

Wolves of the Apocalypse:

Day of Darkness

Book 3

By LC Champlin

Joel 2:1-6

Blow a trumpet in Zion,
And sound an alarm on My holy mountain!
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
For the day of the LORD is coming;
Surely it is near,
A day of darkness and gloom,
A day of clouds and thick darkness.
As the dawn is spread over the mountains,
So there is a great and mighty people;
There has never been anything like it,
Nor will there be again after it
To the years of many generations.
A fire consumes before them
And behind them a flame burns.
The land is like the garden of Eden before them
But a desolate wilderness behind them,
And nothing at all escapes them.
Their appearance is like the appearance of horses;
And like war horses, so they run.
With a noise as of chariots
They leap on the tops of the mountains,
Like the crackling of a flame of fire consuming the stubble,
Like a mighty people arranged for battle.
Before them the people are in anguish;
All faces turn pale.

Chapter 1

Fissure

Traitor - Daughtry

The bullet slammed into Nathan Serebus's chest, knocking him back against the refrigerator—not from force, but from the shock of his best friend attempting to murder him. Thanks to the bullet-resistant vest beneath his T-shirt, the projectile would only bruise.

Mouth still agape in confusion, Nathan heaved his six-foot-two frame forward to stumble after Albin. Albin Conrad, the man who until a gunshot ago had acted as his adviser—for eight fucking years!—and the most loyal man on the face of the planet.

Pain blazed around Nathan's chest, radiating from three-day-old rib fractures. Panting, using the counter and walls for support, he cut through the living room, heading for the front door. What on Earth had prompted this betrayal? At the time Nathan needed him the most, Albin not only deserted, he destroyed.

Pain morphed into the fire of rage. It consumed all feelings of confusion, sadness, guilt. Anyone who turned on their friends deserved severe punishment.

The door slammed behind him as he burst into the California sunshine. He yanked up his T-shirt to clear his Glock. In half a heartbeat, the front sight settled over the lanky blond's receding figure.

BANG!

++++++

The first gunshot prompted Albin to cut right, using the cars along the suburban street for cover. He glanced backward despite himself. Mr. Serebus stalked down the street, weapon raised. Radiating rage as dark and wild as his hair, eyes reflecting the Abyss, he looked every bit the devil he acted, even down to his goatee. His face's contusions and abrasions heightened his barbaric aspect.

"Come, Judge!" Albin urged the German Shepherd, who loped at his side.

Perhaps he had acted rashly. He had fired on his friend not to kill him, but to return him

to sanity. A slap to the face may have proven a more appropriate tactic. But Mr. Serebus would require more than a blow to the face to acknowledge his sins. However, what would make him repent of them remained a mystery.

Albin needed only to reach the white Tacoma pickup truck at the corner of the street. Luckily Marvin Bridges had given him the keys. Or rather, Albin had demanded them.

Another gunshot rang through the suburban neighborhood as Albin lunged around the side of the vehicle. Whipping the door open, he stepped aside as Judge leapt in. After following suit, he shot the vehicle into gear and accelerated southwest along Davit Lane.

To the north, smoke rose from distant San Francisco. The fire in the South Industrial sector grew, and with it the chaos that had consumed both the city and the country over the last four days.

As Albin sped toward Marlin Drive, he encountered no police or military presence. The authorities had largely retreated from Redwood Shores in favor of addressing the mayhem in San Francisco. A shame, for the authorities offered his and the residents' best chance of survival after Mr. Serebus had turned the affluent Silicon Valley community into a place of danger.

Mr. Serebus's thirst for control had grown to a lust for tyranny, which would consume everything it touched. He would not rest until he dominated friend and foe alike.

++++++

“Nathan!”

His trigger finger paused a hair’s breadth before the striker released.

Amanda Muster jogged into the street from her house next door. Upon seeing the pistol, the blonde pulled up short, her face registering surprise and confusion. “Nathan, what are you doing?”

What was he doing? Returning a favor. Damn, where did he put those keys? There, leg pocket. He whipped out the Acura TLX key as he trotted toward the SUV.

“Nathan, stop! Were you shooting at *Albin*?”

He shot me first. The door slammed as Nathan settled into the driver’s seat. The distraction she made had cost him precious seconds. Albin would have reached Redwood Shores Parkway by now.

What was he doing? Hunting down a traitor.

Yanking the walkie-talkie from his belt, Nathan hit the HT's push-to-talk button as he accelerated down Davit Lane. "This is Nathan. Open the roadblock on the south end."

"*It already is,*" came the reply. "*It's been open because the police have been leaving. A Tacoma just went by, too.*"

Shit, the police. Albin would go to them. Whoever reached law enforcement with his story first would win. No one would believe Albin had randomly fired on Nathan. No, Albin Conrad, Esq., never lost his temper. He never so much as raised his voice unless no other solution existed. Besides, the authorities, including Director Washington of the Department of Homeland Suck-urity, already held Nathan in low regard.

He gunned the engine, screeching left around the corner onto Marlin Drive. No Tacoma in sight. However, police cars and military Humvees rolled down Redwood Shores Parkway ahead. They would not tolerate a car chase.

Slamming on the brakes, Nathan grunted in pain as the seat belt caught his ribs. For lack of a true target, he glared at the upscale houses, grinding his teeth. "He shot me. He fucking shot me in the chest."

Deep, calming breath. Inhale for *one, two, three, four.* Hold for four seconds. Exhale for four.

A three-point turn put him back on the road to the Musters' house.

Why the fuck had Albin chosen now to snap? Now, when the chaos had reached its lowest point since the disaster began last Friday. If he wanted to betray Nathan, why didn't he do it at a more opportune time, such as when Cheel and his terrorist bastards had held Nathan at gunpoint?

No, something had happened. Albin had started ranting about the motives behind and the means to Nathan's ends. Damn it, he'd even taken issue with those ends! How could protecting the neighborhood of Redwood Shores offend the attorney? Albin wanted them to evacuate, going with the government, rather than shelter in place. But why, after the government had failed him and Nathan repeatedly and nearly cost them their lives, did he want to climb in bed and fuck them? It made no sense. It just . . . made no sense.

As Nathan approached the Musters' residence, which he'd exited minutes ago, he slowed the vehicle.

Now what? Now he would have to run the neighborhood on his own. For all his high-minded talk, Albin must not truly care for Redwood's people. Blast, it simply made no sense.

He backed into the driveway.

The neighborhood's roadblocks needed reinforcing. The people needed training. Beyond that, they needed supplies. Bottled water and canned food would run out soon.

But how the fuck could he concentrate after Albin had shot him in the chest and driven off like a lunatic?

Maybe Albin had suffered too much stress. Yes, that was it. The adviser didn't enjoy horror movies; thus, he found the contagion-drooling cannibals that roamed the city doubly repulsive. An image of their white, blistered faces and rust-red eyes intruded. The *affected*, or the *Dalits*, as the terrorists called them. Albin had dealt with the cannibals and their insanity, not to mention the Redwood Shores residents, while Nathan had dealt with the mercenary leader Red Chief and his insanity.

"I expected too much." Not everyone thrived on opposition like Nathan Serebus did. Not everyone had the strength of an alpha wolf—or of Hati the Wolf of Odin, who chased the sun. Albin might seem like Skoll, brother of Hati, chaser of the moon, but even he had limits. At the thought, the familiar golden eyes opened in the back of his mind. Hati.

"Then why the fuck didn't you say anything earlier? Damn it, Albin!" He slammed the flat of his hand into the steering wheel.

Surely Albin would come back. Like a toddler—like little Davie—who objected to his parents' dictates and stormed into his room, then grew hungry and ventured out again, Albin would return. He had no choice. Then . . . then they would have a serious discussion. Without weapons. "Then you can explain why I shouldn't beat sense into you." He blinked. No, he didn't want to hurt Albin, despite the pain the attorney caused. Albin was family. When the prodigal returned, how would he handle the betrayal? Would Albin apologize? Should Nathan forgive?

Tapping at the window—He jumped, reaching for the Glock in his waistband. Amanda, not a cannibal, bounced on the balls of her feet outside. Her brown eyes shone with an urgency that darkened her fair features.

For a flash, a green-eyed, fiery-haired valkyrie's face replaced hers. Janine. Pain worse than the fractured ribs' pierced his heart. His arms ached to hold his wife again.

If Janine were here, she would demand an explanation. With a sigh, looking down at the

Acura A on the steering wheel, he pushed the door open.

“Nathan, what’s going on?” Amanda asked as he exited. “Why did Albin take off? Were the affected around? Is that why you were shooting?”

“Was that a gun?” A girl around age nine or ten, with neon-striped hair and wearing a Pierce the Veil band T-shirt, bounded toward them from the Musters’ residence.

“Denver!” Her mother caught her and pulled her close. “Why would you come outside if you thought it was a gun?”

“Denver! Get back here!” A blonde tweenager the twin of her mother except for wearing her hair in two braids instead of one, dashed from the house in pursuit of her sister.

“Taylor, you’re not supposed to be out either!”

“But it’s safe now.” This from Denver, who twisted away from her mother’s grip. “The police came. There aren’t any more cannibals. And Albin helped us get rid of those gang members who tried to kill us.”

“We’ll talk about that later.” Amanda’s face had grown as pale and set as a graveyard angel’s.

“It happened so fast.” Nathan shook his head as he spoke. Careful, don’t make the townsfolk go after Albin with pitchforks and torches. “I don’t know why he left, but I need to find him and talk with him.”

“Maybe he went to talk to the government people again,” Taylor suggested.

“Possibly.” Or maybe he went to reload.

Chapter 2

Inconvenient Truth

I Will Fail You - Demon Hunter

Albin sped northeast along Redwood Shores Parkway, toward the Sandpiper Park baseball diamond. Police cars passed, proceeding in the opposite direction.

The now-familiar headache pulsed behind his eyes, a drumbeat of pain. He removed his wire-rim glasses and pushed his thumb against his right temple.

When he arrived, he found Soldiers in the outfield, disassembling a field hospital tent. The military had transferred its patients to San Francisco International Airport, the government's ad hoc headquarters. A number of residents had tried to accompany their loved ones, but the government agents had warned them that limited space precluded this.

Several meters from the site stood a brunette in her mid twenties. She interviewed one of the Soldiers, holding her phone out to record his responses.

After parking the Tacoma on the sidewalk, Albin strode toward the reporter. "Ms. Josephine, where is Bridges? I need you both to come with me. Now."

"I'm in the middle of an interview." Josephine Behrmann of ABC Action News motioned to her subject.

Using the distraction, the Soldier wished her a hasty farewell before departing to offer instruction to one of his men.

"It is Mr. Serebus."

"Where is he?" She leaned around to peer behind Albin as if the man in question would materialize. "Is he all right?"

"Where is Bridges?"

"What's up?" Speaking of the Federal Reserve economist, he trotted toward them from a group of Soldiers near the dugout.

"Albin, did you find him? Did you ask him?" Bridges's brown eyes blazed with an intensity that enhanced the bristling appearance of his product-spiked hair. "What did he say?" At this, the economist clutched Albin's arm.

Extricating himself, Albin shook his head. "Get into the vehicle; I will explain on the way."

“Albin, has something happened?” The blood drained from Behrmann’s face. The dread banished all thoughts of the interview.

“Come.” Albin led the way back to the truck. Once everyone climbed inside, he locked the doors.

“Where are we going?” Behrman asked from the passenger seat as she fastened her seatbelt. An excellent question.

“Away from here.”

“But—”

“Mr. Serebus is not . . . acting sensibly.” Albin shifted his shoulders in discomfort at the words.

“That’s pretty vague.”

In the rear, Bridges glared out the window as they continued down the parkway. “If you only knew, Josephine.”

“What I am trying to convey,” Albin resumed, his heart rate increasing, “is that he lied to us.”

“What?” Behrmann stared at him as if he had suggested the Supreme Court made judicial rulings by casting dice.

“He attempted to kill Kenichi Oshiro and take over his fortress.”

“I’m sure he—”

“Allow me to finish. He ordered me to send the police to areas where he knew the Red Devil Goats would not be. This provided the mercenaries a clear escape route. He went so far as to inform them of it when they were evacuating the water-treatment facility and radio station. He was working with Sarge.”

“But that’s fine; Sarge was fighting Red Chief! Their civil war helped us.”

“He didn’t have to continue supporting the bastards.” Bridges punched the side of the door at the epithet. “Those human-trafficking pieces of shit.”

“He betrayed us, Ms. Josephine.” Be it the pain-control medication, the trauma, or the pressure of leadership, Mr. Serebus had allowed his lust for power to dominate him. “We fought to keep the Red Devil Goats from airing the broadcast they believed would control the cannibals. Yet after Jeremy Nelson disconnect the power to the radio transmitter, risking his life in the process, Mr. Serebus initiated the broadcast himself.” Hearing them come from his own mouth

made them doubly powerful.

The passengers fell silent. One could almost hear their imago of the man splinter like crystal under a hammer. Mr. Serebus had led them for what seemed like years but amounted to three days. He had saved their lives, but he also placed them in situations that had nearly cost them their lives.

“He must have had a good reason.” Behrmann shook her head as she spoke, and continued to shake it for a moment after.

“I thought the same.” Albin’s mind returned to their confrontation. “I presented Mr. Serebus with the opportunity to explain himself. He refused, declaring his way to be the proper one.”

“That sounds about right.” Brows furrowing, Bridges cracked his neck as if it could release his inner tension. “We trusted him. And he did *this* to us.”

“In God’s name,” Behrmann exclaimed, “what are you talking about? He did *what* to us? Brought us out of the city full of cannibals and away from Ken, who tried to make us into living players in his video game? Or do you mean that Nathan broke up a group of terrorist-paid, human-trafficking mercenaries?

“Marvin, I expect this from you. You don’t know him. But Albin!” She regarded him with shock and disappointment, eyes wide and lips parted as if she could not find the words to express the horror he caused her. “Albin, you are his friend. You’ve been together for years. How can you not take a moment to understand what happened? We have to go back and talk to him.” This came in the tone of finality as she gave a nod at her idea. “I’m sure he’ll be able to explain.”

“I do not believe he is in the mood to discuss matters. He attempted to shoot me.”

Behrmann stared. “Shoot you? With a gun?”

“I’m not surprised,” Bridges grunted. “And yes, with a gun, Josephine. What else would he shoot him with? A rubber band?”

“So where are we going if not to talk to him?”

“I am going to the authorities.” Albin gripped the steering wheel as if holding a rope while dangling over a chasm. “Perhaps with their resources I will be able to bring him to his senses.”

Sighing, Behrmann massaged her temples with both hands. “How? He just talked to the

DHS a few hours ago; they don't have a problem with him leading.”

“I will arrange a way.” In truth, the *how* remained hazy, like the smoke after a gunshot.

Then she straightened, looking at Albin in realization. “Where is he?”

“I assume he is still at the Musters’ residence, though he may have pursued me. But as I did not see either Ms. Amanda’s car or the late Ms. Carolyn’s SUV behind me, he may have thought better.” Or he may have thought his adviser had deserted him, and had accepted the fact with pleasure. However, given Mr. Serebus’s temper, that possibility seemed improbable.

“Albin, stop the truck!”

What had possessed her now? Albin slowed the vehicle to a halt at Marlin Drive. “What is—”

The door slammed on his sentence as she departed.

Bridges threw his door open and leapt out after her. “Josephine, stop! He’ll probably shoot you too!”

Chapter 3

Nothing but the Half Truth

Call Me - Shinedown

“I need a moment,” Nathan warned as he stalked toward the house in which his best friend had attempted to murder him.

God had chosen Nathan to lead. Then why had He allowed Albin, Nathan’s most valuable asset, to desert?

“Nathan, I don’t know what happened, and I’m really sorry to tell you,” Amanda continued as she followed him, “but the neighborhood needs a strong hand right now. They’re starting to wonder what’s going on.”

Indeed, people had begun exiting their houses to mill on the sidewalks. Upon seeing one another, several of the neighbors formed a clot. If left to coagulate, they would eventually block the flow of peace and security, resulting in a heart attack for Redwood Shores. More civilizations fell from trouble within than from terror without.

Albin could—No, *if* Albin had remained loyal, he could have helped distribute and manage forces.

“Amanda, you were Carolyn’s second-in-command.”

“I was not in command, Nathan. I just helped.”

“You need to start thinking of yourself as second-in-command, then.” He took her by the shoulders gently and met her brown gaze. “I need you, Amanda. Your girls need you.” He looked behind her at the sisters. “I don’t know when Albin is coming back, or what he’s doing. Please don’t tell anyone else in the neighborhood what’s happened. If they ask after him, just tell them he’s out of the neighborhood for a while. Tell them you don’t know why, but you think he’s talking to the government about getting us supplies.” This resembled the truth more than they knew.

“All right, Nathan.” Lifting her chin, Amanda straightened her posture.

“You work in Human Resources—”

“It’s more talent acquisition and employee evaluation.”

“Use your experience and your skills to find people who can be block captains for us. Use the information Carolyn collected about residents’ occupations and expertise.”

“I have a few people in mind.”

“Excellent. We have to protect the neighborhood first and foremost. Food, water, and ammunition will come after.”

The ammunition for—Shit, the AR-15 lay in the back seat of the Tacoma! Now Albin claimed a pistol and a rifle. Perhaps Marvin had left his shotgun somewhere accessible. If nothing else, the fallen gangsters’ AK and pistols would offer a start to an armory.

Nathan stood back. “I need a minute to plan our next move.”

“Nathan!” Blue windbreaker flapping, Josephine pounded down the sidewalk toward them. “Albin said you’d be here.”

“You saw him?” Nathan stepped away from Amanda. “Where is he? I need to speak to him. Now.”

“Nathan, I need to talk to *you*. Now.”

“Josephine!” Marvin halted at the corner of the street a few houses away. When he spotted Nathan, he froze.

“Marvin.” As Nathan started toward him, the economist backed up. When Nathan stopped, he stopped. The hedgehog-haired man shifted his weight from foot to foot as his hand slid under his shirt to find his pistol.

“Marvin, what’s the matter? Did you see Albin?” Hard to keep the edge out of his voice when saying the name.

“Nathan, I can’t stay here anymore, not after what happened and what you did.” The words came in a rush, as if they would lacerate his tongue if he didn’t spit them out fast enough. Then he sprinted around the corner, out of sight.

“Nathan—” Josephine’s voice buzzed in the background.

“What the hell is wrong with everyone?” Nathan turned on her. “What did Albin tell you? Where is he?”

“Well.” Josephine caught herself when she saw Amanda and her daughters. “Can we talk privately?” She leaned away from him slightly and smiled as she addressed the women: “Sorry, it’s family business, so to speak.”

Amanda looked confused and somewhat irritated, but she and the girls kept silent.

“Come.” Nathan led the way to the house.

No sooner had the door closed than Jo launched into her opening statements. “Albin told

me everything. He said you tried to kill Ken, you helped the Goats, and you even started the radio frequency broadcast. Can you explain this?" Reporter Mode, which permitted only accusation.

"He told you that?" Keeping the tone casual proved difficult when his fist burned to punch a hole in the plasterboard.

"He and Marvin."

"Marvin?" Nathan's brows climbed as he leaned back against the kitchen counter, a foot from where he had almost lost his life to a .45. Of course. That explained how Albin had learned of Nathan's attempt to overthrow the lunatic Ken Oshiro. Marvin would regret running at the mouth. "What does he know about anything? He's never even around when situations go south."

"What made you feel you needed to do these things?"

Cold smile. "I did not kill Ken. He was playing god; I played back." According to Ken's call a few hours ago, the madman still played with the King of fools, as he called Nathan. "As for the Goats, helping Sarge helped me. Didn't I"—thumb jab at his own chest—"then kill both him and Red Chief?"

"Did you?"

"It's hard to survive having your face two feet from a flash-bang canister. I didn't look for the bodies, because I assumed the cannibal horde surrounding them would finish them off."

"What about the radio broadcast? You thought it would give the terrorists control over the cannibals—"

"I was led to believe it would give *me* control." He sighed and looked away. "But obviously that did not happen." Yet. The resonance modulation output terminal—ReMOT for short—belonged to him. If only it would start working . . .

Hands on her hips, head cocked, she regarded him. "If anything, the affected seem to be getting worse. The government's had reports of them using teamwork to accomplish their goals. They're becoming cohesive units."

The saliva in Nathan's mouth evaporated. He swallowed, or tried to. "Cohesive units. You mean they're starting to form fruiting bodies?"

"What?"

"Like the slime mold the contagion is based on, according to the research files. The pseudo-protozoa act together to form a fruiting body that produces more of their kind."

“Why didn’t you just let the authorities take the ReMOT instead of using it yourself?”

“After all they’ve done to us, you still have faith in them?” Even considering her government-adoring mainstream-media bias, how could she still believe in them? “The terrorist group has people in the government. I didn’t want to risk handing it over to an employee who secretly works for Istiqaamah, the Islamic State, or whatever organization was behind the broadcast. I have a feeling this goes much deeper than simply terrorists.” And so did Ken.

“Is that the whole truth?” The longing of a believer hoping for a sign shone in her eyes despite the shade of skepticism.

“The truth and nothing but.” Nothing but a little watering down to make it more palatable. Allowing the pain in his soul into his expression, he settled a hand on her shoulder. “I don’t know why Albin acted the way he did. Josephine, he shot me. Did he happen to mention that?” He pulled his T-shirt flat against his left pectoral to display the bullet hole.

With a sharp intake of breath, she put a hand over her mouth. “But . . . he said *you* shot *him*.”

“I fired warning shots to stop him. I didn’t want him running into the cannibal- and enemy-infested streets while in that mindset. Emotional people make mistakes. I didn’t want him to get hurt, but he wasn’t listening when I told him to stop.”

“Oh, Nathan.” She sighed and shook her head, relief in the relaxing of her shoulders. “I think Albin is just overstressed right now. He’s been through a lot. I know you have too, but he had to . . .” She looked away, jaw muscles working.

“He had to what?”

“Jennifer. Zander’s mom.”

“You mean the cannibal that used to be Zander’s mom.” And whom Jeremy harbored in his house like a stray animal. Not that Nathan could blame him too much. If Janine—no. None of those thoughts.

“Albin had to put her down.” Steel in her tone and glare.

“He shot her in the head.” The only way to kill a cannibal. If anyone could make that headshot, Albin could.

“I think it really took a toll on him. He’s not as emotionless as he seems.”

As if Nathan didn’t already know this. Eight years trumped four days of acquaintance. “That doesn’t excuse him shooting me. He could have killed me. In fact, I’m not sure he didn’t

mean to do just that.” Ice filled Nathan’s heart as his extremities tingled.

“I find that hard to bel—”

“You didn’t see his face.” Cold and pale, channeling the ruthlessness of his British ancestors, who deposed monarchs by assassination. “Still, I need to talk to him. Where is he?”

“He was in the Tacoma at the corner of Marlin and Redwood, but he’s probably gone by now.” She held her arms away from her sides in a shrug of defeat. “He said he was going to the authorities. He doesn’t have many options, really.”

“No, he doesn’t.” Then again, she didn’t know Albin Conrad.

Chapter 4

Federal Assistance

I'll Be Gone - Linkin Park

Two police cars passed the parked Tacoma on their way south, leaving to assist their brothers in arms in fighting the cannibals and mobs that engulfed San Francisco.

As Albin waited, he checked each mirror in turn. One minute remained for Bridges to return, after which he must secure his own transportation to the government base. As for Behrmann, if she wished to side with a man possessed of fractured judgment, let her exercise her right to make foolish decisions.

A figure emerged from the intersection of Davit Lane and Marlin Drive and broke into a jog. Bridges.

On the east side of the street, to the economist's right, a two-meter-high wooden fence common to most California neighborhoods protected the houses. A head appeared atop the barrier. The owner struggled to bring an arm over. White as an exsanguinated corpse, the face contorted in a snarl. Distance prevented a clear view of the eyes or complexion, but one needn't have a perfect image to recognize a cannibal.

With a last jerk, it flew over the wall as if launched from a trebuchet. It landed on all fours like a frog. Rearing up, it threw back its head. If Albin lowered the windows, the cannibal hiss would reach him and rake his sanity. He kept them sealed.

Spotting the monsters, Bridges broke into a run. While conventional wisdom instructed one never to run from an animal, all convention vanished in the face of these abominations.

Two more cannibals sprang over the fence. Then two more of the monsters writhed across to land on Marlin Drive's sidewalk.

The two lead cannibals broke into their ground-eating lope: two to three bipedal steps, their torsos falling further forward at each, then their hands came down as if preparing to perform a push-up. Their legs launched off to land in front of their arms. They resembled lions on the hunt.

Albin placed the vehicle in drive and sped down Marlin, aiming between Bridges and the predators. He could run them down, but colliding with a human would damage the vehicle, possibly rendering it less effective for escaping. If any of the windows broke, the cannibals or

their oily sputum would find their way inside.

The lead cannibals dashed forward, trying to cut off Bridges. The other three spread single file and moved diagonally like a fishing net to close the distance to their prey.

The tires screeched as Albin braked beside Bridges. “Get in the back,” Albin ordered through the semi-open window.

The economist swung himself over the edge of the truck to land in a crouch near the rear window. His feet had barely touched the bed liner when Albin accelerated down Marlin Drive.

He rumbled across the median in a U-turn. The cannibals fell away as the vehicle sped out to Redwood Shores Parkway. There he banked right, southwest, and proceeded toward Marlin Park.

Due to the park’s proximity to the heart of the neighborhood, the government had used the football—ah, *soccer*—field as a staging area as they prepared to dispatch the cannibals at the Heron Court Apartments on the western end of Redwood Shores.

Only a skeleton crew of law enforcement officers remained, likely planning to act as rear guard when the government forces completed their withdrawal. Two police cruisers guarded the parking lot beside the park’s tennis court.

Hopefully he would find—Aha. A Hispanic DHS officer with the air of a Tasmanian devil prepared to slide into the passenger seat of a patrol car. Officer Rodriguez. She barked an order at her driver, a police officer.

Albin guided the Tacoma into the car park, stopping five meters from the cruiser. Officer Rodriguez stared at the interlopers, her eyes narrowed in suspicion.

As Albin stepped out, Bridges vaulted over the side. “Officer Rodriguez,” Albin addressed her as he approached. “We require your assistance.”

“What is it now, Conrad? More cannibals? Did the Devil Goats get back into the neighborhood?” Her tone made it clear the ideas caused her annoyance, not concern. “You people wanted to be on your own. What’s the matter, isn’t Serebus stepping up to the plate?” She smirked.

“There were more cannibals, yes,” Bridges affirmed. “They’re on Marlin Drive.”

“But not on the residential streets?”

Albin held up a hand to silence Bridges. “That is not why we have come. Officer Rodriguez, I wish to re-enter the government’s custody. I will accept their offer of transport to a

safer location, as Director Washington promised us before the fiasco at the Belle Air Elementary.” How long ago that seemed, though only two days had transpired since he and the others had first taken shelter with the government. At that time, it appeared he and Mr. Serebus could do without them. But no substitute existed for armed guards and the blessing of the Department of Homeland Security.

“You what?”

“Mr. Serebus now pursues different goals from us.”

“Well.” She blinked. “I’m sure Director Washington will have something to say about it.”

“I will accept her judgment.” He would accept it as long as it facilitated his goals.

“Fine. You people are my responsibility, at least partly. You can ride in the back”—she jerked her head toward the rear seat of the patrol car—“or follow us. Decide, because we’re leaving. Now.”

Uncertain, Bridges rubbed the back of his neck. “Josephine is still in the neighborhood. She went to speak with Nathan. Maybe she got tangled up with those cannibals. She doesn’t have a vehicle like we do.”

“Mr. Bridges,” Albin interposed, “she is aware of incident command’s location. She is also every bit as ingenious as you at escaping dangerous situations.”

“Speaking of which.” The color in Bridge’s face turned to ash as he pointed behind the police cruisers.

At the same instant, Judge began barking from the Tacoma.

All heads turned in the direction. The five cannibals from Marlin Drive approached at a lope, using the shrubs as concealment.

Rodriguez shouldered her MP5, while her partner and the two civilians presented semi-automatic handguns. “Take them down.” The order had barely left her mouth when she fired two rounds into the chest of the nearest cannibal. Her third bullet destroyed the back of the creature’s skull in a geyser of blood and brain matter, completing the Mozambique Drill of two center of mass hits and one head shot.

The cannibal stopped, tottering. Then it dropped like a corpse cut from the scaffold.

The police officer released three shots as well, but only one impacted, striking the left thigh of his target. Aside from a momentary stagger, the monster continued its charge, oil flying from its maw.

Meanwhile, the other three cannibals moved in a flanking maneuver, two to the left and one to the right. Their group organization evolved with each encounter, it seemed.

The front sight of Albin's SIG Sauer P250 snapped into focus over a cannibal on the left. He took up the slack in the trigger. The shot broke, punching a neat hole between the eyes. The slow, heavy round tore through the occipital lobe, carrying brain matter with it and reducing the threat to a heap of meat.

Bridges loosed a series of rounds. Two struck a cannibal in the torso. Then its head snapped back, ending the charge forever. The killing blow originated from Rodriguez.

The remaining two fell under the lead storm from other law enforcement officers, who had deployed their weapons at the first gunshots.

When the pack's threat ended, the scramble for the vehicles began, as did the caravan to the incident command center.

Cold swept over the desert of Albin's mental landscape. Mr. Serebus had made his choice, and he would soon discover the consequences thereof. *Fiat justitia*, let justice be done.

Chapter 5

Not a Democracy

Somewhere Only We Know - Keane

No rest for the wicked or for the leader, and Nathan fit both. Rather, he did according to Albin's definition, even if it made no damn sense.

"Thank you for coming, everyone," Nathan addressed the crowd of Redwood Shores residents from the back of a GMC Sierra. His resemblance to a politician courting the Common Man made his skin crawl as if maggots burrowed beneath it. He didn't need to campaign, though; they already regarded him as sheep regarded their shepherd. He would have to turn them into wolves if they wanted to survive this hell—and if he expected them to do him any good.

"We suffered a great tragedy today with the death of Carolyn Blum. She was a true leader, and her sacrifice will not be forgotten. Her right-hand leader, Amanda Muster"—he motioned for her to climb into the truck bed beside him—"will make an excellent replacement. I will also offer my advice as we make sense of all this." By advice he meant the advice Putin gave Dmitry Medvedev before Vladimir resumed his role as president. While Amanda proved capable, she lacked his experience with the cannibals, terrorists, and government. Besides, he owed the neighborhood; they had helped him retrieve the ReMOT. They also offered the chance to develop the research files pertaining to the cannibals.

The crowd murmured as Amanda took Nathan's hand and scrambled up onto the tailgate. Some clapped, others looked down as they remembered Carolyn. The college president had run the neighborhood well during the last few days, but that had not saved her from the infected rebel Eduardo, or Esau Seir, aka the Red Chief of the Red Devil Goats.

"If we live in fear, hiding in our homes and waiting for starvation or looters," Nathan continued, "then we're already defeated. We are Silicon Valley. The world owes us its gratitude for all we've given it. If anyone can turn an obstacle in an opportunity, it's us. We are Silicon Valley. We are Redwood Shores!" He raised his fist like an MMA champion. And indeed, God had saved his life, choosing him to be His conqueror. Like Nebuchadnezzar bringing his rule to Nineveh, Nathan had not come as a prophet preaching repentance, but as the new leader, one who would bring peace—his kind of peace.

Scattered applause greeted this. Amanda gave her support as well, encouraging the

audience.

“Go Redwood!” someone cried. Other shouts of team spirit followed. Excellent.

“Now, Amanda will speak with you about how we’ll proceed. Everyone has skills—”

Nathan broke off as two figures hoisted themselves up to look over the fence at the southeast end of Keelson Circle. Pale faces regarded them with bulging eyes. Their hair fell in tangles, with oil dripping from their mouths and slicking the locks into tendrils like the tentacles of an octopus. The terrorists who spread the contagion called them *Dalits* after the unclean caste in the Hindu culture. Since their bodily fluids passed the contagion through even intact skin, they lived up to their name.

Sssssaaaahhh.

The hiss brought every hair on Nathan’s body erect. The faces vanished, then three cannibals launched over the wall as if on stuntman wires. The remaining two scrambled over a blink later. Since when could they leap like jungle cats?

“Never let a crisis go to waste,” he breathed. One thing about this disaster, crises came at five-minute intervals. Or less. Sometimes they overlapped. Good news for someone who knew how to leverage them.

“Josephine.”

She hopped onto the Sierra’s bed with him. “Do we shoot them?”

He shook his head, attention on the creatures. “Everyone, return to your homes. If they charge you, be a Matador and step aside. Go!” He thrust his hand behind him as if to push the people into their houses with willpower.

They needed no second urging.

Dropping his voice, Nathan explained, “We need our own army. This worked for the Goats, and it will work for us.” It already had worked for him, but Amanda didn’t know that. She didn’t know anything about his previous alliance with the Goats. In her eyes, he had ridden in as a knight in acid-wash jeans to rescue Redwood Shores from the mercenaries.

“What do you mean?” asked Amanda. “How are the affected—”

“I get it.” Josephine began scanning the area. “I suppose we could use the Nelsons’ garage.”

“Good idea.” Nathan glanced at the house, which sat across from the Musters’. “Jeremy won’t need it for a time.” Not until he returned from wherever the government had decided to

medevac him to. “Zander is staying with the Singhs. It’s already been used for holding cannibals anyway.”

++++++

Albin guided the Tacoma along Redwood Shores Parkway, following the flashing lights of Officer Rodriguez’s cruiser. In the rearview flickered more blue lights, the last of the law enforcement presence in Redwood Shores.

“Do you think Redwood will be all right?” Bridges wondered as he gazed out at the office high-rises.

“I sincerely wish I knew.” Keeping the annoyance from his voice proved difficult. “Mr. Serebus is a capable leader, but I do not know how well he will function in his current state of mind.”

“He doesn’t have many people there who can fight.”

“Perhaps the government will be able to spare a few units if the situation deteriorates.”

“Maybe. I remember hearing the story about an incident that happened during Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. A man called 9-1-1 and told the dispatcher a group of people was trying to beat down his door. In the background you could hear them banging and yelling. He said he had a gun. There were gunshots in the background. He was shooting warning shots, but the people kept hammering. He begged the dispatcher to send someone to help . . .” He gulped as his eyes went glassy. “But the dispatcher said, ‘I’m very sorry, sir, but we don’t have anyone to send.’”

Albin’s attention remained on the parkway. The lead vehicle banked right, taking the ramp to the Bayshore Freeway. “What happened to the man?”

“I can only guess.”

“We are not in his position. If Redwood Shores is, it is the path they chose and must now tread.”

“*Did* they choose it?”

The question’s intensity elevated Albin’s pulse. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel as the convoy proceeded along California’s longest highway. The authorities had reserved a lane for their own use. The other lanes, all south-bound now due to contraflow, resembled a car

park with every car in the Bay Area in attendance.

“What’s that up there?” Bridges pushed higher in his seat to see past the police and military vehicles. The convoy approached the sprawling cloverleaf interchange for CA-92, which ran east-west.

Judge pressed her head between their seats, ears erect.

Albin lowered the side window and leaned out. In the distance, figures moved among the cars. None of the people climbed atop the vehicles in the manner of cannibals, however.

The convoy’s lead vehicle halted. Albin’s hundredth check of the mirrors provided no more information than had the ninety-ninth. Stopping in this situation, with danger from every direction, did not bode well.

Shouts joined the din of honking cars. “It’s going to be a mob.” Bridges paled, his hand twitching toward the CZ 9mm pistol at his appendix area. “Shit, now we’re stuck.” He twisted around to squint behind them. “They’re stopped too. We’re boxed in!”

A voice over a government vehicle’s loudspeaker overcame the cacophony: *“Return to your vehicles. This lane is for official use only. If you do not move, you will be arrested.”*

A series of gunshots cracked. Both men stared ahead, not breathing.

Chapter 6

Mob Rule

Seven Devils - Florence + The Machine

Bridges spoke first: “Do . . . do you think that was the police, or the military?”

“Does it matter?” Albin drew his SIG Sauer, placing it in the cup holder on his right.

Bridges too presented his pistol.

Ahead, Officer Rodriguez and her driver stepped out of their vehicle, weapons drawn.

“They’re going out there?” Bridges shook his head as he spoke.

“If they do not move the convoy, we become a target.”

The officers advanced, keeping a low profile. The military would likely take the lion’s share of the crowd-control duties.

“Hey.” Bridges reached into the back seat. Judge licked his arm as he did so. “Nathan left this.” When he straightened, he brought an AR-15.

“I’ll consider it his farewell gift.” Albin relieved Bridges of it, sliding it in the passenger-side footwell.

“I need to see.” Bridges rolled down the window. He pushed his shoulders through before pulling himself up to sit on the door.

“Well?”

“There’s a mob around the head of the convoy. There’s a car in the street. Soldiers are pushing it away with that armored transport thing—”

“The Stryker armored personnel carrier.”

“Right. There are people coming onto the road. They’re leaving their vehicles.”

“Brilliant.” Albin massaged his temples as the coals of pain burned behind them.

“There are some Soldiers and police getting out of vehicles.”

Albin grasped his pistol as he pushed the door open. Grimacing as a gust of humid, smog-laden air struck him, he climbed into the bed of the truck. Ten vehicles ahead along the convoy, scores of drivers gathered around a car that had attempted to take a shortcut through the government lane. Other drivers copied its maneuver while the Stryker pushed the sedan toward the edge of the lane.

Several angry San Franciscans stormed toward the line of police and military that

guarded the convoy's flank. The government officers attempted to send the people back to their vehicles, but as with most riot-response efforts, this only inflamed the situation.

Then bottles, debris from the road, and whatever the civilians could lay hands on began raining down on the officers. The defenders retreated to their vehicles, which emboldened the semi-sentient mob organism.

"Idiots," murmured Bridges, shaking his head. "If the government doesn't have a lane, emergency vehicles can't—"

"I am aware, but they are not."

A three-round burst rattled from one of the vehicles at the head of the convoy. One of the rioters staggered backward as red mist puffed from his back. He slumped against a car, leaving a trail of blood on the side panel as he slid to the ground.

No one noticed, for noise, fear, and confusion decreased the other rioters' awareness.

However, the sound of gunfire stimulated the pack-hunter mentality of the government personnel. Two reports sounded in a double-tap, likely from a handgun. Another rioter stumbled.

This finally gained the writhing humanity's attention. They shoved to retreat, but those in the rear, ignorant of what transpired, refused to give ground.

As the shots elicited more from the officers and Soldiers, chaos swept through the mob. Many fell under the weight of their herdmates' retreat.

Meanwhile, the Stryker completed its mission, clearing the lane.

Nearer the convoy, vehicles inched as close to the car in front of them as possible. Some of the occupants abandoned their vehicles in favor of fleeing the mayhem on foot.

Four cars ahead of the Tacoma, Officer Rodriguez and her partner held their ground as the mob shifted like the sea at high tide.

A section broke from the mass's perimeter. Eyes wide, faces flushed, the escapees dodged southward, toward the rear of the convoy. They wore the baggy clothing common to gang members, but that meant little, given current styles. They worked their way around the far side of the vehicles, avoiding the attention of Rodriguez and her driver.

Pistol in hand, Albin dropped to the ground on Bridges's side of the truck, keeping the vehicle between him and the approaching rioters.

"I'm coming." Bridges pulled himself out of the vehicle to land behind Albin.

"Officer Rodriguez!"

The officers barely glanced in Albin's direction, but the possibly gang-affiliated rioters ducked lower behind the vehicles.

As Albin and Bridges rounded the rear of the squad car, the mob splinter rushed from between the vehicles to ambush the officers. Some attackers carried baseball bats, while others wielded liquor bottles and tire irons.

The officers turned just as the first thug charged toward Rodriguez's partner. The police officer's shots went wild, but he managed to sidestep the first tire-iron strike.

Rodriguez brought her MP5 to bear and fired. The assailant staggered. His friends paid him no heed. No doubt they had treated themselves to copious amounts of illicit drugs now that the end of the world had arrived.

Several cars behind the gang members, a group of law-abiding citizens sprinted from the chaos. The officers opened fire on the thugs, but since flesh posed little hindrance to 9 mm rounds, a number of bullets continued their flight. Several of the refugees staggered and fell as lead struck them. Screams and cries filled the air, worse than the hisses of cannibals.

The police officer reloaded. Apparently spotting movement behind, he swung about to level his weapon at Albin and Bridges.

"Down!" Albin bore the shell-shocked Bridges to the pavement, landing atop him. Hopefully Albin's bullet-resistant vest would protect them both.

"Not them!" Rodriguez's voice rang. "Conrad, Bridges, get back in your vehicle!"

Albin raised his head enough to see over the squad car's bonnet. "Behind you!"

She pivoted in time to bring the butt of her MP5 across the jaw of a rioter. Unfortunately, the "attacker" belonged to the group of civilians fleeing from the mob. During the chaos, he had evidently grown disoriented.

He struck the ground with a thud. The family behind him—a woman with her young boy and girl—screamed. The girl dropped her stuffed unicorn as she fled into the stalled traffic.

"Get in the vehicle!" Rodriguez roared, waving her charges and her partner back.

Behind her, one of the thugs struggled onto his knees. Blood soaked his T-shirt, yet he dragged a pistol from behind his back.

Albin raised his SIG Sauer, finger tightening on the trigger. The shot cracked. It struck the assailant in the fatal triangle between eyes and nose. The target dropped, his brainstem and thus his nervous system ceasing to exist.

Rodriguez herded her partner toward the cruiser.

“Come.” Albin pulled Bridges to his feet and spun him toward the Tacoma.

Inside the truck, Judge whined and barked. She had chewed a chunk of upholstery from the front seat. Ah, to be a dog and relieve one’s frustration by simply destroying foam and fabric.

As the men belted in, the convoy began to accordion into movement. Despite every effort to the contrary, Albin’s eyes shifted to the human wreckage along the route. Carnage like that from a Third-World genocide littered the road. But the convoy had resumed its forward momentum. Nothing else mattered to the government. They lacked the resources, training, and fortitude to deal with a disaster of this magnitude.

The people had brought it on themselves in a way, but in disasters, people often lost their heads. His gaze lingered on a corpse whose head had turned to a pudding of blood and gray matter.

“I . . .” Bridges’s voice caught in his throat. Eyes closed, he raised a trembling hand to his brow. Then he buried his face in both hands and let out a long, hissing breath.

In the back seat, Judge growled as she resumed chewing on the seat.

Albin locked his eyes on the cruiser ahead. His heart kept time with the flashing lights. Just keep moving forward. *Keep your head.*

Chapter 7

Herd Mentality

Flesh and Bone - Black Math

Nathan held his hand up, signaling his companions to stay still. "Amanda," he breathed, "get the Nelsons' garage door open. Close it when we lure the cannibals inside."

"How are you going to get them—"

"We'll drive them home." He gave her a smirk.

Beside him, Josephine nodded slightly, her stance defensive. "I think I understand."

"Good. Get in the truck first. I'll follow."

"Someone needs to be bait."

"No."

"I've done it before." She shot him a look of defiance.

"Fine. I don't have time to argue." They didn't need another death, especially not hers. However, she had a point: bait improved any fishing expedition.

She remained in the bed of the truck while Amanda and Nathan eased to the pavement. Keeping the vehicle between her and cannibals, Amanda worked her way down the street.

When she neared the Nelsons', Nathan stepped forward and clapped his hands. "Over here, you bastards! Come get me."

Five white faces snapped toward him. Their shoulders dropped as their heads pressed forward for a better look at their prey. Why didn't they charge?

Four days ago, the cannibals had twitched and spasmed, barely able to cross the street at a shamble. Yesterday, they moved at a lopé and worked as pack hunters. Today, they could launch over walls and cooperate on a previously unheard of scale. God have mercy on tomorrow.

The Dalits spread out, the central cannibal advancing with knees bent and torso forward as if ready to tackle. Its companions fanned out from either side for a pincer maneuver.

Josephine took up the swine call. "Up here! Come on!"

While she banged on the roof of the truck, clapped her hands, and waved her arms, Nathan slid into the Sierra's cab. Behind, the Nelsons' garage door opened. Excellent.

He edged the vehicle closer to the Dalits. Then he swerved left. They tried to spread out to prevent him from rolling their line. He shot the vehicle around behind them and along the

opposite side of the street. They watched, some dropping to all fours.

He stopped fifty yards ahead of them. "Now I have your attention."

The Dalits broke into their lion lope. They split: two to one side, three to the other. They pursued as Nathan rolled toward the Nelsons' at fifteen miles an hour. Too fast and he would lose them. Too slow and he would lose Jo.

Speak of the devil, she slid through the open passenger-side window as he stopped a few yards past the Nelsons' driveway. The creatures sped toward them.

"Roll it up, Jo!"

"I am!" The window slid upward.

In the side mirror, the lead cannibal dropped to a crouch. Its comrade accelerated, planted a foot between the other's shoulders. It shoved off, using the kneeling cannibal as a launching ramp.

Thud!

The bastard landed on the truck bed just as the window sealed.

Thud-thud!

Two more cannibals leapt onto the bed. Their rust-orange eyes bulged from their sockets as they considered their options. Or appeared to. The last two cannibals diverged, one to either side of the vehicle, as if they knew that the doors could open.

"Holy shit!" Josephine looked over her shoulder, her eyes as wide as the cannibals'.

His heart rattling in his ears, his tongue glued to the roof of his mouth, Nathan put the vehicle in reverse and guided it into the garage. The cannibals in the bed dropped to all fours at the movement, while their comrades bobbed beside.

When the nose of the vehicle crossed the threshold, Amanda appeared ahead. She yanked the garage door down.

At the movement, the cannibals sat up. The two on the ground moved toward the door, but the steel barrier closed an instant before they reached it.

Twilight enveloped the garage. Hissing and shuffling with the occasional bump and thump broke the silence. The vehicle rocked as if weathering a crosswind as they shoved along the sides. The door handles rattled.

With the morbidity that rivets the eye to a traffic wreck, Nathan stared at the cannibal that attempted to wrench his door open. Her—it's—face twitched as if small electrical shocks ran

over it, making the muscles undulate. Pupils dilated, the eyes appeared almost completely black, with only a thread of the hellfire-orange iris. Black, oily drool dribbled from the corner of its mouth and nostrils. Short, dark hair hung across its forehead, brushed its shoulders. It wore the tunic-style shirt common to middle-class thirty-somethings who wanted to recreate the fashion but not the rampant drug use and STDs of the '60s and '70s.

On Josephine's side, another female worried the door. Nathan didn't bother to study the bastards at the rear window. Once you'd seen one oil-drooling monstrosity, you'd seen them all. It didn't matter what they had been, only what they'd become.

"Now what?" asked Josephine, her attention on the cannibal at her window.

"That's up to Amanda." Nathan leaned back, tapping the steering wheel with his thumbs.

"Do you think this is really going to work? I mean, is this neighborhood going to survive? We don't have food, drinking water, or guns. The police are gone."

I know. He swallowed as a flush came over him. "Suggestions?" As usual, she offered criticisms with no cure. Unlike Albin.

"I don't think evacuating was right either." She sighed. "There is no good answer."

"It's not about doing right and wrong anymore; it's about doing what's necessary to survive."

The cannibals in the truck bed began scratching at the window, trying to get their fingernails under the seal.

"The natives are growing restless." Jo wet her lips as she watched the Dalits.

"Josephine."

"Yes?" His tone and the use of her full name drew her complete attention.

"Until Albin comes back, I'm going to need your help more than ever. I don't mean dealing with the media, either. Amanda is an exceptional leader, and she cares about this neighborhood, but she lacks our experience."

For no apparent reason, the cannibals began to hiss.

"Nathan." She placed a hand over his as she held his gaze. "I believe in what you're doing. You're trying to help these people and the world. I think Albin just needs some time to recover. I know you miss him, but don't let it distract you from your role here. Perhaps he'll get support from the government while he's out, or find us resources." She meant her smile to encourage, but it only communicated anxiety.

Miss him? Anger, confusion, and loss churned in Nathan, making acid climb up his esophagus. “Thank you.” He patted her hand with his free one. “You don’t know how much this means to me.” Of all his pack members, Jo had ranked at the top of his Most Likely to Desert list. So much for expectations.

The truck rocked as the cannibals in the back jumped out. Then it leaned left as all five Dalits pushed one side.

“That’s it.” Nathan reached for his HT.

Then the service door to the house opened behind them. A garbage can bounced in. “Hey! Hey, get over here, bastards.” Amanda!

At the movement, the cannibals approached the doorway. They paused, then lunged through.

Jo pushed her door open. She sprinted for the service door. *Slam!* Now the Dalits thumped about in the laundry room.

She moved to the front of the truck and raised the garage door. Freedom! Once the Sierra cleared the threshold, she closed the barrier.

Nathan stepped out of the vehicle as his cohorts converged on him. “Well done, both of you.” He gave them a grin despite his split lip.

“What are we going to do with them now?” Jo wondered. “The Goats used them as distractions, but we’re not invading anybody.”

“Don’t worry.” Nathan smiled at his cohorts. “They won’t go to waste.”

Chapter 8

Captivity

Hollow Vessels - Lifewalker

The sun had set, its work done, but much work remained undone at Redwood Shores. Nathan sat at the Muster's kitchen table, studying the list of the residents' names. A skeleton of a resume, including hobbies and interests, accompanied each name.

"I must say," he remarked to Amanda, who sat across from him, "if I had to choose a location to be during a disaster like this one, and I couldn't stay in my home territory of New York City, Silicon Valley would be my next option." Save for the lack of firearms.

The second-in-command smiled. "We have quite a pool of talent."

"I need you to assemble the people whose names I've marked, and any others you think will be useful. We'll meet tomorrow morning and discuss our plans. Is everyone ready in their homes for the night?" The people had gathered with two or three families to a house for protection. Like a flock of birds, they reasoned that more eyes equaled more security.

"The hatches are battened down." Then her assurance faded. "Nathan, do you think they'll ever get this handled?

"Of course." Sometimes people needed to hear a lie to save their sanity. "We're going to see that it's handled. The next item on the agenda after we get food, water, and defenses sorted out is using those files that Red Chief was so interested in selling."

Once they unlocked the mystery of the cannibals, they could broadcast the frequency pattern to gain control of them. With the abominations at his command, he could reestablish order in the Bay Area one neighborhood at a time, but slowly enough to avoid government attention. If Uncle Sam ever recuperated enough to retake the throne, Nathan would hand over control—albeit grudgingly—and come out as the big damn hero.

"I don't know." She brushed her hair from her forehead. "The scientists here might be able to get into their offices, but the power's still out, and most of their coworkers have either fled or . . ." She didn't need to finish the rest: *turned into cannibals*.

Leaning forward, he placed his hands over hers on the table. "You need to have faith in what we're doing, Amanda. The people in Silicon Valley have solved monumental problems. It was in Menlo Park that Google came to be. Oracle's buildings are practically in our backyard."

He gestured toward the northwest. “There are more bioresearch, pharmaceutical, and software development companies in Redwood Shores’s general area than there are in most *countries*. All the pieces to the puzzle are here.”

She gave him a wan smile. “They might be here, but I think the dog’s chewed up a few, and we lost the box top.”

He sat back with a chuckle. “One step at a time. Nothing worthwhile is ever easy. Achievement through ardor.” He frowned despite himself; Albin cited this motto from time to time. Why did he leave—

“Mom!” The neon-haired Denver bounded into the room. Her sister Taylor followed, worried.

“What is it?”

“I was outside—”

“I told her not to, Mom.”

“The cannibals in the garage are making a weird noise.”

Shit. Why couldn’t they behave like zombies in the movies? With a grunt, Nathan pushed from his chair and headed for the door.

Amanda followed. “Girls, stay inside and keep the door locked.”

Hand on his Glock, Nathan ventured into the darkness outside. He deployed his P2X Surefire flashlight. The neighborhood appeared quiet, with the residents observing the self-imposed curfew. No one wanted to be out unless absolutely necessary.

Finding the street clear, he approached the Nelsons’ house. True to Denver’s report, a hiss like radio static emanated from the garage. Normally the Dalits only made the hiss when they approached their prey or tried to communicate with one another. Or so it appeared.

He raised the Glock to compressed ready against his right pectoral. It eased the pain in his ribs. Behind him padded Amanda, who carried a Louisville Slugger. In her hands, it lived up to its name.

They moved to the side window, which they’d boarded up that afternoon. Given the cannibals’ new physical and group coordination, it proved wise to err on the side of caution.

After easing up to the window, Nathan put his eye and flashlight to a gap in the planks. Inside the garage, the five cannibals sat in a circle, their backs to each other. Their formation bore an eerie resemblance to a pentagram, as if they attempted to summon an Old One from

another dimension. If only drawing a circle of salt around these creatures would bind them.

Heads back, they hissed. They timed their breaths so that no two ran out of air at once. This kept the signal at maximum strength, so to speak.

“What are they doing?” Amanda whispered. “Are they trying to call more affected?”

What a comforting thought. Nathan tapped on the board, but they ignored him.

He motioned for Amanda to go around to the door. When she began rapping on the steel, the hissing stopped as the cannibals lowered their heads. Did the sound interrupt them, or had they already achieved their purpose? Their sudden silence sent a chill to Nathan’s bones.

He needed to find the solution to this plague ASAP. Whatever had transformed them might continue to evolve. They might go the way of computer game monsters and morph into a boss that made him wish for the standard monsters.

He drew his HT. “Everyone on watch, this is Nathan. Be extra vigilant for cannibals. Some may be coming our way.”

A chorus of confirmations followed.

Amanda returned to his side. “Maybe this is like a death rattle. They might be like fruit flies and live only a few days.”

“I won’t get my hopes up. This is a man-made contagion, one designed for a specific purpose. Nature can never be as cruel as humankind.”

“But we don’t know if it’s doing what it’s supposed to, or if it’s gone rogue. You know as well as I do that many inventions don’t come out as expected.”

“Or as in programming, even when you eliminate the code’s syntax errors, there can still be logic errors.”

“Logic in the affected?” She continued to use the media’s politically correct term for the cannibals.

“Logic in their creators.”

“I don’t know much about DNA, but I know even an error in one gene can cause the entire organism to change.”

They fell silent as they studied the cannibals.

“I wonder,” Amanda murmured as the cannibals continued to sit with heads down, “do the affected dream?”

++++++

Outside the Musters' home, Nathan completed his patrol of the perimeter. When he returned to the front porch, he eased down onto the top step. For safety reasons, he had agreed to reside with the Musters, making the guest room his own.

His gaze remained on the surroundings as he reached into his shoulder satchel. He withdrew a tablet-like device. The ReMOT. He powered it on. The main screen appeared with all its status indicators, which made as much sense as the controls of an alien ship. But since they all read inactive, perhaps it didn't matter.

A button titled *Control* occupied the right side of the screen. His thumb tapped it, automatic after performing the action at least twenty times today. Another screen opened with the heading: *Subject Activity*. Below it, buttons for *increase*, *decrease*, and *target*. Gray. Inactive. "Still dead." His grip on the edge of the device tightened. Only hope of them coming online prevented him from smashing the device against the stairs.

Chapter 9

Sanctuary

All Fall Down - One Republic

Bridges paced before the table at which Albin sat. “Welcome to the government: hurry up and wait.”

On the floor, Judge had taken this idea to heart: half awake, she lay with her chin on Albin’s foot.

Steeping his fingers before his lips, Albin gazed at the wall in front of him. “Even if Director Washington had addressed our case the instant we arrived, the CDC still requires a health examination and a six hour quarantine for new civilian arrivals.”

“At least we’re almost done.” Grimacing, Bridges tore off the bandage from his arm’s venipuncture site. “Stupid protocol. They don’t even know what to look for in our blood.”

The remainder of their journey to the command center at San Francisco International Airport had gone without incident, save for a few cars that the military needed to usher out of the restricted lane. None of the government personnel had spoken of the slaughter, however.

Now the trio occupied an interrogation room the Transportation and Security Administration employed in their harassment of travelers. The trio awaited the verdict from Director Washington of the Department of Homeland Security. They had already completed their written statements on recent events. The situations had the flavor of waiting for processing at a detention facility, though Albin had only television shows on which to base this assessment.

“Are they going to keep us in the airport?” Bridges paused to half sit on the edge of the table, a position that lasted less than five seconds before he resumed pacing. “Are we going to have to sleep on airport chairs in the terminal?”

“I wouldn’t know.” Albin closed his eyes. For the hundredth time since leaving Redwood Shores, Mr. Serebus’s abrasion- and bruise-marred visage appeared, radiating fury. How could they have spent eight years together, yet in the space of two days developed diametrically opposing views?

“Albin.” Brows frowning, Bridges slid into the chair across from the attorney. “What are you going to do about Nathan?” The economist pushed back in his chair, balancing on its rear legs as he drummed the edge of the table with his palms. “Some people don’t want to be helped.

I know you've been together for a long time, but maybe it's time for you two to go your separate ways."

Perhaps I was a fool for ever trusting him. "One might believe they can tame a wild beast, but though one takes the beast from the wild, one never takes the wild from the beast. Eventually its instincts will win out, and it would tear you to pieces the instant you turn your back." If Mr. Serebus wanted to style himself as an alpha wolf, then he would face the hunter. What choice did one have when the beast turned savage?

"I guess."

Albin pressed his index fingers into his temples to ease the headache. "Bridges, he told me I was his best friend aside from Janine, his wife. I need to consider what I should do. At present, however, I must consider our immediate situation." He couldn't allow thoughts of Mr. Serebus's mental break to impair his reason. They needn't both go mad.

The door opened, causing Albin, Bridges, and Judge to stand in expectation.

"Sit," Rodriguez ordered. No one moved.

She moved aside to reveal two men, one in his thirties and of Indian extraction, the other gray-haired and in his mid forties: Badal Shukla and Mikhail Kuznetsov, chief engineers in the employ of Mr. Serebus at Arete Technologies.

Judge yipped at their arrival.

When Shukla saw Albin and Bridges, a grin broke across his features. "Guys!" He leapt forward to shake their hands, then pulled Albin into an embrace.

"Mr. Shukla, I am relieved to see you are well." Albin smiled as he placed the software engineer at arm's length again.

Mikhail Kuznetsov glided forward to offer his hand. "Mr. Conrad, we were so worried." One could almost view his gray hair, skin, and eyes as his revulsion toward his Motherland extending to the cellular level, causing a physiological rebellion at the idea of exhibiting even a hint of red.

"I believe you were in more danger with the Red Devil Goats, Mr. Kuznetsov."

"The military rescued us expertly. I'll tell you later, if you wish." A hopeful smile accompanied the last sentence.

"Of course."

"Where's the boss man?" Badal looked around the room as if his employer might hide in

one of the corners. “He came with you, right?”

Kuznetsov shook his head, giving his fellow engineer a look of disapproval. “I am fairly certain he will remain in the neighborhood, given what he’s done. He would be here with Mr. Conrad if not.”

Shukla’s lip curled. “Look, Mickey, you don’t have to tell me yet again. The fact still stands that he was willing to risk his life to save my sister when we thought terrorists had her. I know I would have liked to shoot that asshole Ken in the face for making me believe Hemali was kidnapped.” Shoulders hunching, he punched his fist into his palm.

“But Mr. Oshiro was going to—”

“Gentleman.” Albin’s tone silenced them. “Mr. Serebus elected to stay in Redwood Shores. Mr. Bridges and I have accepted the government’s offer of safe keeping. I can only hope that Mr. Serebus returns to his senses and joins us.”

“Wait a minute.” Badal looked around the room again in case he had missed someone in the first sweep. “Where’s Josephine? Is she all right?”

“Apparently,” Bridges responded, crossing his arms, “she decided his goals are a better match for her than ours.”

Kuznetsov grew paler. “She stayed with him? But why?” He shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. I’m just happy you’re here safely, Mr. Conrad.”

“Mm,” Albin hummed.

The door opened again, admitting Officer Rodriguez. “I spoke with Director Washington.” She looked the group over, unimpressed with their presentation. “She doesn’t have time to talk with you right now. She doesn’t need to, either, she said. You’ll be permitted to stay here. We’ll put you with the other evacuees. It’s not going to be a four-star hotel, but apparently you think it’s better than Redwood Shores.”

“Are we free to come and go?” Albin asked. The answer mattered less than he cared to admit.

“We don’t have time to check you in and out whenever you think you need to go for a stroll. But you’re not prisoners,” she conceded. “And you’ll get rations. We’re not running a concentration camp. Hell, we don’t even want you around. And I’m not just speaking for myself.”

Albin nodded as if she had answered with the utmost respect. “Thank you, Officer

Rodriguez. We are grateful for the government's protection."

She rolled her eyes. "I have to go, but one of my colleagues will escort you to your quarters."

She turned to depart, but paused. "You might be interested to know your hero from the neighborhood is here. The one who got his leg axed up."

"Jeremy Nelson?" Albin stepped forward. "May I see him?"

"Fuck if I care. I mean"—her tone softened a fraction—"it's not my call. But wait until morning; it's past midnight now."

She handed them off to a young man in dress shirt and slacks. He served as guide, taking them to a terminal. His torch's beam swept over the dust tarps that stretched across the waiting area. They divided the gates into common rooms.

"Damn it," Bridges muttered upon seeing the layout. "I feel like a refugee."

"We kind of are," Shukla responded. His characteristic joviality fled as the situation's weight bore down upon him.

Easing closer to Albin, as if the attorney's presence could ward off the depression of the situation, Kuznetsov held a hand toward the nearest gate. "This is where they've been keeping us. It's not so bad."

"Not so bad?" Shukla stared at him. "We haven't spent even one night here yet, so I don't think you're qualified to leave a Yelp review. Shit, we have to go wait in line for our food, for the bathroom, for practically everything! Oh, and you can't drink the tap water."

Their bickering continued as the guide led them to four cots. Albin dropped onto his bunk and lay back. Exhaustion obliterated consciousness.

++++++

Finding no sleep in bed, Nathan wandered back out to the front porch. It didn't offer the chance of sleep, but it did provide better reception for the satellite phone.

Hands shaking, pulse rising with every number he pressed, he dialed Janine's cell.
"Please let there be reception by now!"

Half of a ring—"You have reached the voice mailbox of—"

“Damn it!” His fist slammed into the porch pillar. “Fff!” Pain exploded around his chest—

Doubled over, squinting against the torture, he punched in the Serebus family’s sat phone number. Maybe this time it would work . . .

“*Please leave a message after the beep.*”

“Why the fuck isn’t—”

Beeeeep.

“Janine, it’s me. Call me back at this number when you get this. I love you both.”

He stared without seeing at the waxing moon. What good was phoning home if no one answered?

Maybe later she would pick up. “But it *is* later.”