeping its doors open in case they needed a quick getaway. Meanwhile, Damien conducted a thorough investigation of the employee area behind the cashier counter. The sallow walls were in a state of decay all their own, lockers were malformed metal and garbage was strewn about the floor. Some ripped clothes drooped over toppled chairs, stained with bile and blood. Damien found nothing of use or otherwise important until he turned to leave and his boot knocked something metal. It rolled across the tile floor and jingled against the baseboard.

Damien stooped and swept the beam over it.

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Cartridge casing, .45 brass. Empty and tarnished.

He emerged to see Abe and Jesse talking quietly amongst themselves at the head of the three aisles, while Devon sat on the counter. Her back was to him, M4 lain across her lap. Upon exiting the employee area she craned her head to look his way. Their eyes connected and neither of them wore an expression worth their pride.

“Find anything?” she asked, her voice broken.

“Might as well not have,” he mumbled, shaking his head. He started to walk around to the other side of the counter when he stopped, and impulsively reached under the counter. There was a holster adhered to the underside, directly beneath the register tray, but Damien’s fingers found it to be empty. He sighed and thought aloud “worth a try.”

“Huh?” Devon asked, seeming out of it.

“Nothing,” he shook his head, then walked around the edge of the counter to stop at her left. He looked at Jesse and Abe talking in a quiet argument, their voices muffled to incoherence, but spoke to Devon in quietude. “How’re you doing?”

“Never felt worse,” she said honestly, once she realized he was talking to her.

“You’re supposed to say ‘better,’ not ‘worse.’”

“No room for sarcasm right now,” she said, tattered lips barely moving.

Damien nodded. “Clive always believed anything could be fixed with sarcasm and a dirty joke. And bullets—lots ‘n’ lots o’ bullets. But...I think you’re right.”

Devon looked over at him and he at her. A feeble smile cracked the solemn tableau that had become her face.

“Hey, Seraph,” Abe said, breaking off from Jesse and plodding toward Damien, drawing his attention to say the least. “I imagine we’re holding up here for a bit. Sleep was something we seldom got at the school, believe it or not. I know...this pigsty ain’t much better, but—you two look like shit. No offense...”

Devon sardonically frowned and waved her hands in a gesture of carelessness.

"I agree, actually," Damien said, stepping forward. "But just so you know, *human*, my name is Damien. Do you mind?"

"Uh, right. Sorry 'bout that, Damien," Abe trailed off mumbling. "What's the last name?"

Damien looked over his shoulder at Devon, who just shook her head and stared at the M4.

"I think you know enough, Abe," Damien said. "So what're you proposing? You two keeping watch while Devon and I sleep?"

"Something like that. First hour or two, at least."

"I hate to burst your bubble, but I doubt we'll have that much rest."

"Really? What were you thinking?"

"More along the lines of forty minutes to an hour, tops, before we're disturbed again. But I won't refuse your offer. Devon and I will rest for twenty, twenty-five minutes. After that you two will take your turn, and we'll keep watch."

Jesse walked up to Abe's side.

"Sounds good," the kid said.

"And by 'keep watch' what were you planning on?" Damien asked. "If you see something scampering outside, you gonna shoot it?"

"Probably not," Jesse replied. "No."

"Good. Let's save our ammunition, and secrecy, unless something is actually *attacking* us."

"What happened to the shoot-on-sight order?" Abe asked grumpily.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't realize you were a Seraph." Damien deepened his voice. "I think it'd be best if we focus on self-preservation right now."

"W-what's our next move?"

"Alexandria. And nobody give me any shit about it. We need to get to the nearest HOA outpost. Anywhere else is just a gallows waiting to drop the floorboards."

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“And this place?”

“We need some respite. If you don’t agree, wriggle your way out there like a chicken with its head cut off, in the dark of the night. See how long you last, alone.”

“Alright, alright. I’m here. C’mon, Jesse. Let’s set up.”

The two started to head for the front of the gas station when Damien stepped forward and gently took Jesse’s right arm.

“You need to clean those wounds. Go get some bottled water, if there’s any left. And look for protein bars, they’re good for energy and nutrition. Seems the canned foods have already been taken. I’ll keep to my canteen and MRE’s. *Then* set guard. Which will be...where, exactly?”

“Inside the bus, kept low,” Abe said.

“Good thinking.”

Obvious thinking—all of the windows were impeded by the bus itself, they would have to be inside it to just look out. Damien told Jesse he had some disinfectant and bandages in his backpack for the wounds on his arm, which he got out for him after removing his weapons. Then they set out by themselves to retrieve the necessities—bottled waters, which there remained three, and some of the provisions Damien had mentioned.

Devon gathered her own, and a bottled water, while Damien met with Jesse before he took up watch in the bus with Abe. Jesse asked what Damien wanted, and when he brandished Clive’s Blaser there was a look of bewilderment in the kid’s eyes.

“He’d want you to have it,” Damien said. He shrugged. “And I’ve got damn near enough as it is. Besides...what’ve you got, a Glock? This was Clive’s *Excalibur*.”

Damien offered the rifle to Jesse much like the legendary sword he referenced, minus any kneeling. Jesse, with the Glock visibly stuffed under the waistband of his jeans, took the Blaser with a morsel of disbelief. He looked both confused and honored.

“Bolt-action, takes a lil’ getting used to. Telescopic sight has an NV filter at the end, but you need to hit that

button...there...to activate it, too. Fully loaded, safety's off. I didn't get any of his magazines, so five shots will have to suffice. Make 'em count."

Jesse swallowed. "What am I supposed to say? Thanks?"

"I know, doesn't seem like it's enough." Damien shook his head, gaze hitting the floor for a quick second. Then he looked back up at Jesse and gripped his shoulder. "So prove that it is."

He then turned his back on Jesse and met with Devon as she finished selecting a couple of power bars. They transferred to a far corner right of the cashier counter. It was away from the humming, lit refrigeration units so they could rest their heads and eyes better.

Damien and Devon's backs were to the wall. He extended his left arm behind her neck so she could rest it more comfortably. His gear wasn't the easiest to get used to, but the circumstances called for its presence all the time. He found a lost comfort in her company, especially when her hands found his. They were dirtied and calloused in places, but silk compared to his. He let them touch his face when the darkness settled heavy on them and fatigued sifted through her blood. She had eaten and hydrated but exhaustion was taking its toll, exacerbated by her grief.

Meanwhile, Damien sat almost as stagnantly.

He finished an MRE fast and hydrated quickly thereafter. Then he stopped moving entirely, except for his hands and wrists like swivels. Their fingers danced together in their blemished palms, but their eyes kept away and their smiles in another dimension. It was inquietude within each of their consciences, but the world enveloping them posed not a single sound.

Only their hoarse breaths and the occasional cough.

Their weapons rested on the ground to Damien's right, as if mimicking their legs. Devon's M4 was adjacent to Damien's R5 and MP5K.

It was odd not seeing Clive's Blaser there anymore. Given, it seldom ever left his hands or back when slung, but now

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its absence only proved to be a stronger reminder.

A cavity had formed in his chest.

This emotion was only vaguely familiar to the Seraph. Now it was genuine and palpable, worse than any of his nightmares or knotted memories. And when he glimpsed that same emotion—only much rawer—in Devon’s eyes, he felt it swell. He tried to clear his mind of the matter, but it felt as though it had grown spidery fingers that rooted itself in his being.

Damien’s disposition was human and plagued.

He tried to keep it from Devon’s perception. She seemed too caught up in her own. She probably hadn’t seen anything as gruesome as she did outside of that gymnasium. Willem and Darryl’s demises were devastating to say the least, and having spent any amount of time with them now left her heart in divots.

Three minutes into their sitting respite, following the consumption of their food, Devon Eckle Ballard started to cry. It was quiet and humble, and it flowed into Damien. Although he did not cry now, he felt no different than a car’s chassis at a junkyard being crushed. The pain was dulled to a numbing ache and he even struggled against its manifestation.

Damien’s left hand found her left bicep and he flexed to bring her closer to him. He hugged her singlehandedly, using his other to interlock her fingers. Their hands tightened into one white grasp, and Damien kissed her forehead.

The night only grew heavier around them.

Time slinked by like a thickening pool of blood, but eventually it was their turn to take watch. Damien only had to give Devon a small shake to make her wake up, for he hadn’t got any shuteye. His lids drooped but never sealed to bring on that absolute blackness he’d come to abhor.

“Rise and, well, shine,” he said indolently as she woke.

“If only,” she breathed thinly. She stood and stretched, then extended her hand to Damien as if he needed assistance getting to his feet. He certainly didn’t refuse the offer, taking her hand to stand. Her arm curled in, biceps flexing, and she didn’t

stumble at all as he trusted her to pull him afoot. He came up with a vigorous bounce, and looked down into her eyes. She smiled weakly, but in all its faintness he detected an infallible strength.

“Don’t be so sure,” he added belatedly, emphatically, and turned his back to pick up his weapons. He slung the MP5K and shouldered the R5, then handed Devon her M4 after she had a swig of water.

“Thanks,” she said, checking the receiver out of habit. Damien saw that this woman hadn’t been a leave-alone wife. Her husband had been in the military, even before Hell’s Fissure, and he’d rubbed off on her. Undoubtedly vice versa, too, Damien imagined. She then asked him if he’d seen a bathroom in here at all. He nodded and pointed to the employee area behind the counter. He mentioned that it was far from pleasant, to which she replied “barely any of that left these days.”

“Barely,” Damien muttered, and turned to go relieve the guys in the bus. He boarded it slowly, but a creak and slight shift on the bus’s chassis alerted them to his presence. Abe turned like a lethargic owl while Jesse jumped.

“Dammit, man, announce yourself,” Jesse sighed.

“Sorry,” Damien lifted a palm in apology. “Here to relieve you two, though. Be happy.”

“Oh, yeah,” Abe grumbled, “we’re bursting with joy.”

“At long last. I could *really* do with some sleep.”

“You fucking deserved it, Jesse,” Damien said.

“Wait...where’s Devon?”

“Restroom.”

“I bet that place looks bad.”

“Horrendous.”

Both Abe and Jesse made disgusted looks, but offered to hold their position until she was finished. Damien wasn’t one to object.

“So, how’s that rifle treating you?” he asked Jesse.

“Oh, uh...haven’t shot it yet, obviously...but feels nice.

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Lightweight, considering. Inspected a cartridge out of boredom—so fucking quiet out here—saw the .338 Lapua Magnum brand. Impressive.”

“Very. Got quite a kick, but most of it goes straight back—limited muzzle climb.”

“That’s...good.”

“Yeah. Just hold on. Can’t really use the bipod in here, but, keep it in mind.”

“Will do.”

“And you, Abe? That a Winchester?”

“Yes, sir,” Abe said with pride. “An SPR-210, 12-gauge. Ever shot one before?”

“Never anything non-military,” Damien said. “But I still have a deep appreciation for fine craftsmanship.”

“And stopping power.”

“Oh, no doubt.” Damien paused, hearing something creak or groan. He turned to see Devon exiting the employee area with M4 in her hands. He glimpsed the Glock 22 tucked under the waistband at the tail of her jeans, and was convinced that among them they had sufficient firepower to defend—

Movement out in the darkness of the Sunoco forecourt suddenly caught Jesse’s attention. He cursed under his breath and glued his eye to the scope, while Abe shouldered the Winchester and gathered his composure.

“What is it!?” Damien demanded in a whisper.

“Don’t know. Tall, though. I think...”

“You *think*, Jesse?”

“Skinner, probably. I...I think...”

Damien rolled his eyes. “Don’t remove your eye from that scope. Abe, move down the aisle to the emergency exit at the rear; tell me if you see anything. Devon, take his spot—you’ve got greater range than his Winchester. I’m gonna cover ten windows down, toward the back. Everybody keep your eyes peeled.”

Abe relocated and Devon replaced him one seat over from Jesse, who did as Damien told and hadn’t moved since.

Damien, meanwhile, occupied a seat five feet from the back, half-kneeling as the others had, with his Remington shouldered. The barrel protruded out of a window and they waited.

Damien traced the holographic sight's red U-dot reticle across the darkness set before them. He could see dim shapes and silhouettes of vehicles bunched up around the pumps, but little else. He controlled his breathing more easily than Jesse and Abe were, but Devon—by sound of ear—seemed composed.

And then a bloodcurdling shriek made them all jump in their skin, a startle that shattered the silence. Damien couldn't tell exactly where it came from, except that it was nearby. Dangerously nearby. He twisted in his seat, pivoting his aim, sweeping the sight back and forth until he spotted movement streak past one of the pumps. It leapt over the back end of a pickup truck, a tall humanoid shape, bouncing the vehicle on its chassis. This alone made more noise, creaking and groaning. It alighted on the other side with a long stride and he lost sight of it.

A devilishly humanoid silhouette.

"We got a Skinner," Damien announced in a loud whisper. The panic was evident in the survivors surrounding him, but after what he endured at the school—and what Clive suffered—Damien realized he, too, was a 'survivor.'

And he hoped to stay that way.

All of a sudden something heavy and fierce leapt up onto the bus's hood, its clawed feet denting the metal and scraping like steel nails on chalkboard. A gravelly roar seemed to shake the bus on its chassis more than the creature's weight did. Damien spun, R5 kept in the window, to look toward the front of the bus. He saw a large Hound skulking on the hood, its breath fogging up the windshield.

"Shit!" Devon cursed. "Do I shoot it!?"

Damien pondered for a brevity—and risk blowing out the windshield, their greatest line of defense from the front?

The Hound lowered its head and struck the windshield, splintering it at its center. It backed up again and roared, spittle

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spraying the glass.

“Hit it!” Damien shouted.

Devon pulled his M4 out of the window, turned into a stand, and fired a five-round burst at the windshield’s center. Moreover, at the Hound on the other side. Plexiglas ruptured and the creature took a few rounds in the open mouth. Gore splashed the hood and dripped down the grille as the Hound jerked backward, landing on its side before sliding off.

“Good shot,” Damien said, and returned his attention to the darkness set before them. He glimpsed more movement, again humanoid and lanky, then another and in a few seconds a third, he was sure of it. “Skinners, inbound! I’m using my flashlight. Devon, likewise.”

There was no reason not to now that they were announced. He activated it and swept the beam across the pumps and the vehicles surrounding them. Devon armed not only her flashlight but her lasersight too, and within seconds of doing so she glimpsed what she would rather not have: a Skinner striding past the bus, within fifteen feet of it. Her flashlight’s beam had a shorter range than Damien’s but it still illuminated the creature’s sleek black body and arachnid eyes, those Grim Reaper claws and deathly teeth. Her lasersight traced over it for a quick moment, a tiny red dot wavering over its skin. Where the flashlight failed to reach, the lasersight extended.

And beyond that, her bullets.

For now there was nothing to shoot at, though. The creatures were running back and forth around them, providing no more than a split-second to track a target.

“I know you can see better than any of us right now, Jesse!” Damien snapped. “What’ve you got?”

“Four, five Skinners. They’re running too fast, I wouldn’t stand a chance!”

“Jesse, don’t you fire at any of them! They’re easier for us to take down than a Hound...or worse. Save your ammo for anything bigger. Callouts would be helpful, though—”

“Oh shit, there’s a Hybrid on the road, coming in fast

from the left!” Jesse’s voice was filled with the static of fear and panic.

Damien’s muscles tensed. He shifted his aim, sweeping the flashlight and spotting the ghastly bipedal creature approach from the road parallel to the Sunoco. It strode across the concrete of the forecourt, to the left of the pumps, making a fierce beeline for the back of the bus. Damien fired in curt bursts, knowing he hit it a few times in the torso, winged it at other points. It was surprisingly nimble and zigzagged better than he would like to admit, so he couldn’t do much.

“Abe, it’s all yours!” Damien said.

“Aw, hell.”

All of a sudden the back emergency exit door was peeled off of the bus, from not its hinges but its entire frame. The steel door was flung through the darkness behind the bus, clanging loudly against the asphalt. In loomed the horridly apelike face of a Hybrid, its mouth agape and sharpened teeth not too dissimilar from a human’s glistening with saliva. Abe stared down its abysmal mouth and into those unmoving eyes for all but a nanosecond before he squeezed the trigger. The Winchester shotgun bucked wildly, one barrel illuminating half of the bus for an instant and blowing the Hybrid’s head off with a plume of gore. Its body, below the obliterated stump of a neck, toppled backward in a heap.

Devon hooted victoriously.

Damien and Jesse remained stagnant.

A few bullets spurted from Damien’s R5 as a Skinner strode by, closer than any time before, and slower even. It appeared to have been studying the bus’s integrity, reaching out to touch its side but not quite close enough. Then another swung past Devon’s line-of-sight and its claws stroked the side of the bus, bringing sparks up and flaring Jesse’s sight through the NV scope. He cursed out loud and Devon fired into its back as it fled.

“Got one,” she breathed, satisfied with herself. The Skinner bled out on the ground, while its surviving brethren

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scampered about more heatedly.

"It's a start," Damien sighed, and exchanged glances with Devon for a moment. They nodded to one another, then returned their intent stares to the night outside.

A raucous commotion of Hound howling sounded, rising goosebumps along the survivors' skin. Damien pretended not to be so disturbed by it, but knew that it indicated at least six of them in the vicinity.

One and two made their appearance shortly after.

The first clumsily entered through the bus's back exit, now a gaping entrance thanks to the slain Hybrid before it. Not unlike that same creature, this one was soon to suffer its same fate. It got a little more than halfway into the bus, having caught Abe off-guard, when he let loose the other barrel. It expunged with a loud roar and cloud of gunsmoke its 12-gauge buckshot. The Hound's left shoulder took residual damage after that side of its skull peeled back in a spray of blood and brain matter. Cranial fragments specked the gore that now coated the ceiling directly inside of the bus nearest its rear.

Damien's nostrils struggled to cope with the stench.

Abe had gotten a few gobbets on himself, but fortunately nothing on his face. He broke open the barrels, ejecting the spent shells which rolled down the aisle and under some seats. Thin but rank smoke roiled out of the empty barrels while he withdrew two more from a pocket. He slid them in, snapped the barrels shut, and in that same instant felt a searing pain swallow his right leg. Abe's cry out shook everyone inside the bus, and they all turned to look his way, Jesse included.

Another Hound had leapt inside, its upper half stable between the seats, while its back legs treaded air outside the bus. Its jaws had clamped down around Abe's right leg, its incisors crushing the bone of his shin while bottom canines punctured his calf. Blood both the previous Hound's and Abe's own now coated the bus's floor and even the two seats on either side of him. His cries of pain permeated the bus and one hand was released from the gun to reach up, grabbing the back of a seat.

The Hound started pulling him out of the bus.

Damien withdrew into the bus, R5 dangling from the window but safe inside. He alighted in the aisle and drew his Desert Eagle while clutching Abe's extended forearm with his own left hand. He fired the four-pound pistol, putting two well-placed half-inch slugs into the Hound's shoulders. It growled under its breath but refused to release Abe's leg.

Damien was the only reason the Hound hadn't hauled Abe outside of the bus by now.

"Hounds, inbound!" Jesse abruptly announced. He swiveled the Blaser. "Devon, on your left! Light 'em up!"

Devon didn't have to be told twice. She aimed left, flashlight and lasersight both finding a slew of impending targets. She fired in three-round bursts, sometimes four and five if she was confident about placement. The Hounds' abdomens took a slew of 5.56mm ammunition, rippling skin and flesh, crippling some of them en route to the bus. She managed to kill two out of—five, six, seven!—by the time they reached the bus. Several flung themselves into its side, rocking the vehicle on its chassis. Others navigated around it, searching for weaknesses.

Damien, meanwhile, fought for hold of Abe. He weakly shouldered the Winchester with his left hand, and reluctantly squeezed the trigger. The recoil knocked the gun out of his clutches but severed the Hound's right shoulder from its arm. It sunk to that side, jaws releasing his leg as it howled in pain. Damien lurched backward with Abe, but unfortunately nothing remained from his right knee down.

Abe groaned in his own immense pain while Damien put the Hound out of its own, although he wished it wouldn't have been so quick.

The Desert Eagle recoiled, slide snapping almost as loud as the shot itself, and the Hound's crown burst. Its body fell to the aisle, then slumped outside.

Damien lowered a hand to lift Abe up and onto a seat. He put the Winchester in his hands and told him to hang tight. He wanted to get some gauze from his backpack to at least

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temporarily mend Abe's wound, but the creatures on their doorstep wouldn't allow him.

The bus rocked and swayed on its chassis, hard.

Damien nearly fell over, Devon did, and Jesse one-handedly helped her up. Whatever had caused it was now on the bus's roof, punching holes through the ceiling like a clawed awl. Except the bus's roof wasn't leather, it was steel—even so, the Skinner managed easily enough. Then another boarded the bus, bypassing Jesse's sights, and started doing the same. Their reach was long, and their claws protracted this distance.

"Get down, everyone in the aisle, and low!" Damien shouted, but he himself refused to. He holstered the Desert Eagle and returned to his window, shouldering the R5. His flashlight immediately fell across a Hound lunging at the bus, and he opened fire. The creature was killed with a few rounds in its skull, and tumbled back into its kin. Damien emptied the magazine in a few seconds and quickly reloaded.

There were too many of them.

Jesse fired the Blaser as Damien locked a new magazine into place, and he swept his flashlight over the mark. Jesse either had enough time or simply stellar aim, but the practically headless Hybrid crumpled to the ground all the same.

Jesse bolted the rifle with less ease, but Damien saw nothing more than a horde of Hounds and some Skinners running amid their ranks. They clouded the forecourt like a biological plague, creatures both vivid and as dark as the stygian night swarming amongst each other.

Devon fired into the ceiling a few times, and Damien started to tell her not to when one of the Skinners dropped to the roof. It was a loud, metallic thump. Its oily blood leaked through one of the holes its arms had punched through, for its arm still remained there. It dangled down just within reach of Devon, who now slinked away. She stopped within eight feet of Damien.

Unfortunately two Skinners remained on the roof.

A low roar caught their attention down the road. It came

at an astounding rate, or perhaps it was already very near. Everyone adjusted their attention, especially when many of the creatures appeared distracted, too.

Damien hoped against the prospect of a Roughneck.

A garbled scream ruptured Abe Shepard's mouth as a Skinner's hand punched through the ceiling to find his head within reach. Long claws sunk into the base of his neck and shoulders, two fingers curtaining his eyes. He shook and screamed and cursed incoherently. His arms lashed up but couldn't swat away the lean yet powerful arm. In the same instant that everyone saw this, the Skinner yanked upward, and pulled Abe to the ceiling. Damien dove for him, across the top of seats as if he were crowd surfing, reaching for his leg. If Abe hadn't lost the right one moments ago, Damien's hands would've clutched it. Instead his fingers grabbed empty air as Abe's head was pulled through the hole. Jagged metal around it shredded his face like a cheese grater, leaving behind curls of skin and tissue on the seat. Abe's gurgling screams stopped when the Skinner topside did whatever it happened to do, Damien inadvertently picturing the worse.

Devon was screaming, as he hadn't realized it until her M4 rang out inside the bus. Bullets pattered the roof and casings clinked the floor, but it was either too late or simply too slow. The Skinner bounced across the roof, leaving only one other to stand up there as it escaped.

Damien knew it escaped, too, and with Abe's body in tow, because he saw it over Devon's shoulder. It descended the front of the bus, taking Abe's corpse with it like a ragdoll clutched by the head. With dismay and disgust Damien saw that Abe's skull had been reduced to a flattened mess, as if it were a deflated basketball in the Skinner's hand.

Devon, tears on her cheeks, paused to reload.

Damien returned to his window, aimed outside, and swept his flashlight over the creature as it disappeared into the night. And it did just like that, a vanishing act in nightmare form.

The subtle roar down the road had reached them, no

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longer making its sound, at least not as loud now. Bright lights that blinded all of them, especially Jesse through his NV scope, temporarily drew the attention and fury of the creatures surrounding the bus. The lights obscured whatever its source was, but the creatures turned away from the bus to attack it regardless.

Shielding their eyes and sunken back into the aisle of the bus, Damien, Devon, and Jesse could only hear what happened next. Although it was Damien who made the deduction in his head.

Gunfire. And not just a Remington or two, but a machinegun. Probably mounted, high-caliber. Damien imagined a Browning M2HB, .50 BMG rounds capable of shredding a grown man—or in this case Skinner—with great ease. The gun emplacement's volleys weren't as fast-firing as the M4 assault rifle or even decelerated R5, but much slower to accompany the massive rounds. They still spat out relentlessly from behind the intense lights, which Damien figured were probably a combination of high-beams and foglights fixed to the front of the vehicle...

At last the gunfire stopped, while the resonant reports from the emplacement still rang out in the emptiness of the night.

The lights were shut off, and a loud whistle snagged their attention as if it wasn't already held. Slowly, Devon and Jesse stood up after Damien sprang to his feet with far less caution. He looked through the bus windows to see an M1151 Humvee parked perpendicular to them, its concoction of lights along the mean brush-guard dimmed to just its standard headlamps. These alone gave it a slightly visible glow, and its topside gunner could be seen if they shielded the lights with their hands.

He had a big frame, large bald head, dark skin, and shit-eating grin on his face.

"I suggest you all come out, now," he said with an incredibly deep voice and coherent Southern accent. "And if you're survivors that aren't too fond of Seraphim, I suggest you

drop your pieces.”

Something slapped metal and then called out.

“Get in the fucking Humvee!” said another voice entirely, younger but still assertive. It was the driver, Damien noticed as he squinted against the light. The pale man had a crew-cut of brown hair and soot caked his cheeks. He slapped the outside of his door a couple more times. “C’mon, more will be showing up soon, let’s go! Plenty of room!”

“Ain’t gotta tell me twice,” Jesse muttered, slinging the Blaser, which was almost as big as he was, and exiting the bus via the windshield. The hole in the Plexiglas was big enough to pass through, Jesse doing so with surprising ease. He nearly slipped on the blood coating the hood, but found his footing on the bumper before landing on the asphalt. He quickly made it over to the Humvee, entering via the passenger door.

“Nuh-uh,” the driver said firmly. He nodded to the back. “Pick any other seat.”

“Right,” Jesse nodded, giddy. He transferred to one of two seats behind the front two. “I, uh, I thought you said you had plenty of room?”

“Enough for three, I noticed you had three inside.”

“And him?” Jesse pointed up at the big man standing between his seat and the other. His torso vanished just outside of the Humvee, through a port in the ceiling, where he manned the gun emplacement.

“Don’t worry about him. He’s at home there.”

“I’d shake your hand,” the man said, voice like groaning metal, “but I can’t reach my zipper.”

“Ah, funny man,” Jesse said with a forced smirk.

“He likes to think so,” the driver replied. His gaze swapped from Jesse to Damien, who now stood outside the Humvee’s passenger side door with Devon on his left. He nodded to Damien, spotting the HOA patch and eliciting immediate respect in his voice. “Take a seat, Seraph. Welcome aboard.”

“Appreciated,” Damien nodded, and Devon entered from

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the other side, taking the seat behind the driver. Abe's Winchester double-barrel had been left behind, but Damien cradled it under his arm nevertheless. It was rather bloodied, though functional, so he wasn't going to leave it behind. He entered the Humvee and set the weapons down between his legs, muzzles on the floor. He shut the door with a hard slam and nodded over at the driver.

Behind him, Devon did the same.

"Ma'am," the gunner said with a lift of his left leg.

"Thanks for the help," she replied, then leaned forward to get a good look at the driver. She offered her hand, but he kept his on the steering wheel. She spoke kindly nonetheless. "We really, really appreciate your help. I don't think we would've—"

"Doubtful," Damien interrupted, nodding to her. She sat back in her seat. The driver peeled out of the gas station, leaving behind a necropolis of dead and dismembered Hounds, including a few Skinners and one on the bus's roof. Damien set his Remington between his feet, muzzle down. He took a deep breath. "Really, our survival was doubtful back there. Devon speaks for all of us. We're grateful for your intervention."

"You're welcome," the driver said in earnest, although the exasperation in his voice said otherwise. "Sorry if I sound...agitated...but Wallace and I have been driving around for *days* looking for survivors. We were, uh, deployed in Leesburg after some work in West Virginia and our brief relief there in Charles Town. We hit a whole mess of hostiles at Dulles, which really tested us as Seraphim I'll tell you that much."

"Bullshit. That was a job for *four* Seraphim, not two."

"You won't normally hear Wallace belittle his own potential," the driver said quietly. "So that's saying quite a bit."

"Dulles Airport? I don't bout you. That *should've* been two pairs, at least."

"Fucking HOA," the gunner, Wallace, grunted.

They were driving now, down the road in the dense night. The roar of the Humvee's engine coupled with the

whipping air through the gunner port made it difficult to hear him speak. His words were muffled, especially as baritone as his voice was, but if he truly wanted to be heard he'd make himself be.

"Anyway," the driver said, "we were on foot until Lansdowne, where there was a small HOA outpost. We knew the next one wouldn't be 'til Alexandria, so we figured we'd stop by. They'd just been hit with a huge resurgence, wiped out most of their guys, but fortunately many still stood tall. We stocked up on ammunition and asked for a vehicle. After some back-and-forth, including Wallace's innate persuasion, we got this bad boy from their lot. We know, driving is discouraged because of the noise and vulnerability, but after Dulles we figured *what the hell?* Besides, we were getting into more populated regions, so armored transportation would be key."

"Yeah, well, we *wanted* an APC," Wallace said. "But *no*, they insisted that was *too much*."

"Hardly such a thing these days," Jesse said. "At least in terms of defense."

"I hear that!" Wallace replied in accord.

"So, what's your story, Seraph?" the driver asked.

Damien didn't know where to start. First, he began with names. The driver's was Ethan Fennel and the gunner, formally Wallace Harlow. They had been Seraphim together since the beginning, as long as Damien and Clive.

Through a spiel of matters not known by Jesse and some facts about his and Clive's journey these past few days even Devon wasn't aware of, Damien told their new allies just about everything. By the end of it trust was apportioned and the three Seraphim formed an almost automatic brothers-in-arms pact.

They were all kin bound by HOA, in a sense.

Now they were more than any title could place on their shoulders. More than a uniform patch or military oath. Ethan was about Damien's age, and Wallace a year or two older than Clive was. They took kindly and respectfully to Damien's telling of his partner's death, as well as the others survivors they had

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formally met at the school.

Ethan told of a few survivors they met along their way here, too, but none of them lived long enough to even see the Humvee.

Their current itinerary was set for the HOA outpost in Alexandria. There was no denying or delaying it now, no objections whatsoever. It was, simply, their best chance at substantial relief.

Devon and Jesse longed for it the most.

Damien and the other Seraphim just pretended not to.

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Jesse, to everyone's surprise and as if by some kind of miracle, caught sleep during the drive. Alexandria was but twenty-five minutes from the Sunoco they left in Vienna, half of it spent conversing. Yet Jesse needed to be shaken awake when arrived, even after Ethan hit the brakes. Wallace joked about kicking him, but Devon insisted she could take care of it. With Jesse groggily awake and the others a little too much, they all exited the Humvee.

To Jesse's belated dismay, like a delayed rubber band snapping back into position, the HOA outpost before them appeared abandoned. And not in the sense of a condemned building or derelict structure voluntarily neglected.

Ethan had pulled into the outpost's employee parking lot, a small rectangle of marked asphalt to the left of the building. What few vehicles present—four squad cars and two Humvees—were overturned or entirely crushed, undoubtedly after a bout with Roughnecks. The building itself, composed of red-brown brick walls and a pale concrete foundation, appeared alright under these circumstances.

What struck them as immediately alarming were the absence of patrolling guards, tower gunners, or gate security. What remained of the parking gate was a crumpled mess of

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malformed metal. The group was fortunate enough to go undisturbed during their drive here, and even now they had arrived in peace. Although the exact boundaries of that word weren't quite in play here.

"You smell that?" Damien asked, looking around.

"No," Ethan said, shaking his head with the others, even he and Wallace quizzical.

"Exactly," Damien finally said. They slowly approached the side entrance to the building within the parameters of the parking lot. "Where are the bodies? The blood, even? This place has been wiped clean...and it happened some time ago. Which means that their return isn't very far off."

"*Their* return?" Jesse asked.

"The creatures," Damien said, stopping at the concrete stoop to look over them. He nodded to Ethan. "Have I hit it on the nose, or what?"

"Sounds about right. So much for a cold shower, eh?"

"I'm sure you could squeeze one in if you'd like, but it'd be counter-productive if we're right in assuming a return party."

Ethan nodded. "I can forego one. Wallace?"

"What's the difference, water and sweat?"

Devon grimaced.

Wallace chuckled. "Let's get reloaded, man."

"Yeah, they should at least be well-stocked," Damien said as he opened the door with the front end of Abe's Winchester. It hadn't even been shut all the way. It was heavy, with no windows in it, but swayed inward with ease. Illumination inside was flickering, but for the most part dark.

At least the spotlights around the property were still lit.

"See any bodies?" Wallace asked, at the back of the single-file line. Directly behind Damien was Ethan, and behind him Devon. Then it was Jesse and Wallace.

"Negative," Damien replied, quiet but audible. He walked to the end of the hallway, which split left and right. To his left was a stairwell with a weathered sign next to it, barely legible. Down the stairs led to the holding cells and up one level

were administrative offices.

It was once a police station, now designated an outpost by Hand of Ares for temporary relief to Seraphim, rearmament, and a site of base command. There were typically two to three per state along the east and west coast of the U.S., with far less in between due to limited resources.

Each one had roughly the same layout.

Damien felt like he was at home, or as much as any one place for a cloned soldier could be called home.

He looked to his right, which opened up into a lobby with desks on both sides and the front entrance straight ahead. They were a pair of double-doors each, heavy metal with shatterproof window squares and push-handles. One set remained well barricaded, but the other had been busted through entirely. The doors themselves were lying on the white tile floor of the lobby, warped from pressure. Overall the building's interior was much healthier than any other building would be these days, except for larger strongholds in the city, as it was decently maintained.

Now, it was on its way to becoming one among the rest.

"Clear," Damien said. "As far as level one goes. Gotta check behind the front desks, though. Then upstairs, in the offices. And down, in the holding cells. We should probably flip the breaker, too, get these lights fixed if possible. Kill the ones outside, while we're at it; Skinners aren't fond of bright lights, sure, but they won't keep them away. If anything it'll just draw more, and probably Roughnecks too."

"That's reason enough for me," Wallace said, stepping forward. He toted an FN M240L light machinegun, belt-fed with a mean damage output. It was fitting for the man, to say the least. He grunted and walked past Damien toward the stairs. "Who wants to tag along? We'll flip the breakers and clear the cells. That's where they keep the weapons 'n' supplies, too."

"I'll go," Devon said, surprising the others. "I wouldn't mind getting something fresh to kill those fucking things with."

Everyone nodded in mute agreement.

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"I don't believe we've been formally introduced," Wallace said, one-handing the 23-pound machinegun to shake Devon's hand.

They walked down the steps, vanishing into the bowels of the recently overrun HOA outpost. Damien didn't need to tell her 'be careful,' in reality he didn't need to say it to anyone these days. It came as a default setting in their lives, but especially here he still felt the urge to.

Now it was left to these three men.

"How spacious are the offices upstairs?" Jesse asked.

"Very," Ethan said. "Three-man spacious, so how 'bout Damien and I clear out the lobby, you secure that side door best you can."

Jesse nodded. "I can do that."

"Good. Then we'll head upstairs."

Jesse slung the Blaser rifle to free his hands as he tended to the door. There were splotches of blood on the walls and by the door itself, as there were elsewhere throughout the building, namely on the tiles in the lobby. However, large quantities of blood and gore there were not, for the creatures must've lapped up most of it. This happened only during resurgences, or more appropriately afterward. Before they pulled back into their abysmal safe havens.

For Damien and the others, this was now theirs.

They would have to make do.

Jesse didn't have to go far to secure the door. There were two chairs with steel frames sitting opposite the stairwell just before the lobby. He took one and propped it under the door's handle after he dead-bolted it shut. TO make sure it wouldn't slip free on the tile, he disheveled one from the floor—easier than it should've been—and set the chair's foot against the dip.

Meanwhile, Damien and Ethan finished clearing the lobby. They walked around the splotches of blood on the floor, gazing over the counters to visually secure these areas. No creatures remained behind, as it was already assumed.

Better safe than sorry.

“How ‘bout this travesty of a door?” Ethan asked.

Damien sighed. “Don’t know, but this ain’t gonna work. Unless we can put the doors back.”

Ethan clicked his tongue. “Doubtful. Frames are FUBAR.”

“I got an idea,” Jesse’s voice spun them on their heels. He entered the lobby with a confident stride that Damien hadn’t seen since he and Clive were saved back at the school.

A seemingly long, long time ago.

Too long.

“Let’s hear it, then, hotshot,” Ethan said with a smirk.

“Where are we?” Jesse said, stopping on the other side of a pool of dried blood on the floor. He opened his hands up, speaking like a salesman preparing an elaborate pitch.

“HOA outpost,” Damien said simply.

“More...specifically,” Jesse squinted.

“Former police precinct.”

“And...what do police precincts have in them that regular homes do not?”

“Dammit, Jesse, get to the—”

“Holding cells,” Ethan said abruptly. He stepped over the puddle and past Jesse, but not before patting him on the shoulder. Ethan stopped at the stairwell and turned around. “Specifically, barred doors.”

Damien smirked. He and Jesse met up with Ethan.

“The only problem in this stellar idea of yours, Jesse,” Damien said, “is the transference and fitting of a barred door to *that* frame.”

“Easy.”

They turned to stare at Ethan.

“Mind elaborating?” Damien said.

“Well,” Ethan sighed, “the Humvee that took us here has a winch on the back. Detach that sucker, fasten it to the inside frame, but on the outside so that it’ll be harder to push inward.”

“You sure are a Seraph,” Damien smirked.

“Resourcefulness, key trait number five.”

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“What about my idea? Seraph material or not?” Jesse asked, as if deeply insulted.

“Guardian,” Ethan shrugged. “Guardian material. Now let’s go get that door.”

“Jesse and I will get the hitch first, cover each other out there. Wallace and Devon should already be down there. Go ahead ‘n’ get reloaded, too. We’ll be down soon enough.”

Ethan nodded. “Sounds good. See you soon.”

Damien and Jesse returned to his temporarily barricaded door while Ethan descended the stairwell. Jesse put the chair off to the side and Damien exited the building, sweeping the aim of Abe’s Winchester side-to-side. Fortunately the spotlights outside were still on, and illuminated the parking lot. Jesse was behind him soon enough, keeping the Blaser slung but drawing his pistol. He left the door ajar for quick reentry once they were done.

“You need a screwdriver or something?” Jesse asked.

“Ideally, a wrench,” Damien grunted as he exerted himself trying to loosen the bolts at either end of the winch fixture. “How’s it looking?”

“Around here?” Jesse said, scanning the walled-in parking lot with his M1911. “Clear as a Fourth of July Sky.”

“I don’t know what the hell that means,” Damien said under his breath. He popped one bolt loose. “But I suppose it doesn’t matter. Just keep an open eye.”

“Right on. Good thing we’ve got these lights.”

“Yeah, but not for—”

The spotlights fixed to the ledges of the building’s roof suddenly shut off. They whirled down until not a speck of luminance shone from them, casting the fullness of night upon Damien and Jesse.

“Just had to say it, didn’t you?” Damien shook his head.

“Bad timing is all. Wallace wastes no time, I guess.”

“That’s a good thing, at least,” Damien said. He stood and kicked the winch twice before the final bolt came loose. The Humvee swayed a little but with no great noise. Damien was just

shy of wanting to shoot the damn thing off before he got it, but didn't want to stir up a lot of noise. He cradled the winch spool under his arm and picked up the shotgun with one hand, impressed by its weight alone. He couldn't wait to shoot it.

Moreover, he couldn't wait to blow off a Skinner's head with it. Even if it wasn't Abe's exact killer, it would slate his anger a good deal and he hoped that Abe—wherever he was now—could get a bite of satisfaction from it, too.

"Back in we go," Jesse said, his voice lilting, almost as if singing it. He opened the door for Damien but didn't enter until after the Seraph. He thought he heard some rustling before he stepped inside, or a faint scratching sound. Now it was no more, because he shut the door and locked it then secured the chair under the handle.

Now it was no more.

"Would you mind carrying this?" Damien asked.

"Sure, I got it." Jesse took the spool from him, feeling its weight, and followed Damien toward the stairwell. Every single fluorescent ceiling fixture was well-lit, except for a few shattered ones in the lobby. At least the hallways were illuminated, and the stairwell too. Jesse followed Damien downstairs at the spur of fearing faint commotion.

Upon reaching the base of the stairs, which wasn't far from ground level, they saw the noise's source. Each holding cell had at least three crates of carious ammunition, including some weapons leaning against the bars. This excluded the holding cell nearest the far wall, which was composed of a surprisingly intact rollup door. In this cell were three air-drop crates under a half-draped tarpaulin.

Wallace, Devon, and Ethan were all resupplying.

"Looks like we hit the jackpot, shit!" Jesse exclaimed, shuffling past Damien with an eager gaze. He sought to rearm himself, although his hands were full.

"Technically, not really," Damien said as he followed less enthusiastically. "This is a HOA outpost for a reason. They're all stockpiled like this. Only thing to be thankful about

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here is that the creatures weren't still present when we arrived. Unfortunately, it appears nobody survived. The men and women who died here, I can still smell them in the air."

Damien's cold words stirred truth and grief in each of them. They also iced their spines and gave them goosebumps. Not so much what he said or his delivery, but its veracious meaning.

"Damien's right," Ethan finally said. He snapped the firing lever on his Remington R5 RGP. "We should be a little more respectful to this place, and—"

"Focused," Damien said, "is what I was getting at. But thanks, Ethan. So...did you get the door?"

"Yeah," Ethan nodded, walking past Wallace toward Damien. "It's right over here. Wallace and I already detached it. Harder said than done."

"Seldom works out that way."

"Tell me about it."

"That's 'cause you *seldom* have *me* at ya side."

"Well put, Wallace," Damien said. He and Ethan stopped by the cell with the detached barred door leaning against one side. He sized it up, curious if it would be able to fit alright. "We got the winch spool, Ethan. Good thinking. Should I have Jesse go up and—"

"Wallace and I are all set to go," Ethan said. His R5 was fully reloaded, sufficient magazines packed into his satchels, and a fresh battery in his flashlight mount. Similar improvements had been apportioned to his other weapons, an MP5K and M1911. "We'll handle it, faster than Jesse. Besides, he needs to suit up real good, too."

"Definitely. Appreciate it."

"Right on, man. We'll see you topside soon. Hopefully we won't have any visitors before then."

"Hopefully. Careful up there."

"Always." Ethan patted Damien on the bicep and turned to throw Wallace a solid glance. Although the big man was still hovering by the weapons stockpile, he had long since gotten

resupplied. A new ammunition belt of 7.62mm armor-piercing rounds equipped to his M240L and fresh magazines for his MP5A5 and Desert Eagle. He carried all of this on himself without a single hitch in his stride, as only he and few other Seraphim of his size could. He bid temporary farewell to Devon and Jesse, taking the winch spool up to Ethan. Damien nodded and walked past Wallace, heading toward that far cell. Behind him Wallace helped Ethan carry the barred door upstairs, with the spool of winch cable in tow.

“Ditching the M4, I see,” Damien said, eyeing the weapon currently in Devon’s eager hands. It was a Heckler & Koch HK416 carbine, fitted with a foregrip, reflex sight, lasersight, and extended magazines.

“Yeah,” Devon said. “This is, a, uh...”

“HK416.”

“Right, that’s it. A lil’ shorter than the M4, feels better in my hands, too.”

“That’s good. Yeah, eight inches shorter than your M4 carbine. Makes all the difference in the world if compact is what you’re looking for. And the Glock?”

“Still with me.”

Damien nodded. “Anything else?”

“No, this is plenty for me.” Devon gestured at Jesse who stood beside her. “Him, on the other hand...”

Devon walked past Damien, wearing a BDU waist rig for additional magazines. It wasn’t perfectly fitted and had a lopsided shift to it that was exacerbated with the natural swing of her hips every time she walked. Damien decided to keep his focus on guns as she walked toward the stairs. He looked up at Jesse, whose eyebrows were raised, his gaze speaking for itself.

“If your next words don’t have anything to do with your new arsenal,” Damien said, lifting a forefinger, “then I don’t wanna hear it.”

Jesse opened his mouth, dropped his eyebrows, closed it, and nodded. He cleared his throat as he fitted himself with the necessary supplies, BDU rig included.

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“Well, for starters, I’ve got one more mag for the Blaser—just in case. Damn things are heavy, though. And, uh, then I’ve got this bad boy—the same thing most Seraphim use.”

“Remington,” Damien said, enunciating it. “Heavier punch than an M4, which means firmer recoil, but slower rate of fire. I imagine it’s nothing you can’t handle.”

“Of course not!” Jesse laughed. “Trust me, *I got this*.”

“I hope so.” Damien turned his back to wash the vacant holding cells with an observant gaze. The walls were a faded beige-painted concrete, with raw patches visible in places. Down here the postmortem scent of a massacre hours earlier didn’t grow so heavy. But upstairs it was more prominent. He began to think twice about this plan—it was adequate, but could be better. He gestured Jesse to hurry after the others; he would be right behind him soon enough, after he resupplied too.

“See you up there!” Jesse said, and scrambled upstairs.

Meanwhile, Damien leaned over the unveiled air-drop crate and gazed at the weapons available on the wall. A buffet line for any soldier.

This wasn’t about enjoyment anymore, even if he did admit to feeling the satisfaction of killing those creatures. More significantly, he convinced himself that this was about efficacy more than anything else.

He resupplied his R5, Desert Eagle, and MP5K ammunition, then searched for 12-gauge shells to use with the Winchester SPR210. He loaded a handful into an empty ammunition satchel, and their plastic cases clattered together with every stride. He put the holding cells behind him, ascending the staircase to meet the others just outside the lobby.

In Damien’s hands was the Winchester double-barrel shotgun since it had no sling, while his R5 and MP5K rested on his back. Combined with all of his freshly stuffed ammunition satchels, this was the heaviest he’d been since he and Clive were deployed near Durham, Virginia five months ago.

“How’s it coming?” he asked.

“Oh,” Devon said, gesturing at the two Seraphim by the

lobby's front entrance, "they're just about done. Wallace placed the barred door outside the frame and Ethan's securing the cable."

"We have enough, right?"

"Yeah, like twenty or thirty feet of it."

"Think that'll hold?" Damien asked, raising his voice.

"You bet!" Ethan replied while he secured the cable using the other doors as anchors against the frame. Meanwhile, Wallace stood outside holding it in place. Ethan grunted as he affixed the last stretch of galvanized steel cable.

"Hey, Wallace, how 'bout you come back inside now, eh?" Damien called, waving him in.

"Go on," Ethan affirmed with a tilt of his head.

Wallace picked up his M240L and began to circle back around to the parking lot so he could reenter via the side door. Jesse left Devon and Damien so he could remove the chair and temporarily unlock the door for Wallace.

"Hey, Ethan," Damien said, "Devon and I are gonna sweep upstairs. You mind?"

"No problem, just take Jesse with you."

As soon as Wallace reentered, safely, Jesse secured the door again and followed the other two up the stairs. Their steps echoed in the stairwell before vanishing upstairs and onto the building's second level.

Administrative offices.

They crested the top step and stopped, Damien standing between Devon and Jesse. In unison they stared across the vast room, about twice the floor space as the lobby, the center carpeted while the track around was white tile. Half of the space were cubicles, the other half open desks with wooden chairs. The right side of the room was a plain white wall with corkboards and papers pinned to them as well as large maps. On the left a would-be wall was replaced with a row of glass windows and small offices behind him.

There were papers littering the floor, some of the cubicle walls toppled or split down the middle, and many ceiling tiles

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were missing too. Still no bodies, but blood up here was more profuse than downstairs.

Death had visited this room, alright.

And without a single pause, either.

“Let’s get this over with,” Damien said, leading them into the room. At least eighty percent of the fluorescent fixtures up here were perfectly lit, the remaining ones shattered out of their ballasts. Damien took the main floor while Devon fanned along the right-side track and Jesse swept the offices on their left.

With one glance to his left, Damien spotted bloodied handprints marking some of the office glass windows. They had long since dried, as well as their weeping red trails. Damien shook his head and focused on his own area. They moved cautiously and methodically, but still injected haste into their procedure.

Afterall, at any time something could attack the station...

They finished their first round, then doubled back to return to the stairwell. They had just reached the top step when they heard a loud crash behind them. Pirouetting with weapons raised and blood pumping, they spotted a sizeable black shape plummet into a desk on the other side of the cubicles, having fallen through the ceiling.

“What the...” Jesse began, but didn’t finish.

The Imp rose all of a sudden, wings outstretched and jaws chomping at air. One of its wings cramped up, folding like a pocketknife, and it pitched down into a cubicle wall. It rolled through, hard, tumbling until it crashed past the last one nearest the stairs.

Devon shot first. Her HK416 pumped out ten rounds in a matter of mere seconds, reducing the Imp’s torso to a bloody mass before it could recuperate.

“Well done,” Jesse said with a nod.

Ethan’s voice echoed up the stairwell in question.

“We’re good!” Damien replied, voice firm. “All clear, coming down now!”

“As well you should! Me and Wallace are hearing some crazy sounds through this barred door. Not very pleasant. You got any windows up there?”

“Uh...negative. Why?”

“Gotta set up posts.”

“True. I guess it’s gonna be like the school I told you about earlier. No windows, at least nothing open. We’ll have to post ourselves indoors, *wait* for ‘em.”

Ethan didn’t respond. Damien rushed down the stairs, the other two following close. When Damien alighted at the base, he found Ethan just standing there holding the R5 at his side. Wallace was far behind him, pacing the lobby when he didn’t have his ear to the barred door.

“So?” Damien asked.

“So,” Ethan sighed, “we wait here, like you said. Take posts right here, between the lobby and stairs, one to that person’s right for the side-door, and someone upstairs to cover the stairs...in case anything slips by.”

Damien nodded, not liking this plan too much because it resembled so closely the school’s situation. And everyone knew how well that panned out. An image of Clive’s mutilated face flashed behind his eyes and he stowed the grimace.

“Sounds like the only option we’ve got,” he said with a sigh. Then, a nod, and he began assessing what to do. “We should have Wallace with the LMG and someone else at his side to cover the lobby. On their right, facing the side-door, me—this shotgun’s got the best potential for the bottleneck route. Then, like you said, one at the top of the stairs where the offices are...but let’s not forget the rollup door downstairs, just in case. We’ve got two more people to spare, so might as well.”

“If I didn’t know you were a Seraph before, Damien,” Wallace said with a reverent nod, “I sure as hell do now.”

“I’m flattered,” Damien said firmly. “Now let’s—”

That same cacophony of eerie sounds in the distance of the night outside the station came flocking in again. Except now they were much thicker, fiercer. They were eldritch to say the

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least, and sent shivers down their spines as they imagined the horrid animals that they belonged to.

And what they were capable of.

Then Damien remember what he and his comrades were capable of. Seraphim and human alike.

“Like I said,” Damien put his foot down, “let’s get ready!”

Wallace knelt with his M240L shouldered, occupying the space where the hallway opened up into the lobby. To his right was Damien, who laid down in a prone position instead of standing. His logic was simple—aim high, but have a better chance at slowing the creature behind the first with a crippling effect. His R5 was set aside instead of slung in case he didn’t have time to reload the shotgun. Meanwhile, to Wallace’s left knelt Jesse and at the top of the stairs by the offices was Devon. She watched her back keenly, especially after that Imp fell through the ceiling. They assumed it probably had worked its way through the rooftop, somehow, and gotten into the ventilation ducts, which clearly hadn’t kept it at bay. Beneath her two levels stood Ethan, feeling more alone than ever before amid the holding cells, facing the ribbed steel rollup door at the back of the building.

With their positions locked down, they waited.

Damien wouldn’t have minded a few more minutes of encroaching silence and waiting before they came. As they neared their terrible sounds ceased, striking those inside the station with an almost unbearable quietude carrying a plague of its own.

Unfortunately, Damien and the others didn’t get long.

The first creatures were, to their surprise, Imps. They came at the front entrance first, a group of four or five. Two of them smashed into the barred door, trying to push through them or dismantle the whole thing. Its steel frame groaned against the lobby’s foundational entrance but otherwise did not budge. The creature gnashed with piranha teeth and the fury of a hundred condemned souls but still found themselves incapable of

passage. Others could be heard barreling into the still standing double doors, rattling them in their frames. Ahead of Damien, he heard similar sounds as they struck the side door. The chair under the handle held surprisingly firm, barely yielding to the impacts.

Downstairs was no different, and they could even hear it topside. The rollup door rattled shrilly,

“Hold your fire ‘til they actually come in, Wallace,” Damien said without taking his eye off the side-door. “Jesse, take care of whatever’s trying to get through those bars. Clean, precise shots. Use the Blaser if it’s anything bigger than an Imp.”

“Right on.” Jesse already had his new R5 equipped. It would take some getting used to, alright, but he handled the recoil well enough to clear the first two Imps quickly. They screeched and bled all over the steel bars, careening out of sight. They were quickly replaced by two more, unfortunately, trying to find weaknesses in the improvised barricade.

Wallace just knelt there, breaths controlled and flaring through his nostrils. He waited with eagerness more than anything else, but he did agree with Damien’s strategic suggestion.

After about twenty seconds of constant pattering Imp bodies and wings outside, they relented. The ensuing hiatus was but a deep breath’s worth of time, and then the Hounds replaced them. Their burly bodies slammed into the entrances, all except for the barred door, which Imps continued to gnash at. Likewise, Jesse continued to shoot them down; their numbers seemed indefinite.

“Got a breach!” Damien announced.

The side-door buckled, its askew chair bending along its back frame. The metal groaned and the door itself rattled on its hinges. One of them suddenly popped off with a metallic clang, skittering across the floor. It stopped within reach of Damien, but he stood—technically, laid—steadfast. He cocked one of the shotgun’s two triggers, waiting with controlled respiration.

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A howl erupted on the other side, blood-curdling and feral down to every ligament of the creature. Then it lowered its shoulder, or head, into the door one final time. The deadbolt snapped from the jamb, which groaned like a metallic beast as it was twisted from the wall. The chair left its place with a loud clang, tumbling across the floor like abstract art. The door came next, warped in more than one place and giving way to the Hound behind it. They were so greedy to get in, not unlike back at the school, that they tried squeezing through the entrance at once. They briefly got stuck, but Damien helped them with that. He squeezed the trigger and killed one immediately, tearing off one side of the skull and peppering the other's face with buckshot. Crippled, it lumbered over the corpse of its comrade only to veer into a wall in the narrow hallway, bludgeoning itself half to death.

Damien swiftly unholstered his Desert Eagle and killed it with one shot, as opposed to wasting a 12gauge shell on it. The Hound collapsed in a bloody heap, but behind it flowed more.

These came in one at a time, to Damien's dismay.

At least the first two slipped on the bloodied floor, a third bounding over them only to trip over the foremost of its slain brethren. It plummeted into the floor and Damien replaced its face with a load of 12-gauge buckshot. The stench was already rising horrendously, becoming almost unbearable especially in these narrow confines.

In the lobby, things were approaching similar problems.

The double-doors stood firmer than the one Damien watched, but they were beginning to lose faith in themselves. Jesse and Wallace watched as the barriers on the inside shook against the impacts on the doors from the other side, undoubtedly by Hounds. Imps finally stopped flocking at the barred door, retreating to leave it untouched while the others buckled. Jesse took the time to reload his second magazine.

"Windows would've really helped us out," Jesse sighed.

"Yeah," Wallace said with a grunt. "This place is like a fucking prison."

“Too bad it’s become the opposite,” Damien said.

“What do you mean?”

Damien fired the shotgun and it roared with a great echo. A Hound was blown away, one of its arms severed from the shoulder. It whined as it fell and another tumbled over it.

“We’re here trying to keep things from coming *in*,” he replied. “Instead of getting *out*.”

Wallace grinned to himself.

“You find this amusing?” Jesse asked.

“A little.”

“And I thought *I* was the whacko.”

“Keep your eye on that damn door,” Wallace said, giving Jesse a dirty look.

“Alright, alright.” Jesse snapped the R5’s firing lever and shouldered it to aim down the EOTech sight again.

Just then a Skinner ran up to the barred door, grasping the vertical bars with its long clawed fingers and pressing its face into the gap. Its ominous grin widened, rosy gums appearing to swell. Its eyes danced about motionlessly with their black stare, and it began screeching.

“Kill the fucking thing, already!” Wallace barked. He spat a few rounds out from his M240L, punching the Skinner in the forehead with hot lead. Its brains splashed out the back of its skull, lithe body folding over the back of a Hound as it charged the barred door. The beast snapped its jaws, several times latching teeth onto the bars but doing nothing more than rattle it in its place. Its hot, rank breath spewed into the lobby.

Wallace was firing two-round bursts at the thing when a louder report made him stop. The Blaser rifle to his left was effective as it was loud. The Hound’s nasal crests ruptured and the bullet must’ve cleaved the glabella of the skull, splitting it down the middle in a spray of gore. The creature toppled backward, no more than a flaccid corpse. Wallace cocked an eyebrow and looked over at Jesse, who rolled his shoulder under the buttstock of the Blaser.

“Well, then,” he said matter-of-factly.

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“Doing what I can with what I got.”

“Then do it more!” Damien shouted, and fired the shotgun again. It boomed and another Hound’s head transferred to the walls. Damien broke open the boxlock of the shotgun, ejecting two spent shells that trailed curls of smoke. He loaded a fresh pair, locked the barrels again, and fired both simultaneously as a trio of Hounds rushed him. Barely two could walk the narrow path side-by-side, but the third made it its business to somehow fit, too. Now two of their bodies took the fall, one’s skull exploding into the other’s face, the second’s chest rupturing in a plume of gore. The third was blinded and sent rolling head-over-heels down the hallway. It landed in a clumsy heap about six feet from the end of Damien’s shotgun.

He reloaded in the time it took to get back to its feet, and made it regret ever coming in here.

The Winchester roared almost simultaneous to the Blaser’s own report. Two Hounds died in about the same second, sixty feet apart. Their floor and wall-painting gore was no different, though. The creatures were all in the same, their consciences if not obsolete certainly of no interest or pity to mankind.

And certainly not to Seraphim.

The resonance of gunfire and Hounds throwing themselves into the lobby doors when they weren’t howling or snarling overwhelmed their ears. Even Damien and Wallace couldn’t hear beyond their vicinity, so if Devon or Ethan were shouting there’d be lapses of coherency. And however the rollup door was holding downstairs, they simply hoped for the best.

Worst-case scenario, Ethan had plenty of supplies.

He could even pick up an M240L if needed.

Damien could have, too, but he preferred the brute strength of the Winchester double-barrel coupled with his reliable Remington above all else. Besides, enough was enough; he didn’t want to become cumbersome to all of the firepower.

Just the same, the reload time for the shotgun was crippling. It had been alright until now. He ejected the two spent

shells, heat splashing his face, and glimpsed a blur of blackness in the doorway. It bounced off of a Hound scrambling over its dead brethren. Tall and humanoid with unnaturally lanky limbs and claws like sabres.

Damien got one shell in by the time it reached him. He dropped the shotgun, grunting out loud and rolling to his right. Its swiping hand barely missed him, claws digging troughs into the worn tile instead. His teeth grinded and his back struck the right wall, coming up with R5 shouldered. The muzzle spat fire and the Skinner towering over him shrieked in pain. Bullets punched holes through its lean chest, splashing the wall behind it with that abominably black blood.

Its shoulders swung left and right as 6.8mm bullets riddled its torso. After about ten rounds its back smacked the wall and it slid down to the floor, bleeding out of its mouth and the holes Damien had created.

He rose to his feet now, R5 shouldered. He killed the next Hound with seven well-placed rounds to its face. He had a brief moment of relief, when nothing came through the side-door except for the enrobing fetor of death and more to come. He leaned the R5 against the wall, scooting back so that his left shoulder was but inches from Wallace's right. He reloaded the Winchester and returned its buttstock to his left shoulder.

"You good, Damien?" Wallace asked without moving.

"Hardly...But I'm still standing and they're not."

"That's what I wanna hear."

"How 'bout you guys?"

"The same. Doors are gonna buckle soon, though, for good. Bars are still standing, on the plus side."

"Plus side!?" Jesse exclaimed under his breath. He aligned to shoot another Hound and was about say something when he decided against it. He fired and half of the Hound's face went missing. The other half collapsed with the rest of its body, piling in front of the barred doors. Then a Skinner—no, two—made an appearance, reaching through the gaps in the barred door, claws swiping like pinwheels.

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They searched for the weakness. The cable.

“Oh, no you don’t,” Wallace growled. He started firing into the creatures, ripping them apart with his machinegun. They fell back, voicing their downfall louder than they had risen.

After his M240L had stopped barking out rounds, there was a throbbing silence that ensued. It lasted but a heartbeat, because it was quickly punctuated by gunfire upstairs. They came in rapid bursts, from Devon’s HK416, and Damien was urged to go up to check on her. He looked down the narrow hallway to the gaping side-door, seeing absolutely nothing come pouring through it as there had been earlier.

Were these creatures getting wiser?

Damien hoped so, but for the time being he would take any break as a chance to lend Devon a hand. It might not even be worth him going up there, but he turned to Wallace and just nodded once, then snatched his R5 and leapt up the stairs. As he neared the top, he heard more gunfire downstairs, assuming that it was Wallace not Ethan based on the distance.

Then he crested those final steps.

Devon was pivoting on her heel, sweeping bursts of gunfire through the air. That’s right, he realized instantly—the air. Imps were falling through the ceiling like hail, most of them making a clumsy descent. Others swooped into the room more vigorously, screeching and reaching out with clawed fingers extended. Their tails lashed out behind them, ominous whips audibly slicing the air. Devon appeared to be taking care of them well, but soon she’d need to—

“Reloading!” Devon said out loud, albeit under her breath, as she backed up past the last cubicle and ejected her magazine. It clattered to the floor as Devon approached from behind her. Despite having just called it out, probably more out of impulse than anything else, she clearly wasn’t aware of his presence.

Until he made it obvious.

He had set the shotgun down so that it leaned against the guardrail of the stairs. With the R5 shouldered, he began

shooting the winged fiends out of the air like an exterminator to flies. They crashed into desk and cubicles alike, their blood misting the few ceiling tiles remaining before falling into their own puddles.

Devon flinched at the suddenness and proximity of the gunfire, ducking and skirting off to the side. Then she slammed a new magazine home and looked up at Damien as he stepped forward, like a machine obeying the order of mass execution.

Except that it wasn't a terrible thing here.

It was a saving grace.

Ten seconds later every creature was on the ground in one form or another. He turned to face Devon, extended his hand. She took it and returned to her feet. She thanked him quietly, her lips barely moving and her eyes glazed with adrenaline. The fear was there, too, but it did not conquer her disposition.

"They just started falling through the ceiling?" Damien asked, speaking more out of certainty than inquisition.

"Yeah, like cats and fucking dogs."

"Right," Damien drawled, and turned to stare at the stairs. He heard more gunfire, then a really loud rattling sound. Something large and metal, and not as sealed as a traditional door. Damien breathed. "Ethan..."

"What's that sound?" Devon asked, stepping up.

"The rollup door downstairs," Damien said. "C'mon, let's hurry. Things are getting heavy."

"What about up here?"

"You did good, we'd be screwed if you hadn't been up here when those things fell through." He led her down the stairs, speaking loudly as they went. "But I have a feeling they're gonna focus more on the bigger entrances than the smaller holes."

"Wonderful."

"Yeah." Damien reached the bottom of the stairs at lobby level. He looked straight ahead and saw that the double-doors were beginning to buckle through their barriers. In addition, the

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barred door had been knocked askew; it still stood but one of the cable ends had popped free because of the other doors. Damien heard more gunfire and a scream from downstairs. Wallace turned immediately, eyes wide. Damien nodded and said, "I'm going to check on him! Wallace, you need to *stay here*. We need that LMG on the lobby. I think they're gonna focus on the bigger entrances from here on out."

Wallace clenched his jaw. He wanted to disobey and go after his partner, but he knew that if he didn't stay here for at least the first dozen or so enemies that breached, they would all die a lot sooner.

Sooner. That really lit a fire under them all, as they were all thinking the same thing.

"Devon, stay here with them. Keep an eye on that side-door, *just in case*." Damien nodded to her and she to him, then he turned to head downstairs. He skipped two steps at a time and his boots slammed down at the base in a matter of mere seconds. He skidded across the bare concrete floor as he rushed away from them and toward the back of the room. He immediately spotted Ethan backpedaling from the rollup door, clutching at his right arm and firing bursts from his MP5K with the other.

"Piece of shit," Ethan mumbled to himself as Damien reached him. He turned to see his fellow Seraph standing with weapon drawn, but he wasn't startled the least—only relieved. "Damn things starting attacking the rollup door en masse. Must be at least five Hounds out there, Skinners too."

"How do you know Skinners?"

"One of 'em reached in and swatted at me as I tried shooting through that busted gap a Hound caused earlier." Ethan indicated part of the rollup door on the right side, flush with the steel frame, where it was wrinkled inward. Damien spotted four deep gashes on Ethan's right forearm, right through the fabric. Blood seeped through and he was beyond lucky the Skinner hadn't severed his arm entirely. Ethan eyeballed Damien and said, "I know what you're thinking. I was an idiot—I could've gotten my whole arm cut off."

Damien shrugged.

“How’s it upstairs?” Ethan asked with a sigh.

“Manageable, if you want to be optimistic.”

“Seraphim aren’t optimistic.”

“There’s a first for everything.”

Ethan chuckled. “Alright. So now what?”

“This plan’s as fucked as it was when we began. We need an escape plan.”

“Right, well, the Humvee’s still our best bet.”

“Yeah, especially with that gun up top. But upstairs is gonna be swarming real soon. And we don’t wanna hightail outta here with the full lot on our ass.”

“True. Which means...”

“It means we hold out ‘til the last fucking second. Then hit the road. I’ll take the wheel, if you don’t mind. Wallace on the Browning.”

Ethan nodded, swallowed. “What’s that, then, Plan D?”

“Oh, no, that shit’s definitely Plan E.”

“For ‘Ethan,’ right?”

“Sure thing.” Damien patted him on the shoulder and turned to face the stairs. Devon stood on the steps, weapon idly shouldered. Her face displayed pure anxiety, but she didn’t utter a word.

“Go find out what’s going on,” Damien said, practically pushing Ethan past him. He gave Damien the keys to the Humvee and jogged over to Devon at the base of the stairs. Meanwhile Damien approached the rollup door that was incessantly rattling, and pictured the horde of atrocities on the other side. He had grown more accustomed to labeling them monsters than simple animals or creatures, since it seemed most fitting.

Survival instincts or not, they wanted to butcher.

There was no in between.

“You won’t kill me,” he said under his breath.

A hand on his shoulder. He turned to see Ethan, and glimpsed Devon ascending the stairs far behind him.

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“They’re about to come through, any second now. Wallace was going to scream when they do, let us know.”

“Wallace, screaming?” Damien said with a lopsided smirk. “Now that’ll be interesting.”

“Gunfire or not, you’ll hear it.” Ethan nodded. “Trust me.”

“Good. And the rest of this plan?”

“As soon as they breach, Devon’s going to climb the stairs but not all the way...just enough to provide cover for Wallace and Jesse’s backs. Once Wallace has put down sixty rounds or so, enough to suppress the first wave, Jesse is going to pull back and head for the parking lot. He’ll hop in the Humvee, occupy the gun to help secure the lot ‘til we get there. Devon will be right behind him, by which time we need to pull the pin.”

“The pin?”

“Grenades. In that crate up against the wall,” Damien indicated the cell to their right, with the supplies stockpiled at its center. “Pull the pin, thirty second timer. Drop it in the crate, haul ass upstairs.”

“Where’s the crate going?”

Damien fired a round at the center of the rollup door, nearest the handle by the floor. It punched through the ribbed steel and a shriek sounded on the other side.

“Alright, then,” Ethan nodded.

A loud, vehement bellow erupted upstairs. It was none other than Wallace Harlow, belting his lungs out in a wordless call of attention. Gunfire followed in a continuous stream. No bursts, no intermittence. He was mowing down creatures as they rushed through the doors; the first two waves would be the thinnest, fortunately, climbing over each other. This didn’t say much, though—there wouldn’t be enough of a shortage to give them a huge cushion. They needed to act like rapid fire.

“Now!” Damien barked, already backing up. “Get that crate ready! I’ll be right back!”

Ethan nodded and got to it, wincing from the wounds on his arm as he slung his weapon to free his hands.

Damien bounded up the stairs, stopping at lobby-level only to have an Imp flock over his head. It nearly took off his scalp, but its tail did loop around his neck. His breath was cut off and he lost his footing, boot soles lifting off the floor. Clawed hands lowered to his face, but fortunately there wasn't much room to move around in here. The Imp hit the low-hanging ceiling barrier between the stairwell and lobby, involuntarily releasing Damien. He landed awkwardly, bruising his entire right arm and breaking the pinky and ring fingers. His head missed the floor but he did roll into the back of Wallace, briefly sabotaging his aim. A Skinner survived because of it, but fortunately Jesse had yet to leave. With the Blaser slung, Jesse had the R5 shouldered and put the creature down, along with a Hound as it pushed forward and Wallace readjusted his aim.

"It's time!" Jesse shouted, turning to leave.

"Go!" Wallace barked like a Great Dane.

Jesse asked Devon, who was tending to Damien, if he was going to be okay.

"Yes, just hurry!" Devon said, panic like fire in her voice. She lifted Damien into a sitting position, as if nursing him back to health. He was a bit disoriented, but it quickly came back to him. He reached for his shotgun, but it was out of reach where he'd been scooped up by the Imp moments ago. Devon got up and retrieved the double-barrel weapon for Damien, returning in time to see him standing, although his right hand looked bad. Two fingers were simply wrong.

"Give it," he said nonetheless, snagging the Winchester with his left hand and lifting it to his shoulder. He aimed to the left of Wallace, standing, his right arm dangling. Before he fired he yelled at her to leave, as per the plan. "Go, Devon! *Now!*"

"Be careful!" she said, and turned to leave.

Jesse screamed outside, warranting greater haste in Devon. She yelled to signify her approach.

Damien fired both of the Winchester's barrels at once. The spread was wide, the kill count two skimmers and half of a Hound, as gruesome as it sounded. The report was thunderous,

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but the recoil even more violent. It flung free of Damien's left hand, smacking a wall and sliding into the lobby. A Hound leapt over it, slipping and kicking it backward just as it plummeted. A few other creature tripped over it body, plunging too.

That worked out...strangely well.

Damien drew his MP5K, appropriate for single-handed use. He started firing into the crowd of creatures, splashing blood in every direction, including their own eyes.

"Fuck!" Damien blurted, gnashing his teeth. "Where's that explosion!?"

"Go check on him. I got this."

"Dammit, Wallace, don't be—"

"I'm no hero, I'll leave when I need to! Now go!"

Damien wasn't going to hesitate any further. He was halfway down when he heard flapping wings and peeled back to see an Imp flying down from upstairs. Wallace had set down his M240L, its belt dry, and wielded his MP5A4 while single-handedly reloading it from his pack. It was a hassle to do, Damien was shocked he was even trying, but there appeared to be enough cushion to fare if he were to try. Damien killed the Imp before it reached Wallace with his MP5K, swatting it out of the air. It landed sloppily behind Wallace, who gave a curt nod without lifting his eyes from the M240L.

Damien continued his hasty descent. He reached the bottom and his heart sunk. The right side of the rollup door had been peeled back significantly, ample space for Skinners to get through but not enough for any Hound. Two of the lanky creatures had already done so, and were now nothing but corpses on the floor. But they weren't alone down there. Ethan had fallen, his legs shredded like pencil shavings, upper body draped over the grenades crate. He had two in his right hand, their metallic pins dangling from his middle finger, which rose above the rest, palm facing Damien. Ethan grinned a bloody smile and Damien nodded once, unable to voice the words.

More than his heart was felt in that moment alone.

Damien ascended the stairs in the greatest hurry of his

life. He reached lobby level and bumped into Wallace as he backpedaled, firing that M240L from the hip. He was yelling incoherently and battering the crashing waves of creatures with 7.62mm ammunition. Armor-piercing bullets tore through the flesh and muscle of Hounds with ease, dismembering and eviscerating Skinners like papier-mâché.

“Let’s go!” Damien yelled in Wallace’s ear.

“Where’s Ethan!?”

A hefty explosion rocked the earth and the former police station quaked on its foundation. Black smoke billowed up from downstairs in thick clouds.

“Looking over us,” Damien replied, eyes connecting with Wallace, who didn’t look the least bit pleased. His eyes glassed but his face didn’t even twitch.

“I’m behind you,” he said simply, his voice like gravel on steel. He fired in long bursts now, the machinegun’s recoil sending tremors through his body and chattering his teeth.

Damien nodded and ran down the hallway. He hurdled over the corpses he’d put there just ten minutes earlier, and reached the side-door. His feet scuffed the threshold and he was enveloped by the night, illuminated by only two sources. One was the Humvee’s massive lighting array up front, fortunately not directly facing the building but away from it. Second was the gun emplacement’s muzzle, flashing from its constant operation.

There were creatures spilling into the parking lot from the entrance gate, not far from the building’s lobby entrance. Mostly Skinners thinking they could evade bullets, but Jesse was relentless up there. He took advantage of what Damien assumed was a freshly reloaded Browning M2HB, spitting out .50 BMG rounds at 630 feet-per-second. Each cartridge was enough to halve a Skinner at the waist and dismember a Hound.

Damien rushed toward the M1151 Humvee, thankful that the parking lot itself wasn’t swarming with creatures. They must have abandoned trying to get in through that side-door after he’d repeatedly slaughtered their attempts.

“Get in!” Devon yelled, popping the passenger’s door.

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“Wallace!” Damien yelled, his throat hurting.

Wallace emerged through the doorway, backpedaling, still shooting the M240L. He stopped as his right foot touched the threshold and the gun ran dry. He cursed incoherently and threw it at whatever rushed him, then drew his Desert Eagle. He fired it repeatedly, then backed up again. His left heel caught the threshold and he fell backward; his head would’ve split on the pavement had Damien not slid to catch him. His broken fingers screamed with pain but he propped Wallace up as he emptied the Desert Eagle’s clip into the pursuing Hybrid.

Seeing that monstrosity charge them through such a narrow passage, its arms and legs crashing through the wall as it proceeded, was about all Damien ever cared to see again. He gazed down its infinite mouth, death in those abysmal eyes. The .50-caliber slugs from the Desert Eagle had driven holes through its chest, but still it advanced.

Wallace was swapping his pistol for the sub-machinegun when Damien extended his left hand to shoot at something else. An eager Hound had leapt past the Hybrid’s upper body, using the wall to ricochet out in front of it. Its left shoulder slammed into the metal door jamb, undoubtedly fracturing it because the creature landed unstably. It was almost upon Wallace’s extended legs when Damien’s own Desert Eagle barked. Two rounds caught it in the face, two more in the mouth. Its skull opened up at the back of its neck like a watermelon, chunks of cranium lined with brains. The beast fell in a heap and the Hybrid behind it reached the threshold, pouring through the doorway like a wave of iniquity. The frame buckled as its muscular hindquarters tore through the wall so that it could exit the building after it had so vigorously entered.

It swiped a clawed hand out at Wallace, missing his nose by mere inches. It lumbered forward, intent on bearing down upon them. Wallace’s evasion drove him violently backward, crashing into Damien and pitting them onto the asphalt yet again.

Gunfire suddenly hosed the Hybrid’s face. It backed up

and juked left, then right, trying to dodge its human enemy's aim.

Damien looked up and behind, seeing Devon standing just outside the passenger's door, firing her HK416 over the top. Several bullets chipped off the Hybrid's skull, one obliterated an ear, and another ripped through the left corner of its mouth. Bleeding and near-death, it still breathed—albeit painfully—and practically fell onto Wallace, who was inadvertently pinning Damien.

Devon hurriedly reloaded.

The Hybrid's face loomed into Wallace's and its jaws came down—

Damien twisted out from beneath Wallace, putting precious inches between his nose and the Hybrid's fangs, swinging in a wide arc his right hand. His broken fingers were subservient to the other three, which clutched his combat knife like a vise grip. He drove the tip of the carbon steel blade into the Hybrid's left temple, burying all seven inches in its skull. The creature bled out of its eyes and nasal slits, as well as curtains that rolled over its lower jaw. Wallace bent his legs and kicked the corpse off to the side, where it rolled lifelessly.

"Want your knife?" Wallace heaved as he got to his feet.

"Fuck that," Damien said. "Let's go."

He and Damien boarded the Humvee. Jesse had paused shooting because the creatures had just stopped coming. They were probably all in the station, now pouring out of the side-door entrance. Damien got behind the wheel while Wallace climbed aboard and replaced Jesse on the Browning.

Damien keyed the engine on, joining the vehicle's headlights with the rest of the illumination array up front. The Humvee's turbo-diesel V8 rumbled to life and Damien turned it around in the parking lot. He pushed past an overturned Humvee that looked like it had lost to a Roughneck, and drove toward the open-gated entrance of the lot.

Devon asked where Ethan was.

"Plan E," Damien said through gritted teeth. He drove

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through the open entrance, back tires screeching on top of the asphalt as the Humvee's end swung out behind it. Damien glanced in his rearview and saw, despite a lack of luminance, the gleaming faces of several creatures in the night. Skinners and Hounds mostly, some Imps fluttering in the air as if they were leashed to a mobile.

They were about two-hundred feet down the road when a large shape moving toward them from a side street caught Damien's eye. He shot a glance to his left, and through the window glimpsed the inbound silhouette of a Roughneck.

"Hold on!" Damien yelled, and abruptly hit the brakes. The Humvee's body lurched forward on its chassis, tires screaming something fierce. Smoke kicked up all around it and the charging Roughneck cross the road right in front of it, perfectly illuminated for an instant.

The Humvee sat at a standstill in the middle of the road.

The Roughneck, on the other hand, ground to a gradual stop as it realized its error. It turned to face the Humvee, whose gunner—a rigid-faced Wallace Harlow—spun the Browning machinegun full-circle. Fingers on the triggers, Wallace growled and put the iron sights right over the Roughneck.

"Motherfucker," he said, lackadaisical yet irate.

He opened fire, the Browning M2HB rip-roaring in the night. The heat splashed his face and his eyes screamed with no sound, lips sealed, teeth rattling in his head. Two-inch-long anti-materiel bullets tore decimated the Roughneck's skull and body in a way that the beast would've never expected. The result was devastating and gruesome to say the least.

Wallace patted the Humvee's roof when finished, basking in the reek of gunsmoke and spent lead.

Damien nodded and accelerated into the fading night.

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Half an hour passed while Damien sat behind the wheel. It was his first time ever driving a Humvee, but he did so without a single hitch. Fortunately for him, and the lot of them together, the night was slowly receding from Virginia. He drove northward, with the nation's capital in his proverbial sights. Sweat beaded his brow and he felt surprisingly cold. The roads were hugely deserted, like the rural highways even when they gutted towns congested with buildings. Every few blocks there would be an entire neighborhood gridlocked with abandoned and wrecked cars. Because of this Damien stuck to the highway.

Still, it was startlingly unnerving to have driven this far without any hostile contact on the roads. In addition, morning's earliest signs were beginning to grace them with light.

It was so dim at first that many of them thought they were simply slipping off into the embrace of sleep. But after those first thirty minutes passed since they fled the partially demolished HOA outpost, Damien announced that he was going to pull over. The announcement was expected to have waken Jesse from his presumed slumber, but to Damien's surprise he was frozen awake.

On second thought, there was little surprise to it.

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The look on the young man's face was a blemished collage of fatigue and terror. Pain and loss. He wasn't alone in feeling defeated, despite their survival.

Ethan Fennel, a Seraph who had saved their lives back at that gas station, died doing no different. Damien and Wallace faced death more than once back there, too, and even as Seraphim they couldn't deny the fear in their chests. Jesse had seen more than he cared to recall, Devon likewise.

Sure, they escaped—but what now?

That perpetually bleak question rattled their nerves to the bone. Damien pulled off the asphalt, the Humvee's right tires grinding into the dirt of the two-lane highway. To their right was mostly woodland bordering the Potomac River and on their left—across a partially forested median—was the other road leading in the opposite direction. Beyond that, suburbia shrouded in trees, separated from the larger districts.

"Why're we stopping?" Wallace asked, leaning back so that his voice could carry down into the Humvee. "Damien?"

"I'm tired."

"You're *what*?" Wallace said in disbelief.

Damien killed the engine. "I said," he raised his voice and enunciated slowly, "I – am – tired. You have a problem with that, shoot me."

"Right, well...we're not far off. Reagan Airport's within sight, I can see their tower. Probably two minutes' drive from the Rosslyn Bridge. We cross that baby, *boom*, we're there. HOA will greet us with slaps on the back, cold showers and warm cots."

"Are they friendlier to survivors than Seraphim?" Jesse asked, his voice a dry croak.

Wallace kicked his seat.

"I'm joking, I'm joking," Jesse mumbled.

"We could be fifty feet from that bridge, Wallace," Damien sighed as he laid his arms over the wheel's top arch, leaning forward. "And I *still* would pull over."

"Take your breather, then, man. We've deserved many."

“Amen to that,” Devon said, exhaling deeply and reclining her seat. It was tough to do so, but eventually she slammed it back.

Damien stared at his hands as he dropped them in his lap. His forehead rested on the steering wheel. In the murk of the Humvee’s cabin, with his body slumped over to barricade light from entering his side, he couldn’t see much. Just a lump of skin and bone he didn’t need to observe to know the palms were arrayed with callouses and knuckled scarred up. And the blood? There was some of that, too. He could smell it, and wondered for a moment if he needed to worry about it. Could it sink in through his pores, affect him the way it did those abominations?

“Damien,” Devon said, touching his right shoulder.

He didn’t reply at first. He slackened his body as if he were dead, but he knew it was far from the case. The pain in his broken fingers was a faint throbbing, and the joints were swollen. He could have righted them by now, but not once did he ever really contemplate it.

The importance was distant.

“Damien,” Devon said, her whisper a touch louder as she shook him gently.

Damien sat up and stared over at her. He no longer looked distraught or fatigued. He looked ready and vigorous.

“What is it?” he asked keenly.

“Nothing,” Devon said with a feeble smile. “Just...wondering how you were doing. *Are* doing.”

“Oh...I’m fine. Just thinking. A lot.”

“It’s a curse, isn’t it?”

“What’s that?”

“Human thought. The conscience.”

Damien smirked. “I might’ve said so at one time. But through all of this, I couldn’t be surer of anything else, and it’s that it isn’t.”

Devon’s smile slowly strengthened.

Damien looked out through the grimy windshield. I was no longer very transparent, but a kind of faded gray. An opaque

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panel of BAE bulletproof glass between him and the world outside. This same world started to feel the effects of morning, no different than any other day on Earth after Hell's Fissure. The sun couldn't penetrate the clouds, however, so what little filtered through gave birth to a new day for those surviving beneath them. It was hardly dawn, so it certainly wasn't as light outside as it would be midday.

Still, it was better than night.

Damien was content with this much.

"Alright," he finally said, that ease in his voice slipping through his fingers. "Everybody get out."

"What'd you just say?" Jesse asked, leaning forward.

"Get *out* of the Humvee," Damien repeated, this time louder for Wallace to hear.

"What the hell for?" Wallace asked.

"We're out of gas," Damien said simply. "I think we've been leaking since Alexandria. Noticed a mile back, engine light came on. If we have any left, no more than a mile. Trust me."

"Dammit, Damien. Why didn't you say anything?" Devon asked, suddenly frustrated.

Wallace ducked back into the Humvee, occupying the seat behind Damien and opposite Jesse. He gathered his MP5A5 and secured his rig of munitions.

"Because," the big man smiled toothily, "he thought that 'pulling over for a breather' would be a better prelude than saying 'shit, we're out of gas. Now let's *walk* the rest of the way and fear for our lives even more than before.' Am I close, Damien?"

Damien shook his head. "On the nose, actually."

"Well, bravo. You're a Seraph, sure, but you've got a human heart. Now let's get out 'n' start walking before I develop one, too. Would hate to prove Ethan right..."

Wallace popped open his door and stepped out, boots clapping to the asphalt. He stretched his body out, despite having been standing since they fled the HOA outpost. He wrapped the sling of his sub-machinegun around his torso as if needed, and

armed his hands with it. The thing felt more like a sidearm than anything after having handled two machineguns for so long.

It was better than nothing.

Jesse got out after Wallace, watching his footing on the shoulder, and circled around back to meet the Seraph on the asphalt. They chatted up a few uneasy laughs as Damien looked over at Devon.

“We’re gonna make it alright,” he said quietly.

“I know we are. I’m just...tired as hell.”

“You aren’t alone. And I’m not ashamed to admit it.” Damien nodded and opened his door. “Let’s go.”

Devon met him and the others on the left side of the Humvee, everyone with their weapons in-hand and carrying what ammunition remained on their bodies with them. They walked down the right side of the highway, not quite on the shoulder but not in the middle of the road either.

Ten minutes passed before they noticed something that seized their attention more than anything since Hell’s Fissure ever had. High above them, the gray ceiling of overlapping clouds was thinning out. Where the clouds drifted endlessly against what little horizon they knew of anymore, out over the airport they approached, they could see it more clearly. The deepness of their abysmal colors were lightening, and the formations themselves giving way to broader holes. Sunlight filtered through in great cascades, however dim in reality to their eyes it was impeccable radiance.

The first signs of pure sunlight in two years.

Damien’s thought process should have been bustling with excitement and intrigue, but instead it was shot. He didn’t know what to think. He didn’t even know if he should believe it was a sign worth his faith or resolve. Ultimately this same mindset carried over to the others. Or at least it seemed to. Damien believed that Jesse and Devon weren’t so heavily affected with this pessimism as he and Wallace were.

Or perhaps it was just the Seraph curse of reserved silence.

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Regardless, little was said among them, and they continued walking along the road. Ten more minutes passed and they were alongside the Reagan Airport, merely separated by a stretch of grass and trees.

Nothing could defeat time in its highest moments.

The clouds were beginning to disperse in greater quantities now. Thinning was one way of describing their nascent departure, but in this moment pessimism was banished for the human race.

Damien, leading the group by a few paces, stopped in his tracks. He gazed up, and behind him the others stopped. Wallace paused at Damien's left, studying not the skies but the expressions on Jesse and Devon's faces. They were equally thrilled, their eyes awash with relief. But this word alone served no purpose here.

Damien, meanwhile, tilted his head to the side. It occurred then to Wallace that he wasn't marveling so much at the skies as he was captivated by something else. All of that machine-gunning must have royally messed with his hearing, for at last did his ears pop. He heard, too, the approach of a vehicle. Damien turned to stare down the road stretching out behind them, briefly deceiving Wallace that he was actually looking at him.

Wallace watched as Damien's eyes widened.

He hadn't seen the Seraph—the clone, the man, in essence—smile much since they met. Small smirks of a struggling spirit here and there. But the grin that lit up his face now was nothing shy of authenticity.

Wallace turned on his heel to face that direction.

An M35 cargo truck with high canopy bed drove down the road in their direction. For what little bend in this road there was, they currently occupied it. They could see, ever so slightly, whatever was behind this truck. And to their relief, it was more. At least three more M35 trucks followed it, all a dark green with black splotches and olive drab canopies.

"Finally!" Wallace said excitedly, throwing his arms into

the air. He then started waving them over his head.

“What?” Devon asked, and spun to face the direction they had come. She joined Jesse in an overexcited display of relief, while the two Seraphim waved their hands and wore content smiles of their own. Above them, the clouds were in sluggish retreat and the morning seemed to smile as well.

The first truck passed them without slowing down, but exerted a loud honk of its horn. It dropped into several honks, like Morse code, and Damien told the others to step back. The second and third trucks passed in suit, but the fourth and last decelerated to stop in the middle of the road. The two-and-a-half-ton cargo truck groaned as its chassis lurched and its tires grittily halted on the asphalt. A tall man with pale skin and cropped black hair under his military cap exited the cabin, descending the steps with exuberant strides.

“Seraphim!” he said with a handsome ear-to-ear smile. He saluted and they saluted back, Devon and Jesse even as well. To this he simply nodded but never disarmed his smile. “Glad to have crossed paths with you all. We passed an abandoned Humvee on down the road. Yours?”

“Yes, sir, it was.” Damien stepped forward and offered his hand, which the man clearly hadn’t been expected. Damien asked what the convoy was for, adding, “I thought I saw people in the backs...”

“Right you did, sir,” the man shook his hand. “Pardon me, my name is Manuel Benitez, Sergeant. I imagine you all would like to hear what’s going on?”

“Depends,” Wallace said. “Good news?”

“I don’t think he’d be bouncing like that if it weren’t,” Damien said. He nodded to Manuel.

“This convoy of ours started as two trucks in Manassas, eventually picking up two more once we crossed through Springfield. But it wasn’t until then, when we were refueling, that we got word of a recession. That is, uh, the creatures—they were falling back, or simply not being spotted in places they were known to be more numerous. Especially around this region.

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What's strange is that all of our communications equipment is shot—so we just took the word while it was good and kept going, rounding up any survivors and Seraphim alike we could find. We're heading to D.C. now, where—as I imagine you already know—HOA's most fortified stateside stronghold is.

“And, as you can tell, the skies are finally clearing. Over two years, it's finally believed to be over. I mean...a lot of it is hearsay, but the signs are prominent enough. Now, the bed's not even half-full, I welcome the lot of you hop in, and we'll get going again.”

It was a whole lot to take in at once.

Jesse and Devon were enthusiastic to board the truck. Their grins had yet to fade, nor would they for some time, Damien figured. He looked to Wallace and even he smiled bright.

“Can we keep our weapons, Sergeant?” Damien asked.

“Of course! Most of the guys in the back of this one are military, no Seraphim here but a couple in one of the other trucks. Some civvies, too, but just arm your safeties and hop in.” Manuel saluted and returned to the cabin. “Let's go, let's go!”

Damien and Wallace went to the back of the M35 cargo truck, now a personnel carrier, and helped each other board it. There were other soldiers present that had lent Devon and Jesse a hand in getting up there. Under the tattered canopy of the truck, which accelerated once the tailgate was slammed shut, it was murkier than the four of them would have preferred.

Nonetheless, the truck moved along, and so did they.

Wallace and Jesse greeted some of the other people in the back, but for the most part they kept to themselves. The majority were staring out holes in the sides of the canopy at the skies as they peeled back, exposing for the first time in two years the firmament in its truest form.

And it happened to be a clear-skied morning.

Damien gazed out the open back of the truck with Devon under his arm, enrapt with a spectacle unlike anything he'd ever seen. Memories from Devon's husband of sunrises could never

live up to this. He only wished his Seraph partner, Clive, could have survived to see this himself. In a way, he believed that he and Ethan had already. Now Damien just sat and exhaled contentedly, smiling as he ingested the sight of dawn bleeding through the grayness...

