



Primal

E. J. Deen

Pivotal Books

Also by E. J. DEEN

Covenant

Malevolent

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PRIMAL

E. J. Deen

The year 14 A.R. After the revolt...

As he crept through the woods, the crackle of dead leaves crunching beneath his feet sounded disturbingly loud, like a blast from a shotgun. He frowned as he paused to listen, his senses alert, his body charged and ready for any consequence the noise of his footfall might bring. It could come from any side. Silent, deadly. His shoulder muscles bunching from the tension, he strained to hear anything that might alert him to the enemy. No sound came. Nothing but the ragged wheeze of his own breathing, unusually harsh in his ears.

Christ, why had he agreed to this perilous mercy mission? What if *they* were out there, just waiting for him? He would be one man against many. It could cost him a lot of pain. Pain was something he was no stranger to, but he didn't exactly relish an onslaught.

He reached up and fingered the jagged scar on his left cheek. He remembered how it had come to be there, remembered what those heinous men had done to him so long ago. He could still feel the agony. It was hard to forget. They had made sure of that.

A tiny flicker of fear sliced through him, and he found himself peering nervously through the trees, half-expecting the worst. They could be out there, all around him, boxing him in, waiting.

"Don't think about it," he muttered to himself.

No more *what ifs*. Just get the girl and get out quick. Don't even think about the dangers. There was no time for it.

Steeling himself against the panic that threatened, he forced himself to move again, creeping forward through the brush, his eyes and ears keenly tuned to any traps.

Crouched low so as not to be seen, Zach hovered just inside the tree line, blending with the landscape. *Focus*. He had to stay focused. He needed to be alert.

It was a blistering summer in Louisiana. He was damn hot, too fucking tired, and thirsty beyond reason. Still, he pushed on with a singular purpose. He couldn't stop. Not yet. Soon he would allow himself a drink, but right now he only had one thing on his mind. Getting the job done, getting paid, and retreating back into the hills, where he could disappear for a time. At least until someone else came hunting for him, begging for his help. Or until he felt the need to be on the move again. Then he would come down out of the mountains and make himself available to whoever could pay him enough to make it worth his while. Weapons, ammunition, fuel. Whatever he could scavenge from them.

Zach paused on the edge of the clearing and touched the dagger he kept hidden in his right boot. Christ, he'd never wanted to come back here. But he had good reason. There was a little girl out there who needed him.

He was close now. He could feel it. His instincts were humming, almost painfully, and his heart had begun to beat a little faster. Soon he would be there, in the middle of it.

A quick look at the battered photograph he carried in his pocket assured him that he hadn't lost the anger that drove him. He could already feel the adrenaline beginning to course through his veins and up through his heart, giving him that constricted feeling in his chest that was so damn familiar to him now. It was a power-pump that had gotten him through many a difficult situation, situations when his life

had almost been snuffed out of existence. He was certain it would get him through this mission, too. It had to, if only for the girl's sake.

He stared at the picture, burning the image into his mind. Once he was there, he wouldn't be able to look at it again. He would have to identify his target and act without hesitation or uncertainty.

A photograph was a rare treasure these days. Cameras were not easy to come by. But the girl's father had once been a wealthy man, and the camera had most likely been in his possession for many years. The snapshot had been taken during happier times. She was a sweet-looking child, with a smile so beautiful, so full of hope that it could soften the hardest heart. She had fine blonde hair and wide, innocent eyes. It touched him, that innocence. It was so impossibly uncommon in these hellish times. It's what had clinched his decision to find her, to take her back to her parents, to give her what she deserved. To give her a chance.

If she was still alive. There was a possibility she wasn't. She'd been taken, kidnapped by the Pirates, most likely for their sexual pleasure, and it wasn't their way to keep a girl for long. When they were tired of her, they would kill her and then discard her without even bothering to bury her. But there was a slim chance she was still alive, a chance she'd been traded for profit, traded to one of the hole houses that were so famous in Louisiana, in what had once been known as New Orleans.

New Orleans. It had changed. Most of the levees had been destroyed, and with no one to monitor the elaborate pump system throughout the city, it had become nothing short of a mosquito-infested swamp where the great Mississippi flowed. In fact, that was very nearly the only way to identify the region, simply by following the Mississippi river until it zigzagged close to Lake Pontchartrain.

The city had become a wasteland of gutted buildings, the structures in the ninth ward completely flooded out now, destroyed by the unnamed hurricane that had blasted the gulf a few years back. It had been a fifth category hurricane that hit without warning. There'd been no way to track the damn thing. The satellites were still up there, somewhere, presumably still operable. But no one on the ground gave a shit about them anymore, and no one possessed the intricate equipment that had been used in conjunction with them. Most everything attainable had long since fallen prey to the Pirates, those looting, murdering vandals that were everywhere. They were dangerous men, psychotic. Men to be avoided whatever the cost.

Like a sleek forest cat, he moved through the woods. The only audible evidence of his presence was the sound of dry leaves crunching under his heavy boots. Snake boots he had taken from a Pirate he'd killed. He was one of the few men who had the balls to take them on. Still, he was hoping he didn't encounter any of them today. Locating the girl had been no easy feat, and he didn't look forward to any further complications.

As he approached the little wooden shanty, he could hear raucous laughter coming from inside. He looked once more at the photograph of the girl. Would he even be able to recognize her? The photograph had been taken when she was just six. He'd been told the girl was twelve now. She would have changed quite a lot.

A twig snapped beneath the weight of his boot. He paused, listening intently for any sounds to follow. Had he been spotted farther back by a scout? Did they know he was coming? Would they be waiting for him? It was a paranoid thought. This wasn't exactly Pirate quarters. They only seemed to frequent such places when they were in need of a woman, which wasn't often considering they raped anything that moved whenever the mood struck them. Strangely enough, the threat of acquiring the plague through sex didn't seem to bother them. Satisfying their appetites was all that mattered. They had made a life of living on the edge of destruction. They lived for the moment, for the high, the devil and everyone else be damned.

Still, whatever he met with when he opened the door of that shanty, he needed to be prepared for it. An ill-prepared man always had one foot in the grave, and he didn't intend to die this day. He would find the girl, if she was still alive. And if she wasn't.... He'd find out who had killed her, and woe to that man because he'd take that individual to hell with him.

At the edge of the woods, he paused and checked his gun just to reassure himself that it was loaded. It wasn't something he often used. The ammunition was too damn hard to find and even harder to make without the proper equipment. He hoped he didn't have to use it today, but it was always nice to know that it was there if he needed it, especially if his sheer brute strength, or any of the myriad of weapons he always carried with him failed to get the point across. But he didn't anticipate failure this day. Not when he'd been so careful at tracking the girl, and not when he was armed with a dangerous mood.

He took a deep breath. It was time now.

Pumped and ready, he sprinted across the clearing, and within seconds, he was on the front porch of the shanty. He opened the door in one powerful yank, nearly jerking the flimsy thing off its hinges in the process. The force of his swing sent it banging hard against the outer wall, garnering several gasps from inside the room. He stepped into the gloom of the shanty, ignoring the way his pupils protested as they adjusted to the sudden change in light. The door barely missed his heels as it ricocheted back inward to slam against the frame with a deafening crack. Although it sounded as if the wood had splintered behind him, Zach never even blinked. His mouth set in a grim line, he swung his gaze around the dank interior, cruelly assessing the dozen or so people inside.

The boisterous laughter had stopped and all eyes were focused on him in wary surprise. He regarded those closest to him, sizing them up before passing them over as trivial. The occupants of the shanty were mostly women, half of them only partially clothed, although he didn't pass them over on that account. He'd learned long ago never to underestimate the ferocity and determination of a woman, especially a desperate one.

Only a handful of men were present, all of them hanging on to a girl or two, and all of them bleary-eyed from spending the afternoon drinking bad booze that had most likely been made in the still he spied sitting in one dirty corner. None of them appeared to be more dangerous than a slug, but looks could be deceiving, and he wasn't foolish enough to lower his guard.

Music blared from a jukebox in the opposite corner. A surprising commodity. Electricity had long since become a thing of the past, yet someone had obviously found a way to bootleg fuel for a generator. He wondered where their resources were. Perhaps he could take advantage of it. At the very least he could look for their holding tank. It had to be somewhere nearby.

Perhaps this trip would prove more lucrative for him than he'd imagined. It was an intriguing possibility, but the girl's life was his first priority. Once she was in his possession, he would take a closer look at his options. At the moment, he wasn't foolhardy enough to compromise his identity.

"A man!" one particularly filthy looking woman squealed, detaching herself from the grubby cajun she'd been clinging to and crossing the room to get a better look at Zach.

He eyed her with little interest, his face devoid of any emotion despite the disgust he felt. She would be the first hitch, the first complication he would have to deal with. It angered him that she was getting in his way.

He didn't pull away or even flinch when she lifted a work-roughened hand and swept a heavy lock of black hair off his forehead. He just stared straight ahead. She didn't seem daunted by the dangerous gleam in his eye, the hard set to his unshaven jaw, and it made him all the more leery. She was a little too bold.

“He doesn’t have the brand,” she told the others. “He’s clean.”

She smiled up at him, a smile that was meant to be provocative but could only be repulsive, since it showed a row of teeth that were rotted beyond repair. Before Zach could take another step, he found himself surrounded by women. They clung to his arms, his legs. One of them even tried to yank the zipper to his trousers down. He ignored the grumble of complaint in his gut and continued to stare straight ahead, as if the women weren’t even there. The men had taken a greater interest in him now, largely because he had commanded the attention of all the women. The useless whores! That would be the next snag, dealing with the anger of the men.

One of the women had gotten his zipper down and was already feeling around for his dick. With a motion so swift that it surprised a startled gasp from the others, he grabbed the woman by the hair and coldly jerked her to her feet before she could lay her disease-ridden fingers on him. His move summoned an answering chuckle from the men. They obviously found the bitch’s discomfort amusing.

Paying no heed to the cajuns, Zach twisted the woman’s head back at a painful angle until she was staring him straight in the eye. He made sure she understood his expression so he wouldn’t have to reinforce it with a quick jab to the jaw that would set her on her ass. He wouldn’t hesitate to strike her if he needed to. He had no compunction about hitting a whore.

“I want a blonde,” he growled through gritted teeth.

It was early in the game yet, and he was already having trouble controlling his anger. What he really wanted to do was blow everyone in the shanty to kingdom come. He had enough small artillery on him to do it, but for now, he had to keep a level head and maintain his cool, at least until he’d found the girl. But, dammit, this loathsome bitch was turning his stomach. He was positive she had the plague. Even if she didn’t, he wanted no part of her.

“None of you are blonde,” he grunted, sweeping his gaze over the other women. They had all stepped back, a little in fear of him now.

“I can pretend to be a blonde, honey,” one of the braver ones suggested, caressing one droopy breast as if that was enough to get him horny for her.

He narrowed his eyes in anger and released the other woman’s hair, pushing her away from him so hard that she fell back against the bitch behind her. Both went tumbling to the dirty floor of the shack.

No one said a word. No one dared. By now, they’d pegged him as a dangerous man, and these cajuns weren’t about to defend a couple of whores.

“I can pay well for a blonde,” he told the man behind the bar.

He pulled a long gold chain from his pants pocket and dangled it in front of the man’s face. The women stared in obvious lust. They still liked a pretty bauble. The men only turned their backs on him, going back to their putrid drinks.

The bartender, apparently the man who operated this particular hole house, only laughed. “Take a hike, asshole. We don’t want yer fuckin’ gold. Ain’t ya’ heard? Nobody pays with gold no more.”

Zach had known the gold was worthless. He only used it for effect, to make them think he was ignorant. And it worked. They were already taking the bait.

“Then maybe you’d be interested in this.” He pulled two sticks of homemade explosives from the pocket of his leather jacket and held them up for everyone to see.

“What the fuck is that supposed to be?” the bartender snarled, trying to sound disinterested. But his eyes betrayed him.

“Modern-age dynamite,” Zach replied, his gaze sliding over to where the rest of the men sat. It was easy to see they weren’t a threat. They were either too drunk or too cowardly to make a move on him. “I’ll pay four sticks for half an hour with a blonde.”

The bartender hesitated for a moment, eyeing the sticks with undisguised greed now. Such things obviously weren’t often available to him. He wanted them. Zach could see it in his face. He wanted them bad.

“How do I know they work?” the man demanded.

Zach didn’t answer. He merely pulled an old flint striker from his pocket and struck a spark close to the sticks he held clenched in his other fist. The women’s eyes went round with fear, and they quickly scurried away into the corners of the shanty, as if that would help them. Zach laughed at their pathetic attempt to protect themselves from the imminent danger. It was a low, guttural sound that only made him seem all the more dangerous, perhaps even a little insane.

“One stick would blow this entire shack sky high,” he mocked for the benefit of the women.

“Don’t let him light it, Jimmie! Are you fucking crazy? He’ll blow us all up,” one of the whores shouted.

“If you’re so afraid, then why don’t you just leave,” the bartender answered.

The woman glanced warily at Zach, then looked away. His considerable bulk blocked both doors, and she obviously didn’t want to take the chance of having to pass him to get out. He was too unpredictable for her taste.

“He’s just bluffing,” Jimmie said, his eyes on Zach.

His gaze challenging, Zach squeezed the flint striker. Once.... *Tshook!* Several sparks flew out and extinguished themselves on the way to the floor.

“Give him the bitch, Jimmie,” one of the whores wailed. “She isn’t worth it.”

“Shuttup, cunt! I’m tellin’ you he’s bluffing,” Jimmie snarled, his eyes never leaving the flint striker in Zach’s hand.

Twice.... *Tshook!* A third time.... *Tshook!* This time the sparks hit the cloth tip of the fuse and ignited with the fuel Zach had soaked it in. A small flame erupted and then died down to a burning ember that began to make its slow way up the fuse, crawling steadily toward the dynamite.

“She’s in the shack out back!” one of the women screamed.

A nearby man slapped her across the mouth to shut her up.

Despite warning looks from the man, another whore finished for her. “Through the door behind the still,” she said, her words punctuated by anxiety. “Now put that thing out. Pleeese,” she wailed.

“Dumb bitch,” Jimmie sputtered, looking sullen.

His face devoid of emotion, Zach extinguished the fuse. With a casual air, he tossed the sticks onto the bar. “Payment for the blonde, just like I said,” he told no one in particular.

“She ain’t in no condition....” Jimmie began.

He never bothered to finish his thought. He was already snatching up the homemade dynamite and stuffing it behind the counter for safe keeping, unconcerned with anything else now.

All eyes watched as Zach strode across the shanty and stepped out the back door. He fully expected the men to come at him, but apparently their small numbers and lack of adequate weapons dissuaded them.

Their cowardice made his task less complicated, but it didn't keep him from paying close attention to everything around him, or keeping his ears intently trained on anything that might come up behind him. He was no fool. Things could take a turn for the worse in a flash, a flash he wanted to be aware of.

Outside, he found a small ramshackle lean-to butted up against the main body of the shanty. He eased the door open with considerable caution. It was dark inside. No windows. The only sunlight in the tiny dirt-floor room came from the open door, but his own body blocked out most of it, making it difficult to see the interior.

For one heart-stopping moment, he wondered if he'd been set up, but the notion was dispelled by a slight whimper that came from one corner of the floor. The sound drew his attention down to the huddled mass lying there in a ragged heap. A tangle of hair covered her face. She was in bad shape. He could barely tell that she was a girl. The only thing that gave her away was her dirt-smearred body, which was naked as the day she'd been born. She was curled into a fetal position, trying desperately to shrink into oblivion. Anger boiled through him, intense and white-hot, rage at these animals that would do this to a mere child. He would have liked to take the pleasure of slicing each and every throat that had been a part of this, but for now he had to concentrate on getting her out of there. He would have his moment. He wouldn't have the thrill of watching them all squirm in their own blood, but they would pay. They would damn sure pay.

"Serena?" he whispered into the dark, his voice carefully modulated to be less intimidating.

Another whimper.

"Serena, your mother sent me." It wasn't true. Not really. Her parents had used a go-between. But he wasn't about to tell her that. He needed her to believe in him, to trust him.

"Do you remember your mother?"

Hell, he didn't even know if he was talking to Serena or someone else. He couldn't see a damn thing in this gloom.

"Serena?"

The heap moved and a hiccupping sigh came from somewhere beneath all that matted hair. Then she lifted her chin to look up at him, and a shaft of light fell across her face. Her wide blue eyes were red from weeping, her face streaked with dirt. Her mouth was swollen, bruised, and dried blood was crusted around her nose. She'd been beaten. Probably by everyone who had come into contact with her. At that point, it didn't matter who she was. He was getting her out of there. Now.

"Serena?"

She nodded once, a tear streaking down one cheek.

He checked his watch, glanced behind him, and then touched a tiny button on a small metal box he had hidden inside his jacket. Without asking for permission, he bent to hoist the girl into his arms. Balancing her tiny frame against his broad chest, he turned and stepped out the door of the little lean-to. Inside the main building, the music blared and the revelers partied on, oblivious to their encroaching fate. The men had probably decided to wait and stab him in the back when he was in the middle of raping the poor girl he now carried, but they wouldn't get the chance. They had a little surprise of their own coming.

Heading for the woods, his scarred face sported a macabre grin as he bore the girl across the back lot behind the shanty. He was going to relish every moment of this, even if he didn't get to watch. He could only hope that no one saw him making his getaway. It was a hitch he didn't want to be bothered with, but one he could certainly handle if it did arise.

It never did. He'd just passed into the tree line when the shanty blew. The explosion reverberated through the woods, making the air vibrate from the sudden disturbance. A nanosecond later a fireball rushed out in all directions, hurling wood through the air like gigantic toothpicks. Zach felt the heat of the blast even from where he stood, but he didn't even flinch.

The moment she heard the blast, the girl in his arms let out a shriek of terror and promptly fainted, going dead weight in his arms. Zach paid her no mind, just gave an ominous chuckle. For those enterprising enough to know how to use it, a little technology still remained. The poor fools actually thought he'd given them four sticks of precious dynamite. They'd never realized what those four sticks really were. Dumb, backwoods assholes.

Deep into the woods, as he began to near the place where he'd left his Hummer covered with dead branches, Zach became aware of another problem. An independent gang, probably a couple of teenage boys trying to prove their worth to the Pirates, had discovered his prize possession and were trying to figure out how to start the engine so they could steal it. Not that they ever could. Most likely, they didn't give two figs about the Hummer, anyway. What they wanted was the fuel, the most precious commodity to be found anywhere. Fuel brought the highest price of any other item to be had, and people would do anything to get it. Even kill.

Undetected, Zach dropped to his knees in the underbrush and laid the girl in the leaves beneath a towering oak. She was still out cold, probably from shock. It was better for him that way. It made things much easier. He wouldn't have to worry about her for the moment.

Before he made his move, he surveyed the situation, searching for possible dangers. Fortunately, the boys were a bunch of amateurs. He could tell by the fact that they hadn't bothered to post lookouts. A definite advantage in his favor. They weren't even aware that he had come upon them.

"Morons," he muttered under his breath, already drawing the dagger from his boot. This was going to be too easy.

With a swift flick of his wrist, he hurled the knife into the small clearing. In seconds, the blade plunged into the nearest victim, all the way to the hilt. The young man pitched to his knees with a garbled cry of pain, causing his companions to glance around in surprise. Cloaked by their panicked cries of alarm, Zach quietly maneuvered around to the tree where he'd left his bow and quiver hanging concealed. It was an old habit of his to leave himself a trail of weapons. They always served him well during a speedy departure and for just such an occasion as this one.

By the time the boys discovered the knife sticking out of their friend's chest, Zach had an arrow notched. He let it fly with an accuracy that took another one to his knees, and to his death. The bow was Zach's favorite weapon. It was quiet, like him. Deadly silence was his hallmark. He blended into the woods like it had always been his natural habitat, and he could handle almost any situation there. The knowledge had been hard won over the years, but the experience had paid off. It kept him alive.

Only two assholes left. Zach notched another arrow and released it into the air before rolling away to move to another tree. He couldn't stay in one place. By this time, the amateur thieves would have realized where the assault was coming from, and Zach wasn't sure what sort of weapons were in the remaining boys' possession. Best not to take any chances.

The third victim went down, clutching his chest in agony. In fear of his life, the last remaining gang member plunged headlong through the brush and fled into the woods. Zach waited for a few minutes before easing out of his hiding place and stepping into the clearing. One of the young men was still alive, but just barely. He looked up at Zach as he passed, his mouth working but no sound coming out. Zach ignored him. He ignored all of them. He didn't even bother to retrieve his dagger. It was covered with blood, blood that might well be tainted. Not that he cared about that. He just didn't like touching

blood.

He should have gone after the other boy, should have killed him too, but there were more important things to be done. He had to get the girl home, to fulfill his contract and get the payment due him.

She was still unconscious when he gathered her into his arms and placed her in the passenger seat of the Hummer. She didn't even stir. Concerned, he checked her pulse. It was weak, but she was still alive. She would make it. She would be scared, but she would pull through.

Feeling an uncommon pang of compassion, he reached into the back of the Hummer for a blanket and covered the girl with it. She murmured something unintelligible, but her eyes remained closed. He stared at her for a moment, almost, but not quite, feeling...something. Some emotion he'd buried years ago.

Afraid of getting involved, he turned away and was just beginning to prepare the Hummer for travel when he remembered the generator. The possibility of obtaining more fuel was far too enticing to ignore. He couldn't just leave it, not when it was there for the taking, not when he so desperately needed it. He had room enough in his Hummer for it, but....

He glanced at the girl. The explosion in the shanty may have drawn some unwanted attention, attention of the bad variety. Lingering behind for even a few minutes might endanger the girl, as well as himself. The hunt for the tank would not be an easy one. It would be hidden. Finding it would take time, and the search might prove too risky.

Damn this hellish world that put him in these unenviable circumstances! Everything was a struggle, every decision one of life or death. Nothing was simple anymore.

Heaving a weary sigh, he went to the front of the Hummer and bent down to feel under the right fender for the switch that would free the ignition process, another of his many precautions. He climbed into the driver's seat and cranked the engine, but he didn't drive off just yet. He couldn't. The fuel was holding him back.

Glancing once more at the girl, he turned the vehicle back in the direction of the shanty, leaving the carcasses of the would-be Pirates behind to drown in their own blood. The fuel was just too damn precious to pass up, and he intended to make it his.

"God forgive me if I get her killed," he whispered to himself.

It could have been anywhere in the United States, or the world, for that matter. The world had changed so drastically. Economic structures had collapsed. Industries had fallen apart. There were no jobs. No money. Social classes had ceased to exist, and only the poor remained.

There wasn't even a president to bring order to the chaos that reigned. The government had long since been overthrown by thousands of angry citizens, angry because that self-serving conglomeration of

ruling liberals had rested on their laurels and allowed the plague to become an epidemic in the first place, the plague that had raged on undaunted for years.

No markets, no food. No retail, no buying and selling. No companies manufacturing anything, foreign or domestic. It was all gone. The glorious superpower had fallen. The government had disintegrated from the inside out. All due to a disease, a virus no less that couldn't even be seen with the naked eye.

A bio-engineered cure for HIV that had gone terribly awry. A retrovirus that was supposed to have gone into the body, scavenged for HIV, and destroyed it. It had been touted as the wonder cure of the decade. They'd thought it was the end-all. But the cure had turned on the host, mutating to catastrophic proportions. And nothing could stop it.

Except the widespread genocide that the radicals had adopted.

It was there that the war had really begun. The people of the United States panicked when they realized what was happening. Survivalist factions rose up to carry the burden of protection. Some of those factions went too far, taking it upon themselves to write a new law. Kill or be killed.

How could one fight a virus? There was no cure, no vaccine. How could one fight something that continually mutated, cloaked itself, hid, killed, destroyed without compunction? It seemed hopeless.

One group had proposed a plan to quarantine the people who carried the new plague. It might have worked, but the liberals in government refused the solution. They spouted human rights until they painted themselves into a corner. Unconcerned with the surprising and unfortunate speed with which the plague took over, they ignored the pleas of the public, ignored all the warning signs. *The rights of the individual* had been their mantra. But what about the rights of those who would die? Innocent people. Unnecessary deaths.

They had ignored it all. Until it was too late. It was just too damn late. Nothing could stop the new plague or the war it spawned.

Hospitals slowly became a war zone for drugs. When they were all picked clean of any sort of painkiller, barbiturate, hallucinogen, amphetamine, and anything else available, the institutions faded into non-existence. A few struggled to stay open for as long as possible, but most of the physicians weren't up to it. It was simply too dangerous. Without government funding, why bother to stay? Health care had only been a money game, anyway. Those doctors who had made it through the many battles had long since gone into hiding. These days they were in high demand, and their lives were at risk because of it.

The war eventually called a screeching halt to everything, and the research for a cure to the new plague was among the first things to go. Now all that remained was a vague hope that the spread of the plague would somehow stop, that the victims would die off, that society would be restored. It seemed a futile desire.

Death was rampant. If you didn't die from the plague, you were killed by someone who thought you carried it. Children were abandoned. Infanticide, genocide, homicide, and always the plague. There was no humanity. No brotherhood. In this new system, only the self was important.

The United States government eventually made one last ditch effort to control the epidemic, but it came too late. The plague was too widespread. Now everyone seemed to be dying, the population of the world cut in half and rapidly dwindling. Some of the plague-stricken were tattooed during the attempted quarantine, a desperate act from a government that was out of its league. Most of them were dead now, easy targets for the zealots who didn't have the disease yet. But some were in hiding.

Everything had changed. Cities were burned-out shells of their former state. Any communications

network had long since become defunct. America had become a primitive place, with no order, no leaders. A throwback to archaic days, littered with the useless debris of the technological age. No phones. No radio. Nothing. Just a barren land full of people trying to make it. It was man against nature again.

The world was not safe to live in. There were damn few men of integrity left. Money was useless. Even gold had no value anymore. The only thing that really mattered was food and water. And shelter if you were lucky.

Meanwhile, the radicals raged on. They called themselves the Hunters. To them, there was only one way to stop the plague. Their method was to kill the people who had it. Killing was what they did best. The victims were rounded up, hunted down, cornered like animals. Burned alive, or hanged, and sometimes, mercifully, gunned down. All too often, innocent people were killed in the process.

It wasn't easy to tell the clean ones from the infected, although the thin, emaciated bodies of the ones in the last stages were easy enough to detect. It was the ones who were in the first stages of the disease that were the walking time bombs. Most of them were killers who didn't intend to be killers, but some were very intent on spreading the plague. And it *was* still spreading, despite the efforts of the Hunters.

Always the innocent suffered. The lack of hospitals and physicians left the Hunters with very little in the way of testing for plague. Testing by fire was the new means. Lynching mobs, inquisitions. The Hunters decided the fates of everyone. They decided if someone had the plague or not. Some didn't. Some died unjustly.

There was a more humane faction who dealt with the plague by searching for those they suspected and, once finding them, tattooing them and then releasing them back into the general populace. With this brand on their forehead, clearly visible to anyone and everyone, the untainted public could avoid the plague-stricken. But it left the victims of the disease vulnerable to the Hunters. More killing, just done in a more roundabout way.

Then there were the children. Most of them had been left to fend for themselves. They didn't even live with their parents anymore. They didn't want to. Any that made it over the age of seven had learned the new survival techniques. They had become a semblance of their elders. Adult yet still children. This made them far more dangerous than the adults because they hadn't been raised with any sort of moral foundation. They had learned the ways of the world. If they wanted to live, they must be strong, resourceful, determined. Killing was something to be done without remorse. It was necessary. The ones who could, performed it with psychotic precision. These children saw more bloodshed in their short lifetimes than most war veterans had, and some of that blood was drawn by their very own hands. With knives, guns, clubs, anything that could be used as a weapon. They were ruthless and would certainly slit Zach's throat without compunction. Still, these were the ones, these odd adult-children that he hated to kill, and he did so only when he was forced to.

No one was immune. Everyone shared in this unending nightmare, both ruthless killer and innocent victim alike. It was a time of regression. A man was lucky to survive under this new society. Lucky? Or doomed?

A man could die in so many ways, and so many of them painful, agonizing, interminable. In truth, to be murdered was almost merciful. It was so much easier to go quickly rather than face the hell. For that was what the entire world had become. Hell.

And he was right smack in the middle of it all. Not by choice, certainly not by choice, but because he had that survival instinct. He was one of the strong ones, one of the few who were driven to survive. He couldn't stop. He went on like some sort of automaton. It was that very mechanism, the innate cunning, the sheer strength of will that had gotten him through some hellacious times, times that would have

crushed a weaker man.

Yet, it wasn't enough to just survive anymore. One had to be angry, ready to kill at the drop of a hat. No remorse. This knowledge, this enforced code, was what had molded Zach and made him into the ruthless man he had come to despise so much.

Once, so long ago that he could barely recall it, he had been a gentleman. A Harvard graduate, a young up-and-coming attorney. One of the brightest. How many years ago had it been? He couldn't remember. He couldn't even remember how old he was. Thirty-eight? Thirty-nine? Or was he already forty? The past several years had wearied him to the point where he no longer cared.

Too much had happened to blot out the memories of those glory days. He'd thought it was such a struggle then. In retrospect, it seemed ridiculous. Those hardships were nothing compared to the hardships he now endured every day of his miserable existence. He would give anything to have those days back. But they had all become part of some far distant fantasy, a memory he used as a retreat when he felt he couldn't handle the strain, the desperation, the terrible loneliness.

Only occasionally did he feel the need to seek out those who were like him, human, but those occasions were rare. He preferred to be left alone. Even when he helped people, he never got involved. He came into their lives, did what he could, and then disappeared again.

Who would have ever thought the world would come to this, this fucking hellhole that was nearly impossible to live in? He remembered when he'd worn the most expensive, impeccably pressed suits. He'd driven the finest cars. Had lived in a nice, upper-class neighborhood. Now he lived in a cave. He ate whatever he could kill with the bow and arrows he fashioned with his own hands. He wore stolen camouflage, and sported a scraggly beard and long jet-black hair that hadn't been combed in years. He didn't give a rat's ass about manicured nails, shoes that were fashioned from the best leather, or that he would have to go for days sometimes without a bath. Not anymore. Nothing mattered to him anymore. Like it or not, he had become a part of the new society.

Goddamn, he hated it! He was angry that his life, the life he'd worked so hard to achieve, had been snatched from him. He loathed what he'd been forced to become. Yet he kept going. It was that damnable paradigm inside his head. It wouldn't let him rest. He couldn't find peace.

Peace. It was there, just a breath away, but he couldn't quite touch it. It teased him, tormented him, lured him. He coveted it, wanted it like he'd never wanted anything else in his life. But it wasn't to be. Or, at least, not yet. Perhaps not ever.

There was an image he sometimes clung to in times of utter desperation. He wasn't certain if it was a memory or just a fantasy, but sometimes he could almost remember what it was like to rest his head against his mother's bosom as a child and find the most complete, utter peace.

Strange to think it now, but he'd had a mother once. He *had* been born of a woman. Dimly, he was aware that she had named him Zachary. Did he even have a last name? He couldn't recall. A few people, those loyal few he had allowed to get close to him, simply called him Zach. There was no point in anyone else knowing his name. No one else cared, anyway. They'd just as soon kill him and leave him to rot as know him personally.

His mother was dead, of course. She'd been killed in the revolt long ago. He didn't mourn. He never had. There was no time for it. Ever since the day she'd fallen in that bloody heap, gunned down in the streets of Washington, he'd been running, constantly on the move. Rarely resting unless he could find a safe place to do. And always he was searching.

Somehow, he had managed to endure it all. He was still intact by some divine will, although his body displayed dozens of battle scars and he was missing the pinky finger from his right hand. He'd lost it in

a skirmish in the Everglades. That had been a long time ago. How long he couldn't exactly remember. He couldn't even remember what year it was anymore. Calendars, like everything else, had ceased to be important. There was only one worry now. Just one.

Surviving.

But Zach did more than just survive. He was a bounty hunter of sorts. He searched for family members, children, or the elderly. Any innocent person who had become lost in the many war-like skirmishes that took place amongst the citizens of the new society every single day. Sometimes he looked for certain commodities a particular individual felt was needed. But not often. It wasn't worth the risk.

He wasn't a hero. Not really. He used people as much as they used him. It was the way of things now. It was an integral part of his survival, or that's how he saw it, anyway. A long time ago, he'd thought he wanted to change the world. Now he just wanted to live through another day.

Some people called him a hero, but he didn't feel particularly heroic. He didn't look like any sort of hero, either. In fact, he resembled one of the Pirates, those malignant tumors that everyone avoided. He liked it that way. It made people stay away from him. His looks commanded the only sort of respect that was recognized in this world anymore. Fear. And he wanted to keep it that way.

He was an intimidating sight. Six feet four inches of power-packed muscle, in the prime of health, with a fiery blue gaze and a set to his strong jaw. He could strike terror into some of the bravest. The anger in his gaze coupled with his long, unkempt hair only added to his wild appearance, making him look like a man who would try anything once. Like a man who wouldn't hesitate to maim, or kill.

He was a soldier. Hard in every way. He had learned to be ruthless, cruel, cold. His emotions had long since been detached from any part of his existence. He'd been tempered by hardship, and the experience had given him an edge. The very edge that allowed him to be who he was, to do what he did. To help the people who needed him. God knew he needed them, much as he hated to admit it. He needed them to help him keep going. Not through what they could give him in any material way, but because they gave him something much more important. A purpose. And that was perhaps of the most valuable to him. Without it, he would come apart at the seams.

3

Hunched beside a slowly dying fire, Zach stared into the gloom. He'd carefully chosen a small clearing in the woods that was concealed by the dense vegetation surrounding it, but he wasn't satisfied that they were safe. He was never quite satisfied of that.

The girl watched him, still wide-eyed and wary. She hadn't said a word since she'd regained consciousness. Not that his rescue had gone without a hitch. She'd given him a little trouble back at the site of the bombed-out shanty. The second she opened her eyes, she'd started screaming. The sound had reverberated around the forest like a tornado siren. He'd just dug up the damn fuel tank and was cursing over how small the thing was when he heard the earsplitting wails coming from the Hummer.

He rounded the burning shack just in time to see her climbing out of the vehicle and running toward the woods. It hadn't taken him more than a few seconds to catch up to her, and restraining her had been as simple as grabbing her by the waist and hauling her back to the clearing. Shutting her up proved more difficult.

She fought him like a wild animal caught in a trap, all the while screaming so loud that he grew fearful that the sound would attract attention. Lucky for him, no one had bothered to investigate the explosion that had splintered the shanty into a thousand pieces. Maybe the shack was too far out in the woods. Or maybe no one cared to get involved. Either way, he had taken advantage of his good fortune. But he wasn't crazy enough to think it could last, and the girl's screams made him nervous.

He tried shushing her to no avail. When she wouldn't stop, he lost patience and became a little rough with her, clamping a hand tightly over her mouth as he forcefully hauled her back to the Hummer with him.

Once there, he set her on her feet, but he didn't remove his hand from her mouth. She continued to struggle, still making muted attempts to scream. Annoyed, he pressed her backwards against the body of the vehicle and glared down at her. One look into her terrified eyes reminded him that she was only a child, and he made a rather awkward effort not to look so hostile. But it wasn't easy. He still had to find a way to get that fuel tank into the Hummer, and he was angered by the fact that she was jeopardizing such a precious find. Small as it was, the tank was still worthy of his interest.

As he watched, a single tear streaked down her dirty face. Her eyes were riveted on the deep scar that started at his left temple, curved around under his eye, crossed his nose, and ended below his right ear. She was terrified of him. There was no doubt about that. He knew he wasn't a pretty sight, but he couldn't stand there and molly-coddle her until she decided he was safe. Patience was no longer an aspect of his personality, and there was no time to waste. Every second that he lingered brought inevitable danger all that much closer. She would have to trust him. She had no other choice.

"Serena, listen to me!" he insisted.

His voice had a characteristic rough quality that only lent to his rather malevolent appearance, but he didn't bother to try and soften it. The girl would just have to get used to it. He couldn't change what nature had given him.

"Your mother sent me to find you, and I'm going to take you back to her. But there's something I have to do first. If you want to get back to your family, I need fuel for the Hummer. Understand?"

She stared up at him, another tear following the one before it, a whimper squeezing out from around the massive hand that nearly covered her entire face.

"Do you understand?" He shook her a little then, although he hadn't intended to do so. He was just so frustrated.

More tears.

"Serena, if I wanted to hurt you, I would have already done it. I'm not here to hurt you. I'm here to help."

His pledge seemed to elicit a response in her because she stopped her whimpering.

"Do you understand?" he asked in earnest.

After a long moment, she tried to nod, but the hand he held over her mouth made the movement difficult for her. Still, it was enough to let him know that she got the picture.

"Good. I'm gonna take my hand away now, and I don't want you to make any noise. No screaming,

understand?”

She nodded again.

Slowly, he eased his hand away from her face. As promised, she didn't utter a sound. Her obedience came as a surprise. She seemed so afraid of him.

“Be a good girl and get into the Hummer. And don't get out again unless I tell you to.”

Her eyes downcast, she fearfully eased away from him and climbed back into the Hummer. Certain that she would stay put now, Zach quickly surveyed the forest that bordered the clearing. Satisfied they weren't being watched, he went back to the fuel tank. It was damn heavy, and he had to harness it with a rope and drag it behind him in order to get it back to the Hummer. The task was taking longer than he had expected, and he was anxious to get the hell out of there. But he was just as determined to have the fuel, even if it meant putting himself in danger.

A few yards from the Hummer, he accidentally kicked something with the edge of his boot. Curious, he looked down and saw a bloody, mangled hand lying in the dirt. Part of a victim from the explosion. If the girl saw it.... He glanced in her direction. She sat huddled in the Hummer, her shoulders bent and her head bowed. He relaxed somewhat. She hadn't seen the hand. He kicked some dirt over it and went back to work.

Once he'd secured the fuel tank in the back of the Hummer, Zach made a beeline for the open country. He wanted to get away from that shack as fast as possible. Serena rocked and bucked beside him, clinging tenaciously when his rough driving threatened to unseat her. Silent tears streamed unchecked down her face. It irritated him that she was still crying. He had no finesse when it came to weepy females, so he simply drove on in grim silence, keeping his eyes trained on the terrain ahead so that he wouldn't have to see her tears. He didn't stop driving until the sun began to set.

Their journey had been a long, silent one, and now he was tired, weary to the bone. He wanted nothing more than a good meal and a decent sleep. Untroubled sleep was a rare occurrence, but he continued to pray for it nonetheless. Someone had once told him that prayer worked. Zach didn't exactly know how to pray, but if those brief, silent pleas for God's help was what had kept him alive all these years, then he supposed it really did work. Who was he to say for sure?

Never uttering a sound, the girl watched every move he made. Her scrutiny was nerve-wracking. He didn't like to be stared at. In fact, he didn't like much interaction with people at all these days. He had long since grown disenchanted with such human failings.

There was a question in her eyes, a need that she obviously wanted him to fill for her. He knew what that need was. She wanted to be comforted, reassured. He had no intention of obliging her. He didn't feel like being nice right now. He felt more like ripping someone limb from limb with his bare hands. His tolerance had run dangerously low. He was past due for a little rejuvenation, and he couldn't wait to get the girl off his hands so he could go back to the mountains. He needed to be alone. But there was still one leg of his journey yet to be accomplished. That of getting her back to the go-between so she could be returned to her family.

Damn, but he was weary.

He stared grimly at the rabbit that was roasting over the makeshift spit he'd fashioned. He'd caught the hare earlier in the evening, just before nightfall. A lucky find. He'd expected to go hungry tonight, but now he had a meal to look forward to. He considered it a good sign.

While the rabbit cooked, he took out his solar-powered energy pack and checked it. It was the same energy source he'd used to power the detonator and the receiver in the bombs he'd used back at the

shanty. Since he was extremely fortunate to have it, he took considerable care of it, along with everything else in his possession. He was very protective of his gear. Many of his belongings were irreplaceable. Even years ago they'd been difficult to find. Nowadays it would be next to impossible. Unless, of course, he wanted to deal with the Pirates. Considering that he frequently inhibited their trade, they'd just as soon kill him than sell him anything of value.

When he'd finished checking his equipment and weapons, he glanced over at the girl. She lay huddled in a dirty mass on the other side of the small fire, looking scared and uncertain. He almost felt sorry for her, but the sentiment didn't last. He didn't want to feel anything for her, not even pity. Emotions only complicated life. Experience had taught him that much.

"I need to take another look around," he told her. "Stay near the fire and you'll be safe."

She stared back at him, unblinking. He got to his feet and silently walked into the darkened woods beyond the tiny campsite. He took a moment to relieve his bladder, and then made a quick survey of the surrounding area. After a second check, he returned to the clearing, satisfied that no danger lurked nearby. He'd half expected the girl to run off in his absence, but she hadn't moved. She was still curled into a little ball near the fire, one of his old army blankets pulled around her shoulders like a shield, a cocoon of safety.

"Do you need to go to the bathroom?" he asked, his voice carefully muted. Perhaps too muted. She didn't even seem to hear him.

When she didn't respond, he crossed the little clearing and turned the rabbit on the spit so the other side could brown. His ears carefully attuned to the sounds of the woods around them, he went to the Hummer and rummaged around in the back for a jug of water. Precious stuff as it was, he hated to have to use it, to virtually waste it, but he couldn't stand to look at the girl's dirt-streaked face for another minute.

Serena lifted her head and peered warily at him as he approached. Without a word, he knelt down in front of her and lifted a damp rag to her face, intending to wipe away some of the grime. His action seemed to scare her. Before he'd even touched her, she drew in a sharp gasp and scooted out of reach.

A little angry and a hell of a lot frustrated, Zach let his hand drop back down to his side.

"Look, I don't intend to waste this water for nothing."

She stared back at him, the blanket pulled up under her chin.

Zach set the water jug down in front of her and draped the cloth over the top. He had found a t-shirt for her to wear, but he didn't exactly know how to give it to her. She didn't seem comfortable with his presence. Annoyed, he tossed the shirt onto the ground nearby and then stood up, deliberately turning his back on her.

"If you know how to wash, I suggest you do so. There's a little clump of bushes a few yards out, just to the left. Do what you need to do and be quick about it. I'm tired, and I'm running out of patience. So help me God, if you run off, it will be on your own head. I won't come after you, and you'll probably never see your mother again," he coldly informed her. "I don't have time to chase a child around the forest all night long. I've done my part. Now it's time for you to take a little of the responsibility for yourself."

After what seemed like an interminable length of time, he heard the girl get to her feet and move off away from the fire. Feeling even wearier, he went back to the spit. The rabbit smelled so good it made his mouth water, and he couldn't wait to eat. He stared at the meager meal, willing it to cook faster, all the while keeping one ear trained on the activity nearby. He wondered if the girl would heed his

warning or if she would make a run for it. If she did run, he would keep his word. He would not go after her.

She returned to the circle a few minutes later, her movements so subdued and quiet that it took a keenly alert individual to even detect them. Zach saw her bare feet pause in the dirt near where he knelt, and glanced up to meet her eyes. Her face was clean now. The blood that had been crusted under her nose and along her jaw was gone, showing the bruises beneath, bright purple against her pale skin. She wore the t-shirt he'd given her but still held the blanket around her. She didn't say a word, just handed him the damp cloth and the jug of water and then went back to her spot on the opposite side of the fire.

Zach stared down at the jug in his hand. Smart girl. She'd used only a minimal amount of water. He felt an unusual perception in his face, something like a grin coming on. But it had been so long since he'd smiled that the act seemed foreign, and the grin never did manifest. As if his face didn't remember how anymore.

He looked at Serena. The fact that she hadn't been careless with the water was a good sign. She still cared about things, despite her injuries and the atrocities that had been forced on her. That was almost worth smiling about.

As soon as the rabbit was done, Zach took it off the spit and divided it into two meals. When he offered a portion to the girl, she didn't even hesitate. She snatched it from his hands and began to eat ravenously. Her actions were a clear indication that she'd been starved. He didn't bother to caution her to slow down. If she puked, she puked.

Knowing it was the only meal he would get for awhile, Zach ate more slowly. It wasn't nearly enough to satisfy the ache in his gut, but he could fill that void later, after he'd gotten the girl safely home again. Then he would go back into the hills, disappear from the world, and take his fill of what the land had to offer, restore his energies, and renew himself.

When he finished his meal, he took the rabbit remains away from the clearing and buried them deep in the earth, packing the dirt tightly back into the indentation and scattering leaves and other forest debris over the mark. Satisfied that all was well, he returned to extinguish the fire. The girl watched him with eyes that reflected her apprehension. She obviously didn't understand the need to douse the fire, and the sudden darkness seemed to frighten her.

"I'm not in the mood to entertain any has-been that might happen along and see our fire," he explained.

Without further conversation, he eased himself down onto the ground, made himself comfortable, and closed his eyes. He didn't even bother to use anything under his head for a pillow. Nor did he take another blanket from the truck to wrap around his large frame. He just lay there, alternately closing his eyes and then opening them again to stare up at the stars winking in the inky expanse above. Occasionally, he lifted his head and listened to the noises around them to make sure all was as it should be. Weary as he was, he remained alert until he eventually drifted into a fitful state of semi-sleep.

The dream blind-sided him, sneaked up on him. He'd thought the memories had been purged from his mind, but he was wrong. They were still there, just as vivid. Just as powerful.

News items flashed through his mind, bits of the past colliding together and then falling apart. Collages of memories marched through his mind in succession. He couldn't stop them. God, help him, he couldn't stop it. Those misty fingers enshrouded him, held him prisoner, choking the life from him, and there was nothing he could do about it. The memories were always there, eager to haunt his dreams and to remind him that the world was still in chaos.

"We interrupt our program to bring you this special report. There has been an explosion at the White House. Officials aren't certain how security was breached, but they know the people behind this explosion had the help of an insider, and perhaps even access to the President himself. As of late this afternoon, there have been no real suspects named in this chilling event. It is not certain what particular message was behind the bombing, but Intelligence is taking it very seriously, and they are taking extreme measures to protect the life of the President. Former epidemic activist Linda Donovan is being questioned concerning the possible involvement of one of her key members William Stiles. Most of you will remember that Mr. Stiles is the man responsible for the legislation that instigated the tattooing of the victims of the deadly GV-3 virus. As of yet, Mr. Stiles has not been found for questioning. Stay tuned to this station for further updates as we rejoin our scheduled programming."

That had been the first incident, the beginning of the chaos. The news bulletin was eventually heard around the country. A sense of doom hung in the air as the nation waited for the outcome. On the surface, it was business as usual, but everyone knew things weren't quite the same anymore. Society teetered on the edge of a massive, worldwide change, and much as people would like to trick themselves into believing it wasn't happening, everyone knew what was coming.

At the time of the bombing, Zach had been visiting his parents at their home in Washington, D.C. He was fresh, young, his face free of the scars that would mark him in the future. A Harvard student on the verge of graduation. Despite the widely spread plague that was slowly lessening the population, law firms were already bidding for him.

Every day more and more people died and countless numbers fell victim to the virus. Amazingly, life went on. Society still functioned. The people who were free of the virus pretended to be unaffected by what was happening around them, as if they were somehow above it all. Like the government, they chose to ignore the situation. Unbeknownst to the public at large, there was a small faction in the south that didn't like what they were seeing. They *were* affected by the changes, and they were trying to do something about it. At the time, no one had any idea how large they would become, how powerful. Not even Zach. He'd been too busy with his career, his successes, with his life, to even bother to pay attention. Like everyone else, he'd heard the stories, but it just hadn't touched his world yet. Not yet. But it would. Inevitably, it would touch everyone.

Zach sat with his father in the den, watching the news while his mother put the finishing touches on the evening meal. After listening to the broadcast, his father resolutely turned the screen off. Zach expected him to say something, but he didn't speak for a long time. He just sat there staring down into his scotch and soda, the silence stretching between them until it became almost painful.

"I lost another employee today," he finally said.

Zach felt something contract inside his chest. There was an odd quality to his father's voice, an edge he'd never heard before, and it gave him the slightest twinge of panic.

The older man glanced at his son, his expression one of sadness. And something else. He was

frustrated, afraid. Zach had never seen fear on his father's face before. It was a humbling experience, disturbing, and it increased his own anxieties.

"The man just up and quit on me. Said he couldn't work with someone who had the virus," his father said.

"You mean Simons?"

Zach knew of the man his dad was referring to. Simons was a ten-year survivor of the illness, but the symptoms were beginning to show now. The more they manifested, the more workers his father lost. Sadly, there was nothing that could be done about it. Years before, Simons and everyone like him had been given the right to work, the right to be a functioning part of society. No amount of force, no amount of pleading by the people, had been able to change that, although the government was well aware, perhaps even more aware than the populace, that it was a major factor in the spread of the disease. The politicians were too intent on hiding the truth to be much good to society anymore. As long as it didn't touch them personally, they didn't care about the risk.

"There's something else," Zach said, knowing there was. His father was hiding something, probably hoping to protect his family from the awful truth.

Zach could see by the look on his father's face that he was right. There *was* something more, something his father wanted to tell him, but he was never given the opportunity. Zach's mother came into the room and announced that dinner was served, ending their conversation. Zach would never know what his dad had been about to divulge. The only weak moment in the man's entire life had been squelched before he could even fully reveal it.

Even in his sleep, Zach could feel it, all the emotion he'd experienced at the time. The anxiety, the uncertainty, and the fear. God, the fear...pressing in on him from all sides. He couldn't escape it. He'd never imagined then that it would only get worse, that it would become such a part of his existence. Like living in a damn nightmare that he couldn't wake up from.

Why? Why did it have to happen?

His dream raced forward in time. Years passed in a kaleidoscope of constantly shifting images before settling into another snapshot of time. He was a successful attorney now. The quarantine had just gone into effect. Images chased one another through his mind. The National Guard was sweeping through all the major cities, rounding up the people with the virus, preparing to transport them to the designated areas that would yank them out of society, keep them away from the others, and hopefully stop the spread of the infection. A staggering amount of money was spent. It took weeks. Months. The country resembled one big police state, some sort of bizarre form of Nazism. The government became brutal in its enforcement of the new laws. They instituted mandatory testing every six months for every citizen of the United States. For months, the police hunted down those who broke the law by hiding out and refusing to go to the designated areas. Those who managed to slip through the cracks became the new underground.

Immune to mankind's feeble attempts to stop it, the virus plowed onward. The people began to revolt, and in all the ensuing confusion, it was impossible to contain all the plague-ridden. When the government failed them, the southern faction rose up and took matters into their own hands. They called themselves the Hunters, and they had one agenda. To kill.

The process was slow, but once it gained prevalence, nearly everyone owned a gun, and it was every man for himself. Several more factions rose up and joined the Hunters. The angry citizens who were too humane to kill outright began to do their own tattooing, trying to continue what the government had started. Victims of the plague were rounded up like animals and tattooed on the forehead. It was a

desperate attempt to control the disease. It failed.

It was a strange time in history, a time of turmoil. Even Hitler himself couldn't have caused the destruction that was about to take place.

On the day of the first revolt, the President of the United States was killed. He had acted too late, and the southern faction made sure he paid for his misdeeds. It was no great loss. He had been a weak President. He hadn't been able to stand against the untainted public's cry for action, so he had fallen, along with everyone who had tried to protect him.

War broke out all across the country. Bombs, shootings, fires burning out of control, looting. People lay in the streets dead and dying. The sight of blood and gore became common. Blood was everywhere, left to congeal in the gutters of every major city in the country. Every metropolitan area was ripe with the smell of decaying flesh. The living were forced to ignore it all, to step over the dying. They couldn't afford to stop and help. No one wanted to risk touching tainted blood. No one had time for compassion. They were too busy hiding out or running from the killers who were everywhere. In these times, it didn't pay to trust anyone. Not neighbors. Not friends. Not even family members. Everyone was a potential enemy.

The government crumbled. Most public officials were dead or running for their lives. The National Guard tried to contain the chaos, but it was no use. A slapped-together government was formed, headed by a new president who promised to resolve the problems. But it was too late. The situation was out of control. This government too fell by the wayside. With no one to take direction from, the Guard eventually quit trying. It was useless. The country was in collapse. The plague could no longer be ignored. It was raging in full force now, and the world was raging with it.

The images in Zach's dream slid forward, clashing and colliding into a confusion of memories that left him frustrated, until it finally settled on that horrible day when the Guard had come to Washington. The day his metamorphosis had begun.

The memory had tormented him for years. He should have done something. He should have at least tried. But there wasn't much he could have done except be killed like everyone else. Instead, he had survived, to live the hell.

The tanks rolled into the city like dark sentries from Hades. In fear for their lives, Zach and his parents huddled together in the basement. They had barricaded themselves in the night before, after an attack that had left his father wounded. Outside, the city was in a rampage. Thieves had already broken into their home and stolen all they could, including food. His father lay bleeding, his breath rattling in his throat. Zach's mother had tried her best to bandage the stab wound, but it didn't look promising. The war outside prevented them from leaving to seek help. Trapped in their own home, unable to get to a hospital, there was nothing they could do but wait, hope, and pray.

He could still smell the dank wetness of that basement, could still smell his father's blood, congealed on the dirty bandage. And urine. Strong. Pungent. God, how he wished he could erase those scents from his nostrils, but they wouldn't go away. They never went away.

When the tear gas came crashing through the windows, Zach grabbed his mother and pulled her out of the basement, up the stairs, and out the front door, gasping and choking on the burning chemical as they went. She screamed and fought him all the way, pleading for him to release her, to let her go back to her husband. He never let go of her. He couldn't. He had to save her.

Outside on the stoop, sunlight knifed across his sensitive eyes, temporarily blinding him. He hadn't seen the light of day in more than a week, and his eyes had difficulty adjusting to the sudden glare.

As his vision cleared, Zach was stricken by the pandemonium that greeted him. Thick smoke billowed

skyward from the burning city beyond, and he could hear screams and gunfire in the distance. Mayhem everywhere. The bullets were fired before he realized what was happening. His mother's body convulsed in his arms, a cry of surprise startled from her throat, and then blood spurted all over his chest, all over his face. Her blood. My God! It was her blood! So much blood. Horrified, he stared at the thick red dots that spattered his chest, his arms and hands. How could this small body have contained so much blood?

Stunned, he glanced around and saw a line of National Guardsmen in front of the house, a gleaming row of rifles pointed in his direction. His mother sagged against him, blood dripping from her nose and mouth, her eyes staring vacantly toward the sky. He opened his mouth to roar his outrage, but the sound was cut short when he heard another blast and then instantly felt a stab of fire in his left shoulder. He tore his gaze away from his mother's face long enough to glance once more at the Guardsmen. Through the smoke, he could see them all, waiting. Waiting for him to go down. Why? Why were they trying to kill him? He was an attorney, for chrissake! He was on the side of the law.

And his mother. Why had they killed an innocent woman who had never hurt anyone in her life?

Zach was confused. He didn't understand what was happening. But when he saw that the Guardsmen were about to fire again, his instincts kicked in and he made a snap decision that would haunt him for the rest of his life. He let his mother's body fall from his arms, heard the dull sounding thud as she hit the pavement, and then he collapsed on top of her. Forcing his eyes into a sightless stare, he lay still, feigning death. He could feel his mother's blood soaking through his shirt, could feel its warmth, its stickiness. He wanted to weep, wanted to give in to the fear, but he didn't dare. If he were lucky, the Guardsmen would think he was dead, and they would leave him lying there while they went after their next target.

He didn't know how long he lay there. At some point, he vomited. His mouth felt dry and his head throbbed. His left arm was numb, a little wet, and he felt dizzy whenever he tried to focus his eyes on anything for very long. At times, everything would fade into oblivion and he was certain he had died. But then he would awaken again, to pain and despair so intense that it shook him to the core.

By some cruel miracle, he didn't die. He wanted to. He even begged God to let him go. He blamed himself for his mother's death. He should have done something. But it had all happened so fast. Maybe she was the fortunate one. Maybe it was best that she had gone the way she had. Quickly. With no warning. At least she wouldn't have to endure the anguish of the next several years. Like he would.

Christ, why couldn't he believe that? Why couldn't he make himself believe that?

It must have been an accident. The National Guard must have made a mistake. Why else would they kill innocent people? It didn't make sense. Nothing made any sense anymore.

The dream morphed a little, slipped around, and then brought him back to that day, back to the street where he lay in his mother's blood. The thick, red ooze was everywhere. Covering him, pressing him down, heavy on his chest, choking him, dripping from the eaves of the house to fall into his face. He couldn't escape it. It was always there to remind him that he should have been the one to die. Not her.

Suddenly, Zach realized that his eyes were open. He had snapped out of the dream and now found himself staring across the dark clearing into the night. There was just enough moonlight to make his surroundings easily visible. For a moment, he didn't know where he was, but then he spotted the girl. Her eyes were open too, and she was staring at him, watching him. A fine sheen of perspiration prickled on his face and made his shirt cling uncomfortably to his broad chest. He felt a surge of anger. Perhaps because the perspiration, added to the heat of the swamp, was so irritating, or perhaps because she was staring so intently at him. Had he cried out? Had he been moaning in his sleep? Did she know? Did she know he'd been having that damn recurring nightmare again?

He stared back at her for a long time. She didn't even blink. Annoyed, he rolled over, turning his back to her so he wouldn't have to look at her, so he wouldn't have to see that curious expression on her young face. Damn, what an innocent she was. He felt sorry for her. She had no future. There was no future left in this fucking place.

On the other side of the clearing, the girl remained silent. For a short time, he wondered about her, tried to feel what she must be feeling, tried to imagine what it had been like for her, to be raped and beaten and starved. Had she been terrified? Had the pain been unbearable? What was she thinking now? Was she in torment, or had she learned to block out the suffering, like he had learned to do?

The sound of a twig snapping somewhere nearby brought his thoughts to an abrupt halt. Instantly alert, he rolled back over to see if it was the girl getting up, maybe to relieve herself. She was still lying in the same position, the only noticeable change being the slight widening of her eyes. She had heard the noise too, and she was afraid.

Frozen, Zach listened intently to the rustling noise that came from the woods beyond the clearing. It sounded too heavy to be a coon, far too light to be a bear. If the intruder was a man, he was a small man, perhaps a wiry one. A cajun maybe? Damn, but they were dangerous.

The rustling stopped for a moment, then started again, this time even closer. His eyes went to the girl's face, and he saw her mouth opening as if she were about to give in to her natural urge to scream. He put a warning finger to his lips, gesturing for her to be silent. She immediately obeyed, stifling the scream as she clamped her mouth shut. She obviously trusted him, but she was scared and he didn't know how long she would be able to remain silent.

He had learned long ago never to sleep without a weapon handy, and his bow and quiver lay just behind him, beneath the leaves. Cautiously, making as little noise as possible, he felt around for them. Even without looking, it only took him a second to find the quiver. He had the arrow notched before the next twig snapped, and when it came, the sound gave him the perfect target. Poised on his haunches, he remained vigilant, ready to make the kill at a moment's notice. But he didn't let the arrow fly. Not yet. He never had been the type to shoot blindly into the dark before he knew what enemy he faced. Not since his mother had been so unjustly murdered. He just couldn't do it. He couldn't take the chance of accidentally killing an innocent woman or a child. Whoever was out there might be seeking help, and he had to take that into consideration before he fired willy-nilly.

When a dog stepped into the clearing, Zach momentarily relaxed the fingers that were wrapped around the bowstring. It was just a damn dog! He would have been relieved, but he knew better than to hope the hound was safe. A dog in the woods was not unusual, but a wild or hungry animal could prove dangerous. The mutt could be rabid. Or worse, he could have a master close on his heels.

The animal paused and eyed them with apprehension before going to snuffle around the girl. Serena sat perfectly still as the dog sniffed her hair. Zach tightened his grip on the bow, keeping the canine in his sights, waiting, waiting....

Zach studied the animal intently. It was a domestic breed, not that any dog was truly domestic anymore. Like everything else, they had all gone wild after the revolt. Still, it looked tame enough.

The dog raised its head and looked his way, as if to make sure Zach posed no threat, then turned back to give the girl another curious sniff. The animal didn't seem to mean her any harm.

Zach's eyes were drawn to Serena's face. To his surprise, she wasn't watching him anymore. All her attention was fixed on the dog, and Zach detected a slight gleam of awe in her gaze.

Steering well away from Zach, the mutt made a quick pass around the clearing and then went to sniff the Hummer. Lowering his bow just slightly, Zach waited, his eyes piercing through the darkness

beyond the clearing, searching for the canine's owner. The mutt let out a sudden yip and rushed the girl. Thinking the dog might intend to attack her, Zach raised the bow again, aiming straight for the animal's heart. Before he could let the arrow fly, the girl startled him by uttering her first word since he'd found her.

"No!" she wailed.

Zach lifted his head away from the bow's sight and stared at her in surprise.

"Don't," she begged, her eyes pleading with him. Her voice was hoarse, barely discernible. Her throat was obviously raw, probably from the beating she had received at the hands of the Pirates. She must have screamed it ragged.

Zach faltered, his gaze sliding back to the dog. The animal wagged his tail, its tongue lolling out of one side of its mouth as the girl's hands stroked its matted fur.

"Please," she whispered, tears filling her eyes. "I think he likes me."

Damn, damn, damn, he silently cursed. That was all he needed, a fucking dog tagging along behind them, making enough noise to wake the dead, alerting anyone and everyone to their progress through the swamps.

"We can't keep him," Zach said, his bow still raised and aimed at the dog.

The girl started to cry harder.

"You don't understand," he growled, his eyebrows slamming together in a frown of anger and frustration. "He could be dangerous."

"I don't th-think he'd hurt anyone. He s-seems to l-like me," she hiccupped, fat tears rolling down her bruised face.

When his eyes drifted over those bruises again, bruises that were standing out starkly against her pale cheeks, he almost gave in. The idea was beyond stupid. It could jeopardize both their lives. But he was fast weakening to her mournful gaze.

"We can't keep him," he repeated.

"Mister, please. I've never had a dog before," she whimpered. "You c-can't kill him. L-look at him. He likes me."

Zach glanced back at the dog. It was lying next to her now, looking for all the world like it was born to be there, obviously enjoying the affection she offered. Zach didn't like the notion. It was a big dog, some sort of mixed breed, and it would be difficult to handle during the trip.

"I've never had anything like me this way before. Not like this," she murmured, gazing at the dog in adoration.

Reluctantly, Zach lowered his bow, although he continued to eye the mutt with some suspicion. He could understand her need, especially if she'd never known what it was like to have the unconditional love of a pet, but he didn't know about this particular dog. The mangy thing had come from nowhere, and there was still the uncomfortable possibility that it had an owner lurking somewhere nearby. That didn't seem likely, though. The animal didn't appear to be well fed. Maybe he should reconsider. The dog seemed to make the girl happy, and if a pet could make her forget about what had happened to her back at that shanty, perhaps he was worth keeping around. After all, the appearance of the fleabag *had* made her speak, and Zach had thought that was an impossibility.

"He's your responsibility," he gruffly capitulated. "The minute he becomes a problem, I'll put an arrow

through him, understand?”

Serena rewarded him with a bright smile, her first since her rescue, and nodded her agreement, then snuggled back down in her blanket, the dog nestled close beside her.

Zach stared at the twosome. Christ, he was either getting more stupid as he aged or he was getting soft. Neither thought pleased him any.

“I’m gonna regret this,” he grumbled to himself.

He scowled at the dog, then said, “I’m going to survey the area. Don’t go anywhere.”

She nodded.

This time he had no doubt she would obey him. He got to his feet and crossed the clearing. As he was passing by the two, the dog wagged its tail. Zach paused and put the tip of his boot on the end of the ratty butt-handle to keep it from rustling the leaves. The noise sounded like gunshots exploding into the night. Of course, that was just an illusion caused by the intense quiet of the woods around them, but it unnerved him all the same. He couldn’t abide even the tiniest noise.

When his boot touched the dog’s tail, the canine’s ears flattened down and his furry brows wrinkled in humble apology. The animal looked so damn humble that it almost made Zach smile.

“Hangdog,” he murmured, still looking down at the animal.

The girl immediately drew a protective arm around her new pet, as if Zach were threatening the dog’s life again.

“You should call him Hangdog,” he explained to her. “He looks so hangdog.”

When it became apparent that he didn’t intend to hang the dog by its scrawny neck, she relaxed. But her gaze was one of puzzlement.

“Haven’t you ever heard that expression before?”

She shook her head.

Zach didn’t bother to explain, just walked off into the darkness, the bow and quiver clutched in one callused hand. Stealthily, he made a thorough sweep of the area, periodically checking the clearing to make sure the girl was okay. When he was certain no human accompanied the dog, he returned to the campsite. The girl was fast asleep, cuddled close to the mutt. The animal hadn’t budged an inch. Having chosen its new owner with care and precision, it seemed perfectly at ease. Damn dog. He was no fool. He’d known who would readily accept him.

Zach went back to his place on the opposite side of the dead fire, but he was too restless to go back to sleep. He couldn’t. It was no good to even try. He was much too wary now.

Resigned to another sleepless night, he propped against the nearest tree, his bow balanced across his knees, and stared out into the night. As soon as dawn began to lighten the sky, he would look for breakfast. For the moment, he was left to just sit there, alone, apprehensive and alert, ready to act without hesitation.

But the dream still haunted him, set him on edge. All those questions that had never been answered. They were always there, making demands on him. Even now, it seemed impossible that he had survived at all. Why had he been allowed to live? Why hadn’t one of those bullets pierced his heart and drained the life out of him that day? It would have been simpler for him.

In a way, he felt like he *was* dead. The walking dead. He existed. That’s all.

He frowned at the darkness. No. There was still a spark there. Somewhere deep inside. Though he denied it, he still wanted something out of this life. He still yearned.

God, to feel young again. To laugh. To be happy. He wanted it, ached for it. All of it. He wanted to live again. Really live.

With a weary sigh, he rested his head against the trunk of the tree and closed his eyes. No use hoping. He couldn't allow himself to hope. It would only make him weak. And, by God, he was not willing to be weak. Not ever again.

5

Smack in the middle of bayou country, a complex of small shacks and buildings lay hidden. Surrounded by swamp, it was the perfect place to secrete anything of value or importance. No one in their right mind ventured into the swamps of Louisiana. That is, not unless they had a death wish. Most people were afraid of what they might encounter, and Cajuns were at the top of the list. They were an intimidating group. But the Cajuns who resided in this particular bayou had an agenda that only a handful of people knew about, an agenda that made them all the more dangerous. They made up a vast part of Doc Folson's army. Their job was to protect the site of his precious operation. They were a loyal following that would do anything to further the cause, even kill. Or die.

Zach only managed to get through the booby traps that were scattered throughout the forest with the help of the guide who met him on the road. Coon-ass was his name. Zach knew him well. He was one of Doc's most loyal, a tall, muscular man with solid shoulders and a kick-ass demeanor. He was a powerhouse, built to take a lot of pain, but inside he was a teddy bear.

Zach knew nearly everyone in Doc's army, and they all knew him. Otherwise, his throat would have been slit before he got anywhere near Folson's hideout. But with the help of the guide, he, the girl, and the damn dog were able to travel safely through the swamp. As they progressed, silent sentinels stepped out of carefully camouflaged hiding places to give him a nod of greeting, then disappeared into the vegetation again. Without Coon-ass, they would all be dead now. Even Zach didn't know where all the traps were. He wasn't around enough to know, and they were moved on a regular basis.

Doc's was a delicate yet deadly operation. An operation that was important to all humanity, whether they knew it or not. Years before, out of the chaos of the revolt, Doc Folson had managed to salvage much of his research and at least part of his equipment. What hadn't been saved had been obtained through any means possible. Some purchased from the Pirates. Some traded. Some stolen. Even killing to obtain a piece of test equipment was a possibility that was never overlooked. In fact, Doc's army rarely stopped at doing so.

Doc had been one of the researchers studying the GV-3 virus, a genius caught in government bureaucracy. He was a brilliant, highly acclaimed scientist who had given up his entire life to study the virus. Fed up with government red tape, he had eventually branched out into a privately funded facility that was damn near hidden from the public. His lab had been the last to be hit during the revolt. He'd

been on the verge of a breakthrough when all hell broke loose, and the ensuing war stopped his research cold.

The chaos hadn't ended his hope of finding a vaccine or a cure. Zach had the utmost confidence in him. If anyone could find a cure, Doc could. Doc was too damn determined to give up. With a little assistance from his friends, he continued the research, all in secrecy. It was the only way. He would be killed if any one of the Hunters discovered what he was doing. If that were ever to happen, there would be no hope left to the world. And hope was what made Doc tick.

Doc called his future cure the G-code Messiah. The genetically engineered savior of the world. In many ways, Zach was his key to that future.

The complex of buildings sat in the middle of a swampy region, the structures raised up out of the water by stilts and pilings, a labyrinth of docks and board walkways linking it all together. It was quiet out there, remote. Almost serene. It was the most protected area in the swamp, and Zach always felt relaxed and peaceful whenever he was there.

Serena seemed intrigued, and as they stepped up onto the board walkway that led into the midst of the complex, she gazed around her in awe. An egret roosted on a distant cypress stump, so still that it almost looked like a statue. Hangdog paused for a better look, his ears pricked in interest. Zach nudged him forward with his boot and was relieved when Hangdog obeyed. Any ruckus from the dog and Coon-ass would kill the mutt.

As they drew near to the centermost buildings, a thin, blond man stepped out a side door and glanced up. When he saw Zach, he broke into a grin that smoothed the serious lines in his face, and immediately came out to meet them.

"Zach! I'll be damn! What the hell are you doing here in Louisiana?" he called. "Not bad news, I hope."

Doc's eyes fell on the bruised face of the girl beside Zach. He faltered for a moment, the twinkle in his eyes fading in the wake of a sudden rise of confusion, but then he recovered himself enough to give her a reassuring smile.

"I brought you another charity case," Zach said. "She needs to be tested."

Doc gave him a searching gaze.

"She was kidnapped by a group of renegade Pirates," Zach reluctantly explained. He hadn't wanted to mention it in front of the girl, but he'd been given no choice.

Doc gave a slight nod, signaling that Zach need say no more. He understood perfectly well what had happened. Turning to the girl, he asked, "What's your name?"

Pretending a sudden interest in the boards at her bare feet, Serena fiddled with the thin rope Zach had given her to use as a lead for the dog, obviously a little nervous in the presence of so many fierce-looking men.

When she didn't answer him, Doc tried again. "Is this your dog?"

She looked up then and met his gaze fully before nodding in answer.

"How'd you manage to come by a dog?"

"He found me," Serena answered, her voice thin and quavery, evidence of her anxiety.

Doc looked surprised. "And Zach let you keep him?"

She gave him another nod.

“What’s his name?”

Serena automatically reached for the mutt, her fingers caressing the canine’s matted fur. Zach stared at the hand she had buried in the dog’s coat. He understood the gesture for what it was. She was drawing comfort from the dog more so than she was giving it.

“Hangdog,” she finally answered.

Zach felt that odd sensation in his cheeks again, the tug of a smile that never quite made it to completion. He was secretly pleased that she liked the name he had given the dog.

Serena watched in open curiosity as Doc chuckled over the moniker. She didn’t seem afraid anymore. Over the past few days, she’d grown dependent on Zach’s presence. She had learned to trust him, and she knew there was nothing to fear as long as he was beside her. She obviously felt that he was formidable enough to handle any threat.

“The name suits him,” Doc said. “He looks awfully hangdog.”

Serena managed what could have been taken for a smile—considering her upper lip was so swollen from the beating she had endured, it was hard to tell—and rather shyly looked away when Doc instantly returned the smile. Despite her bashful tendency, she watched with interest when Doc bent down to give her pet a thorough examination. Like a mother with a new child, Zach thought to himself. She wanted to take part in every aspect of her dog’s existence.

“He seems friendly enough,” Doc pronounced.

“He likes me,” Serena informed him, one hand still resting protectively on the dog, who was patiently enduring his unexpected exam.

“He’s healthy. What color is he under all this mud, does anyone know?”

Serena shook her head.

“Would you like to know?”

She nodded.

“Coon-ass here can take him and wash him for you, if you like,” Doc told her.

“Can I go with him? Zach says Hangdog is my responsibility, and if I don’t look after him and keep him out of trouble, he’ll put an arrow through him.”

Zach grunted in response. It took all his effort to keep from laughing out loud. She was a smart little cuss, obviously very observant. Until they had entered the complex, she’d never known what his name was, but just hearing the other men speak it, she was already comfortable using it herself. Even more interesting, and not a little surprising, was the fact that she had listened to every word he’d ever said to her—although it hadn’t seemed so at the time—and she meant to obey him.

“Candid little thing, isn’t she?” he muttered.

Doc grinned and then addressed Serena again. “Coon-ass will take good care of him. He’ll bring him back when he’s nice and clean. I promise. In the meantime, we should take a look at those bruises. Do you mind?”

She shook her head and rather reluctantly relinquished Hangdog’s makeshift leash into Coon-ass’s massive hands. On the verge of stepping into the building with Doc, she surprised everyone when she hesitated and turned soulful eyes on Zach.

“Will you come, too?”

Zach reached out and touched her shoulder lightly in an effort to reassure her. “If you want me to. But Doc will have to look at every part of your body. Do you really want me there? It might be a little embarrassing for you.”

“Aren’t there any girls here?”

Zach shook his head.

“Then I want you to stay with me.”

Zach glanced at Doc. “Is that all right with you?”

“I’m okay with it.” Doc turned to Serena. “But whenever you think you want him to leave, you make sure and say so, okay.”

She nodded her agreement. “Will it hurt?” she added as an afterthought.

“I’m gonna be honest with you, Serena,” Doc told her, all seriousness now. “You have a lot of bruises, and it may hurt when I touch them. I don’t mean to hurt you. I’m just gonna make sure you’re all right. I may have to touch you in places that will scare you, but Zach will be here, and he can put an arrow through *me* if I do anything wrong. Agreed?”

She nodded and gave him that odd little smile again.

“Come on, hon. Let’s get you fixed up, shall we? I bet you’re hungry as they come.” He spoke soothingly to her as they stepped into the little shack, obviously trying to make her as comfortable as possible.

“Zach feeds me very well, but I am a little hungry,” she admitted.

Doc laughed. “Well, just as soon as we take a look at you, I’ll take you around and show you what real cajun food tastes like. Would you like that?”

“Very much,” she agreed. “And then you’ll tell me why they call that man Coon-ass?”

This time Zach did laugh. Serena turned and stared at him, seemingly incredulous that he could laugh at all. Giggling happily, she threaded her fingers through his and gave them a squeeze. Zach tried to control his initial reflex to pull away from the familiar touch, and managed to keep his hand linked with hers. Still, despite all his efforts, her gesture had caused his laughter to stop abruptly.

Zach looked at Doc, as if for guidance, and then lamely said, “She’s gonna be all right, isn’t she?”

“She’s smart, she’s tough, and she’s got spirit. She’ll be just fine,” Doc answered.

Despite the private nature of Doc’s examination, Serena pulled through like the bravest of soldiers. She didn’t even wince when Doc poked the needle into her arm and drew blood for testing. Zach felt immensely proud of her, a rather odd paternal feeling settling somewhere in the region of his chest. Surprisingly, it wasn’t an unpleasant feeling. Not unpleasant at all.

The examination complete, Serena went outside to find Coon-ass and Hangdog. Zach waited impatiently for the results of the test, the minutes ticking by too slowly for his taste. In an attempt to keep his mind off the possibilities, he occupied himself by looking over Doc’s ledgers of test data until he noticed that Doc’s hands were idle and his eyes downcast. He suddenly looked more haggard than Zach had ever seen him look before. Without having to ask, Zach knew the results of Serena’s test were not good.

“No.” It was a hoarse, ragged whisper that barely squeezed past the tightness in Zach’s throat.

Doc kept his gaze on the equipment in front of him.

“No!” The denial exploded from him, and he emphasized the word by slamming a fist into the examining table, accidentally putting a small dent in the middle of it.

Doc stared at the indentation, obviously feeling as impotent and numb as Zach did.

“Why? Why her of all people? She’s only twelve, for God’s sake. Only twelve. She has so much spirit, so much heart. It isn’t right. It just isn’t...fair.” He nearly choked on the last word. It seemed ludicrous to even say it. The world had ceased to be fair eons ago, if it ever had been at all.

Doc remained silent. There was nothing to say. They both knew that.

Zach glared at the equipment as if he wanted to destroy it. “Can it be wrong?” he finally asked.

Doc shook his head. “I’ve checked it twice. There’s no mistake. She’s infected.”

Deflated, Zach sat down hard on the examining table. He wanted to punch something, to rage at something, anything. It didn’t matter what as long as he could relieve this terrible aching frustration he felt. It was eating at him, gnawing on his innards.

“She’s so young,” he whispered.

Doc could only stare at him. He felt the same frustration, although he didn’t express it in quite the same way as his friend did. He could see the anger on Zach’s face, making his scar stand out in dark purple relief against his skin, skin that had gone oddly pale. Doc was devoid of anger. He was too swallowed in pure helplessness. He was a scientist. He was supposed to be able to cure people, yet he could do nothing for the girl. Nothing at all. The knowledge made him feel terrible inside.

“I should hunt them down and kill every one of them,” Zach mumbled, his eyes vacant.

Doc sighed. “How would you find them? And what purpose would it serve?”

“So they can’t do it to anyone else,” Zach vehemently replied.

Doc didn’t answer. He understood Zach better than anyone. Zach had become a one-man army of late. He was the only justice left in this world. But he was only one man against many. He didn’t understand that he couldn’t change the world without help.

“What about the G-code?” Zach asked.

Doc shook his head. “It’s only in the developmental stages. It’s too unstable to test right now.”

Zach rubbed a weary hand over his face. “Her parents...they won’t be able to take care of her. They might even kill her, and if *they* don’t, someone else will.”

“Leave her with me.”

Zach glanced up sharply. Was Doc serious? Would he risk that much for this little girl, this odd woman-child? “Will she be safe with the men?”

“The men aren’t afraid of the virus, and she might actually be good for them. Besides, she can help me with my research. I can study her. She’ll be safe here. I can take care of her, ease her pain when it comes. She’ll have a longer life here with me and the men.”

Zach considered it for a moment and then slowly nodded. “I’ll have to tell her parents that she was dead when I found her, killed by the men who kidnapped her.”

“It’ll be best that way,” Doc agreed.

“Damn, I’m glad I let her keep that dog,” he moaned, raking a trembling hand through his tangled hair and then rubbing his bristly chin in agitation, absently thinking how much he would like a shave. Damn beard itched. “How are we going to tell her?”

Doc released a weary sigh. "I'm not prepared to tell her just yet."

Zach disagreed. "She has to know. She'll wonder why I'm leaving her behind."

"She needs some time to settle, to get over the trauma she's been through. Stress can only further the harm the virus can cause, speed it up."

"She has to be told," Zach reiterated. "It's her right."

Doc considered it for a moment and then nodded, resigned to the fact.

"I'll do it," Zach said simply.

He sounded so sure of himself, almost detached, but just thinking about telling Serena gave him a sharp tug of remorse. It was a terrible way to die, and he dreaded having to tell her. It wouldn't be easy for her to accept. Not by a long shot. Cripes, he felt like the grim reaper, come to steal her youth from her. Hopefully, she had enough spirit and strength in her to pull through and trudge on regardless of her circumstances.

"How are you feeling?" Doc asked.

"Tired," Zach answered.

Doc's brows lifted. "You know what I mean."

Zach nodded. "I feel fine."

"No problems?"

Zach shook his head.

"I'll need to test you."

Without a word, Zach stood up and began rolling up his shirtsleeves. Doc reached for a sterilized syringe, another precious commodity, and prepared to test him for the virus. It had become a ritual for Zach to be screened whenever he was in the area. Today, like all the times before, he tested negative. He hadn't expected to be anything else.

Doc took another sample of blood. "I have a new control running. The last experiment was a bust, but I think I may have ironed some things out. The blood showed promise."

"Enough to use on Serena?"

Doc shook his head. "We're a long way from that yet. Besides, I still want to observe you for awhile."

"I feel fine."

"We'll see," Doc said, swabbing alcohol onto the needle wound.

Zach was Doc's living experiment. Three years ago, he'd gone through a radical gene therapy that Doc had been working on, designed to alter his immune system to recognize the GV-3 virus and eradicate it before it could become too prolific. Doc had been engineering the vaccine for a long time, but his first experiments had been unsuccessful. Before the war, the gene splicing had caused some damage in his first control group, and it had nearly wrecked Doc's career. He'd gone back into the lab to make some changes, but the war had ended his research before he could present an alternative. Zach had been the only one willing to take the new treatment.

Getting through the genetic alteration had been torture. Zach's immune system had gone into overdrive, and he'd lain for weeks at the lab, under Doc's constant care. Alternating between pain and weakness and fever until his body had finally found its own balance.

Uncertain whether or not the treatment was a success, Doc had waited two long years before injecting Zach with the GV-3 virus. Both of them had been nervous about it. Doc most of all. He intended to harvest the blood, monitor it, and perhaps find a cure. In twenty-four hours, Zach had gotten a mild case of the sniffles, then a fever that spiked to dangerous degrees for several days. After some residual weakness for two weeks, Zach had gone back to being Zach. So far, it was the only sign that anything foreign had entered his body. Still, Doc monitored his blood as often as he could, seeking any signs at all that GV-3 would rear its ugly head. It hadn't. Zach was clean.

The genetic alteration seemed to be effective, but Doc wanted more data. Soon he would begin the gene treatment on at least half of his men. If it proved to be safe, he would have to find a way to get it to the rest of the population. That would not be easy. There wasn't enough material means to do something on such a large scale, not nearly enough manpower, and he would have to fight the Hunters and the Pirates every step of the way.

And then there would be the long journey to a cure for those already infected. Zach's blood could save the world, if he didn't get himself killed first. It was a big responsibility, but he had other responsibilities, too. Doc had long since stopped trying to tie Zach down. It couldn't be done. Zach was running too hard, trying to get away from himself. Doc knew it, but there was nothing he could do to help. Only Zach could do that.

Doc put the vials of blood in a tray and stared out the window overlooking the swamp. "I'm so close, so damn close. But I'm running out of supplies, testing materials."

Zach reached for his leather jacket and put it on. "You let me worry about the easy stuff. You just stay focused on the hard stuff."

Doc turned to look at him, a sad, half-smile on his face. "I wouldn't trade places with you, my friend. I feel like my job is the easy one."

Zach gave him an affectionate clap on the shoulder. "I'll get you whatever you need whenever you need it."

Doc looked away. "These things are getting more and more scarce. I don't know if it can be done anymore."

"It can be done. You just say the word."

Doc nodded, but he didn't look convinced.

Zach stared toward the door, already dreading his meeting with Serena.

"Do you want me to do it?" Doc asked.

Zach shook his head, then steeled himself for what was to come. He was not a man given to emotion, or dealing with them, but somehow he knew Serena would prefer hearing the news from him.

When he emerged from Doc's lab, he found her nearby, laughing and playing with a sparkling clean, tawny colored canine that could only be Hangdog. Coon-ass was there with her, joining in her game, but he broke away from the twosome when he noticed a somber Doc motioning him over, leaving Serena alone with the dog. Zach took his cue and went to the girl. She glanced up and gave him a bright smile as he came alongside her. He noticed that a small belt had been added to her attire. It gathered the material of the t-shirt at her waist and transformed the shirt into a little dress that ended just below her knees. She looked so alive and happy, even healthy, and the sight of her only made Zach's chore all the more difficult.

"Hello, Serena." He winced at the guilt he heard in his own voice. A voice that sounded small even to his own ears.

Hangdog scooted closer and begged for a pat on the head. Zach gave it to him, but his eyes never left Serena's face.

Serena watched, pleased that Zach was giving the dog some affection.

"He's kind of golden colored, isn't he?" he commented.

Worried that he might frighten her with the remnants of anger he knew was still there in his eyes, he focused his attention on the dog. Sometimes he forgot that the anger was always there, that he always looked just as fierce as he had on the day she'd first laid eyes on him. Even if that was precisely how she had accepted him, anger, scars, emotional inadequacies, and all, he didn't want to look angry now.

"Yeah. I like him that way," she answered, stepping a little closer and rubbing Hangdog's ears gently between her fingers.

Zach knelt down beside her and looked straight into her eyes. "I have something to tell you."

She understood the seriousness in his tone and sobered instantly. Something about his expression must have conveyed a silent message to her because she seemed to already know what he was going to say.

"Doc found something..." Her voice was barely above a whisper, and it broke on the last syllable. She averted her eyes, as if she couldn't bear for him to look at her.

"I'm afraid so."

She looked back up at his face again, her eyes wide and fearful. "The virus? My momma told me I could get the virus if a man...touched me in a certain way. And that's what they did, they..."

A muscle twitched along Zach's jaw as he tried to contain himself. He reached out and put a hand on her shoulder. He didn't know what else to do. He didn't know how to comfort people anymore.

Her chin began to tremble with the effort of holding back the tears.

"I can't take you back to your mother," Zach explained. "It's too dangerous for you. Doc wants you to stay here with Hangdog and the men."

She lifted her gaze to his, and he was stricken by the intensity of sadness in her eyes. She was afraid, poor girl. Terrified. She didn't know what to expect. And he couldn't bring himself to tell her. It was too horrible.

"Am I going to...die?"

Zach hesitated for a moment. He didn't want to lie to her. She deserved to know the truth of what she was facing and how long she might live. If she knew, at least then she could choose to enjoy what life she had left.

"Not yet. Doc says he can take care of you. You might live another ten or fifteen years. Who knows, maybe Doc will find a cure by then. If he does, you'll be the first person to receive it. That would make you a pretty important girl."

Her eyes began to fill with tears, and her lower lip quivered. She was holding her breath, trying not to cry, trying to be brave. Silently, he opened his muscled arms. Without a moment's hesitation, she went into them and began to weep against his big shoulder. She was so tiny in his arms, so frail, so young. His heart went out to her. He wished he had the power to make things better for her, but there was nothing he could do. It was out of his hands, beyond his control. Much as he wanted to, he couldn't change it. All he had to offer her was restitution. And he would. He would find the men who had done this thing to her, and he would make them pay. By God, he would make them pay.

Time stood still for them as Zach held her. She clung to him in desperation and despair, her sobs

reaching into his soul and ripping his heart to shreds. Feeling inept and helpless, he rocked her gently, holding her, giving her all that he could in the way of emotional support. He was surprised that he had any solace to offer—he hadn't touched anyone like this in years—but he offered it to her willingly. Even when she had exhausted herself of weeping, he still held her, stroking her hair in silence, transmitting his caring to her in the firm yet gentle way he held her. The dog sat next to them, his tail still for once, his ears flattened against his head, as if he knew. Even the mutt knew, and he seemed to mirror Zach's sorrow.

When she finally spoke, her voice was muffled against his broad chest, almost unintelligible. "Will you come see me often?"

"Sure, I will," he whispered, eager to reassure her. "I come this way all the time, and I'll stop and see my favorite girl every time I do. I promise."

She pulled away and looked up into his face, her own little mug streaked with drying tears, her nose pink and swollen, her eyes red-rimmed and bloodshot from crying. She looked so pitiful.

"Then I'll stay," she whispered.

He smiled then, a genuine, heart-felt smile. The first in a decade. All for her. "That's a good girl."

She wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him hard one more time before drawing away and giving Hangdog a reassuring pat. "I'll have to stay and take care of Hangdog." She gave a little sigh of conviction. "He needs me, don't you think?"

"He needs you very much," Zach agreed, relieved that she was taking it so well. She was being so brave. He didn't know if he could have been so brave. He would have raged, been angry. And cowardly.

"Serena...."

She glanced up at him, waiting.

"There is one thing you can do to help me."

Her face brightened at the prospect of helping him, and her obvious desire to please touched him somewhere deep down inside where he hadn't been touched in years.

"Tell me about the men who took you from your parents."

She glanced back down at Hangdog, her expression grim. Then her chin came up and she swung her gaze out over the bayou. Zach watched her, marveling at her spirit. She looked so adult, so mature. She seemed to be struggling within herself, trying to make up her mind. He could understand that, and he was patient with her. She needed time to decide.

Once she made her silent conclusion, she turned her eyes back to his and nodded. He knew it wouldn't be easy for her, but she would do it. Then he would have his vengeance on those men. Even if it took the rest of his life to find them, he would have his vengeance.

Two days later Zach left the encampment. He wasn't quite prepared to start the journey back to Serena's parents just yet, but it was inevitable. It would be an arduous undertaking, both physically and emotionally exhausting. But before he began, there were a few items he needed to collect. Bargaining tools. Money. The only sort of money that was any good in this society anymore. Besides weapons, food was one of the best trading items, and sugarcane topped the list. It was a much sought after indulgence, as good as any drug, and where he was going it would bring the most value.

It wasn't easy leaving Serena behind, knowing that she was the only one among a group of healthy men, the only one faced with the virus and a slow death. She had no one to identify with, no peers. She was alone in every sense of the word.

When he said goodbye, she clung to him for a long time before finally releasing him and bidding him a safe journey. Hangdog sat next to her, his tail still as he watched the big man retreat into the distance. It was a picture Zach knew would stay burned into his memory for all eternity. The girl and the dog, each needing the other, each relying on the other for comfort, for support, for the very threads that would hold their lives together into the future.

As he left them behind and disappeared into the swamp, he felt an odd sensation in the region of his heart. He hadn't felt anything like it in years, not since his mother's blood had dried against his face and chest on that awful day when he'd lain against her body pretending to be dead so that the soldiers would pass him over. That was the last time he had allowed himself to feel anything for another human being. Until now. Until Serena. Somehow, she had awakened the old Zach. He was coming to life again. A tiny flicker of his former self, buried deep inside, must have survived all the hell. But sometimes a flicker was all it took to ignite a fuse.

Brownish water swirled and slopped around his boots as he stepped off the path and entered the swamp. The mosquitoes were out in force today, and he was grateful for the grease Doc had given him. The malodorous muck acted as a natural repellent against the tiny vampires. Without the added protection, he would have been raw meat for their appetites.

It seemed unusually quiet in the bayou, almost eerily so, and he listened with a keenness borne of necessity. It had become a habit for him. Even when there was no threat, he listened. He was close enough to Doc's camp that there was no real danger here, except perhaps for that of his memories.

* * *

He wasn't certain how, but he survived the National Guard's invasion of Washington, D.C. The details were murky, like a bad dream, but he vaguely remembered getting to his feet, leaving his mother's stiff body behind, and staggering through the streets. His arm ached terribly, his mouth was dry, and his head throbbed. Despite the pain, he kept moving. He didn't even know where he was going. He only knew that he had to get away.

Danger was everywhere. Death lay just around the corner, waiting to ambush him, just as it had the rest of them. So damn many of them, lying in the streets, their mouths gaping, their eyes wide and staring as he passed them by. All of them had died with the same astonished expression on their faces, as if they'd all been asking themselves the same question when they had suddenly been caught by death.

Why?

Why was the National Guard doing this? What were they looking for? The zealots? Was every citizen fair game now? Was every citizen considered the enemy?

There wasn't much of a government left. The president was already dead. That asshole McNeil, the man who had tried to make order out of the chaos, must have been behind this heinous order. Just like everything else he'd done, he'd botched it miserably. There was no rhyme or reason to his actions. Only desperation that ended in sick failure.

Smoke, thick and choking, still hovered over the city. Most of the buildings were nothing more than charred remains of their former glory. Some fires still burned, but most of those were in the distance. Zach was barely able to assimilate what he was seeing. His mind almost refused to believe it. It was too awful. This wasn't America, the country that had sheltered every refugee that came down the pike. It couldn't be. This was just a nightmare. He would wake up soon. *God, please let me wake up.*

Blood oozed thick against the pavement where he walked. By the time he realized what it was, it was too late. He suddenly lost his footing and went down hard on one elbow. Pain like lightning shot through his wounded shoulder. He cried out, then tried to stifle the sound, afraid some of the Guardsmen were lurking nearby and would hear him. Tears of pain squeezed out between his closed eyelids, and he took several quick breaths to keep from crying out again. The jarring motion of his fall had caused his wound to start bleeding again, and his stomach churned with nausea as he fought to stifle his panic. He wasn't sure if he could make it. It was too much for him.

When the pain began to ebb, he opened his eyes and glanced around. Only then did he see whose blood he sat in. A woman, naked, lay a few feet away, her legs sprawled apart. She was dead, all her blood having left her body through the gaping knife wound in her belly. Beside her lay the unborn infant she had carried, a third trimester fetus, covered in its mother's blood. Sickened by the sight, his body reacted before he could prevent it. A quick expulsion of bile jetted from his mouth and splattered down his chin, down the front of his shirt, a shirt starched with dried blood.

Disgusted and afraid, he pushed himself to his feet, and ignoring the reeling in his head, propelled himself down the sidewalk. He was desperate to put some distance between himself and that horrible sight. Someone had deliberately gutted that woman, had deliberately yanked her baby from her womb and left it lying on the pavement next to her. Someone horrible. He couldn't think about it, didn't want to think about it.

"God, help me," he moaned, his handsome face set in a grimace of pain and revulsion as he stumbled along.

He wasn't sure how he came to be standing in front of the house. Perhaps something about it had caught his eye and made him pause. Whatever the case, he was drawn to this place. Unlike the buildings around it, this one seemed untouched. It hadn't been torched. No one had vandalized it. He stared at the facade for a long time. It took a moment for his mind to adjust, and then he realized what had drawn him there. He recognized the house. Vaguely, but he recognized it nonetheless.

His head pounding with the effort of his exertion, he stumbled up the front steps. For a split second, he felt relief, even a little excitement, at coming to a place he knew. But before he could make an effort to get inside, everything began to tilt and whirl around him, and his world once again went black.

* * *

Zach finished bundling the sugarcane he'd gathered into two tight backpacks and slung them over his

shoulder, his jaw set in a hard line. He didn't like the memories. He wanted to forget, but they wouldn't let him.

As he straightened, he readjusted the backpacks to a more comfortable position, perspiration making tiny little runnels in the mosquito grease smeared on his face. It dripped into his eyes, stinging. He tried to blink it away, but more stubbornly followed. Ignoring the sweat that blurred his vision, he started back through the swamp. Now that he had his bargaining chips, he was anxious to be on his way.

It was a long walk from the cane field to the clearing where he'd left the Hummer. Long enough to think. Over the years, he'd made it a point to stay as busy as possible at all times. It was the only way to keep the memories from recurring. But sometimes even work didn't help. Like now, when the memories were so vivid.

Back at the Hummer, Zach thanked the two men who had guarded his vehicle, and then took his leave. The journey into Texas was not something he looked forward to. It wasn't the danger. Serena's family lived far enough away from the border skirmishes taking place between the south Texans and the Mexicans. It was the drive. It was abysmally long. He was eager to get the trip over with so he could begin his new quest.

* * *

The family had taken him in. He would never know why they risked their lives to help him. Perhaps because their family had once been such close friends with his own parents. They'd suffered casualties, as well. Their young daughter was dead of a gunshot wound not unlike his own. Despite the added strain he created, they took him along on their hasty flight out of the city and up into the West Virginia hills where they hid for a short time. It was an arduous journey, mostly taken on foot. It was dangerous to travel by vehicle anymore. Cars were too conspicuous, such easy targets. He vaguely remembered being jostled around on a makeshift cot between two drag-poles, drifting in and out of fever. Along the way, the woman had hastily yanked the bullet from the muscle in his shoulder and then cleaned and bandaged his wound. He was in pain and he was delirious. He didn't care. Nothing mattered to him anymore. Most of the time he didn't even recognize the woman who tended him.

Days later, they left the mountains. Zach did not go with them. Instead, they left him in the cave where they'd taken sanctuary. He didn't blame them for leaving him behind. They had no choice. They couldn't take him any farther. He'd lost too much blood, and the infection from his wound was raging throughout his body. He would only slow them down. They'd done all they could for him. His fate was now in the hands of the cosmos.

The woman pressed some jerky into his hand, placed a small jug of water beside him, and something else that she kept insisting would rid him of the infection in his wound.

"I'm sorry, Zachary," she whispered, stroking his sweat-dampened hair away from his feverish forehead.

She made him drink something bitter, muttered a quick prayer over him, and then she was gone. He couldn't even remember her name. The future would bring him news of their demise. They were killed on their way to Montana. In an odd twist of fate, the woman had been the one who had needed the prayers. Their attempt to find a safer haven had failed, and they had only succeeded in becoming a few more bodies added to the rapidly climbing statistics.

No place was safe anymore. Not for anyone.

Somehow, Zach had escaped becoming one of those statistics. But at the time, he'd had no way of knowing that he would survive. Death seemed to hover over him like a dark bird of prey.

Alone in his hell, he drifted in and out of consciousness for days, a faint echo replaying itself inside his fevered brain. Something he was supposed to remember.

"Take the medicine. Don't forget to take the medicine. It's the last little bit I have, but it will keep you alive."

Compelled by the memory, Zach had managed to take the vile tablets from the bottle clutched in his fist. One by one, until they were gone.

Roughly two days after being abandoned, he ran out of jerky and was forced to begin rationing the small amount of water he had left to him. It was dark in the cave, almost pitch black, and that darkness sometimes pressed in on him so that he thought he would go mad. It was like being completely blind. Powerless to do anything else, he lay there in that blindness, waiting for the dark bird to claim him.

Time, something he had once taken for granted, became nonexistent. He had no real way of knowing the passage of even a day. He tried to keep track as best he could, but he knew his system wasn't nearly accurate enough. He wasn't even sure he cared.

On what seemed like the fourth day, he became obsessed with the idea that a bear was in the cave with him. It was an uncertainty that kept him bathed in panic every waking second. He waited for the bear to find him and maul him to death, but the torture never descended on him. In the end, he concluded that the scuffling noises had only been his imagination, perhaps the effects of delirium, because nothing ever came of it. The sounds simply stopped.

Always he was hungry, his stomach aching for sustenance, but he was far too weak to do anything about it. Even if he'd known how to find food in the forest, he didn't have the energy to try. He wouldn't know what to eat, which things to avoid. Harvard graduates were accustomed to eating in five-star restaurants, not scavenging on berries and roots. He wouldn't even know which ones were safe. That was something he would learn later, by trial and error, by watching what the animals ate, and by a hell of a lot of starving.

The hunger was a constant gnawing annoyance that seemed to never end. That and the fear. It tormented him, made him so crazy that he finally crossed over into a place where the fear left him altogether. It was the beginning of his learning process, the first stages of his metamorphosis.

Then one day he suddenly became lucid enough to realize that he heard water. *Running water!* He heard it with an almost impossibly sharp clarity, coming from somewhere deep inside the cave. Why hadn't he noticed it before? It had been there all along, but he'd been too consumed with fever to pay attention.

Water. The foundation of all life. It was there, somewhere, making vague promises to sustain him, to cleanse him, to give him back his life force. Soon the intense thirst drove him to seek the source.

Inch by precious inch, he began to pull himself toward the sound, hoping beyond hope that he wasn't experiencing some sort of hallucination. It was an agonizingly slow journey and physically painful for him, but he wouldn't give up. He refused to give up. He needed the water to survive, and survival was suddenly of utmost importance to him.

Perhaps it was nothing more than instinct that drove him, or maybe it was merely the fear of death. Either way, when the drive finally kicked in, it laid hold of him and wouldn't let go. He didn't even know if there was a world left to live in. He didn't know what was happening out there beyond that cave. But he knew he wanted to live.

For most of the journey, he was forced to drag himself, pulling his body along with his good arm. Sometimes he found the strength to crawl along on his knees for a short distance. And always he listened for the direction from which the sound of the running water came. He would crawl on his belly a few yards only to collapse into unconsciousness for several hours. When he awakened, he would start again. Determined. Driven. Never entertaining the notion that he wouldn't make it.

Once, he woke and started to crawl forward only to realize his hands were clawing at nothing but thin air. He was on the edge of a precipice, and judging by the sound of the falling rocks he'd dislodged, it was a deep one. One that would have ended in his death if he'd plunged headlong into it.

The drop made his journey even more grueling. He had to find his way around the rim, feeling along in the pitch blackness, blind to whatever danger lay ahead of him. He was taunted by the fear that he would tire and lapse into unconsciousness before he could make it to safer ground, and go catapulting into the deep recess, to be snapped in half on the rocks below.

Then there was the disappointing possibility that the running water he heard lay below him, in the drop. If so, he would never be able to get to it. Without light and with no means of lowering himself into the pit, he would never be able to reach it. Even with the right tools, he hadn't the strength, anyway. Even more haunting was the fear that he would find the water only to learn that it wasn't pure enough to drink. Still, he doggedly pressed onward.

There were moments when he felt he couldn't go on. Too weak to move, he would lie in the dust, the rocks that lined the floor of the cave biting into his ribs, his shoulder aching, weeping until he passed out from sheer frustration. When he awoke, he would take hold of himself again and press on, unwilling, or unable to give up the fight.

He wasn't sure how long it took him to find the water. It could have been a day, two days. He had no real way of knowing. What might have proven to be a two-hour hike to an uninjured man became a hundred mile crawl for him. But he managed it in triumph and was rewarded for his effort.

When he finally found the source of the water, he wept with relief. It was a beautiful, clear underground stream. A gift from a God who had by all accounts forgotten his people.

He drank from that beautiful gift, and it kept him alive.

In the days that followed, he slept a lot, drank plentifully, and cleaned his wound in the freezing water as often as he dared. He was deep in the cave now, and the temperature was a constant fifty-six degrees, something he couldn't quite get accustomed to. He only had the thin blanket the woman had left behind for him. But he survived. Thanks to the woman and her pills, thanks to the water, and thanks to the cave.

In the beginning, he'd hated the damn cavern. The darkness had sometimes driven him to brief moments of madness. The dank smell had left an acrid imprint in his nostrils. The sounds that came from deep within its belly had frightened him. But he and the cave were simpatico now. The cave had become his mother, his nurturer, and he had learned to love it. It would continue to teach him. Inside its womb, he would grow into the force, the freak of war that people would come to fear.

He was a changed man. His mother was the earth, his teacher pain, his goal to survive. And death to anyone who got in his way.

By the time he crossed the Texas border, Zach's fuel was getting dangerously low. The ten paltry gallons he'd found in the tank behind the New Orleans shanty was barely enough to get him where he needed to be. A hellish place this Texas had become, crawling with the maggots of humanity. He hated to even have to enter the city, but enter it he must.

As he drove through the streets of what had once been Dallas, he surreptitiously observed the dregs that had gathered there to claim the ruins as their home. All sorts of people lived there, scattered and few but there nonetheless. The men were surprisingly scarce. Women stood on the corners, their hair tousled and dirty. Children ran loose in the city, carrying knives, guns, even homemade explosives. Gang warfare was rampant. Most members joined by the age of nine and died before they ever reached their fifteenth birthday. They killed without compunction, for whatever they could get out of it. Clothing, food, ammunition for their weapons, and transportation when they could get it. As worthless as it was, they even killed for jewelry. And sometimes they killed just to vent their frustration and anger on what was left of society.

The streets were nearly deserted, but he could feel them watching from their hiding places inside the charred and gutted buildings, those great skyscrapers that had once ruled the city. It seemed odd, but those structures had once stood for wealth and power. Now they only stood for failure, complete and utter. He knew what they wanted, these children, these odd creatures who weren't even human anymore. They wanted the Hummer. If he wasn't careful, they would get what they wanted. That or they would die trying.

He didn't feel much like killing today, especially not children who had no concept of what they were doing in the first place. But he could feel it coming already, snaking through him and settling in his gut like a bad meal.

Near the center of the city, he found the place where he was supposed to wait for the go-between who would give him further instructions. It was a burned-out building in an abandoned business district. A yellow piece of cloth was nailed to a post outside. The go-between's calling card.

Zach pulled into the empty lot and parked the Hummer in plain sight of the front door. The precaution offered little protection. The Hummer would be a sitting duck. When the vandals who were sure to come discovered that they couldn't crank the engine, they would get angry and try to destroy it. He didn't have much to worry about in the way of aesthetics. The Hummer was a battered war horse that had seen many a dent and ding, and there wasn't an inch of glass left on the vehicle. The windshield, headlights, and taillights had all been busted out long ago. His fuel tank was as secure as Fort Knox. The worst they could do was puncture the tires. And that was precisely what he was afraid of. Tires for Hummers were not easy to come by.

For a long time he stood next to the Hummer, his keen eyes searching every nook and cranny of the area. He didn't like this. There were too many places for Pirates or gang members to hide. It was a bad choice for a meeting, a stupid choice. But then, he hadn't been the one to pick it, so he couldn't account for the other man's intelligence.

It irked him that Serena's parents didn't trust him enough to allow the meeting to take place on their turf. He resented the inconvenience and the added danger. He could understand their fear, but he'd been

hired to help them, not hurt them, and he personally felt they were putting too much trust in the wrong people. Not that it was of any real concern to him now. Serena was safe, and after today, he didn't plan on dealing with her parents ever again.

Zach surveyed the building again. When it became apparent that his contact had no intention of coming out to meet him, he reluctantly left the Hummer and approached the entrance. He didn't like this. The smell of an ambush was heavy in the air. It made him edgy, nervous. Angry. Already his hands were itching to kill someone just for making him go out of his way.

It was a sunny day in Texas, but the interior of the building was devoid of any light, and Zach didn't relish the idea of walking into that darkness. But he had to. It wasn't that he felt any real compunction to deliver the message to Serena's parents. That was pointless now. He felt no obligation to a man who would allow a bunch of rogues to make off with his daughter. He was here for the fuel they had promised him. Payment for his services. He needed it too much to leave it behind.

Primed for action, he solemnly walked to the door. Just outside the entrance, he paused long enough to pull a small stone from his pocket, a piece of celestite, which he lit and tossed into the building. The flare illuminated the interior enough that he could see, and he peered warily inside, his eyes taking in everything. Finding the entrance hall empty, he stepped inside. No one skulked in a corner waiting to bang him on the back of the head and leave him for dead—not yet, anyway—so he went farther into the room.

A scuffling noise from somewhere deeper in the building drew him through another doorway. Ever the skeptic, he proceeded with caution. A shadow lurked on the far side of the room. Zach could see by the glow from the flare behind him that the man was rather muscular. Not nearly as muscular as Zach himself, and nowhere near as tall, but large enough to get his respect.

“You Steve?”

“Who's asking?” came the reply.

“I have news about the girl,” he countered.

The man's demeanor changed, his face registering unmistakable interest. Stupid ass. He obviously didn't know the rules of the game. He shouldn't be so expressive, especially considering that he didn't know who Zach was.

“I'm the one you're looking for.”

“Got any identification?” Zach wasn't really serious. He was only stalling for time until he could get a little closer to the man. He didn't like this situation. His gut was warning him that he was about to get screwed all the way around.

“Where the fuck have you been in the last decade?” the man shot back. “No one carries identification anymore. Who the hell needs it?”

“You do if you want any information out of me.”

“Hey, what is this?” the man demanded. “You trying to be funny or something? This is what you agreed to.”

“Yeah, at the time. But now I'm not so sure. I think I've had a change of heart.”

“Too fucking bad,” came the answer.

By this time, Zach was practically standing toe-to-toe with him, close enough that the man could consider his sizeable bulk.

“I take it that means you aren’t gonna tell me where I can find the girl’s father.” Zach sounded dangerously casual. Anyone who knew him at all knew that now was the time to run like hell because he was about to bust loose.

The man grinned. He obviously thought he had the upper hand. “You’d be thinking rightly.”

“I don’t suppose we could negotiate a deal.”

“What sort of deal?”

“You tell me where the girl’s father is, and I won’t kill you.”

The man’s eyes narrowed skeptically as he took a better look at his opponent’s size. “What the fuck makes you think you could kill me?”

“This does,” Zach answered, pulling a dagger from his coat, a throwaway he’d carved out of bone.

The man laughed when he saw it. “You expect that little stick to beat this,” he said, producing a .38 revolver that had been tucked in the small of his back.

The moron was in the process of drawing back the hammer when Zach hit him in the face. The blow was so quick and packed such force that ole Steve’s head slammed back against the brick wall he’d been leaning against. Blood spurted from his nose, and the pistol clattered to the floor.

Dammit all! He hated it when they bled so easily. It always gave him the willies. Even though he had the protection of Doc’s vaccine, he hated to have blood on him. Anyone’s blood. It reminded him too much of his mother’s death.

“If you wanna kill someone with that thing, you gotta learn to be a quick draw,” Zach mused.

The man looked dazed, almost like he was about to lose consciousness. Zach grabbed him by the throat to keep him from sliding down the wall. He needed the man lucid. At least until he got what he wanted out of him.

“Now, what was that you were saying about the girl’s father?” he growled.

Steve—if that was really his name—obviously didn’t need another taste of Zach’s wrath, and was all too willing to comply now. “Outside of town. East. He’ll be waiting beside the road. Just off 80, at the 110 junction.”

“Sorry. That’s not quite good enough. Where does he live?”

Steve hesitated, noting the hostility in Zach’s eyes, then apparently decided it was best not to mess around with such a dangerous individual. “Further south. There’s a small ranch. You’ll know it by the windmill.”

Zach released him and, without another word, turned to leave. He felt rather than heard the man bending down, reaching for the dropped pistol. It came as no surprise. He had expected the rash move, anticipated it, almost wanted it. In a maneuver that was as graceful as it was deadly, Zach spun around and released the dagger he held. The man didn’t even have time to react before the throwaway lodged itself in the middle of his chest. For a moment, Steve’s eyes widened in surprise—they always looked so damn surprised—and his hands fumbled ineptly at the hilt of the knife. Before he could pull it out, his body slumped to the floor in death.

Without a speck of remorse, Zach left him where he’d fallen. He was worried about the Hummer. He’d spent too much time inside the building. Anything could have happened in his absence.

Just as he suspected, the Hummer was not alone. As fortune would have it, there was only one fuckhead to deal with. The little ass-wipe was busy painstakingly checking the vehicle over, obviously

confused because he couldn't get the engine started. Zach assessed the area, then the would-be thief. He couldn't have been more than fourteen or fifteen. It was unusual to find a gang member alone. Maybe he wasn't a member yet. Maybe this particular heist was his initiation. Whatever the case, he wasn't going to get what he wanted.

"I've killed one today. Don't make it two," Zach casually warned as he drew closer.

The boy jerked around in surprise. When he saw the size of the man coming toward him, he instinctively backed away. He knew imminent death when he saw it. Zach ignored him, just climbed into the Hummer and started the engine.

The boy's eyes grew round with amazement. "How'd you do that?"

"Magic," Zach replied. With that, he gunned the engine and left the stunned boy in a cloud of dust.

Zach took the road out of town like a maniac. He didn't bother to stop or even slow down at the intersections. Once, he nearly ran a woman down, but she managed to get out of the way before he mowed her over. The near miss didn't even get his adrenaline going. He couldn't afford to stop at every crossroad, couldn't afford to waste a single drop of fuel, and the continuous stop-and-go would only burn more of the precious commodity. He wasn't even sure he had enough to get him to the edge of town, but he wanted to get as far as possible as fast as possible before he ran out of fuel and the solar packs kicked in. The solar packs wouldn't last long going full tilt, and leaving the Hummer hidden in the woods somewhere wasn't nearly as risky as leaving it in the middle of a place like Dallas.

He should have never agreed to this hair-brained arrangement to begin with. It had been a mistake from the word go. But he'd promised Serena, and despite the warning in his gut, he would make good on that promise. He would finish his business here, get the fuel, and never look back. He only hoped the long trip was worth it.

Just outside of town, he was still praying that the fuel in his tank would be sufficient to take him the distance when he saw the man. He was hiding behind a clump of bushes alongside the deserted roadway, but to Zach's keen eyes he was nakedly visible.

"Serena's father, I presume," he muttered.

He veered off the road and drove the Hummer right up to the stand of trees where the man was crouched. The man seemed startled to realize that he hadn't been so hidden after all, and even more dismayed when he got a closer look at Zach's scarred face and renegade appearance.

He was about to bolt and run, but Zach stopped him. "I have word of your daughter."

The man paused and turned back to give Zach a more appraising look.

"Where's Steve?" he demanded.

Zach's answer was deliberately casual. "He met with an unfortunate accident."

"What sort of accident?" he wanted to know, looking nervous again.

Zach shrugged. "Me."

The man visibly blanched.

"But it's your daughter you want to know about, right?" Zach said rather pointedly.

He knew the type. Daughters didn't mean much. A son was a greater asset, and infinitely less hassle. Serena's mother had probably pushed her husband into finding someone to search for the girl. This goon probably hadn't cared one way or another. He may have even considered it a relief to have one less mouth to feed.

“What would you know about my daughter?” he said suspiciously.

“I’m the man you hired to find her.”

Seemingly unable to formulate a response, the man gulped and stared.

“Get in. I’ll take you back to your ranch.”

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea,” the man said, taking a half step backwards.

Zach glanced off into the distance, counted to ten in an attempt to quell his growing impatience, and then turned back to level a serious gaze at the man. When he did finally speak, he couldn’t keep the irritation out of his voice. “Look, I traveled a long way to find your daughter and a long way back to bring you word. I’m tired and I’m thirsty. I thought you might be kind enough to fill my canteen with some fresh water, that’s all.”

The man hesitated for a few indecisive minutes and then climbed into the Hummer. Despite the dangers of being hospitable in these tumultuous times, he had apparently concluded that he would do well to offer some hospitality to a man like Zach, a man who looked like he could tangle with a cougar and come out none the worse for wear.

Without another word, Zach pulled the vehicle back onto the dusty road and headed for the ranch. The man gave him directions, his eyes shifting warily, constantly, over the strange man before him. The coward was intimidated by his mere presence. Zach could feel it, and it rankled him.

Thankfully, the ranch wasn’t far away. The Hummer made it into the dirt driveway on little more than fumes. Zach cut the engine before the last dregs of fuel ran through the lines, and then both men climbed out of the vehicle, the other man hasty in his scramble to put some distance between them. Zach ignored him. He was busy assessing the farmhouse and the outlying area. Out beyond the barn, a windmill churned. The house itself was small, a bit ramshackle, but it was more than what most people had these days. A woman came running out into the yard, followed by a little girl who couldn’t have been more than six or seven. She looked a lot like Serena, and she clung to her mother fearfully, her eyes wide as she stared at Zach.

“Taylor, what’s going on?” the woman called to her husband as she approached.

“This here is the man we hired to find Serena,” Taylor answered, his eyes on Zach. He didn’t go to his wife. Instead, he stood between her and Zach. As if he provided enough barrier to stop him. What a laugh! A fine time to be protecting his family, after his eldest daughter had already been taken, used, and left for dead. Anger like fire coursed through Zach, and he suddenly wanted to rip the man’s head off with his bare hands. Somehow, he managed to control the urge. He needed to keep a level head about him. For now, anyway.

“You found our daughter?” The woman gazed hopefully at Zach’s formidable bulk.

“That I did, ma’am. She’s dead,” he announced without hesitation, his gaze direct and his voice devoid of emotion.

The man, Taylor, staggered to his wife’s side and automatically gathered her into his arms as she collapsed into a pitiful fit of wailing and weeping. They were both obviously quite pained over the news of their daughter’s death, so pained that Zach wondered if he’d misjudged Serena’s father. Maybe he should have told them the truth. But the truth was just as painful. Serena *would* die. Eventually.

It was better this way. He was protecting them from the ugliest of all realities. He figured the mother would try to do the valiant thing and demand that he bring them their daughter without even considering the danger they could bring to themselves, to Serena, and the rest of the family. If the Hunters ever got wind of it, the girl’s presence could be the death of them all.

No. He'd made the right decision. It was best to leave things just as they were. Besides, he never misjudged people, and there was something altogether untrustworthy about Taylor.

"You certain?" the man finally asked.

Zach nodded, his face set in grim lines.

The man detached himself from his wife and stepped a little closer to Zach, his eyes on the ground between them. "Thank you for your time, mister. But we need to be alone now, and we'd thank you to leave."

"What about the fuel you promised me," Zach reminded him. It seemed a callous thing to do under the circumstances, but, dammit, he needed that fuel to get back, and he wasn't leaving without it.

"Mister, you didn't bring my daughter back alive," the man began.

"You hired me to find her. No one said anything about bringing her back alive. Besides, after what those men did to her, you wouldn't want her alive," Zach replied through clenched teeth. He knew his eyes were narrowed in that dangerous look so many people feared. His anger was to the boiling point now, threatening to spill over on anyone who got in his way, and it was becoming increasingly more difficult to control.

"Why didn't you at least bring her body back so we could bury her," the woman wailed, her face red from crying.

Zach gave her a brief, assessing glance before looking back at the man, waiting, expecting.

The man shook his head, adding to Zach's ire. "I'm afraid you didn't do your job, mister. I won't give you the fuel. You didn't earn it."

"Won't, or can't?" Zach's voice was a lethal growl.

"Either way you're not getting it," the man countered. "How do we know you're even telling the truth?"

Zach was on him in an instant, catching the smaller man by surprise when he grabbed the front of his shirt and lifted him off the ground with one hand. An enormous hunting knife appeared in his free hand. He pressed the blade to the man's throat, the tip biting into the flesh and releasing a slow trickle of blood that oozed out around the steel.

"Do you have fuel here?" Zach hissed in his face, his eyes angrily searching the other man's gaze.

Unable to speak because of the tight grip and the knife at his throat, Taylor gurgled an answer. In an unexpected turn, the worn shirt that Zach clutched in his fist suddenly gave way, ripping in two, and the man went crashing to the ground, leaving Zach with nothing but a handful of cloth. Taylor instantly began to scramble away, screaming for his wife to get the gun.

"Ma'am, if you get that gun, your husband is a dead man. You'll never be able to get back with it in time," Zach warned as he casually slammed a heavy, booted foot down on Taylor's back to stop his slow progress across the yard.

Certain she would obey him and not her husband, Zach paid no more heed to the woman, just bent forward and grabbed hold of a big clump of Taylor's hair, jerking his head back at a painful angle and once again pressing the big knife to his throat.

"You have two seconds to answer me. Do you have the fuel?" he reiterated.

Taylor started to nod, then realized how dangerous that could be and stopped himself. "Y-yes, I have the fuel."

“Where?” Zach demanded, roughly yanking on the hair he held and causing the man’s neck to crack ominously.

“J-just let me up, and I’ll sh-show you...ungh!” He ended on a grunt of pain when Zach gave his hair another yank.

”If you do anything stupid, you’ll die. Understand?” Zach warned.

“Y-yes, ungh, I understand.”

Zach released the man so quickly that he fell face forward in the dust, bloodying his own damn nose. Bastard! He should kill the asshole just for the general principle.

“Tell the woman and the girl to get back into the house,” he quipped.

“Go on and do like he says, Beth,” Taylor called to his stricken wife.

“T-taylor...” she began.

“You listen to me, Beth! And don’t do anything rash. He’s a dangerous man, you hear?”

The woman glanced once more at Zach and shouted, “How can you do this?” before taking her daughter tightly by the arm and running for the house. Her words didn’t even come close to piercing the thick hide around Zach’s heart. He had long ago ceased to care what anyone thought of him.

Zach waited until the woman and her daughter were both inside before lifting Taylor off the ground and shoving him into motion. “I did the work, and that fuel is my payment. You just remember that next time you try to swindle someone,” he hissed in Taylor’s ear as they walked out around the house and approached the barn.

Fortunately, the man didn’t try anything stupid. He just stood in silent defeat while Zach collected all the fuel his tank could hold, plus the two holding tanks in the back of the Hummer. When they were full, he called, “You have a nice day now,” and left Taylor standing in the middle of his front yard, looking a little bewildered and a whole lot mad.

“Fuck with me and you get what you deserve,” Zach muttered to himself as he steered the Hummer out onto the highway.

Jesus, he couldn’t wait to get home. West Virginia wasn’t close enough for him. But he still had to make a few more stops yet. Just a few. Then he could disappear into the mountains, get away from the rest of the world for awhile, rest, meditate, and plan. Once he was rejuvenated, he would come out with a vengeance, to vent the anger that was building inside him, the anger that threatened to blow him apart.

It was nightfall, a day later, when Zach pulled the Hummer off the highway for the last time. West Texas, the perfect place to find what he was looking for. Still, though he searched carefully, a celestite flare lighting his way, it took considerable effort and an equally considerable amount of time before he found his first victim. Out to absorb the heat the rocks had accumulated during the day, the first Mojave rattlesnake he found coiled at his approach, its tail buzzing a warning. One of the most lethal and dangerous snakes in the United States, the Mojave rattler could be an excitable animal. Zach would have to exercise extreme caution.

As he drew closer, the snake’s head reared higher, its tail waving a furious banner of impending death. In a flash, the rattler struck at the long stick he was using to fish it out of the rocks. Clear of danger, Zach used the flat end of the stick to press the snake’s head into the soft dirt, then reached down with his bare hand and picked it up by the neck, just behind the head.

“Big sucker,” he muttered to himself as he drew it closer to his face for a more thorough inspection.

Satisfied with the size of the animal, he used his free hand to draw a glass vial from the inner pocket of his fatigues. He pulled the rubber cork out with his teeth and then carefully pressed the snake's fangs over the lip of the vial, gently milking the poison sacks of all the lethal venom they had to offer. This was just the first. His hunt would take precision and patience, but the painstaking task would be well worth the effort. The poison these snakes carried would be more than sufficient for his purpose.

When he'd filled several vials, Zach gladly left Texas behind. The wind whipped his long, black hair into a tangled wad as he sped along the dusty roads heading for home. Eager to get there, he pushed the vehicle to its limits. Despite the lack of headlights to brighten his way, he traveled at an alarming speed. He didn't need headlights. The moon helped to light the way, and his keen eyes had long since grown accustomed to seeing things in the dark, anyway.

His trip into Texas had been lucrative. Not only had he been able to acquire the fuel that would get him back home again, but he'd also managed to find more celestite, a considerable load of sulfur, which he'd mined from a cave the day before, and the precious poison from his little friends. It had taken him more time than he'd cared to spend, but he was satisfied with his haul. The items he had collected were priceless.

Now it was time to get back home, for a bath, maybe even a shave, but most of all for some much-needed solitude.

He was free to do as he chose now, and he was glad of it. While working in the caves to mine the sulfur, he had come to the decision that he was finished helping people. He didn't need them. His last taste of humanity would be his final act of vengeance, and then he was through with the damn ingrates.

8

As soon as Zach crossed over into Tennessee, he made a beeline for Franklin's pub. Franklin's was a hub for information, one of the best, and Zach made it a point to visit whenever he was in the area. He had always liked the place. It had a slightly less roughneck clientele, and he felt at home there. He was accepted. It was a place where he could relax.

Zach sat at the bar, sipping 100 proof homemade whiskey that burned all the way down and helped take the edge off like no other liquor. As far as he was concerned, it was the best whiskey in the world. A thin, black man sat next to him, sharing a round with him. Grady Jones was his name, and he was the news network in these parts. What he didn't learn by traveling, he learned through his own private grapevine, and he was always accurate. Grady told events precisely as they happened. There was no other way, since there was no point in prettifying anything anymore.

Zach made a circular motion with his index finger, indicating the two shot glasses between himself and Grady, and then passed another cutting of sugar cane across the bar. Franklin smiled and gave the two men another round.

"So, tell me, Grady. What's been happening while I've been away?"

“Uh-uh. You first,” the black man insisted. “Did you find the girl you was lookin’ for?”

Zach frowned and glared hard at his shot glass. The glass was worn and cracked from overuse, and the amber liquid it held seemed to glare back at him. He didn’t want to talk about Serena, didn’t even want to think about her. He didn’t like the way it made him feel. Awful inside. And angry.

Grady noticed the long silence and the frown between his friend’s brows. “Uh, oh. Touchy subject?”

Zach didn’t say anything, just picked up the shot glass and tossed the liquid down his throat, squinting against the burn that traveled all the way to his gullet.

Grady glanced away and fidgeted with his own glass for a moment before beginning again. “There’s a faction down in south Florida, a group of boys, none of ‘em more than fifteen years old. They goin’ around killin’ the elderly for their food, their clothing, their shelters, anything they can get off their dead bodies. And the Hunters are in action again. They found a colony of GV-3s livin’ up north of here, and they went after ‘em with a vengeance, burned their shelters, burned most of the men alive.”

“Don’t you have any good news?” Zach broke in.

“They ain’t no good news in this world we livin’ in, Zach. You know that.”

“Sorry. It’s just that....” He shrugged his massive shoulders and didn’t bother to finish.

Grady just nodded. He understood what Zach was feeling. He’d been feeling it for some time now himself. Everyone who had a heart did. The futility and apathy. The frustration. It was like a living entity, pressing down on all of them.

“There’s a group out in Texas tryin’ to get some of the old oil rigs goin’ again, tryin’ for some industry,” Grady offered.

Zach shook his head in disbelief. “Industry, huh? Crazy asses. Don’t they know there isn’t any industry anymore?”

“Most people would agree. But not the Pirates. They’s just sittin’ back and waitin’ to take it from ‘em.”

“More killing,” Zach muttered.

“Ain’t that the truth,” Grady agreed, running a hand over the patch of graying fuzz on his head.

Their conversation was interrupted when a young boy came into the building. A scrappy little towhead named Tadpole. When he saw Zach sitting at the bar, he gave a whoop of delight and rushed forward to greet him.

“Hiya, Zach,” the boy crowed as he plopped down onto the stool next to him.

“Hey, Tadpole,” Zach returned, gazing down at the boy with an expression that was as near to affection as he could come. “How goes it?”

“The usual.” He grinned back at Zach. “I’ll take a whiskey, Franklin,” he said to the bartender.

Franklin poured him a small shot and passed it down the bar. The boy tossed it back like any hairy-chested man. The act created a stir nearby, and some of the onlookers clapped and cheered him on. Everyone knew Tadpole, everyone liked him, and no one ever said a word about him being too young to drink whiskey.

Tadpole was a unique individual. Near as anyone could tell, he’d been born some time after the rioting had begun, born into a tumultuous and corrupted society. Like many others, his parents had been killed shortly after the revolt. He’d been an infant at the time, left alone in a heartless world. But by some divine miracle he survived. He’d been taken in by one family after another, with long stretches of

isolation and solitude in-between as each family either abandoned him or were killed by one faction or another, until he'd finally been left completely alone at the age of seven. No one knew how old the boy really was. Tadpole figured he was somewhere near around the age of nine, but he didn't act like a nine-year-old. Hardship had made him an odd mixture of child and man, yet the trauma hadn't corrupted him like it had some of the other youngsters. He was one of the good guys, his heart solid gold. He idolized Zach, wanted to be just like him, much as Zach tried to dissuade him from the notion.

"Did you find her, Zach?" Tadpole demanded, his hazel eyes gleaming with excitement and hopefulness.

Tadpole loved an adventure, and that was precisely how he viewed every aspect of Zach's life. Just one big adventure after another. If he only knew what pain and suffering Zach had gone through, maybe then he wouldn't want to be like him. The boy had already experienced enough hardship as it was. But no one could ever tell another about pain. It was something that had to be experienced first hand.

"I found her," Zach admitted, unable to hide his amusement at the boy's zeal.

"I knew you would," Tadpole crowed. "There ain't nothin' you can't do. And you know what I'm gonna do when I get big and strong like you, Zach? I'm gonna rescue people. Just like you."

Zach had heard this declaration before. Ever since he'd met little Tadpole outside this very bar two years ago, the boy hadn't left him alone. Anytime Zach was in the area, Tadpole was underfoot, incessantly pestering him about one thing or another. Zach had a particular affection for the boy, so he tolerated Tadpole's vocal attempts to be included in on his clandestine operations. He just couldn't get it through the boy's head that he was a loner and didn't need any help from anyone. Tadpole was no quitter, and he refused to give up on his hopes and dreams. No matter how unattainable they seemed.

Zach ran a critical eye over Tadpole's wiry frame. Perhaps due to an inadequate diet, he seemed small for his age. Poor kid. But he was feisty as they come, and he'd fight tooth and nail for a cause. Still, he led a lonely existence. Like Zach, he didn't know any other way.

Tadpole was the only name the boy had ever known. The moniker had been given to him years ago by some crusty mountain man. The only parents he'd ever really known were the hooting of an owl in the middle of a cold, dark night and the underside of a tiny tin roof that had kept him out of the rain for half his life. It was an odd existence for a boy, but he'd refused most offers from older folks to take him in, always insisting that he didn't want to be a burden. When he found Zach, he'd been even more convinced to stay independent, just like his hero.

It was sad that a child had to be bereft of family, but that was reality. A reality they all had to deal with in their own individual way.

"Can I help carry anything back for you, Zach?" Tadpole asked, looking too damn eager to please.

"Thanks anyway, Tadpole, but you know the rules."

"I know." His face fell. "No one knows where Zach lives."

"One day you'll understand, kid," Grady added. "Zach didn't get all those scars for nothin', you know."

"And the less people know about his whereabouts, the less people will get hurt," Tadpole finished for him, his voice a mixture of pride and disappointment.

"That's right," Zach said.

The boy turned away and began to fiddle with his shot glass. Zach grew a little uncomfortable. He had hurt the kid's feelings. Again. He understood the boy's eagerness to help, but Zach wouldn't break the rules for anyone. That was just the way of things.

What Tadpole really wanted was for Zach to be his father figure, but that wasn't a scenario Zach could embrace. He was no father figure. He was a killer, just as ruthless as the Pirates, only in a different way. Besides, he didn't want any responsibilities to weigh him down. He had chosen his path a long time ago, knowing the sacrifices he would have to make, and he was willing to accept that. Tad would have to accept it, too.

"I don't suppose you've been keeping an eye on Pete and Sara for me while I've been away, just like I asked you to?"

The boy's face brightened. "Every day. And Sara's been feedin' me real good, too." He grinned and rubbed his belly.

"You do look a little bigger around the middle," Zach teased.

"A lot bigger," Tadpole said. "Sara says all that eatin' will help me grow a big chest like you, so I worked real hard at it. Miss Sara's a good cook. She even made me sweetcakes."

"Well, well. If she's willing to waste all that sugar on you, you must be pretty special in her eyes."

"Mighty special," Tadpole agreed, his eyes gleaming. After a short pause, he added, "Hey, Zach, will you gimme a ride in the Hummer. I was thinking maybe you could take me out to Sara's house."

Tadpole's enthusiasm made Zach smile.

"Sure."

Tadpole loved to ride in the Hummer. Since few people even owned vehicles anymore, it wasn't often that he got such a privilege. As far as Tadpole was concerned, the fact that Zach owned such an unusual vehicle and was cunning enough to have kept it all these years without getting killed only added to his mystique.

Over the top of the boy's head, Zach caught sight of Grady. The black man had set his shot glass down and was staring at him with a peculiar look in his eyes.

"What?" Zach prompted. "What's wrong?"

Grady shook his head, seemingly mystified by something about Zach's face. "You're smilin'. Or somethin'. At least, it looks sorta like a smile. I ain't never seen you do it before, so I wouldn't know for sure."

Disturbed by the notion, Zach immediately replaced the smile with a scowl. But the sensation in his face lingered, annoying him, maybe even scaring him a little.

"Hold down the bar for me while I take care of some business," he told Tad.

"Aw, shucks," Tadpole moaned. "I can't go with you to do business?"

Zach shook his head.

"But it might be a valuable lesson for me," Tad argued. "I got to learn somehow. You said so yourself, Zach."

Zach hesitated for a moment, then sighed heavily and gave a terse nod of acquiescence. The boy was right. If he wanted to continue to survive, he did need to learn how to handle good business dealings.

Tadpole jumped off the barstool, grabbed Zach around the waist, which was as high as he could reach, and gave him a quick squeeze of thanks.

"You won't regret it. I promise you won't. I'll keep my mouth shut the whole time. I won't say a word. I'll just stand by and let you do your business. I swear, you won't regret it," he babbled.

“I already do,” Zach teased.

To the bartender he said, “Hey, Franklin, give me about ten bottles of that hundred and ninety proof rot you keep behind the counter, will you?”

Franklin raised a knowing brow but said nothing as he passed the bottles over the bar.

Grady gave Zach an appraising look. “You goin’ to war, Zach?” he queried, a gleam in his eyes. “Cause I know you ain’t gonna drink that stuff.”

“Could be. Could be,” he muttered, stacking several pieces of sugar cane on the counter as payment for the whiskey.

“Can I go with you, Zach?” Tadpole said from somewhere behind him. He’d been dancing around impatiently waiting to get on the road, but he’d perked up when he heard mention of war.

“No, you can’t go with me, Tadpole.”

“Aw, shit!”

“Hey. Remember what I told you about the ladies. They don’t like that kind of talk. And if you get in the habit of it, you can’t stop,” Zach reminded. To soften his words, he tousled the boy’s hair in a rare expression of affection.

“There ain’t no ladies ‘round here, Zach, so what’s the difference?” Tadpole grumbled.

“Well, just in case you ever do run into one, it’s nice to have some manners on you,” Zach said.

“She’d have to be tough like me. And if she was tough like me, she’d probably cuss worse than me,” Tadpole insisted, grinning from ear to ear.

Zach was amused by Tadpole’s insight. What the boy said was true. There weren’t many nine-year-old girls who could survive the way Tadpole had. In fact, women in general were few and far between these days. Most of them didn’t stand a chance against the rapists and the murderers, or the rigors of the new lives they were forced to lead. The likelihood of Tadpole ever having a mate near his own age was slim. But Zach wanted him to be a gentleman, anyway. It was good discipline for him.

“If you’re coming, you better get a move on, or else you’ll miss the bus. And grab a few of these bottles for me, huh?”

“Sure thing, Zach,” Tadpole readily agreed, taking as many bottles as he could carry.

“And don’t break any. They cost me a pretty penny.”

“You ain’t got no pennies, Zach,” Tadpole called as he made his way out the door of the shack, his arms laden with bottles. “But I won’t break any. I’m real careful. You know that.”

Zach watched the boy struggle out the door. The minute Tadpole was out of sight and out of earshot, he turned back to Grady and Franklin. “Either of you seen Joe lately?”

Grady’s gray brows lifted. “You really are goin’ to war, aren’t you?”

Zach didn’t reply. The less they knew, the better off they would be.

“Joe ain’t been around lately,” Franklin said. “He probably hasn’t left the hole. You want me to let him know you’re looking for him when I do see him?”

“No, thanks. I think I’ll just take a quick drive by the hole myself and see what he’s up to.” Ignoring their curious stares, he began to collect the remaining bottles of whiskey, stuffing them in his shoulder satchel.

When he was finished, he half turned away to leave, but then caught himself up short and paused for a quick word. "I'm not available to anyone...for any price."

Grady nodded his understanding. Zach glanced expectantly at Franklin.

"Understood," the bartender agreed.

Zach gave the bar a slap of finality and started for the door. Grady called after him, "There's somethin' different about you, Zach. Somethin's changin' in that head of yours."

Zach paused and looked back at his friend.

"You smiled," Grady teased, grinning in toothy jest.

"I'm still a mean son-of-a-bitch, Grady," he promised the man, and then stepped through the door.

As Zach disappeared through the doorway, Franklin exchanged a knowing glance with Grady. "He's definitely got some important business planned."

"And we bes' not be snoopin' around in it, neither," Grady commented. "I'm too old to die. Done made it through the revolt, the plague, and everything else. Don't need to die now."

Franklin nodded and began to absently wipe down the bar.

Outside, Tadpole was impatiently waiting in the Hummer. As Zach crossed the dirt lot, a stray hound slunk across his path, whining a little as Zach's heavy snake boots kicked up a few stones and sent them skittering near the canine's rear legs. Seemed like everything was afraid of him, whether he intended them to be or not.

Unconcerned with the hound's hang-ups, Zach carefully stowed the bottles in the back of the Hummer. There was barely enough room, but he managed to squeeze the bag in next to all the other paraphernalia there.

"You sure got a load of stuff back there, Zach," Tadpole commented. "A reg'lar arsenal."

Zach ignored the remark and climbed into the driver's seat.

"Will you let me drive this time, Zach?"

"Not this time, kid. I have too much on my mind to be wasting precious time."

"Shit! I mean, shucks," he quickly amended. He hadn't missed the warning glance Zach gave him.

"Where we goin'?"

"Just sit tight and enjoy the ride, little man," Zach said, cranking the engine and pulling out of Franklin's parking lot. "You'll know soon enough."

As they sped along the deserted highway, Tadpole seemed to derive a simple enjoyment from the feel of the wind whipping across his dirty face. Zach felt a stab of melancholy when he realized that he'd forgotten how to take such simple pleasures from life. He could barely recollect a moment in his own childhood. Somehow, all those memories had slipped away from him. It was awful to think the only memories Tadpole would ever have to reflect on were ones of hardship, pain, loneliness, and deprivation.

"Have you given any more thought to that last conversation we had?" Zach asked.

Tadpole stiffened, and the smile fell from his face. He didn't even glance Zach's way, just kept his eyes fastened on the passing landscape, although he had clearly lost any pleasure in doing so.

"Tad?"

The boy turned slightly, as if to acknowledge his name, and then glanced away. But Zach had already caught the fleeting look of sadness that crossed the boy's face.

"Why are you so opposed to this?" Zach questioned, his eyes on the road ahead. "Pete and Sara would be so happy to have you come live with them, and yet you act like you can't stand the idea. They probably think you hate them."

"I don't hate them," the boy answered, his voice so low that Zach almost didn't catch the words.

"Then what's the big deal?"

When there was no immediate reply, he glanced over and found Tadpole staring down at his feet, looking so much like a boy that it tugged at Zach's heart. So, there was some youth in that strange shell of a person after all.

"You know why," Tadpole finally managed.

"I'm not so sure I do know why," Zach prompted, trying to draw the boy out, trying to force him to say it, if only to make him admit it to himself.

"B-because, everyone I live with dies!" Tadpole screeched, looking furious now.

Zach didn't allow himself to get angry. He understood. He knew the boy wasn't mad at him. He was simply venting his frustration by yelling.

"That doesn't necessarily mean it will keep happening." It was a poor attempt at reassurance. He knew it, and the boy knew it, too. But Tadpole wasn't buying it.

Tadpole only had one response to that. He simply hung his head and ignored Zach for the rest of the drive. Zach didn't bother to try and draw him out again. Tadpole could be as stubborn as Zach, and Zach was not one to waste energy on futile efforts.

Zach's destination lay just over the Kentucky border, at a place everyone called the hole. The hole was one of several hidden mines in the area, all of them worked by a crazy coot named Joe. Joe and his mines were closely guarded by the hill folk in the area. It was the perfect symbiotic arrangement. Hill folk had always been fiercely loyal to one another, which was precisely why Zach had chosen to stay in the mountains. No one could pry a secret from hill folk. He could trust these people, and they could trust him, so he had no fear about entering Joe's territory.

Joe not only worked the hole, but he lived in it, too. To most folks, that would have been a dangerous proposition, but not to Joe. Joe was different. He didn't care much about danger. He had no fear. He couldn't. In his business, fear would kill him.

The minute Zach cut the engine, the old-timer came out of the surrounding woods to greet him. Tadpole hopped out of the Hummer and started looking around. His sullen attitude was slowly wearing off, but he still avoided Zach's gaze.

Joe was small in stature, hard as lighter-knot, and brown as a berry. He had sharp blue eyes, grizzled features, and wild, snow-white hair that tended to stand up in fuzzy clumps, which only added to his crazy demeanor. Truth was, Joe was smart as a whip, and he liked people thinking he was crazy. It kept them at a distance.

"What brings you to my neck of the woods?" Joe asked as he shook Zach's hand. "I haven't seen you in a coon's age."

"I have a little trading proposition," Zach replied.

Joe's eyes began to gleam. He loved a good hagggle. "I figured as much. What sort of tradin' you got in

mind?”

“I recently made a trip out to Texas. Got some sulfur. Thought you might like some, in exchange for a little saltpeter and some coal.”

Joe laughed. “Now that is an interesting trade. Very interesting. How did you come by sulfur?”

Zach’s lips stretched over his teeth in an ugly sort of grin. “Well, I’m no expert like you, but I managed.”

Tadpole stood nearby, intently watching the exchange and obviously trying to pick up some pointers. He was busy trying to act mannish. In his unabashed way, he practiced Zach’s facial expressions and gestures with all the solemnity of a man on a mission. It was something he’d been doing ever since he’d met Zach. He wanted to look tough, and Zach was his role model.

Joe eyed the boy with curiosity. “Who’s the sidekick?”

“My protege.”

“He’s gonna have a devil of a time keeping up with you,” Joe said, whistling between his teeth.

Zach shrugged. “Maybe. I might have a hard time keeping up with him.”

Joe laughed and rubbed his head, which swirled the hair around and made it even more bushy and unkempt.

“Let’s go inside where we can talk turkey,” Joe suggested, leading the way back to the opening of the mine. “Maybe, just maybe, we can do some business today.”

By the time Zach left the hole, he was half drunk on the most gut-burning white lightning he’d ever tasted. He’d bargained long and hard with Joe, and had finally come to an agreement with the old horse-trader. He had what he wanted. Now all he had to do was put it all together.

He reluctantly dropped Tadpole at the Tennessee border. He’d had every intention of taking the boy on to Pete’s farm, but Tadpole insisted on being dropped out in the middle of nowhere. The boy had decided it wouldn’t be such a good idea to go on to Pete and Sara’s after all. Zach was wise enough not to press the issue. Tadpole was still sore at him. The boy needed time to sort things out on his own.

Zach handed him a small tube of sugar cane to suck on, waved goodbye, and left him standing next to the road. Damn, he always felt so guilty when he left the boy. But that’s the way Tadpole wanted it. If he couldn’t go with Zach, he would accept no substitutes, and there was nothing Zach could do to change it. Best to forget about it, and get on about his own business.

Several miles into Kentucky, Zach pulled off the paved highway and bumped along through the woods for nearly five miles before guiding the Hummer through a stand of trees and then breaking out into an open yard in the middle of a clearing. A small house sat hidden among the trees on the other side, with a barn a short distance away. Zach drove the Hummer straight to the barn, cut the engine, and got out to open the doors to the big wooden structure. A gray-haired man appeared from out of nowhere and stood in his path, a shotgun in his hands, pointed straight at Zach’s chest. Zach paused and stared at him for a moment, his eyes searching the man’s face, looking for any telltale signs of evil intent.

Suddenly, the man broke into a big grin and lowered his gun. “Just practicing,” he said, stepping forward to greet him.

“Pete, you old son-of-a-gun!” Zach said, slapping him on the back. “For a minute there, I thought you’d turned on me.”

“Never!” Pete swore. “Not even if they were pulling my fingernails off one by one.”

Zach gave him another slap on the back and handed him the keys to the Hummer. "I have a few things in the back for Sara. Wanna give me a hand with it?"

"Sure," the older man agreed, and followed him to the rear of the Hummer. "Damn. You sure got a load this trip, ay? What the hell is this? Saltpeter?"

"Yeah." Zach took several pieces of sugar cane out of the Hummer and leaned them against the rear bumper, keeping only a few long, slender pieces for himself.

Pete let out an appreciative whistle and began helping him unload the cargo. A few minutes later, Pete's wife came out of the house and started toward the barn. When she spied Zach's Hummer, she broke into a smile of welcome and quickened her pace.

Sara was a pale, fragile redhead, the delicate lady to Pete's large-boned, farm boy looks. As she drew near, Zach opened his arms and she flung herself into them, greeting him warmly with a kiss on each cheek. Pete and Sara were two of the few people in the world Zach trusted, and they both adored him. He had saved them from certain extinction during one of the death-sweeps perpetrated by the Hunters, and they'd been like family ever since.

"It's so good to see you," Sara said, giving him one last kiss.

"I brought you some sugar cane," he told her. "And some wax-myrtle berries for candles."

"Oh, Zach. It's been ages since we've had sugar cane. You know what I can do with these?" She picked up a stalk and gazed at it with reverence, her eyes gleaming in appreciation of the gift. "You always were so thoughtful."

"I also picked up some corn starch, but we'll have to share it," he admitted.

"Oh! It's like Christmas or something," she whispered, eyeing the goods with delight.

Pete reached over and patted her hand affectionately, then winked at Zach. "I can just see all the cakes piled up in the kitchen, cakes and pies and cookies. And pudding. She'll bake 'em until the sugar is all gone, and I'll be fatter than a spring heifer."

They shared a round of laughter, but then Sara was soon turning serious eyes on Zach. "Did you see Tadpole?"

Zach turned away and solemnly took a few more cases out of the back of the Hummer. "Yeah, I saw him."

"How's he doing?" Sara pressed.

"He's his usual stubborn self."

"He hasn't been up to see us for awhile," Pete commented.

Hadn't been to see them? The little cuss had sworn he'd been up there eating Sara's good food. Zach made a mental note to have a little chat with the boy about lying.

"We've been wondering if he's okay," Sara said.

Zach paused, a muscle jumping in his jaw. He knew what they were getting at, and the conversation made him uncomfortable. He'd been trying to convince Tadpole to come live with Pete and Sara, but the boy had stubbornly resisted. Tadpole didn't want to be with anyone but Zach. He didn't feel that anyone else was strong enough to keep him.

"He's fine," Zach said, then forced himself to turn and face Sara, his gaze sympathetic. "Try to understand. He needs time. I think he's scared."

“Scared?” Sara queried, looking puzzled.

“The boy’s been through a lot. He may never come around to the idea.” Feeling inept, he shrugged. “I tried,” he said rather lamely.

“I know you did,” Sara said, touching the back of his hand with her fingertips. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have burdened you with it. It’s just that...well...” She broke off when Pete gave her a warning look, then forced a bright smile onto her face as she asked Zach, “Will you stay for dinner this time?”

“I’m sorry, Sara. I can’t. I have a lot of work to do, and I’m eager to get back.”

She looked disappointed, but she didn’t press the issue. She knew Zach too well. He had his own agenda, his own way of doing things, and they were none of her business. But she loved him dearly, and she worried about him constantly.

“I’ll just go finish my sewing while you men finish up here then,” she murmured.

“Sara,” Zach stopped her before she’d gone two steps.

She turned back and gazed at him expectantly.

“I’ll keep trying.”

She nodded and tried to hide the shimmer of tears in her eyes.

“There is one thing I need,” he said.

She glanced back up at him. “Anything.”

“I could use as much bar soap as you have.”

Sara made soap every month and always had a little extra for Zach, so she didn’t question his request.

“I’ll give you what I have and make a new batch for Pete and myself,” she kindly offered.

Zach nodded his appreciation and went back to unloading the Hummer. Pete had already brought Zach’s travois out of the barn and was busy fastening several bundles between the poles.

“This is gonna be a heavy load,” the older man commented. “You might need to make two trips.”

“Just pile it high and heavy. I’ll manage.”

“Zach, you ain’t in any sort of trouble, are you? Because if you are, you know I’ll help in any way I can,” Pete told him, his keen eyes assessing Zach for any reaction that might lend credence to his fears.

“I’m not in trouble. I’m just...” He trailed off and signaled with a shrug that he didn’t want to discuss the matter.

Pete understood and went back to what he was doing.

By the time the travois was packed, Sara had returned to the barn and pressed a bundle into Zach’s hand. He smiled down at her for a long moment. She was so tiny, and she looked so damn forlorn. He knew she was sad that Tadpole still refused to stay with them, but there wasn’t much he could do. Tadpole was a free agent. He could do what he wanted.

“I brought you some food,” she whispered, tears glistening in her eyes.

“Thank you,” Zach answered.

“Aw, Sara,” Pete moaned. “Every time the man goes off, you get all misty-eyed.”

“Well, I can’t help it,” she defended herself. “Besides, you ain’t much better. You worry about him just as much as I do.”

Zach glanced from one to the other, then bent forward and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. He hefted the sack of food and teasingly commented, “There must be enough to last me three days in here.”

She lowered her eyelashes and smiled. “That way you don’t have to worry about finding food for yourself. You can just concentrate on your trip.”

Zach’s eyes were twinkling with mischief now. “You’re still trying to find out how many days journey it is from here, aren’t you?”

“Well, you can’t blame me for trying, can you?”

“You know the rules, Sara,” her husband reminded her.

“I know, I know,” she muttered, throwing her hands up in mock surrender. “I don’t need to be told twice.”

Pete was the only person in the world who knew where Zach was headed. He was the only person who ever would know. It was best that way, safer for Zach, safer for Sara, safer for anyone who might be involved with him, except for Pete. It was a tremendous burden for Pete to bear, and Zach was eternally grateful that he was willing to carry it.

“Well, I better be going. It’ll be nightfall soon, and I want to get a good head start,” Zach commented. “Take care of the Hummer for me, Pete.”

“I will. Oh, I almost forgot, I’ll have that bigger fuel tank ready before long.”

“Thanks.”

Without further explanation, Zach positioned himself between the travois poles and tested the weight of his burden. Pete went to his wife and put his arms around her. She leaned against him, drawing comfort from her husband as they said goodbye to their dearest friend.

Zach gave them a nod and started on his way, dragging his bundles behind him. It was going to be a long, tiring journey on foot, up into the West Virginia hills where he stayed hidden from the world. Back home, back to his cave and the memories.

* * *

It seemed like an eternity passed before his shoulder finally healed, an eternity he spent in pitch darkness. Hunger finally drove him out of the cave, and it had not been an easy journey. He’d gone so deep into the earth to find the water that he had no idea how to get back out. He wandered around for days before he realized he was going in circles. It was when he finally found the pit, almost fell into it again, that he knew he was making progress. If he went the wrong way, he would end up back at the underground stream, but if he went the right way, he would end up in the chamber where his rescuers had left him. From there, it was a short distance to the entrance, to sunshine, to food.

He’d been so damn green, so ignorant about survival. It was a wonder he’d lived at all. He’d led a rather soft existence up until that moment, unaccustomed to the rigors of life outdoors. But he was fortunate enough to possess a natural stamina, a strong physique, and he’d always been too damn smart for his own good. He had learned. It hadn’t been easy—God knew it hadn’t—but he had learned.

The cave provided him with shelter, and in its core, he had water in abundance, but getting food became a trial. He learned to acquire it by watching the animals. He observed which berries the birds

ate, watched which roots the bears would dig for, and he even found a wild potato patch that he began to cultivate. It was a long learning process. The hunger, often intense and even painful, gnawed at his insides constantly. Sometimes he would hallucinate from lack of nourishment. He lost a good deal of his body weight and precious muscle mass, and he was often discouraged, lying in the darkness of the cave for days and wishing he would die. But something kept him going.

His mind warred with his body in a constant battle for supremacy. Eventually his intellect won out. He survived. Fierce determination kept him alive, and that same determination led him to explore, to seek, to learn.

He learned that certain areas of the cave made great underground refrigerators. And after receiving a nasty scar on his right thigh from a bear mauling, he learned how to keep the animals away. By leaving his own dung near the entrance, the animals would smell the human occupancy and seek shelter elsewhere.

He learned that caves with underground streams could be a dangerous thing. He was nearly killed when his cave flooded. Afterward, he was faced with the problem of finding another cave, a dry cave.

It took weeks. He hadn't a clue what to look for, and it was pure accident that led him to find his new shelter. He was out scouting one day when he stumbled across a curious occurrence. He'd gone through a hard winter. Spring was just days away, but it was still cold enough to cause warmer air to frost, and it was precisely that phenomenon that aided him in his search. Walking along a ridge, he noticed a slight puff of warmer air rising up from the ground, seemingly from nowhere. Upon closer inspection, he discovered a small opening in the rocky mountainside and realized there was a chamber directly beneath him. He'd stumbled onto a breathing cave. Now all he had to do was find an entrance, one big enough for a man to get through.

He looked for days before he finally found it, but the long search paid off. His new shelter was a dynamic cave, secluded, almost impossible to find. The entrance was a steep uphill grade followed by a shorter downward sloping grade that opened into a small chamber on the other side. A tunnel in the back lured him farther along, and he followed the rather cramped, rocky terrain for some distance before he came into a larger chamber. A natural chimney-like structure stood in the very rear of the room, and he realized that this was where the puff of warmer air had been coming from. Looking up the shaft, he could see that the drop from above shot straight into the ground. It was far too deep for animals to even consider, and too small to admit a man. The cave was perfectly protected.

It was beautiful actually. God's artwork. Layers of warped limestone folded and twisted by time itself decorated the interior, and elaborate walls appeared to be hung with draperies fashioned by the shifting of the earth's crust. Ornate pedestals and columns rose from the floor, and huge stone icicles hung from the ceiling. The upward slanting entrance protected the entryway from snowdrifts and high winds in the winter, and would easily keep anyone from stumbling across it, even in the summer. The natural chimney kept the cave breathing and the air circulating nicely, and the interior was a constant fifty-six degrees, making it much warmer than the outside air in winter.

He immediately marked his territory with human scent and moved in. His new home wasn't far from the other cave, so he still had water nearby. It would work. He could make do. The idea pleased him. Here in the mountains, he could be truly self-sufficient. He would never need to rejoin society again, and that suited him just fine.

He set up residence in the deepest chamber of the cave, and it didn't take him long to make it more amenable to human occupation. He figured out a way to build a fire under the natural chimney, although the first few attempts weren't very successful. The heat of the fire shifted the natural breathing of the cave, but he eventually managed to position the fire in such a way that it wouldn't hamper the

airflow.

Over time, he learned how to hunt, how to make bows and arrows, and flint knives. He learned how to use the skins from the animals he killed for blankets to keep him warm. He ate well and gained back the weight he'd lost, and his outdoor activity made him strong, resilient. He was healthier than he'd ever been in his life.

There were no easy routes in this new society, no quick fixes. Hard work taught him never to waste anything. His was not a throwaway world anymore. Whatever he acquired was not easily come by, so he learned to use everything he could, even down to the smallest things, wasting nothing.

For a time he was satisfied with his existence. He had recovered from his gunshot wound. He was strong and healthy, far away from the horror in Washington. But soon he began to grow restless, and he realized that he needed human contact. He bucked it for awhile, but after months of loneliness, he finally packed up his hunting implements and went out into the world to take a look-see. What he found made him wish he'd never left the cave at all. Hell had come to earth, and it dominated mankind.

9

Zach shaped the last bit of wax into a little funnel and fastened it to one end of the tiny shard of flint he had sharpened into a needle-fine point. That done, he went to the opposite side of the chamber and dumped another batch of wax-myrtle berries into a cauldron of water and placed it on the fire, stoking the wood so the berries would begin to boil. He'd been working on his arsenal for days, ever since he had arrived back in the mountains he called home. Thankfully, no one had found the cave in his absence, and he hadn't had to chase any bears away this time. Luck was with him. Everything was going well. No mishaps, no mistakes, no waste of goods. After being in the steamy heat of the Louisiana bayou country, the cave seemed especially cold, but that was a minor nuisance. He would acclimatize rapidly enough.

While the berries cooked, he went back to the shards of flint he'd been working on and tested them to see if the wax was set. The ultra thin funnels had to be handled with extreme care so he wouldn't crush them and have to start over again. In transit, he would carry them in a little wooden box lined with cushions of dried grass to protect them from being damaged. A few packing precautions and a lot of hope might get them safely to their destination.

Satisfied with his progress, he picked up one of the darts and put it inside the tube he'd made from the sugar cane pole. Placing his mouth around the end, he forced a quick gust of air into the tube. The dart was instantly propelled from the makeshift blowgun. It flew across the room with surprising precision and buried the needle-sharp point into the bundle of clothing lying against the far wall.

Happy with the results, Zach put the blowgun aside. It was perfect. And the rest would be just as good. He was too meticulous for anything less.

He worked all day, using his knife to flake small shavings from the bar soap Sara had given him, filling

bottles he'd been collecting with gasoline and whiskey, fashioning rag stoppers, putting together the proper combination of sulfur and saltpeter, making corn starch incendiaries, and carefully working out the precise igniters for each.

He already had a hefty arsenal prepared, throwaway knives stacked in a bundle, ready for use, explosives and incendiaries he had made over the last few days packed and ready to go, and now the last batch of blow-darts were almost finished. Soon his one-man war would begin.

There was only a slim chance he would find the men he was looking for, the men who had raped and infected Serena. She'd told him they'd taken her to Florida, to one of the places they liked to gather. Even if her kidnappers weren't there, the way Zach figured it, any Pirate would do.

He didn't intend to bother with the small-fry. He would start with the main faction. He had a score of his own to settle with them, and Serena's need for retribution was only an excuse to begin. But he had to be careful. These men were dangerous in the way they killed. He would have to see to it that he didn't get caught.

He paused in his task and stared into the blazing fire that was heating the last batch of wax-myrtle berries. He didn't like to think of what could happen to him out there. The Pirates didn't just kill. They maimed first, tortured until a man begged for mercy.

He reached up and fingered the scar on his face. He'd already had one too many run-ins with the Pirates. But this time would be different. *He* was different. He'd been much younger then. Now he was older, stronger, wiser. He wouldn't make the same mistake twice. He didn't even intend to get close enough for any sort of real contact with them.

He wasn't afraid of them—never really had been—and that lack of fear had been what had gotten him injured before. Now he knew how they operated, and he knew how to avoid their traps. They would never even know he was there until it was too late.

He put his knife down and stretched his back. He just wanted to live through this personal war so he could tell Serena she'd been avenged. He wanted her to know there was some justice in this world, even if it consisted of only one man.

He had no idea what time it was. Time didn't exist when one was burrowed down beneath the surface of the earth. There was no telltale shifting of light as the sun went down, only darkness lit by the fire in the corner and the few candles scattered here and there. He was tired. He'd been working for hours without even stopping for food, and his body was protesting the demands. He finished shaping the last little funnel, securely attached it to the flint needle, and then set it aside to dry before standing up and stretching his aching muscles. He was too tired to even bother with a bath or food. It was all he could do to drag himself to the corner where his straw bed lay. He threw himself down on it and embraced the opportunity to allow his body the rest. It felt good. It was nice to be back in the safety of his cave, where he could relax.

As the flames in the fireplace began to slowly die away, he drifted into sleep.

* * *

Sweat dripped off him, sliding down between his shoulder blades and making him want to wriggle in discomfort. He managed to resist the urge despite the intensity of it. He was beginning to wonder if his journey to the Everglades was a fool's errand. For weeks he had traveled on foot, carrying his bundles of supplies, forcing his body into unnatural, often inhuman feats as he pushed himself further, harder,

longer. He ignored the discomfort because he wanted the supplies. He wanted the wiring, the radio, the electronic equipment, and most of all he wanted the generator. Only one faction he knew of could provide him with these things. The Pirates.

He'd been warned not to go—the Pirates were too dangerous—but he hadn't listened. He was stubborn, headstrong. He was desperate. He wanted those goods, and he would stop at nothing to have them.

He played a dangerous game. He had nothing of value to trade for the items he wanted. All he offered was a bluff, and when the Pirates discovered this, that's where the real danger began. He was so sure of himself, so damn arrogant. In retrospect, he'd been a complete and utter fool. How could he have thought these ruthless mercenaries would be so stupid as to fall for it? After all, this wasn't the legal arena he was dealing with. This was not a jury he faced, where he could argue someone else's case and win by sheer brilliance of semantics alone. This wasn't civilized society anymore. But he hadn't learned that yet. He would, though. The Pirates would teach him.

He'd been out in the world, had wandered from his cave, met some people, run into some mishaps along the way, but he hadn't yet become the hardened soldier that time and experience would mold him into. He was still a bit naive about the ways of the new world, the motivations of lust and greed and fear. The ignorance, the shame, the decadence. It had all been there before the plague, before the revolt, lying dormant, but now it was even worse. Chaos was in its heyday. Greed, corruption, misappropriation of power, all had shifted into high gear. Murder, rape, killing sprees, theft. It was sickening.

Another trickle of sweat rolled down his back. He knew the moisture was creating a noticeable stain on his heavy cotton shirt, evidence of his anxiety. High in the mountains, following his shooting, he'd been left alone with only one pair of bloodied slacks and a torn and bloody shirt, and those had soon become useless to him. When he'd come out of his cave to seek humanity, he'd been wearing animal skins. Over the course of time, he had acquired more suitable attire. Black boots, army fatigues, and a bit of an attitude to go with it.

Zach stared across the clearing at a grubby, sweaty Pirate who stared back at him through squinty eyes. Firelight played across the man's face, making the sweat stand out in relief against his mud-smeared skin. Snake, they called him. He sat directly opposite him on a fallen palm log. They were all clustered around a fire, some sitting, some standing. Snake wasn't the head dog of the greater faction, but Zach had gathered from the respect paid him by the other men around the fire that he was some sort of sub-general, or maybe even as low as a captain of some sort.

Despite the fire, mosquitoes swarmed above and beyond, some swooping in for a nip now and then, most of them lighting on Zach. He was the only one who wasn't smeared with mud. Living in the Everglades, the others had learned how to deal with the bothersome pests. Zach had not. Despite the itchy spots they inflicted, he ignored the insects. Disregarding the darkness of the night beyond, his eyes remained steadfastly fixed on the man in front of him, his gaze deliberately focused inside the circle. The swamp seemed like a surreal place, and the sensation was heightened by his own gut feeling that this meeting would not go well for him.

“So, you want something from us?” Snake said, his eyes never leaving Zach's, not even when he reached for the jug of whiskey that sat between his booted feet. For all his swamp-trash look, the man was surprisingly articulate.

Zach shifted uncomfortably on the log and tried to hide what he was feeling, something he'd been well trained in prior to the revolt. Defense attorneys had to be impassive.

“Yes.”

Snake followed his restless movement, his eyes narrowing slightly. He was no fool. Damn, this had been a stupid ploy on Zach's part. Right about now he was wishing he had listened to all those dire warnings to stay away from the Pirates.

"What you ask has a price. A high price. These items aren't easy to come by."

"I happen to know you already have everything I want."

Snake cut him off, his face screwing into a fierce scowl. "Of course, we have stock. But how we acquired these goods..." He shrugged. "As I said before, they were not easy to come by. That alone makes them expensive, not to mention the nature of them. This equipment is rare nowadays."

"I don't expect to get them for nothing."

A round of laughter followed Zach's statement, making him even more uncomfortable.

"You won't," Snake drawled, grinning so that he bared a hideous set of rotting teeth. Judging by his hygiene, he'd been in the swamps too long.

"I can pay."

Frowning, Snake ran a skeptical eye over Zach's attire. "With what? What do you have to give me that would make this trade worth my time?"

"Information. Valuable information," Zach answered.

Snake was beginning to look bored with the game. "What can you tell us that we don't already know? We have factions all over the southeast. We know everything. And what we don't know, we take by force."

"Suit yourself. If you don't want to know, then I won't bother to tell." With a casual shrug, Zach started to rise. Immediately, one of the men who stood over him forcefully pushed him back down onto the log. Zach pretended that it didn't rattle him, and only just managed to maintain an impassive expression. Inside, fear threatened to spill over and turn his hand.

"But I insist," Snake hissed. "I want to know what you have that you think is so great."

"Fuel."

That one word was all Zach needed to say to get the attention of every man there. All eyes were riveted on him now, full of greed. He knew then that he'd placed himself in grave danger. They would do anything to get fuel.

Stupid to come here, he thought.

His bluff could turn deadly. He had no idea where they could get fuel. None whatsoever. *He* couldn't even find fuel, not a large source, anyway. He knew others who had very small sources of their own, carefully guarded sources. Not that he would ever jeopardize his friends by telling these scum anything. Besides, the Pirates wouldn't be interested in such a paltry amount. They would want tons of it. So, where? Where was the fuel? Or where could he say it was?

"Fuel, you say?" Snake finally queried, spitting a thick glob of saliva and mucous near Zach's booted feet.

He tried not to pull away in revulsion. He didn't want the man to know he had any emotions whatsoever. He wanted them to think he was just as ruthless and reckless as they were. He had hoped the fact that he'd been brave enough to penetrate the Pirate's camp in the first place would gain him some respect, but he was beginning to wonder about that now. These men didn't respect anything. They were psychotics who lived to kill. They didn't need an excuse, just a little impetus.

“And where would this fuel be?”

“The goods....” Zach began, but the words were halted when the man standing nearest him bashed a fist into his mouth. His head snapped back in reaction and blood spurted from his mouth and nose. Despite the stinging pain, Zach ignored it, his eyes hooded in anger as he glared hard at the leader.

“That’s not how we do business. First, we investigate. If there’s enough fuel to pay for the price of the goods you want, then we might strike a bargain. After all, this is a business organization, and I am a businessman. Now, where is this fuel?”

“It would take days to even get there...” Zach started to protest.

Snake gave him a condescending smile. Zach marveled at how easily the man switched from anger to something akin to friendliness. “Come with me. Let me show you something.”

Snake stood up and motioned for the others to allow Zach to do the same. Zach got up slowly, not quite trusting them, and followed Snake a short distance from the fire. A dark mound of brush sat on the outer perimeter of the clearing, partially hidden in the middle of a stand of trees. As they drew near, he could see that the brush covered a brown tarp. With a sharp tug, Snake pulled it back and then stood aside to watch Zach’s reaction.

Zach stared in awe at what had been hidden under the tarp. Jesus, they had a Hummer! He hadn’t seen anything like it for years. It was army issue. A small tank in and of itself, not one of those little Jeeps that couldn’t haul a turd. This was a coup, and a damn fine one. No wonder they were so interested in the fuel.

“You see, distance is not a problem for us,” Snake drawled. “So, where did you say this fuel of yours was?”

“Texas.” Zach pulled a region out of the air. It sounded logical enough. After all, everyone knew there was oil in Texas. It just needed to be drilled, that’s all.

Zach saw the fist coming long before it connected, but he didn’t bother to deflect it. Fighting back at this point would only be a mistake. Best to let them think he was stupid, weak. Best to let them think he couldn’t fight, didn’t know how to fight. It would go easier for him that way. Maybe he could buy himself some time.

Coming here had been a big mistake. It wasn’t going nearly as well as he had planned. He’d long since lost control of the negotiations, if he’d ever had any to begin with. He didn’t give a shit about the equipment he wanted. Only one thing was important now. Somehow, he had to find a way to get out of this situation he’d gotten himself into.

Although it wasn’t sufficient enough to fell someone of his size, when the blow came, he deliberately hit the ground. He’d moved his head slightly to absorb some of the shock of the jab, so it hadn’t caused nearly as much damage as the last one had, the one that had bloodied his nose and still hurt like hell. All that kick-boxing he’d taken in college had paid off, teaching him techniques these assholes probably weren’t even aware of. Although he hadn’t had any real opportunity to use it, he hadn’t forgotten it. Right about now he was wishing he was in better shape. He should have been practicing the damn moves all along, but he’d been too busy playing hunter-gatherer.

He would just have to wing it.

“Do you think I’m stupid?” Snake growled.

He came closer and bent down over him so that his mouth was close to Zach’s ear. When he spoke, his stinking breath fanned out against Zach’s face, making his stomach churn.

“No,” he answered. “There’s oil in Texas. Tons of it.”

Snake drew back and kicked him hard in the ribs. His body jerked into a ball, and the breath rushed from his lungs in one forced exhalation, leaving him gasping for air. Zach instinctively grabbed at his side. Damn, he’d heard something crack. Had that been a rib? Jesus, he felt like he had a collapsed lung.

“Crude oil! Not fuel! Not gasoline!” Snake raged.

“Fuel...oil...b-both,” Zach gasped, still clutching his ribs in pain.

“Roll him over,” Snake commanded his goons.

Zach felt hands on him, pulling at him, stretching him out on his back. He didn’t bother to resist. He knew it was useless. He was outnumbered. There was nothing he could do but wait, hope, and pray. Wait for an opportunity. Wait for the men to be caught off guard. Hope they were stupid enough to believe he was weak, that he didn’t have the will to fight, that he would give in to them no matter what they did to him. And pray they didn’t kill him, although he knew that was inevitable.

A man held either wrist in a firm grip, pressing him down, pinning him to the ground. Zach searched wildly for a way out, and found none. All he could do was lie there, helpless to his own imminent death.

Snake pulled a knife from his boot and knelt beside him, leaning down close to his face. “I’m gonna show you what we do to people like you, people who think they can fuck with us. And it’s gonna be a lesson you never forget. I’m gonna let you live, asshole. I want you to be an example to others. I want your face to be a flag to everyone who sees it. Nobody fucks with me!”

Zach felt the blade bite into the flesh at his left temple, felt the tip slice through the skin, felt the pain burning into his brain. His fingers twitched convulsively, and his back seemed to arch up of its own free will as he struggled not to scream in agony as the knife drew a bloody path under his eye and across his nose. The man seemed to be taking great delight in cutting the path nice and slow so Zach would feel every inch of pain. A grunt escaped his throat as the blade slowly slid down his right cheek, finally ending just at the tip of his right ear lobe. He was shaking now from the pain. He could feel the blood dribbling down around to the back of his head, mingling with the dirt below, matting his hair.

“I like that. A man who doesn’t scream,” Snake hissed, taking one dirty hand and smearing the blood all over Zach’s face.

Some of the flesh along the wound tore away, widening the gash along his cheek. Blood got into his eye, blinding him on one side. He blinked rapidly in an attempt to clear his vision, afraid he wouldn’t see what was coming next. His abdomen heaved up and down as he breathed through the pain, but other than a few garbled gasps, he didn’t utter a sound.

“Hey, boss,” the man holding his right wrist said. “Can I have his pinky?”

“Sure, why not?” Snake laughed, a strange, hyena-like sound that rolled through the darkness of the Everglades like the cry of an insane animal.

Zach allowed himself to scream when the man took his finger, the dull blade sawing through flesh and bone, blood spurting out onto the ground in a tiny river. His entire hand throbbed, and his face with it. He began to sweat, the perspiration mingling with the blood on his face, salting his wound and making it sting even more. He tasted blood, his own, and it scared him.

“Take him into the swamps and dump him,” Snake ordered. “If he’s strong, he’ll live. If not, the alligators can finish him off.”

Zach was in a haze of pain as the two men hauled him off the ground and carried him to the Hummer, where they dumped him into the back like a sack of feed. A few seconds later, he heard doors slam. The engine cranked over and then the vehicle began to move. He tried to reposition himself, to take stock of everything around him, but it was difficult. He hurt. His shoulder was pressed hard against something. A fuel tank. It was full. He could hear the liquid sloshing around in it. His brain tried to wrap around the knowledge, make something out of it, something useable, but he had trouble focusing.

His face was on fire, and his ribs hurt worse with every turn of the wheels as the Hummer jostled through the rough terrain. He was glad when they finally stopped. He was in so much pain he could barely move, but he had to try.

They hadn't bothered to tie him up. They obviously didn't see him as a threat. He saw it as his only chance of escape. Maybe he could use their ignorance. If he could catch them by surprise....

Zach jerked when he heard the doors slam again. The sound was a clear signal that he would have company soon. While he still had the chance, he glanced around quickly, trying to get his bearings. They must have driven a few miles. They were far from the camp. It was pitch black out and he could barely see his hand in front of his face, but he knew they were near water. He could hear it slopping around the men's boots as they came around to the back of the Hummer and dragged him out by his feet. Before he could do anything to prevent it, he hit the ground hard. The air wooshed out of him in a big rush, and for a moment he was stunned into immobility. The impact had jarred his cracked rib, sending molten pain through his body. He sucked in several breaths and tried for a moan rather than the scream that threatened to leap from his throat. He wanted them to think he was only half conscious.

Think, dammit, think! Have to think, he inwardly screamed.

The Hummer! It could be his way out of this mudhole. If only he could find a way to overpower these two men. But with a bad rib, a bum finger, and a gaping wound that was half blinding him, the odds weren't all that promising.

His moment came when one of the men paused alongside him to take a piss, some of the liquid splashing up from the ground and wetting Zach's trousers where he lay half in the swamp, half out.

"The alligators are gonna smell that blood, boy, and they're gonna eat you alive," the pisser said.

"I don't envy you," the other man added as he casually leaned against the back of the Hummer.

Like all psychopathic morons, they had decided to torment him a little, perhaps even watch as the alligators tore him to pieces.

"Snake said he'd let you live, but he didn't really mean it. He knew you'd never find your way out of this swamp," the pisser continued. He finished up, put his dick back in his pants, and zipped it in.

Zach didn't bother to answer. He just lay there, hoping he looked weak and puny. Although he was injured, he didn't feel all that weak and puny. He felt angry. There was strength in anger. Strength he intended to take advantage of.

While he lay on the ground, half turned away from the goons, his eyes cut through the darkness, searching, looking for something he could use as a weapon. They had taken his bow from him the moment they encountered him entering their camp, leaving him defenseless. He'd expected that much, but he hadn't been fully prepared for them patting him down and taking his knives, too. Even the most well placed weapons had been found and discarded. All he had left was his wits and a fat load of desperation.

Then he saw it. A stick. Nothing but a fucking stick. But it was sharp on one end, jagged, and it wasn't rotten. It was still green, like it had recently been snapped off from its mother tree. Sturdy enough to

use as a weapon. Now if he could only reach it.

He glanced back at the men. They were occupied, talking about dragging him out farther into the swamps where the alligators would find him quicker. While they were busy making their plans, he seized on the moment. Rolling his body as fast as he could and ignoring the pain in his ribs, he made a grab for the stick and was up on his feet before the men realized what was happening. He thrust the stick through the belly of the one closest to him and, forgetting his bleeding hand for a moment, jabbed a quick right into the second man's face before he could reach for a weapon. Pain sliced through his hand and up his arm, momentarily causing him to go limp with agony. He quickly overcame it when he saw the second man coming at him with a roundhouse of his own. Zach ducked under it and came up with his left hand, thrusting his fist into the man's balls as hard as he could. With a yowl of pain, the man slumped to the ground next to his friend.

Time was precious, and Zach didn't waste a second. Perspiration and blood mingling to drip from his face into his mouth, he jumped into the Hummer and twisted the key in the ignition. The moment the engine fired, he slammed the Hummer into reverse. He didn't even wince as the vehicle plowed over the two bodies lying behind it. He heard a cry of agony and knew some bones had been crushed, but he didn't care. He was beyond that now, motivated only by his desire to survive.

"I guess you didn't get what you bargained for, ay?" he muttered. "Shouldn't have underestimated me. Assholes."

A few hundred yards from the swamp, Zach brought the Hummer to a halt and sat staring into the darkness. He automatically reached for the light switch to turn on the high beams and then thought better of it. Best not to alert the enemy.

Damn! He'd lost his sense of direction. Which way to go? Which fucking way to go? He didn't want to drive straight back to the Pirate camp. Once they saw who was at the wheel, they'd blow him to kingdom come.

North. He had to head north. But which way was north? His head began to reel from the torture he had endured and the blood loss. The sudden exertion had been a little much. *Get a grip, old boy*, he told himself. *God, don't let me pass out. Stay in control. Gotta stay in control.*

* * *

Zach awoke in near total darkness, perspiring despite the chill in the air. For a moment, he was disoriented, but then he realized he was in the cave. The fire had died out, and only a tiny flicker remained from one of the candles in the corner. The nub on his right hand ached, a phantom reminder of when his pinky had been sawed off. He rubbed it as if to ease the pain, then absently reached up to touch the scar on his face. It was still there, and he was still here. Still a part of this freakish society. Still trapped in his cave. He slowly traced the scar, remembering the pain. He could almost taste the blood in his mouth.

He chuckled, a low rumble in his throat that sounded almost like a growl.

"But I got the Hummer," he whispered into the dark. "Fuckers!"

But his encounter had cost him dearly, had cost him his identity. His life hadn't been the same since that night in the swamps. His entire existence was cloaked in secrecy now. Because of his theft, because he had managed to escape the Pirates, he was in constant danger. The scar was a flashing neon sign to anyone who looked at him. Any Pirate who saw it would kill him on the spot.

Hidden just inside the tree line, Zach stood on the outskirts of the clearing near Pete's dilapidated home. Since he wouldn't be taking the Hummer this trip, he had no real need to stop and talk to Pete. Still, he'd paused on his way out of the mountains. Something had made him stop there, maybe some innate need to check on them.

He'd been standing there for a long time, just watching, considering, and remembering. Remembering the years and all that had passed between himself and his friends. There was so much. Pete and Sara were such good friends to him. He knew he should tell them where he was going, at least say goodbye, just in case he never made it back, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. Sara would worry. She would beg him not to go, and her pleas would only make his leaving more difficult. It was hard enough already. So much easier to leave without seeing them, without telling them.

At times like this he wished he'd never come down from the mountains to begin with. He should have forgotten all about humanity and just lived out the rest of his life alone, without all the pressures that interacting with people imposed. People were nothing but a trap. All of them. Some good. Some bad. But always a trap.

Coward, his subconscious whispered to him.

No, not a coward. Just smart. No distractions. Not in wartime. It makes for a better soldier.

Despite his inner convictions, the word still hung over him like an accusing finger. *Coward*.

He was a coward, of a sort. Afraid to show his emotions, to give in to his feelings. To lose himself in the love that someone else offered. Even friendship. Never mind a woman. He hadn't touched a woman since the revolt. It wasn't worth it to him. Too many of them were prostitutes, forced to sell themselves just for the sake of eating. Even if they weren't tainted, he still didn't consider the risk worth the orgasm. They couldn't possibly offer him what he would demand from a relationship, anyway. Love, loyalty, true companionship. Hell, they were nothing more than leeches. Not even a challenge.

He had come to envy what Pete and Sara had. But always there was that struggle inside him. It was always the same. Every issue he faced. He was always weighing the odds, fighting himself, his desires, his needs, his dreams.

Dreams. Did he even have those anymore? Could he even remember a time when he did?

Yes. And the memory made him bitter. For what he had lost, what had been snatched from him. Success. Family. A future. Damn, what would it be like to have a future to look forward to?

He didn't even want to think about it. It wasn't worth the agony, the mental torture. Entertaining any notion of the future would only make him want it, hope for it, reach for it, and what was the use in that? The future he so desperately wanted was unattainable. Impossible. He knew it, and there was nothing he could do to change the fact. He was only one man. Only one man.

Dragging his mind away from the self-affliction, he glanced back at the little house Pete and Sara shared. Considering it was midday, there was a surprising lack of activity in the yard. Were they inside? Making love perhaps? Was Pete smoothing the hair back off her forehead and whispering that he loved her? Or were they sharing a meal together, merely content with the comfortable silence he often noticed between them? Did they talk about the future? Was it easier knowing they had one another?

He didn't know. He'd never asked. Strange how he'd known these people for so long—they'd done so much for one another—yet he didn't know what they were feeling, what they suffered just to get through a day. He only knew that they were good, honest people. Caring people. He knew they cared for him in particular, and he for them. But he had limits to his ability to get close to them, and he had to work within those limits. His face and body hadn't been the only thing scarred in the revolt. His heart and his ability to trust had been damaged too, and that was a scar that could never be healed. Not by anyone.

He stared down at the house, hesitant to leave. Something inside him, something he had lost long ago stirred. Just as it had when he'd put his arms around Serena and offered his comfort. A flicker of something he vaguely remembered from before the revolt, there and gone in an instant.

He took a deep, decisive breath, toying with the notion that danced on the edge of his brain. Perhaps there was one more thing he could do for his friends, to let them know how much he appreciated them. Just one more promise he could keep in the event that he never saw them again. Something that would ease the suffering he might cause if he got himself killed in this venture.

Tadpole.

His mind made up, Zach sank back into the woods and skirted the clearing. Like a phantom, he moved on silent feet, passing on by the house and setting his sights on the few miles that would take him to the tiny shack where Tadpole had set up residence.

Tadpole's shack was empty when he arrived. Damn, he didn't want to have to go into Franklin's. Not like this, loaded down with weapons and bombs, and dragging more behind him. He didn't want anyone to see him like this and start asking questions.

He sighed. It was unfortunate that Tadpole wasn't around. Sara would be disappointed, but he couldn't jeopardize his mission by going in search of the boy. Time was too precious, and he couldn't waste it. He had to move on.

He was on the verge of leaving when someone called his name. The voice distinctly belonged to Tadpole. He swung around just as the boy broke into the clearing. As usual, Tadpole was excited to see him. Zach felt his mouth twist upwards in that sensation that was becoming more and more commonplace of late. A smile. Slight, barely perceptible, but there nonetheless. Much as he pretended to resent the boy hanging around underfoot and trying to tag along behind him everywhere he went, he actually liked it. He could admit that now that he was leaving. It was safe to admit that now.

"What are you doing here, Zach? You don't usually come out so soon," Tadpole called as he drew near.

Zach hitched his pack a little higher on his shoulder, a subconscious signal that he would not be staying. "This is an important occasion."

"What do you mean important?"

Tadpole's expression shifted. The boy had caught the subtle undertone in Zach's voice. He knew something was amiss. Dammit. The kid was too perceptive for his own good. Might as well come clean with it.

"I'm going away for awhile. I don't know how long I'll be gone. I'm not even sure I'll ever come

back.”

Tadpole’s face fell. “What do you mean? ‘Course you’ll be back. Won’t ya?”

Zach knelt down beside him, watching as the boy’s curious gaze studied all the different bundles strapped to his fatigues, and the small travois Zach had propped against the side of the shack, his eyes dark with disapproval.

“Can you keep a secret for me?”

Tadpole met his serious gaze and nodded, but he couldn’t hide the betrayal he was feeling. He was scared. Zach could sense it, roiling off the kid. He understood it. He had been a huge factor in Tadpole’s life, and to have that taken away from him now...

Zach shrugged aside the nip of guilt that came on the heels of the boy’s obvious disappointment. He didn’t need it right now. Any emotion taken with him would only bog him down, possibly even get him killed.

“I have something very important that I have to do. I can’t shirk it. Understand?” he said.

Tadpole nodded, his eyes still searching Zach’s face.

“It’s very dangerous. I could be killed.” No sense in lying to the boy. Best to tell him straight out. Tadpole knew how to deal with straight-talk, and Zach knew the kid would appreciate the truth more than a lie. “That’s what I mean when I say I might not come back.”

Tadpole glanced away from him, considering this for a time. Then he opened his mouth to say something, but Zach stopped him before he could start. He knew what Tad was thinking.

“No, you can’t come with me. It’s too dangerous. You’d only get in the way. If I have to worry about you all the time, I can’t do my job. That would put both of us in danger. I need you to stay here and look after things for me. That way I can leave with a free conscience. I won’t have to worry about Sara and Pete, about you, and if I’m not worrying, I might live longer. Understand?”

It was propaganda, little more than blackmail, pure and simple, but it was worth a try. Maybe it would get the little man to thinking.

“That way you can keep your mind on what you’re doin’,” Tadpole said, understanding.

Damn, but he was wise beyond his years. He didn’t even act like a kid. Never had. Not since Zach had known him.

“Exactly,” Zach answered. He fell silent and studied the ground for a moment, wondering how the hell to broach the subject of Sara, then finally plunged in. “Sara asked about you again.”

Hiding his expression from Zach, Tadpole hung his head and kicked at a clod of dirt with a bare foot. He knew he’d been caught in his lie, and he was obviously ashamed. But Zach couldn’t let it go at that. The boy needed some sort of guidance in his life.

“You could have told me the truth, you know,” he said, letting the boy’s own shame be his correction.

Tadpole didn’t say anything, just stood there, his head down, his eyes fixed firmly on his toes. Finally, he gave in with, “Sorry, Zach.” But he still wouldn’t look up and meet his gaze.

“Just don’t let it happen again. Pete and Sara are good people. They deserve better.”

Tadpole kept his chin tucked into his chest, and still wouldn’t look at Zach.

“Is it so terrible, the idea of living with them?”

“That’s not what’s bad.”

“Then what?” Zach felt like he’d lost the battle already, again, and it was damn frustrating.

The boy just stood there for the longest time, not saying anything, not offering any explanation.

Zach took him by the shoulders in earnest. “Tadpole, do you understand that you may never see me again?”

That got his attention. His head came up, and he looked him square in the eye. What Zach saw there made him uncomfortable. It was fear. Fear in that little boy’s eyes. Pure vulnerability. Zach understood it all too well. The fear was something he’d never quite been able to escape himself. It seemed to hang over all of humanity these days.

“Tell me why you won’t go live with Pete and Sara,” Zach demanded, gripping Tad’s little arms a bit harder than he had intended to. It was the frustration. He had hoped to convince Tadpole, for all of them, but mostly for Sara, and to assuage his own damn guilt. But Tadpole was as stubborn as they come, and he wasn’t budging an inch.

Tadpole didn’t answer, just stared back at him. Zach let his hands fall away from the boy’s shoulders and stood up, turning his back as if to leave.

“Wait!”

Zach hesitated.

“I’m afraid.... I’m afraid if I go to live with them, I’ll get all soft and I’ll forget how to take care of myself.”

Zach went back down on his knees in front of the boy, reached out and took the kid’s shoulders, shook him a little, as if the action would help him get his point across. “You never forget, Tadpole. You never forget.”

Tadpole didn’t say anything. He just flung his thin little arms around Zach’s neck and squeezed hard. Zach felt his heart sink down into his stomach. They both knew that what passed between them was so much more than just a conversation. It was their way of saying goodbye, the only way they knew how. Their way of expressing that they cared for one another.

Then Tadpole was pushing away, as if embarrassed by the sudden display of affection—what he would call weakness. Zach understood. After a time, he stood up, preparing to leave, his expression closed, devoid of all emotion.

“Just think about it. Think about all the good you could do them. Think about how it would help me. I wouldn’t have to worry about them so much.” The blackmail again. What he really meant to say was that Tadpole’s presence would make Sara happy, and Zach wouldn’t have to worry about the kid so much. “And Pete could teach you a lot of things about farming.”

Tadpole nodded silently, absently scraping the back of his hand under a nose that had gone wet.

“You’re always saying you want to be like me, you want to help people,” Zach reminded him. “Well, a good place to start is with Pete and Sara. They could use your help around the farm.”

Tadpole didn’t say anything. He seemed terribly interested in the ground between them, was in fact studying it rather thoroughly, as if his life depended on doing so.

“Think about it,” Zach said, reaching for his travois, preparing to go. In just seconds, he would be leaving the boy behind, possibly forever. Oddly, it made him feel weak inside.

“Zach?”

He paused, his back to the boy.

“Do you have to go?”

Zach took a deep, stabilizing breath and nodded, but he didn't turn around. He didn't want Tad to see the emotion on his face, didn't want the kid to know how much he was going to miss him, how hard it was to leave him behind.

“Come back. Promise me you'll come back.”

Zach could hear the pleading in his voice, the desperation.

“I'll try, Tadpole.”

Without another glance, he started walking away. He couldn't stay a moment longer. If he did, he might never leave. This was his home. These people were his family, and it was becoming increasingly harder to leave them. And, just like Tadpole, that was a threat to him. Being tied to someone was a threat to his very existence. It was a frightening thought. He had carved an identity for himself by sheer determination and will alone, had carved a way of life, and he couldn't afford to have that disrupted. Perhaps this personal war of his would turn out to be a good thing in more ways than one. Perhaps he needed it, needed this long journey that would keep him away from here. Maybe it would remind him of who he was, of what he had become, and that he couldn't afford to love anyone.

Zach's journey was a long one. He traveled for days, weeks, hunting for his food with his bow and arrows, and lugging his burden of weapons along with him. He spent night after night sleeping on the cold, hard ground, his muscles weary and aching. Nights of dreaming, of remembering. Images of death, plague, and blood floated through his subconscious as he slept. Nights of cold sweats and waking up to fear and disorientation, then remembering where he was and what he was doing there and having to abandon the idea of any more rest to continue the journey until he was staggering from fatigue, only to start the cycle all over again.

His dreams were vivid with the memory of his mother, her body falling against him, lifeless. Her blood running over him, out into the street, flowing to meet and mingle with the blood of others, innocent people. So many innocent victims. Bloated bodies lying all around, and him stepping over them, around them, wading through them.

Why? He always awakened to that silent scream dying away in his head, and always there was no answer, only the dark staring back at him, taunting, challenging, as angry as he was.

He was a tormented man, alone in his mission. He ate alone, he slept alone, and he would fight alone. Those people he trusted enough to help him, he valued enough to protect, and he would not ask them to risk their lives for a fight that was solely his. He had no one to lean on. He could only rely on himself. He was alone in every sense of the word.

There were still people out there. People wanting, needing. People in despair, people waiting to take, to plunder and ravage, to rape, to kill. The timid, the weak, the lame, the sick, the dying. The confused, the worried, the scared. The strong, the angry, the fighters. The leeches, the parasites. The thieves, the killers. Still the same assortment. Only, now the bad guys seemed to be winning more than ever, taking control, taking over. Odd how one could feel so helpless, so alone amongst so many who felt the same way. He wished he could disassociate himself from it, but he couldn't.

People. He despised them. He loved them. He yearned to be indifferent to them. It would be so much better for him, such unimaginable freedom, were he to attain that indifference. But he knew he never would. Never could. It wasn't a part of him, had never been a part of him. Much as he might try to change it, that was the one constant. He still hoped. Perhaps foolishly, but it was there all the same.

Several days into his journey southward, he encountered a band of miscreants he would rather have not

run across at all. They complicated his mission. They were few, but what they represented stretched all across the country. A group of Hunters, only five of them, and they had apparently been working with deadly precision.

They were clustered in a small clearing, so intent on what they were doing that they had no idea he was watching them from the woods. When Zach found them, they were in the act of hanging a woman, her body twitching convulsively as the last shreds of life drained from it. Hanging was one of their preferred methods of disposal. It was a relatively clean kill, a way of killing that assured they wouldn't be tainted, but it was nonetheless inhumane.

A pile of bodies lay off to one side, all of them children, four or five of them. They'd been tortured, burned alive, another sick practice the Hunters had adopted for the purpose of disposing with plague-infected people. The sight enraged him. He wanted to kill them for their ignorance, for their hate, their unjustified actions, and their paranoid fear. He wanted to charge into the clearing and battle each one with his bare hands, choke the life out of them one by one, but he controlled the desire, forced himself to remain calm. He couldn't get involved. It was too risky. It wasn't a part of his war.

While he looked on, one man went to the pile of bodies and, unzipping his trousers, proceeded to piss all over them. One of the others laughed when he saw what his friend was doing. Zach's temper flared. He wouldn't be able to ignore this. It wasn't right, what they were doing. Dammit, the children didn't deserve to die this way, tortured, brutalized, hated.

The other men were talking amongst themselves as they lowered the woman from the tree. They wore heavy gloves that appeared to be made from some sort of homemade rubber, presumably an attempt to keep the men free of the taint they assumed was on her. Once she was out of the tree, they dumped her on top of the stack of dead children.

"Fuckers should've stopped screwing everyone, should've stopped spreading the damn disease," one griped.

"If they had, our country wouldn't be in such a state now," another commiserated.

"The government should've quarantined earlier."

"Quit yer blabbering and let's get to work. We have another group to finish off before daylight's through," the leader interjected.

Christ, they were talking about killing more!

Zach glanced back at the charred remains of those children who had never known anything but an unforgiving world, the wood beneath the bodies, stacked to burn, to incinerate the flesh of the victims, and the virus with them. He looked back at the assholes responsible. Anger burned inside him, slow and steady, but lethal all the same.

He was tired of living in this putrid, hate-filled world. Tired of running. Tired of the fear. Tired of the plague. Tired of the indifference, the sacrifice, the days and nights of hunger. Tired of the people, the attitude, the apathy. He was sick to death of all of it. Something, somewhere, sometime had to change.

Maybe he should do something about these guys after all. He could give them a light show they would never forget. All it took was a little planning and a big dose of surprise.

He watched them carefully, calculating the possibilities. The stupid fuckers didn't even know he was there, so close he could have reached out and thrust a knife into the chest of the nearest one. He was a master at camouflage, at staying perfectly still for long periods of time, accustomed to being completely silent. He'd had a hard teacher: experience. These men weren't nearly as expert in survival. He could tell by their actions, by the way they talked so loudly, and their disregard for the woods

around them. But then, they didn't really need to exercise caution. They had no real enemies. Most people feared them, didn't even bother to fight back. The Hunters were at the top of the food chain, so to speak.

Zach made a careful assessment of the group. Five men. A quick check of his weapons assured him that he could take them all out with only one item from his bundles, but he would have to be careful. He would have to calculate his timing to perfection. So much depended on the men themselves, on what their next move would be. If he could catch them all around the fire, just when they were lighting it, then he could get away with it. They would be unaware, off guard, without weapons.

Like a gift from the cosmos, his moment came a second later. The perfect lineup. He acted quickly, yanking one of the hand-fashioned grenades from his bundle and taking careful aim. He didn't need to worry about an igniter. The fire would take care of that for him. Only one problem remained. If it didn't explode on impact, he was risking his life. There was no way of telling now.

There was no time to waste. He had to act before they moved out of position.

All five of the men were standing around the fire, waiting to make sure the victims burned completely before they took their leave of the place. The leader bent down and lit the edge of the wood. The small spark caught onto the flammable they had used, and the entire pile went up in a hot burst. Zach timed it well and threw his explosive at the precise moment of combustion.

The men never saw their demise coming. The grenade landed square in the middle of the pile, exploding instantly as the flame touched the exposed igniter. Caught unaware, the men were thrown to the ground. In just seconds, it was over and the ground was littered with gore. Torsos with limbs missing, gaping holes in their abdomens. Faces burned down to flesh and bone in an instant. Dead. All of them. It was almost too easy.

Without even bothering to look twice, Zach stood up and skirted the clearing, his feet already programmed to their original course, heading south, his mouth set in that grim line so familiar to him.

He didn't take any pleasure in annihilating those men. It was just something that needed doing. Justice. Hard, maybe even a little difficult, but it was justice all the same.

He wondered at how hardened he had become. Killing them hadn't touched him, affected him in any way. He'd just done it because he seemed to be the only one willing to take on the responsibility. Maybe that didn't make him any better than them, but he wasn't going to sit by and watch it happen anymore. No more.

It took weeks to find the enemy, weeks of travel by foot, by hook, or by crook. He spent days prowling through different locales, observing everything that went on, watching and listening and waiting. He visited dives he'd never thought he would have to step foot inside, ever vigilant for any information he could use. Under the guise of a quiet drunk, he watched everything, waiting for the right word, the right

rumor. No one paid much attention to him. When he wasn't being low-key, he was friendly, buying a round or two of drinks for anyone who was willing to talk, the most awful, rot-gut whiskey he'd ever had the misfortune to slug back. He never asked questions, never pressured anyone. That would have been a mistake. He was in Pirate territory now, mid-Florida, sunny and warm, and anyone who had ears would gladly sell him to the Pirates for another sip of bad booze. Just one wrong move, a simple indication that he was looking for the Pirate's lair, and he'd be history.

In a crowded, randy bar facing a muddy river that had once been known as the Blackwater, Zach began to hear bits and pieces of information. The sort of thing he'd been waiting for. Despite the danger, he decided to stick around for a day or two. He hoped to learn more before his anonymity wore off. But any more than two days could be risky. He didn't want to become too familiar to these people. They might start talking around and inadvertently say the wrong thing to the wrong person. He was so near, too near to fuck it up now, and he was painfully aware that anything could go wrong.

And it almost did.

A woman was the cause of the commotion, a damn fine looking woman. She was tall, almost reaching his shoulder, which was tall for a woman, and she had long hair, an explosion of color that reminded him of the reds and browns of autumn leaves, burnished like bronze. She had a pert little nose that looked a little unusual over a wide mouth, with full, rosy lips, and blue eyes that could cut through iron. She was the feistiest bitch he'd ever laid eyes on.

He'd spent the better part of the night copping a rather nauseous buzz with a few scumbags he'd been carefully picking for information. He'd discovered that as long as the booze was flowing they were more than willing to gab, and without much prompting from an outsider. They were stupid as hell, which made them especially dangerous to any man who wanted to keep a low profile. He only hoped they'd be too drunk to remember his face, or the fact that he had ever been there at all. Toward that end, he'd made certain to keep them well supplied with whiskey.

He was just leaving the bar when he made the acquaintance of the vixen. A few wobbly yards away from the shack, through a whiskey induced bout of tinnitus, he heard a ruckus in progress and couldn't seem to keep from following the sound. It was such a slight sound, just a little scuffling noise really. Something most people would have ignored. But not Zach. It held the promise of a fight in progress, and, despite the warning bell in his head telling him any interaction could threaten his anonymity, he was feeling a little on the brawling side and wasn't about to back away from a few good cracks at a jaw, anyone's jaw. Maybe it would relieve a little tension.

When he rounded the small building and took a good gander at what was taking place behind it, he paused to stand and gawk in surprise. There she was, red hair streaming like polished copper under the light of the half moon. She wasn't alone. Two men were with her. Two characters that looked like they'd crawled up out of a sewer somewhere. Their intentions were crystal clear, and it was equally clear that she wasn't willing.

The men were so intent on their quarry, the girl so intent on her attackers, that none of them were aware of Zach's sudden presence. He didn't bother to make himself known. He wanted a moment to observe, to determine if he should bother to get involved.

One of the creeps had the woman by the arms and was trying to pull them behind her to hold her still. She fought his grip, kicking out at the other man, who was standing in front of her trying to grab her legs. They obviously intended to carry her off into the shadows somewhere. She was making a respectable effort at warding them off, but Zach could see she was getting tired. Judging by all the scuffmarks in the dirt at the threesome's feet, the struggle had been in progress for awhile.

Zach looked on with open interest. He found it a little inspiring actually. The woman was no dummy.

She fought in complete silence when most women would have been screaming like a stuck pig from the word go. But not this one. She was too smart for that. She obviously realized screaming would only attract attention, and any kind of attention in this particular area was dangerous.

He was as intrigued as he was perplexed. What the hell was she doing in a rugged place like this? She didn't fit. She looked too...polished, almost educated. She was a spitfire, determination glinting in her eyes as she opposed the two thugs. The determination intrigued him. That was something he hadn't seen in a long time.

Zach was still a little stupefied by the alcohol, but when he realized one of the men had spotted him, a burst of adrenaline brought him back into focus, made him razor sharp again. The man's curious gaze instantly put an end to Zach's neutral observations.

"If you've come to join us, you'll just have to be satisfied with third place," one of the men called over to him. "Joey here is first, and I'm not about to take last call. But if'n yer wantin' some snatch, you could give us a hand."

"Don't mind if I do," Zach said, sauntering a little closer.

The woman was still struggling to free herself from the putrid slug that held her arms. Zach drew up beside her just as she was managing to loosen one hand, and was blind-sided by a surprisingly sound cuff to the jaw, which jarred an unpleasant tasting belch loose from a stomach that had been vehemently protesting his choice in liquor. When he recovered from the recoil, he turned back to look at her, his eyes narrowed in anger. He'd been told once that the blue of his eyes became so brilliant in anger that it would scare the evil out of Lucifer. Apparently, she was not immune. She took one look at his expression and shrank away, seeming to prefer taking her chances with the slug rather than brave someone as scarred and fierce-looking as Zach. Still, she couldn't seem to take her eyes from him.

Zach flinched inwardly when her gaze drifted across his face, following every inch of the scar he so despised. Once, she would have been attracted to him, but now... She was probably repulsed at the sight of him. Her lingering gaze only fueled his anger. He didn't like the reminder of what he'd lost, his face, his charm, the promise of women who would have loved to capture his attention.

"Hey, bud! You gonna help, or you just gonna stand there and watch?" the slug bellered.

The woman responded by kicking one booted foot out behind her and catching the scumbag on the shin. Before the slug even had a chance to react, a knife appeared in her hand, and she whipped around, slicing a wide arc through the air and bearing down on his chest with the blade. The man's friend saw it coming and moved quickly, knocking the knife out of her hand with one balled fist. She bit off a yelp of pain and swung away from them, even more afraid now that she'd lost her weapon. But it had been an impressive, brave effort on her part, and despite her uncivilized blow to his jaw, Zach decided it was time to lend his efforts to the fight.

In the next instant, both men were on their knees, grasping at their chests as blood seeped around the throwaways imbedded there. Shock registered in their faces and gurgling sounds bubbled from their throats. Zach paid no heed to them. They shouldn't have been stupid enough to trust him. His eyes were on the girl. But she wasn't actually a girl, was she? She was a woman. A real woman. A beautiful, *clean* woman. Something he hadn't seen in years.

Her mouth was slack with fear, her eyes wary as she watched him. He could almost read her mind. She was afraid she would be his next victim. He could see it in her eyes, in the way she backed away from him. Out of his peripheral vision, he took note of the fact that she was searching the ground with her booted feet as she eased away, obviously hoping she would find her knife lying somewhere in the dirt. He almost smiled at that. As if she could do any damage with it. She hadn't even been successful with

the two duds who were dying beside her. How could she hope to fell Zach, a man who had planted two knives in two separate men before anyone had even realized what he was doing?

“Looking for this?” he queried, casually bending down and retrieving the knife, although he wasn’t stupid enough to take his eyes off her for a second. She was a hellion, desperate, apt to do anything, and therefore a potential danger.

She glanced nervously at the knife, still backing away, then drew in a sharp gasp of alarm when her back suddenly butted up against the side of the building. She jerked her head to the left, then the right, seeking an escape, but there was none. Having followed her step for step, Zach was already too close, standing mere inches from her. Her breasts nearly brushed against his chest as they rose and fell with each labored breath she took. She whimpered. The sound captivated him, and his gaze automatically fell to her lips. As if in reaction to the shift in his attention, the tip of her tongue snaked out of her rosebud mouth and moistened the luscious petals, causing him to smile. She probably didn’t even realize she’d done it, but the gesture was telling. This was all very intriguing. He was enjoying himself, but not enough to let his guard down.

“Do you work for the Pirates?” he demanded.

Her eyes flew back to his face, pausing briefly on the scar. She stared at him, unable to mask the apprehension in her eyes. She was afraid to answer the question.

“You can tell me, or you can die,” he offered, twisting her own knife around in his hand so the moonlight flashed off the shiny blade. Damn, but she must have put a spit-shine on the thing. Maybe she wasn’t so smart after all. Everyone knew to dull their blades so no light glanced off the metal. A shiny blade was like a beacon, giving one’s opponent a clear warning flash right before the blow, which always gave them the opportunity to deflect it.

“Y-yes,” she managed to whisper.

Zach’s eyes narrowed as he stared at her, noticing the sheen of perspiration along her upper lip and along her brow bone. Such an exquisite face. How had she survived so long? She couldn’t possibly be alone. She was far too beautiful. The Pirates, or someone, would have gotten to her before now, and they wouldn’t have left her intact for long.

“You’re lying,” he said, deliberately matching her whisper.

She started to shake her head, but he reached out and took her firmly by the chin, stopping the action.

“The truth, or die,” he reiterated, his tone casual.

She seemed to draw courage from some inner source because her voice was much steadier when she replied, “You don’t mean it.”

“The hell I don’t,” he growled, pressing the knife to her throat until she let out a little squeak of protest.

“N-no! No. I’m not working with the Pirates,” she croaked out, pressing her body as far back away from him as the wall behind her would allow, her cheeks suddenly pale. “I s-swear.”

He released her. For a moment, she looked as though she might buckle and faint at his feet, but she managed to keep herself upright.

“What are you going to do to me.” She sounded weary now, as if she were resigned to her fate.

“Nothing.” He shrugged, then glanced at the two men who were slumped on the ground behind him. Both were dead now, their sightless eyes gaping into a distance neither of them could comprehend.

“Then why did you help me?”

“You seemed to need it,” he quipped.

“I thought you w-were....”

When she couldn't seem to say the words, he finished for her. “I know what you thought.”

“What about those two?” She glanced at the men who had attacked her and then glanced away. It was a gruesome sight for a woman.

“They'll be all right where they are.”

“Shouldn't we hide them or something?”

“We?” One jet-black brow went up, and he stared at her questioningly.

“Wouldn't it be safer?”

“Safer?”

“Look, I don't know who you are, or where you came from, and I'm grateful for your help...but my brother always told me—”

“Your brother?” he interrupted. So, that's how she'd managed to escape society for so long. She had help.

“Yes. My brother.”

Zach almost smiled at the defiant tilt to her chin, and only just managed not to. “What was it that your brother always told you?”

Her eyebrows came together in a frown. “He always told me to cover my tracks.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes, it is. And I happen to think it's very good advice.”

Zach glanced at the two dead men at his feet. “I think the best advice under the circumstances is for both of us to get the hell out of here as fast as possible.”

“But....” she started to protest.

“Look,” he growled, glaring at her. “If you want to touch these two plague-infested rodents—apparently, your brother didn't teach you much about the plague—you're welcome to it. But I don't care to handle them. And I happen to know that no one gives two shits about these vermin. No one will even miss them. Will you?”

She blinked a few times, taken aback by his harsh words and bitter tone. Before she could answer, Zach turned away. Arguing with the woman was pure foolishness. He shouldn't have lingered so long. But the woman intrigued him, and it had been a long time since a woman had gotten his attention. So damn long.

His interest angered him. He'd never put himself at such risk over something so ridiculous, and he hated to think he'd discovered a weakness, a flaw in his character. He'd thought he wasn't like other men, willing to risk anything for a quick lay. Not that getting laid was his intent. To the contrary. There was just something about her, and his reaction to the vixen disturbed him. He'd thought himself stronger than that.

“I did my part,” he said over his shoulder as he melted into the darkness of the surrounding forest.

“Wait,” she called. “Let me go with you.”

Zach heard her, but he didn't bother to stop. He had no intention of obliging her. He didn't need the

added burden of a helpless female tagging along behind him. Besides which, she had her brother. Let him take care of her.

* * *

Miles away from the seedy little bar, Zach made his camp in the safety of a dense forest. It had been two nights since he'd left the bar, and the woman. He hadn't allowed himself to slow down for very long. There was too much risk involved. He had to assume that at least one of the drunks he'd cultivated would remember his scarred face. They might start to talk, to wonder where their gravy train had gone. He'd been a free booze ticket for a few nights, and they would miss the drinks, so he'd put as much distance between himself and the bar as he could.

His camp was little more than a stopping point. He didn't even light a fire. He just hid his weapons in some brush nearby and propped himself against a tree for a light sleep. Like always, it didn't take long for trouble to find him.

He jerked awake in the middle of the night to the sound of a twig snapping. Anyone else wouldn't have caught the noise, but he was so accustomed to being alert, to hearing the least little break in the normal pattern of the forest around him that he was instantly on guard. He was about to open his eyes a slight crack to assess the situation when he felt a cold blade being pressed to his throat. He froze, waiting. He'd been in so many dangerous situations that this surprise visit didn't even get his adrenaline up. He just lay there with his eyes closed, his mind quickly formulating a strategy. But all his plans crashed into oblivion when he heard a familiar female voice crooning in his ear.

"I just didn't want you to think you could best me," she whispered.

"I'm not impressed," he answered, his eyes still closed. He could tell by the lightness of the pressure of the knife against his throat that she wasn't serious. "Your brother should have taught you the finer art of bluffing."

In a move so quick and unexpected that it couldn't be anticipated, he flipped her backwards onto the ground. The knife flew from her hand, rose through the air in a graceful arc, and landed harmlessly point-down in the ground a few yards away. Zach frowned. She had dropped the damn thing. She hadn't had a tight enough grip on the handle. Her brother should have taught her better than that.

Before she could get up, Zach was on top of her, his muscular thighs straddling her mid-section, and a hand on either delicate wrist as he pinned her to the ground. Surprising how fragile those little bones felt beneath the pressure of his strong fingers. He could crush them on a whim. The way his body was reacting to her, he felt like doing just that, if only to relieve the anger and the frustration his reaction caused.

She didn't bother to fight him. She knew she didn't have a prayer of escaping his powerful grip. She wasn't nearly strong enough to buck him off, anyway. Not nearly. He wasn't even sure he wanted her to. It felt good resting there, feeling the warmth of her body inching up his thighs like a caress, something he was trying desperately to ignore.

"You're playing a dangerous game," he warned. He knew his eyes held that lethal glint so unique to them because she was staring wide-eyed at him through the moon drenched night. "Someone as vulnerable as you shouldn't be sneaking up on a guy like me."

"So, I did succeed in taking you by surprise," she purred, smiling with satisfaction.

"Not hardly. I heard you coming from a mile away."

“Then why didn’t you stop me before I got so close?”

Zach gave a snort of disgust and released her wrists, easing his weight off her but never lowering his guard as he knelt a few feet away, between her and the discarded knife. He watched her closely. He still didn’t trust her. The mysteriousness of her presence here in the middle of the forest had not escaped him. There could be more to it than just a contest of wills.

“Admit it. I got the best of you. My brother taught me well, don’t you think?” She was still lying on the ground where he’d left her, seemingly in no hurry to get up.

“Not nearly well enough,” Zach grumbled, glaring at her in resentment. He wasn’t about to admit she was quieter than most night creatures, that she did have a rather uncanny talent. “If he had taught you so well, you would know that pulling a stunt like the one you just attempted could have ended your worthless life in a second. If I were a man who was easily frightened, your head would be sagging from your scrawny little neck right now.”

She was sitting up now, staring back at him as she absently brushed the dirt off her jeans, jeans that he suddenly realized were worn and ragged. She wasn’t as well off as he had assumed. In fact, she looked a little down on her luck, like most everyone nowadays. Still, despite her worn attire, she didn’t belong in this forest, didn’t belong in this era. She looked like she belonged in some senator’s drawing room, serving tea to her committee. She had class, loads of it. She was out of place here, out of her element, but somehow she’d learned to adapt. To a degree, anyway.

“Looks like we’re traveling in the same direction,” she commented, as if to break the uncomfortable silence that had lengthened between them.

He didn’t reply. He just sat there staring at her. He’d suddenly been taken captive by the sight of her, suddenly noticing how her blouse was a little too tight across her chest, how her breasts strained against the fabric. Damn, she had a nice swell.

Angry with himself for becoming so fixated on her breasts, he glanced away. For the first time in eons he began to feel the stirrings of desire, white hot in his loins. He was hard as a rock, but there wasn’t a damn thing he could do about it. He hadn’t touched a woman in years, and he wasn’t about to start now. He couldn’t trust it. He was a loner. He wasn’t interested in disrupting his life by taking up with a woman. Not even someone who looked as delectable as she did. Besides, he wasn’t sure she didn’t have the plague.

She’d certainly jumbled things for him. It wouldn’t be easy to get her out of his mind. He would never be able to forget the way she looked sitting there, her red hair streaming down her back, her breasts straining at a shirt made of a fabric that was far too thin. No damn wonder those men had been trying to rape her. She looked entirely too desirable.

“Traveling in the same direction, ay? What makes you say that?” he muttered, his brows pulled down in a fierce scowl. He was hoping he could intimidate her, but it didn’t seem to be working. For some insane reason she trusted him, probably because he had saved her life. Maybe he shouldn’t have bothered. Then he wouldn’t be faced with this new problem, his friggin’ libido.

She shrugged. “Just a hunch.”

His eyes narrowed in suspicion. How did he know she was telling the truth? How did he know she hadn’t been following him?

“So, what do you want with the Pirates?” she asked.

“Who said I want anything with them?” His eyes were riveted on her face now, searching, piercing through to her soul, trying to figure out what had clued her in.

“Last night, when you helped me, you asked if I worked for them,” she reminded him.

“So I did,” he quipped. She was too damn smart for her own good, and it was beginning to wear on his nerves. “But that doesn’t mean I’m looking for them.”

“I figured either one of two things. You’re looking to join the ranks, or you’re settling a score.” She paused for effect. “If you were looking to join their ranks, you wouldn’t have helped me the way you did. Pirates ravage and kill. They don’t help people. That can only mean you’re looking to settle a score, and I figure that scar on your face is one of the reasons. Am I right?”

“You’d do well to stay out of my business,” he answered, his voice a lethal whisper. “If you get in my way, I might just slit your throat.”

Her eyes widened, a hint of fear returning to them.

“I’ve killed my fair share,” he finished, standing up to knock a few clinging leaves from his fatigues.

She stood up with him but maintained a safe distance. Her gaze found the knife that was still stuck in the ground not far away. Knowing she wasn’t a threat, Zach ignored the blade, just stood there staring at her. She seemed unsure of herself now, maybe even a little sad. He thought he detected tears glittering in her eyes. His jaw clamped down tight as he set his heart against them. A weepy female was the last thing he needed right now.

“Y-you helped me once.”

“Lady, I don’t know why you think I’m so wonderful, why you think I’ll help you, but I strongly suggest you forget whatever it is that brain of yours is hatching. I help no one but myself, understand?”

She silently met his gaze, and the look of vulnerability in her eyes almost choked him. Still, he was determined not to take the bait. He knew all about women and their wily ways.

“Beat it,” he growled. “Before Mr. Nice Guy changes his image.”

She stubbornly made no move to leave.

“I said beat it,” he warned, taking a menacing step toward her. “And take your knife with you.”

Obviously afraid he would do what he threatened, she gave him one final glance of apprehension and then darted for her knife. He didn’t make any move to stop her. Once the weapon was in her hands, she whirled on her heels and fled into the woods before he had a chance to say anything more. He thought he heard a sob tear from her throat as she crashed through the underbrush, and he had to fight the urge to go after her. Dammit, he couldn’t feel sorry for her. Not now. Whatever trouble she was in, she would have to handle it alone.

He didn’t try to sleep again that night. He knew she would be lurking nearby, hiding somewhere, probably afraid. Afraid of him, the woods, her plight, and her future. He could feel it whispering along on the breeze, wrapping its selfish tentacles around his brain, his heart, feeling its way into his psyche. He resented it, but there was nothing he could do about it. Nothing he could do but move on, get his equipment and head out. She had complicated things for him. He would have to be especially careful now. He didn’t want her to follow him. And he knew she might try. She was a crafty little thing, bent on trouble for sure.

Zach's foray into civilization had been a dangerous element to his mission, but one well worth the risk. He managed to obtain valuable information. As it turned out, Pirates liked to brag about their exploits, and he came face to face with one of the men who'd been directly involved in Serena's kidnapping. Luck was with him. He spent weeks learning of the man's whereabouts, weeks of wooing drunkards and cutthroats and thieves, and his efforts led him straight to the enemy's camp.

The travois had long since been discarded, left by the wayside miles back so it wouldn't present a problem. He didn't need anyone stumbling across it in the woods and going in search of the owner. When he arrived at his destination, he strategically hid his weapons in the trees, being careful to spread them out over a wide territory so that if one cache was discovered he would still have the others, although he did not anticipate the discovery of his stock. He hid them so well that *he* might even have difficulty relocating them.

He watched the Pirate camp for three days. Three days he stayed hidden in the surrounding woods. He spent his nights dozing in the trees, in a constant state of awareness. During every waking hour, he studied the enemy's every move. They had habits, and he intended to know every one of them. Where they ate. Where they slept. He surveyed every building, every square inch of the encampment and the surrounding woods, calculating and planning, and carefully mapping out his strategy. Until he knew how many men he had to deal with, what their quirks were, who were the most dangerous opponents, and where to strike the hardest.

Zach was intrigued to discover his old opponent among the men, the man who had gouged the scar into his face. Not surprising, considering this was the Florida arm of the Pirates. Ole Snake had apparently moved up in the world and had earned himself a larger faction to ride herd over. Zach was pleased. Not only would he be taking out one of the more important strongholds of the Pirate league but he would have the pleasure of exacting a little justice for himself, too. This almost called for a celebration, maybe a celebration with lots of fireworks.

He made his move on the fourth night, the promise of revenge making his blood run hot and true, for Serena and for himself. There wasn't a scrap of fear in him, nor a smidgen of doubt. Victory flowed in his blood, making him keen, alert, invincible. He couldn't lose.

While most of the men were sitting around a huge bonfire on the other side of the clearing, eating, drinking, and acting like psychotic mercenaries, Zach sneaked into camp and set up his incendiaries, right under their noses. The arrogant bastards. He dodged in and out of shadows, between buildings, and in some cases nearly brushed shoulders with the enemy. His task was risky but necessary if he was to succeed.

Once, he was almost caught when a man stumbled out of a building he'd thought was vacant. Zach was in the process of setting an explosive under the porch when the man stepped outside, walked to the railing, and lit a cigarette. Zach froze, his eyes riveted on the man while his fingers continued to secure the explosive. He wasn't willing to stop now. He didn't want to be this close to danger without having something to show for it, and he refused to leave the explosive behind, inert, unusable. His stock was too precious and too few. He needed to make every weapon count.

The man must have heard the slight clicking noise as Zach set the bomb in place because he suddenly turned his head and peered into the darkness beyond the building. Zach held his breath and closed his

eyes to keep the man from seeing the whites, hoping his fatigues and the grime he'd smeared on his face would blend into the night, making him invisible.

He counted to ten, his ears straining to hear any little noise that might alert him to the enemy's moves. The night sounds of the south, Florida frog-song and the chirp of cicadas all around him seemed amplified by the tension, the strain of waiting to be caught, punctuated by his own thudding heartbeat. He heard the scuffing of boots against wood, smelled the acrid scent of homegrown smokes, tasted the tangy bitterness of his own fear salting his throat.

Nothing happened.

He eased his eyes open a crack. The man was still standing on the porch, cigarette in hand, looking the other way.

On hands and knees, Zach moved backwards until the man turned to peer in his direction again. Zach froze, forced himself to remain calm, his eyes riveted on the Pirate. The slimeball had been leaning against the railing, but now he stood up a little straighter, stomped one booted foot against the porch and then started down the stairs. Zach waited for the worst to happen, watching, his fingers inching toward the throwaway in his boot as his eyes followed the man out to the edge of the woods. He obviously planned to do a little sweep of the area while he smoked his cigarette.

The minute the man's back was turned, Zach shrank into the shadows and silently followed the line of the building until he found an opportunity to dart across to a tree, then another building, and on to another shadow. Slinking along in quick sprints interrupted by brief, anxious pauses, he escaped to the outer perimeter of the camp where he took refuge behind a group of barrels that sat near a wooden shack. He waited a few beats, trying to determine if he'd been seen. When nothing happened, he assumed he hadn't been noticed. Time to get back to his stand in the trees, where it was safer.

Before he could make another move, a group of drunken men passed within inches of him. Thankfully, they were too inebriated to be paying attention, and Zach remained undetected. As soon as it was safe to do so, he sank back into the woods, preparing to put the finishing touches to his mission. If everything went as planned, he would be removing a good seventy or so scumbags from the planet. Most of them kingpins, subagents of the greater faction, men the world could do without.

Now it began. Soon the incendiaries he had placed would ignite and begin to burn the shacks and buildings within the encampment. Then he would act.

Perched high above the camp in a tree he had chosen specifically for its strategic view, Zach surveyed his handiwork. It wouldn't be long now.

"Come on," he muttered, staring down at the building closest to him as he waited for his war to begin.

The shack held particular interest for him. Before he'd started planting his little surprises throughout the camp, he'd seen Snake go into the cubbyhole with another man. When the building caught fire, they would do what any rational thinking person would. Run outside. Where they would be easy targets. He couldn't wait to sink a blade into the chest of his old nemesis.

Zach fought the urge to fidget. What was taking so long? Had his incendiaries failed? Had he gotten the mix wrong? The igniters? Shit, what was happening down there? If they didn't blow soon...

A sudden shout warned him that his war was about to begin. He immediately straightened, became more alert. He repositioned himself, testing his seat on the branch. His muscular thighs gripped either side of the limb he straddled, giving him maximum balance with the freedom of movement his upper body needed in order to aim his weapons with accuracy. He was in a plum position.

Zach peered expectantly through the leaves. *Yes!* The first building had ignited and was starting to burn.

It wouldn't be long now before the others followed. He'd planned the fires so a five-minute delay spaced each burst perfectly. While the men were intent on putting out the first fire, the other fires would ignite in turn and create the distraction he needed to keep the Pirates' attention off the surrounding woods so that he could begin his war without detection. He prayed it went without a hitch. The slightest problem would be the death of him.

So far so good.

He reached for his bow, the smooth curve of the aged wood feeling like a familiar friend, and took aim with deadly precision as the first rush of men passed by below. He caught the last one in the back, and the man went down with little more than a low moan. The others were so intent on trying to figure out what to do about the burning building that they didn't even notice the sudden absence of their comrade.

Zach felt a surge of power and tried to quell it. He would give his ego free reign when all this was over, but not until then. A swelled ego could be too dangerous at this early stage in the game.

When he was certain he wouldn't be seen, he climbed out of the tree and dragged the dying man into the brush to hide him. Meanwhile, Snake hadn't come out of the shack. An unforeseen event. The scum must have left the building while Zach had been dodging danger all the way back to the woods. He abandoned his initial plan and crept along just inside the tree line, circling the camp, his bow in his hand, an arrow notched and ready as he searched for his next unsuspecting victim. He was perspiring, and his heart beat a labored rhythm in his chest, his brain tortured with worst-case scenarios. This scheme of his was looking more and more insane. He was only one man against nearly seventy. How the hell could he ever hope to get out alive?

He could use some help right about now. But he hadn't wanted to endanger more lives, so he hadn't asked any of his friends to come along. Besides, it was his war, not theirs.

He kept low to the ground as he slunk along, relying on the bushes to provide him with adequate cover. No time for self-doubt. He needed to focus.

Focus, dammit!

The second building was in flames now, and he could hear men shouting all around the camp. Judging by all the commotion, the leader had come out of his lair.

Zach surveyed the situation. Snake hadn't yet surmised that the fires had been set by an arsonist. No one seemed interested in the woods surrounding the camp. He hadn't even sent anyone out to search the area. Maybe Zach's luck would hold out for a few more minutes. Perhaps Snake would even suspect one of his own. That would be an ironic twist of justice.

Time to speed up the game before it was too late. With a macabre grin, Zach yanked open his jacket and reached for a homemade grenade, quickly maneuvering around to the first burning building, where at least ten men were standing around calling out questions to one another. Zach didn't bother to identify them. He launched the grenade up and out, following its flight path through the night-darkened sky with his eyes. It landed somewhere on the roof of the building and exploded on impact, sending a good eight of the men sprawling to the ground, most of them bleeding.

Arrows followed the grenade, landing squarely in the chests of the only two men left standing. Zach didn't wait around to do a body count. Shouts from the opposite side of the encampment forced him out of his hiding place and in search of another. No one could have missed the explosion. It had literally rocked the forest. He'd made this batch a little stronger than he'd calculated, but that wasn't so bad. The more damage done, the better.

Screams of agony from the injured men followed his progress through the woods. He moved at a snail's

pace, every cell in his anxiety-ridden body demanding that he run crashing for safety. He had to force himself to keep it slow and steady, silent. He couldn't risk attracting attention to himself. At the moment he had the upper hand. No one suspected foul play. He still had a few minutes to do some damage without being detected.

By the time he circled halfway around the camp, the fourth building was in flames. A group of men had paused in the center of the compound, looking on in bewildered surprise. Zach spotted a few familiar faces. One of them was the man he'd encountered at the bar, one of Serena's kidnappers. Snake stood nearby, shouting like a demon from hell, uncertain of where to direct his anger. Zach ignored the leader for the moment. Serena first, he thought, reaching for his blowgun. A grenade was too damn good for this guy.

He placed the poison-tipped dart into the sugar cane tube and then moved around to a more strategic position. It wouldn't be easy hitting his target from this distance, but when he did, the man would get the shock of his life. Rattlesnake venom that would kill him slowly. No one would be able to do anything about it. He would be left behind, to die a horrible death, just like Serena.

He waited for his target to move into the proper positioning, then put his lips to the makeshift blowgun and forced a quick gust of breath into the tube. He knew his hit was a success when the man let out a yelp and slapped at his neck.

"What the hell is the matter with you?" Snake demanded, taking his attention off the burning building long enough to stare at the victim.

Zach prepared another dart, this one intended for the leader. But Snake had already seen the needle-fine weapon sticking out of his lackey's neck and was looking around, his eyes frantically sweeping the perimeter of the encampment. Determined to make use of the small window of opportunity he had left, Zach sent a sharp gust of air into the tube and immediately began moving again, moving away from the danger of capture. He only paused long enough to glance back and see if the last dart had been true. But no. Snake hadn't been struck. Another man had received the dart intended for him. Now everyone knew they were under attack.

As he moved through the forest, Zach heard Snake bellowing orders to his men. The sound made his guts twist.

"Get into the fucking woods. Now! Find out how many there are. This is..."

Zach didn't hear the rest. He was busy making his way toward his perch in the trees. It was safer there. He could rest and decide what he wanted to do next, maybe even go unnoticed long enough to pick a few more men off from high above.

Most of the men inside the camp had dispersed, presumably to fetch weapons before beginning their search. Zach tried not to think about it. He paused to lob a few grenades into the center of the clearing and was satisfied when he heard screams follow the explosions. Head down, he slithered through the underbrush, never pausing for more than a few seconds, and only then to let loose of more mayhem as he slowly made his way to his hiding place.

More grenades. And more. It was an all-out fucking war, and the bad guys were losing. He hoped the periodic assaults would buy him some time. Maybe injure or kill enough of the men to give him an edge. At the very least, cause enough distractions to confuse them about his location. If he could get them to believe they were surrounded by enemies, maybe they would run like hell instead of coming after him. He didn't give a shit if a few stragglers got away, as long as he had a shot at Snake.

But if they realized he was only one man.... His life would end painfully. Just thinking about all the atrocities they would inflict on him made his scar itch.

When two men appeared from out of nowhere and ran past him, Zach froze in place and hunkered down out of sight, fighting the urge to run in the opposite direction. But he couldn't resist sending an arrow after them. He caught one in the arm. The pig let out a squeal and went down on one knee, clutching his arm. Spooked, his friend spun around and fired a gun into the brush, the bullets spreading wild, one nearly grazing Zach's head. Zach didn't move a muscle, didn't even flinch. His life depended on keeping still. It was yet one more thing he'd learned from survival school. The eye was naturally drawn to movement. One had a better chance of surviving by staying put.

"I know you're out there, mother fucker!" the man screamed, pulling off another round. In the wrong direction.

The slug's dirty face registered surprise when his gun jammed. He glanced nervously into the trees, smacking the weapon against the side of his hand in earnest. Zach could almost smell the fear boiling off him. He was so close he could easily identify the gun as a revolver. Apparently, one of the casings hadn't been filled with enough powder, and the primer had only managed to propel the bullet as far as the back end of the barrel. Now it was lodged there, between the barrel and the cylinder, preventing the cylinder from rotating and rendering the gun impotent. The thing was jammed solid. The asshole couldn't even pull the hammer back. That's what happened when dipshits pressed their own bullets.

"Shit!" the other idiot shouted, holding his injured arm, the arrow still protruding from it. His gun lay in the dirt a few feet away. Neither of the dunderheads was smart enough to reach for it. In their panic, they'd completely forgotten about it. "I can't get this thing out! How do I get this thing out?"

Totally freaked, the uninjured man took several backward steps away from the woods, his eyes desperately sweeping the underbrush. Then he dropped his worthless weapon and fled. One of Zach's arrows caught him in the middle of the back before he'd gone a yard. When the other man saw it, he screamed in fear and lit off through the woods. Zach let him go. After all, he was a sporting man. And at the moment it seemed a rather unequal fight.

The gun still lay in the dirt where the dipshit had left it, catching Zach's eye. He stared at it for a moment. He wouldn't mind having another revolver to match the one he already had. But the damn thing was out of reach, too far into the open, and he didn't dare expose himself for something he didn't really need. Besides, he still preferred the silence of his bow.

Ignoring the attraction of the gun, he tossed another grenade into the clearing and started moving again. The camp was chaos. Wood crackling as the camp burned, men screaming, some in anger, some in agony, and Snake yelling over everything. If Zach hadn't been so intent on war, he would have smiled. All the hell he had created was enough to make him proud.

He was almost to his tree, where he had several more grenades hidden, when it happened. He'd been slinking along on his belly, inching through the low-lying brush when a booted foot came out of nowhere and planted itself smack in the middle of his back, nailing him to the ground and slamming the breath out of him. Damn, he hadn't even heard it coming. All the confusion had muffled the sound of a man creeping through the woods behind him.

He was pinned so solidly to the ground that he couldn't even turn his head, couldn't move. But he could certainly feel the cold steel of a barrel pressed hard against his cheek, and he knew then he'd lost his war.

"Where are your friends?" the man demanded, nearly cracking Zach's ribs with the pressure he exerted on his back.

Interesting. At least he'd been successful in foiling them about that issue. They assumed he was not alone. Of course, that wasn't exactly in his favor. They would try to torture him into divulging the

whereabouts of his colleagues, and when they didn't find any accomplices, they would kill him slowly. "Where?" the man demanded again.

Zach didn't even have time to formulate an answer before a tremendous weight suddenly came crashing down on him, forcing all the oxygen from his lungs in one painful woosh and nearly breaking his back in the process. A strange gurgling sound emanated from the man's throat, and then deadweight pressed him into the ground with an intensity that gave him an uncomfortable dose of claustrophobia. The guy was either out cold or dead. Zach had no idea what had just happened, but he was certain it was in his favor, and he was damned if he was going to lie around under this stinking carcass all night waiting for someone else to come along and put a bullet in his head.

"Jesus," he grunted, trying to pull himself out from under the bulky man.

"Need help?"

What the hell?

Zach craned his neck around so fast that he heard a rather unpleasant popping sound inside his spine. A sharp pain shot up through his temple. He ignored it. All his attention was on the person behind him. He couldn't see who had spoken, but he didn't really have to. He would know that voice anywhere.

With one final grunt, he managed to free himself from his human prison, and turned around to stare at her. A glance told him that her knife was embedded in the enemy's back. She followed the direction of his gaze, looking proud of her accomplishment. Zach was charmed, but it didn't stem the sudden rush of worry that followed.

Christ, what was she doing here? And how in hell had she managed to slink into the middle of enemy territory?

Unfortunately, there was no time to stand around and chitchat. There were still plenty of men out there looking for him.

"Come on. We have to keep moving," he ordered, grabbing her hand and forcibly yanking her along behind him. He didn't bother to ask if she cared to accompany him. It didn't even bear consideration. She was coming whether she liked it or not.

Dammit all to hell and back! She was ruining everything. She was going to get them both killed. He hadn't even begun to exact his revenge on the scum who had cut him, and now that she was here, all his energies would go into protecting her. That wouldn't prove easy under the circumstances. This was not good.

"No thank you, no nothing," she complained, still allowing him to pull her along. "I just saved your life back there, and you aren't even going to say anything."

"Shut up," he growled, searching the dark forest around them, looking for prowlers, and hoping he could make it back to that damn tree before there was another incident.

"Shut up?" She sounded flabbergasted.

"Shut up, or I'll knock your lights out for you," he reiterated, jerking her hand so forcefully that she fell against his chest. He gave a snort of disgust and shoved her off and away, propelling her ahead of him. "Can you climb?" he demanded, practically pressing her nose into the bark of the tree he'd been looking for.

"Yes, I can—"

"Then get up there. Now. Before I leave you here alone. And in case you have any ideas of refusing, let

me remind you that I don't think you'll like what those men will do to you when they find you," he warned before she could protest. He knew she would try. He wasn't so marred by the revolt that he'd forgotten complaining was second nature to women. About anything and everything.

She grunted a lot and made too much noise as she climbed the tree, but Zach didn't say anything. He was too busy keeping an eye on the surrounding underbrush and hoping they wouldn't be seen. Two more beats and he followed her up the tree. When they were both perched along the same heavy branch, Zach surveyed the encampment.

"You did all this alone?" she whispered in amazement.

Zach was already reaching for more explosives, but he allowed her one brief glance. His only answer was a single, curt nod before he lobbed a grenade as far into the camp as he could, catching two men off guard and sending their guts splattering all over the ground. He didn't have time for conversation right now. All he could think about was getting them safely out of there and how difficult that might prove to be.

"Where did you get those?" she asked, staring at the homemade grenades in his hand.

Zach ignored her, intently searching the clearing with his eyes. Something was wrong. Something was different. Something.... Then he realized what had changed. It was quiet. Too damn quiet.

"Something's up," he muttered without looking at her. "If you value your life, then I suggest you don't talk. Remain perfectly still until I tell you otherwise. No matter what you see, don't make a sound."

When she didn't answer, he jerked his head around to glare hard at her. "Understand?"

She nodded. He gave her a smile of approval, a gesture that was in reality little more than a grimace. He was pleased with the fact that she hadn't spoken. It meant she was listening to him, and obeying. Perhaps they would live after all.

A movement from below captured his attention. Zach's gaze swept the area and quickly caught up to the source. Two men were moving cautiously through the brush several yards away. Zach looked at the woman, worried about her reaction. She sat rigidly still and perfectly quiet just as he had ordered her to do. Had she seen the men below? Would she go nuts when she did? With as little movement as possible, he got her attention and pointed in the direction of the two men, a warning finger pressed against his lips. If those men glanced up, they were sitting ducks. She nodded once in understanding. He breathed a sigh of relief and reached for his bow. He was shocked when his fingers found empty air. It wasn't there! His bow was gone! Dammit, where?

The woods! He'd dropped it in the woods when that hulking man had landed on top of him. Besides the grenades, the blowgun was all he had with him. His task had just become more complicated, frighteningly so. He couldn't risk using a grenade. Too much noise. They would be caught in an instant. It would have to be the blowgun. The poison wouldn't start to do any real damage for at least half an hour, but inside fifteen minutes it could disable the vermin enough to make a difference.

In a matter of seconds he had the dart dipped, set, and was taking aim. A short gust of breath into the tube, and the dart began its flight. But his target was too far away. The dart went sailing harmlessly into the brush. One of the goons paused and snapped his head around in surprise when he heard the tiny missile land with a slight rustling noise in the leaves near him. Both men instantly ducked down behind a tree, looking around and trying to figure out what had made the noise, what direction it had come from. The glow from the burning camp gave everything an eerie feel, and the fire unfortunately made things a little more visible than Zach would have liked. If he could see them so well, they could see him just as well. All they had to do was look up.

Zach glanced at the woman. She watched him expectantly. He was beginning to feel a little defeated. It was a very uncomfortable sensation, especially when she was watching him so intently, counting on him to get them both out of there alive. Moving only his eyes, he looked back at the encampment. It was then he spied something that could be to their advantage. A Jeep. A fucking Jeep. He couldn't believe their good fortune. If it was tanked up, they'd be home free.

"Get ready to get on the ground as fast as you can," he whispered, glancing over to see what the men behind the tree were doing. They were still looking around, waiting fearfully for some kind of sign from the woods around them. "Run straight into the camp as soon as your feet touch earth."

He gave her a signal nod, and she positioned herself to begin her climb downward. They were high, near the top of the tree, and it was a long climb. He hoped she could move as fast as he intended to. She gave him an answering nod when she was ready. He took aim and lobbed a grenade near the men. When it didn't explode on impact, he hesitated for a moment, wondering if he'd created a dud, worrying that the enemy had discovered his position. Then fate gave him a window of opportunity. No time to waste. He pushed her down the tree and climbed down after her. The two men nearby realized what had been thrown into their midst and started to flee, but the explosion caught them before they got far, tearing a huge hole in the ground and scattering their remains to the four winds.

Zach didn't even take the time to duck behind the brush to avoid the blast. He just kept running. He could hear the shouts of the other men as he and the girl crashed through the woods toward the Jeep, his eyes assessing every detail as they went. The vehicle sat in the center of the compound, guarded by one man. Danger or not, Zach intended to take the vehicle.

Steeling himself for what was to come, he burst into the clearing, the woman just a few steps behind him. There was nowhere for them to hide, nothing to dodge behind. All they could do was run head-on into the danger. He used the noise and commotion around them like a cloak, a throwaway concealed but ready in his hand as they ran straight for the man guarding the Jeep. Most of the other slime were in the woods searching for him, which gave them nearly a clear shot all the way. Zach hoped it would last.

The guard heard the pounding of footsteps behind him and started to turn, bringing a rifle up to his shoulder, preparing to fire. The throwaway left Zach's hand at the precise moment the man's finger squeezed the trigger. The dagger embedded itself deep into his chest and deflected his aim just slightly. Enough to save Zach's life. The bullet that escaped the gun tore a path across Zach's left shoulder, grazing the skin deep enough to make a sizeable gouge. Ignoring the pain, he motioned for the woman to get into the Jeep. He vaulted into the driver's side after her and made a quick check of the gauges. Thank God, the Jeep had fuel. A full tank.

More shouts came from the direction of the woods as he gunned the engine and tore out of the clearing, fishtailing through the hard-packed dirt and entering the woods on the other side.

"Keep your head down," Zach ordered the woman. "We'll be going through some heavy brush."

She didn't say a word, just pushed her head between her knees and held on tight. Zach veered around and lobbed several strategic grenades in a wide arc around the clearing, and then tore out away from the burning encampment. A few seconds later it seemed like half the forest exploded as his hidden packs went up in a massive burst. Zach smiled. That ought to keep them occupied for awhile. Those that were still alive, anyway.

As he put the camp behind them, the vixen pulled her head out of her knees and looked at him, her eyes questioning. Zach glared back at her. Now that they were safe, he could vent.

"What the hell were you doing back there?" he growled.

"The same thing you were doing," she answered, glancing back over her shoulder at the road

disappearing behind her.

They had bounced onto a two-lane highway, and Zach was burning up the pavement, putting a whole lot of distance between them and the Pirates.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“You ruined my entire operation,” he shouted, his eyes on the road ahead, his hands gripping the wheel as if he would break it off.

“It looked to me like I was saving your life,” she snapped back.

Zach sat in silence for awhile. He needed time to digest this. It was true. She had saved his life. He should be more grateful. Not that he was really angry with her. He was angry with himself for having missed his opportunity to kill the man who’d scarred his face. Although, after that last massive explosion, who knew. Snake might be dead now. But somehow he doubted it.

“I’m sure you had a reason for saving my neck,” he snarled.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she demanded.

“I’m sure you have an agenda of your own, and I’m sure you thought you could get some unsuspecting sap to help you out.”

She started to protest, but he stopped her with a single glare.

“Why are you so damn interested in the Pirates, anyway?” he wanted to know.

She hesitated, looking as though she might need to think about her answer before trusting him with it. He had the distinct impression that she was wavering on that trust, and the idea disturbed him.

“They killed my brother,” she finally said. “Three months ago. He always...took care of me. Now I have no one. And they deserve to pay.”

He didn’t bother to say he was sorry. Besides the fact that he didn’t want her to think she could push all his buttons and make him help her with whatever it was she wanted, any expression of sympathy would be worthless, anyway. Her brother was dead. Nothing Zach could say would ease her pain or bring him back.

“And you thought you could just walk in there alone and take a few of them out?” he quipped, looking at her like she was a little on the loony side.

“Didn’t you?”

“That’s different. I was prepared,” he ground out through clenched teeth.

“You didn’t look too prepared when I ran into you,” she reminded him.

“Shit happens,” was all he said.

“You’re still not willing to thank me, are you?”

“I don’t recall you thanking me for doing the same.”

The remark shut her up for a moment, but only a brief one. Zach was just settling into the bliss of silence when she offered, “My name is Burgess.”

He was instantly irritated. He didn’t want her here, didn’t want her to talk. What made women think it was so damn necessary to talk all the time? If she was going to ride with him, he wanted her to respect him enough to keep her damn trap shut so he could think.

“I don’t care wha—” He’d been about to tell her how he didn’t give a good damn who she was, but

then paused, glancing over at her, curious despite himself. “Isn’t that a man’s name?”

She grimaced and nodded. “My mother had a sick sense of humor.”

After that, they didn’t talk much. He just drove. He only stopped once to tie a rag around his wounded shoulder to try and stem the flow of blood to a less life-threatening trickle. Damn thing ached. She offered to help, but he refused. He just wanted to get where he was going, and he wanted to do it in complete silence. He had an agenda, and he wasn’t going to veer away from it. Not for her. Not for anyone.

Dawn was just beginning to break when he finally pulled off the road and put the Jeep in park. They were in the Florida panhandle now. Time for them to part company. He damn sure wasn’t going to drag her with him.

Without so much as a glance in her direction, he got out and grabbed what was left of his supplies out of the back. A few grenades and the blowgun. It wasn’t much. He felt naked and vulnerable without his bow, but he would have to make do. As long as he could make it to Doc’s, he would be fine. Doc would feed him well. He could get his arm patched up, get some string for a new bow, and Serena would be thrilled to see him. All he had to do was get there.

He glanced at Burgess. She was still sitting in the passenger seat, staring at him in silence. It was the first time he’d seen her when it wasn’t dark out. She looked even more beautiful in the pale light of dawn, almost too beautiful, despite a few dirt smears here and there.

“Next time you venture into the woods, use more dirt,” he advised. “Your little white face is a flashing beacon in the night to anyone who might be paying attention.”

Her hands went to her cheeks, and she seemed embarrassed. “I have dirt on my face?”

He rolled his eyes and stifled a grunt of disgust. “Keep the Jeep,” he told her, his voice brusque, impersonal. “It has enough fuel in it to get you a few more miles. If you can find more, you’ll have something. Try not to let anyone take it away from you. Fuel is power. Never forget that.”

Without another word, he turned on his heel and started to walk away.

“Wait!” she called after him, her voice sounding a little anxious. “You’re bleeding! Don’t you need help?”

“I don’t need any help, lady,” he called back over his shoulder, never breaking his stride. He refused to help her anymore. He couldn’t afford to. He had enough of a load as it was. Besides which, he didn’t quite trust her. Not that she had really done anything to prove herself untrustworthy. It was just that he didn’t trust anyone.

“Where are you going?”

“None of your business.”

“What about me? What should I do?”

“That’s up to you,” he called, shrugging his massive shoulders, then wincing when a burst of pain from his wound shot down his arm. “I’m not your keeper.”

“Can’t I come with you?”

He was getting farther away now and could barely hear her, but he could still sense the urgency in her voice. He almost felt sorry for her, and the sympathy annoyed him.

“Be strong, Zach, old boy. It’ll pass. Just keep walking,” he muttered to himself. Then he shouted back to her, “No, you can’t come with me.”

“Please. I don’t know where to go...what to do,” she called, her voice faint.

Zach paused but didn’t turn around. “Look, lady. I’m a loner. I don’t need someone like you tagging along behind me. You didn’t seem to mind being alone before. You managed to find your way to that Pirate camp pretty well.”

“I followed you.”

Zach turned around and glared at her. He’d been so careful. Of course, in retrospect, there was that possibility that he’d purposely let her follow him. Perhaps somewhere in his subconscious he had actually wanted her to.

“Well, sort of. I overheard some men talking about the camp and figured that’s where you were heading, and—”

“You’ll do all right on your own,” he interrupted. He turned away and resumed walking. “Just do whatever comes naturally. You’ll figure it all out eventually. I did.”

“Wait. Please. At least let me give you a ride.”

Zach wasn’t listening anymore. He disappeared into the trees, taking a deep cleansing breath as he heard the familiar rustle and crunch of dry leaves beneath his boots. He could already feel his muscles beginning to relax a little. It was a wonderful sensation, to be alone again.

His steps faltered when he heard the Jeep crank up, but he managed to force himself to stay on course. He could tell she was angry that he’d left her stranded because she barked the tires getting back onto the paved road, and he could hear the engine roaring off away into the distance. Ordinarily, her anger would have made him smile, but not this time. Oddly, he was disappointed that she hadn’t tried harder to convince him to let her tag along.

Too late now. She was gone.

Zach kept walking. He had a long journey ahead of him. It wouldn’t be an easy one to make with a wound. He was fortunate it was just a flesh wound. The bullet had grazed a hole in his arm without damaging the bone, had entered and exited without lodging. As long as it didn’t get infected, he would live.

As soon as Doc patched him up, he would go home, and this time he would stay there. Maybe he would never come out again. Just stay in his cave like an old worn-out grizzly bear that only wanted to be left alone until he died. No mate. No offspring. Nothing. Just himself and his memories. It wasn’t a very pleasant thought, not a very promising future. But then, what could he expect out of this new society?

“Not a fucking thing,” he muttered, feeling testier than he could remember. He knew it wasn’t caused by his failure to exact revenge on the man who had cut his face. It was because of *her*.

Burgess. A man’s name. What mother would give her daughter a man’s name?

One with a sick sense of humor.

He smiled, a small smile, and wondered if he would ever see her again.

Zach slowed the horse to a walk, then eventually stopped altogether and dismounted. The horse nickered and nudged his back with its nose. He'd found the animal on his journey to bayou country Louisiana, had in essence stolen it from a farmer. He hadn't particularly liked having to do so, but the wound in his shoulder had gotten a little infected, had started to slow him down, and the theft had been necessary. He would repay the farmer one day, somehow, if only to ease his conscience.

Ignoring the animal's stomping hoof, its agitated nickering, Zach frowned as he peered into the underbrush. It seemed strangely quiet in the swamp. Although he was deep into Doc's territory now, no one had come out to greet him or to stop his progress. For a time he just stood there beside the tired horse, his keen eyes searching the woods around him, waiting, expecting Coon-ass or one of the others to step out from behind a tree and acknowledge his presence. When no one did, he tethered the horse to a low limb and proceeded on foot.

He moved forward cautiously, his gaze sweeping the woods around him, every muscle in his body painfully attuned to the possibilities. One wrong step and he could die in one of Doc's traps. It was an agonizingly slow process. The swamp had been painstakingly intruder-proofed. There were hundreds of killing booby traps along the way, designed to prevent anyone from penetrating even the outer perimeter of Doc's complex. Zach wasn't sure how far he would make it before he fell into one of them. But he couldn't afford not to proceed. His shoulder needed treatment, and he'd long since run out of rot-gut whiskey to pour into the wound. If he didn't get it patched....

He didn't even want to think about the consequences. Right now he had to concentrate on what lay ahead of him. He had to focus on picking his way through the swamp, to keep from being blown to bits, from having his skull split by a swinging log, his heart pierced through, or his legs crushed by a falling tree. He would worry about his shoulder later. There was the present to think about now.

Inch by inch, he moved on, surrounded by the stillness and the eerie quiet of the swamp. Strangely, no one stepped out of any hiding places. He appeared to be alone. The idea troubled him. He didn't know what to make of the silence.

Farther into the forest, the swamp widened and the islands of land became farther apart. The water was deeper, and soon there was no more path to follow. Knowing he would not be able to proceed on foot, Zach looked for the canoe Doc's men used to cross the deep. But the little skiff was gone. The absence of the boat coupled with the silence sent a shiver of warning down his spine. Something was wrong.

He made a thorough sweep of the area, looking for the other canoes Doc kept hidden in the woods, only to discover they were all missing. He had no choice but to wade across the swamp. It wasn't the most promising proposition he'd ever been faced with. Wading through a swamp could be deadly.

Despite the danger, he pressed on. Instinct told him something bad had taken place here, but he needed to be certain.

Boots, fatigues, and all, he stepped down into the cool water. Muck from the bottom swirled up around his ankles. He grimaced at the unpleasant sensation of water seeping into his boots and soaking through his pants. Despite it all, he continued on, taking another step, and another. Slowly. Surely. Deeper and deeper, until he was up to his armpits in water. He tried to avoid getting his wound soaked, didn't want to exacerbate the infection, but he accidentally slopped some water onto it when he fell into a small hole along the bottom. The swamp was so murky he couldn't see the riverbed, and that's precisely what worried him. He knew the danger that lurked below the surface, and he didn't relish the idea of

encountering any such behemoth.

Sunlight was muted, strained through the tangle of tree branches overhead, making the swamp seem a little darker than it should be, broken only by a smattering of strong patches of brightness that lent a rather surreal feel to everything. Cypress grew in large hammocks, often shooting up straight out of the more shallow water, their knees poking up like mushrooms clustered together. Moss hung in long gray streamers from the trees, some dipping just inches above the water, like fingers reaching for a cool drink. Swamp creatures followed Zach's progress with interested eyes. Wary egrets took wing only to come to rest again just a few yards away. Turtles plopped down into the water, kicking up mud as they swam off away from him. Some just sat on their logs, sunning themselves and ignoring the strange creature in their midst.

In some places the water grew shallow, in others he was nearly up to his chin in it. The swamp was wide, and there was nothing but water for the remaining distance to Doc's cluster of islands. Every step was a chore. His boots were sucked into the soft mud along the bottom, his footing unsure, the ground below uneven. Waterlogged tree branches and roots along the river bottom hampered his progress, tripping him up, catching in his clothing. He could see none of it. He was blind below the waist and had to feel along with his booted feet, the water squishing unpleasantly inside with each step.

Once, a cottonmouth swam past him, its long body floating high atop the murky water just inches from his elbow. Zach froze until the deadly snake passed on by. Fortunately, the venomous prowler ignored him. The snake was just one example of the death that lurked in the swamp. There were others he didn't want to think about.

He was nearing his destination when it happened. His foot snagged against something large and solid. The object lurched and moved under his feet, sending him down into the water face first. He gulped in an unpleasant amount of swamp water as his feet were swept out from under him. Fear jolted through him like white-hot electricity. He knew exactly what he'd tripped over. A gator. A big one by the feel of it.

Zach immediately went into survival mode. Arms and legs tucked for protection, he made like a fallen log and allowed his body to sink, dead weight, to the bottom of the swamp. He kept his eyes open, his wits sharp, and searched through the swirl of murky water the gator stirred up. He hoped the damn thing wouldn't take an interest in him, hoped it wasn't hungry or easily excitable.

Apparently, the reptile had only moved a short distance away because Zach's sinking body suddenly brushed against scales again, sending the gator into another quick burst of movement as it tried to avoid whatever was touching it. Zach was flipped over twice, his left shoulder scraping hard against the gator's spiny back and re-opening the wound in his shoulder. He tried to ignore the pain, tried to remain as still as possible. If he made any sudden moves, the gator would view him as an enemy, make a defensive attack, and Zach would become piecemeal for buzzards.

Left with no other choice, he allowed himself to be dragged along, jostled against the rugged bottom, his legs and arms tucked into his chest as the alligator once again attempted to get out of his way. Zach remained still but alert, floating along like a dead log. As long as he didn't pose any real threat to the animal, he might live through this.

The gator seemed intent on nothing more than putting some distance between itself and the strange object that had falling into its world, but Zach was nonetheless concerned. Blood from his wound oozed into the water, and his lungs were beginning to burn for oxygen. Out of fear, he kept his eyes open, although he couldn't see much of anything through the dirty water, only a trail of swirling swamp filth as the alligator propelled itself a few yards away. He knew things were happening fast, but every second seemed like a painful eternity as he waited for the worst to happen.

Zach's body finally equalized, and he drifted to the surface, face down. When his lungs couldn't take another moment without oxygen, he slowly lifted his face out of the water, praying the slight tinkling sound wouldn't bring the gator back to investigate. He breathed deeply of the blessed air and used the opportunity to scan the water's surface. Then he allowed his head to drop back into the water and just floated for as long as he could. It was too soon to move yet. He was still hoping the gator thought he was nothing more than a fallen log, a part of the swamp, and still hoping the blood from his wound didn't draw unwanted attention. If he'd been in the ocean with all this blood around him, sharks would already be gnawing on him. There was no telling how the gator would react to the stuff. Could he smell it? Would he attack?

Zach didn't even want to think about it.

The gator was still there, not far away. He could sense it. But there was nothing he could do about it. If he started to swim, the gator would be on him in an instant. If he put his feet down, he ran the risk of stepping on the damn thing again. And he still had a considerable distance to go before he reached dry land. Not that land would be of much help to him if the gator decided to give chase. A gator could easily outrun a man on land, if that man didn't know what he was doing.

He drifted, occasionally lifting his head and taking several deep breaths to keep his lungs from bursting. It seemed like an interminable waiting game, the most gruesome game of chance he'd ever faced.

The minutes ticked by and nothing happened.

Tired of the waiting, he unfolded one arm and felt around in his boot for the throwaway he always kept stashed there. Thank God, he hadn't lost it during the shuffle. He kept his movements slow and controlled, almost robotic, so as not to make any sudden changes in the water around him, carefully pulling his hand back to his chest, the knife held ready. Damn, this wasn't going to be easy.

Careful not to stir the water around him, he lowered his feet and felt immensely relieved when his boots found the squishy bottom of the swamp instead of something that moved and killed. Still concerned about running into the gator, he kept his face down in the water, his eyes wide, only occasionally lifting his head for a breath as he began his painstaking journey. His eyes searched through the muck, hoping he would be able to see the gator before he made another mistake and bumped into it again. It seemed the most logical way to finish his journey, the only way that afforded him a chance at all of making it. With his face thrust down into the chest-high water as he walked forward, his eyes alert for any signs of movement in the mud below him, he made his way through the swamp.

Just when he was beginning to relax, his worst fears came to life. After easing along for some distance, he paused to lift his head out of the water for air. There, floating just in front of him, as still as a log, was the alligator, its reptilian eyes drifting along just above the surface of the swamp like two fishing floats bobbing along side by side. But these things didn't bob. They just sat there, staring at him, not even the tiniest swell rippling out of the water that surrounded the enormous body of the creature.

Zach tried not to recoil in alarm, tried to stifle the overpowering urge to back-paddle. Jesus, the thing was huge! It had to be a twelve-footer. If he hadn't raised his head precisely when he had, he would have sideswiped the damn thing.

Zach stayed frozen into position while his brain frantically searched for a plan of escape. There was an odd buzzing in his ears, the sound of fear. The audible trickle of water dripping from his hair and splashing back into the murky river just inches from his chin seemed to amplify and carry out over the swamp. Too loud. Damn, but it was too loud. Everything seemed amplified. Every breath echoed in his ears, and his heart battered against his ribs as if it would rip from his chest and sprint away. Christ,

what were the odds of him escaping with both arms and both legs?

Everything around him seemed frozen in time, as stiff and frozen as he felt. Everything in the swamp had gone into an eerie silence, punctuated only by the sound of the water dripping from his hair, splashing like little bullets into the still water below. His heart hammered hard in his chest, and his breath was harsh and labored. It was as if all the creatures in the swamp had stopped what they were doing to watch, waiting for the one to strike the other, waiting to see who would be first, and who would be the victor.

The gator didn't make a move, just lay there, an arm's length away. Zach had never encountered anything like it before in his life. It seemed an absurd situation, unreal, impossible. Yet, it was happening. And he didn't know what the hell to do about it except stay frozen into position and wait to see if the beast got bored and moved off. It was either that or try to overcome the damn thing before it turned on him and ripped him limb from limb. If this had been a bitch guarding her eggs, she would have already killed him. The thought raised his blood pressure.

Female or no, if he moved, this thing would shred him. The odds were hardly even. The alligator was in its element. Zach was not. He could be in a hell of a lot of trouble.

He'd never been so close to a wild gator before without the gator having some serious misgivings about it. But this thing.... It was just sitting there, waiting, maybe sizing him up, curious, almost indifferent. It didn't seem all that concerned about moving away from him. The idea was unnerving. Zach wasn't sure just how long he could remain motionless. He couldn't stand there half bent over, stuck into a cramped position forever. His back and arms were already getting tired. Either he or the gator would have to act eventually. By the looks of things, he would be the one to make the first move. The reptile seemed rather comfortable with Zach's discomfort.

He stood there, hunched over, completely still, like some fucking freeze-frame, watching the beast. It was so odd. Up close, the alligator was amazing. It was huge, capable of crushing him with one blow of its powerful tail. One snap of those lethal jaws could remove his arm, and yet there was something mesmerizing about the animal.

The gator seemed to be assessing Zach in much the same way as he studied it. It was an unusual moment. This animal was a survivor, like Zach. And like Zach, it had its vulnerabilities. They were both waiting for their fate. Both strong. Both vulnerable. Common ground.

Hypnotized by the beauty of the creature, his hand seemed to move of its own volition, his fingers tentatively reaching toward the scaly back that was so close to him. He didn't know why he wanted to touch the monstrous creature. He just felt compelled to connect with the animal.

The second Zach's fingers brushed the gator's side, all hell broke loose. The gator didn't like the sudden familiarity, and it lashed out with a speed that was surprising, its massive tail coming around to broadside him. If it hadn't been for the drag of the water to buffer the movement, the blow would have broken his arm. As it was, Zach was sent swirling down into the murky depths. Pain shot through his left arm, and he knew he was bleeding badly now. Damn, that had been a stupid thing to do. What made him think he could touch the thing just because it had been sitting there so placidly? He'd been a fool, and now he was going to die because of his stupidity.

No! He was not going to die, his brain screamed as he scraped along the bottom, his face burrowing into the muck on the floor of the swamp. *Not going to die.*

With renewed determination, he righted himself and came up sputtering, swamp scum spewing everywhere as he shook his head in a violent attempt to clear his vision, his knife poised and ready to strike at the soft underbelly of the reptile. But the gator was gone. Only a swirling trail of muck on the

surface of the swamp attested to the fact that it had ever been there at all.

Zach stood there for several dazed minutes, the knife clenched so tightly in his fist that it was almost painful, his arm still raised and ready to swing downward in a hard, wide arc, ready to kill. His chest heaved and blood trickled slowly down his arm to *splink, splink, splink* into the water, the only sound that interrupted the otherwise quiet swamp. He was terrified the gator was somewhere below the surface, perhaps circling him, waiting to strike. But nothing happened. The gator had disappeared.

It seemed an eternity before he was able to overcome the doubt and the dread. He feared the gator was somewhere between himself and land, just waiting to tear his limbs from his body and leave him to drown at the bottom of the swamp, his blood mingling with the rest of the bilge. But there was no sign of the beast.

After several uneventful minutes, Zach forced himself to start moving again. Despite his fear, he didn't encounter the gator again. He reached Doc's island without incident, not even a telltale swirl of the murky waters around him, only the silence of the swamp, interrupted occasionally by the raucous conversation of a few unidentifiable birds.

It had been an odd experience, both beautiful and frightening. He'd touched a side of nature few people ever dared test, had been amongst it, a part of it, almost like being inside the belly of a whale. It was extraordinary, a strange and frightening experience, even thrilling. Hell, it was fucking invigorating. The experience had done something to him, changed something deep inside him. He felt alive again. Wonderfully alive.

Back on dry ground, he tore another strip of heavy cotton from his shirt and wrapped it tightly around his wound to staunch the flow of blood. The swipe from the alligator's tail had torn the hole nearly twice its original size. It would need attention soon. But one glance around the clearing proved he would not be getting that attention soon enough. Except for himself and the usual assortment of creatures that inhabited the forest, the swamp was empty. The only thing there to greet him was the strange sight of charred buildings. Doc's complex had been destroyed, completely burned to the ground, not a building or a shack left standing. There was no sign of human life left.

Everything had been taken. All the equipment, all the supplies, all the research had been removed from the buildings, presumably before they'd been set ablaze. He sifted through the ashes, looking for evidence. It didn't take long to determine the fire had been deliberate, contained and precise. Professional work. But who had done this? That was the disturbing question.

He searched for hours but found no clues, no trace of his friends. Not even a hint of what had taken place. Just an empty swamp.

"What the hell happened here?" he whispered to himself.

He had no way of knowing.

Grim and reluctant, he left the swamp and made the painstaking journey back to where he'd left the horse. His shoulder aching and his heart heavy with disappointment, he turned north and resumed his trek at a slow walk, feeling helpless. His good friend was gone and everyone with him, and there was nothing Zach could do about it. He had no way of knowing if they'd left willingly or if they had been routed out. He had no way of knowing if they were dead or alive, no way of knowing what had happened to Doc's precious research. The helplessness angered him.

He didn't want to leave, didn't want to walk away without even trying to find out what had happened, but he had to get his shoulder taken care of before he did anything else. Without treatment, he would be no good to his friends.

Two days later Zach located a doctor, miles away from Doc's bayou. There were rumors of a man in the area who had recently delivered a woman's baby. Zach followed the rumors north until he came to a small settlement. It was an amazing place. Unlike most of the settlements in the new society, here the people seemed unharried, civilized, clean. It was like stepping into another world, like stepping back in time, almost to the turn of the twentieth century. These people were dignified, seemingly untouched by the evil of the world around them. They were obviously trying to make a place for themselves, an orderly existence built on mutual trust and respect. He wondered if they were Amish. They seemed so untouched by the rest of society.

Zach left the horse tethered amongst a tight cluster of trees well away from the settlement and walked half a mile into the center of the little township. The people took one look at him, with his long, tangled hair, his torn fatigues streaked with dried mud, and his bloodied shoulder, and were instantly on guard. He didn't bother to try and convince them he could be trusted. It would have been wasted effort. There was no time. His wound was too far gone. They would never believe him, anyway.

Zach was quick to assess the situation. The men were oddly absent. Maybe they were away hunting. That made his task considerably easier. For the moment, anyway.

He went up to the nearest woman and stood just inches from her, his blue eyes glaring down at her, his lips tight with pain. She tried to back away, but he followed her until she was backed against a rail. One look at her eyes and he knew she would tell him anything. He knew the look. She would do anything as long as he didn't harm her. Fear boiled off her like summer heat, so intense that he almost felt sorry for her. But not quite. There was no time for sympathy.

He grabbed her face in his right hand and squeezed a little. "The physician," he demanded.

She didn't argue, just haltingly gave him directions to a place on the outskirts of town.

A sense of uneasiness followed him as he hurried to the house. He didn't like the fact that the men were all gone. It bode ill, reminded him of an ambush. Even if it wasn't, he knew they would come crawling out of the woodwork as soon as word spread about the dangerous stranger that had appeared in their midst. Then they would bear down on him like a lynching mob and either run him out of town or kill him. The latter was the most probable. No matter who he was, good guy or bad guy, he was a threat. He had stumbled across their peaceful settlement, and they could not abide that. They would do everything in their power to protect their township.

Zach barged into the doctor's little wooden house unannounced and uninvited, demanding that something be done about his shoulder. The doctor made it plain that he was angry about being discovered by an outsider. He vehemently refused to treat Zach's wound, but Zach would not take no for an answer. He had a job to do. He needed to find his friends, and he wasn't going to let a little thing like a shoulder wound stand in his way.

He stood in the man's front parlor, an immovable mountain, while the doctor ranted about the indecency, the rudeness, the impossibility.

"I don't know how you found this place, mister, but ain't no one here gonna help you," the doctor insisted. "So, I suggest you just turn around and leave peaceably. We're good folk around these parts, and we don't like to see anyone get hurt."

"The only one who is going to get hurt is you if you don't treat this wound," Zach warned. He was in no mood to waste time. He'd wasted enough as it was.

"I done told you. I can't be of any help to you."

"You can and you will."

The man stubbornly shook his head, his arms folded across his chest in open refusal. Despite all the bluster, fear was apparent on his round, pasty face.

Zach's temper flared. He closed the distance between them and backed the man against the far wall. Before the doctor could even register what was happening, Zach had the barrel of his revolver pressed into the side of the man's throat. He figured the man would understand violence better than a plea for help.

"Go ahead and kill me," the physician bravely murmured, although he'd begun to sweat profusely. "Better to die quickly from a bullet wound than to die slowly from the plague."

Zach's eyes narrowed in sudden comprehension, but he didn't withdraw his weapon. If anything, he only pressed it more tightly against his victim's windpipe.

"So, that's it. You won't treat me because you fear the plague."

The man nodded, although it wasn't easy considering the circumstances he found himself in.

Zach didn't bother to inform the man what he thought of scum like him, physicians who were only in it for the money, not to help people. Judging by the man's surroundings, the people of this particular settlement were keeping him in fine style. He'd probably never known even a single day of hunger, even through the revolt. He'd used his learning to woo the townsfolk, had become the prize they jealously guarded and protected. Until today, anyway. They hadn't counted on Zach.

"You'll treat me," Zach hissed, his eyes narrowed in anger, intent with warning. "Because if you don't, I'll rape your wife, kill your children, and hang your balls from the nearest tree. You'll live the rest of your life despising your wife because you won't know whether or not I gave her the plague. She'll probably eventually kill herself because she won't be able to live with the shame of rape. She won't be able to live with a husband who can't stand the sight of her. Do you want that?"

After a disgustingly lengthy consideration, the doctor managed a shaky, "N-no."

"Then I suggest you prepare your devices. And don't even think of trying anything. If you make one false move, I'll kill you and finish the rest of my promise. Understand?"

"Y-yes."

With Zach's gun pressed into the man's side, they moved out into the hall and went into what served as an examining room off one wing of the house. The doctor motioned for him to sit down on the table in the middle of the room. Zach obliged, but kept the gun leveled at the doctor, watching every move closely. The physician gathered antiseptic, clean cotton cloths, and surgical thread, and brought it all back to the table with him. Zach remained wary, ready to put an abrupt end to any mischief the man might have in mind. He couldn't be too cautious. Most surgical instruments were weapons in their own right. One quick jab in the right place....

But no. The man was carefully laying out the necessities, and Zach could see that his mind was not on killing or getting away. He seemed more intent on getting this procedure over with and getting Zach out of his house.

Upon the man's request, Zach tore the upper part of his sleeve off and laid bare the wound for examination. He winced only slightly as the man cleaned the area. The doctor was thorough, and Zach was grateful for that.

The man didn't bother to speak, just went about the task with resigned determination. Zach stared at him, a frown settling between his brows. The doctor's fear was apparent. Sweat was beginning to bead along his brow, a few droplets sliding down his cheeks and dripping onto his shirt collar. Zach's eyes became riveted on those droplets, and he suddenly felt a sharp stab of panic. It wasn't the threat of

plague. Thanks to Doc, he didn't have to worry about that. He just couldn't abide having the man's sweat on him. For some reason it reminded him of his mother's blood, the way it had splattered him.

The physician's fingers trembled as he prepared a needle and thread for the stitches. But it wasn't the man's nervousness that disturbed Zach. It was the sweat. He couldn't seem to take his eyes off all that sweat. Before the doctor could intrude into his flesh with the needle, he grabbed the man's hand to prevent it, so quickly and so hard that the doctor's knuckles cracked ominously in the otherwise still quiet of the room. The doctor gave an alarmed yelp of pain and dropped the threaded needle onto the table.

"Just give me the stuff. I'll do it myself."

When Zach released his hand, the doctor backed away, bobbing his head in a strained semblance of agreement. Zach gathered up the needle and thread, and then stood up, his wary gaze on the doctor. The man had retreated to the middle of the room, his arms hanging limply at his sides, an expression of defeat on his face. Zach assessed him. He was no real threat. He was too afraid to be any sort of challenge, his initial bravado merely a put-on. In Zach's case, it hadn't worked. The doctor knew that now, and he didn't seem interested in opposing him anymore.

"You got anything for infection?"

The man started to shake his head. Certain he was lying, Zach ignored the gesture and went to the nearest cabinet, yanking it open without bothering to get permission. He wasn't in the mood for games. It was too much time wasted. He needed to get out of there, get back into the woods. He didn't like being out in the open like this, vulnerable, amongst potentially dangerous people.

Inside the cabinet, there were stacks of cotton cloth that had been torn into small strips and clean towels folded neatly on the shelves, but no disinfectant. In a fit of anger, Zach tore the cabinets off the wall and threw them across the room. The wood splintered into a dozen different pieces as the cabinets hit the wall. The doctor gave a cry of alarm, threw his hands in front of his face as he ducked away, then quickly backed himself into the farthest corner of the room, cowering there, his eyes wide with fear.

"I'm not in the mood for delays," Zach warned, menacingly advancing on the man. His fit of rage had opened his wound again, but he ignored the blood, the pain. "I know you have something for infection. Give it to me."

The man needed no further persuasion. Zach's presence alone was threatening enough. He scurried out of the corner and went to another cabinet, pulling it open and locating a small bottle. Turning back to face Zach, he said, "It's the last I have. I was saving it for the children."

Zach hesitated a moment, then took the bottle. There was no time to feel remorse. Given half the chance, this man would kill him. The doctor was probably lying about saving the medicine for the kids, anyway. He seemed more the type to save himself first.

Zach looked down at the bottle, popped the cork, and took a sniff. His brows twitched just slightly. Eyes narrowed, he glanced back at the doctor, then pocketed the bottle and moved to leave. The man's gaze followed him to the door. Zach paused on the threshold and turned back to stare at him for a moment. He was on the verge of telling him that he wasn't a bad person, just a needy one, but then he changed his mind. The good doctor probably wouldn't believe him anyway, let alone care. Besides, Zach didn't owe anyone anything.

He shook his head, as if to clear it, then turned away. In the living room, he located a smaller cabinet that served as a bar, took two quarts of whiskey, and then fled, leaving the front door standing open and the doctor still huddled in the corner of his examining room. He imagined it would be several minutes before the man gathered the courage to creep out to the village and blow the whistle on him. Not that

he really needed to bother. More than likely the woman had already taken care of that. All the more reason to get the hell out of there as fast as possible.

Back into the woods, he ignored the pain in his shoulder, ignored the blood that trickled down his forearm to gel on his wrist. He'd stayed too long, and he was intent on only one thing, getting out of there alive. By now, the settlement would be in an uproar, the men would be splitting off into groups to form a search party, and Zach had no intention of being found.

Forgetting about his shoulder for the moment, he located his horse, mounted, and rode hard. He was counting on the people assuming he had walked into town. They would never suspect he'd been on horseback. He'd been too careful to cover his tracks, burying the dung the animal left behind and covering the freshly turned earth with a bed of pine needles.

He pushed the horse until the animal showed signs of fatigue and then slowed to give the horse a breather. His shoulder throbbed mercilessly. Still, he didn't stop to take care of his wound until nightfall. Only then, by the dim light of a small fire, did he begin to carefully pull the needle and thread through his torn flesh in an effort to stitch the injury. Being as how he could only use one hand, it was a damn difficult procedure, but he managed to close the wound well enough. He used the disinfectant liberally, scouring the area and then soaking the clean cotton strips in it before using them to bandage his shoulder. When he was finished, he studied his work with a critical eye.

"Not bad," he muttered to himself. It wasn't the first time he'd had to sew himself up, and probably wouldn't be the last.

Satisfied, he doused the fire and eased back for a short nap. He needed the rest. Soon he would begin his journey again. He'd already decided he would go back to the swamp and search one last time for any clues to what had happened to Doc Folson. Maybe he would ask around to see if anyone had heard any rumors. But he would have to be damn careful. He couldn't just barge into the nearest settlement and start asking questions. Anyone who'd known Doc would take his secrets to the grave. Most people who knew him had been a part of his army, in which case they would have gone with him if he'd chosen to move his operation. If he'd been routed out, they'd have died with him. Those that didn't know him, need not be alerted.

Weeks later, Zach left the swamp in defeat and turned the tired horse northward for the long trek home. Back to his cave, back to that existence that seemed to drain him of all his will. He'd found nothing to even hint at what had happened in the swamp.

He couldn't help thinking of Serena. Had she been killed, or was she still out there somewhere? Where was Doc? And the others?

He didn't know, and the not knowing made him angry. He hated being helpless. It made him feel like a failure, useless, powerless.

He was almost afraid to go back home. He'd just lost a good friend. There were only a few left to him now, a handful of people he considered a part of his family, and he couldn't help but wonder if they would be taken from him, too. Fear, electric and pulsating, settled in his chest, bogging him down. He hadn't realized until now just how much he counted on his friends, how much he needed them. The thought scared him, almost as much as the thought of losing them did.

How sad. The conquering hero was crumbling, weak, and in need.

Hero. What a laugh! He was no hero. He was just a man. Coming apart at the seams, scared because he was realizing he needed people after all.

By the time he finally rode into town, Zach was exhausted from the long journey, and his shoulders were slumped in defeat, a posture unfamiliar to him. He'd been gone for so long the place almost seemed unfamiliar to him. How long had it been? Three months? Four? He wasn't sure. He wasn't sure of anything anymore except for the fact that he was home now. He felt oddly apprehensive about it. In the wilderness, he'd had to face some truths about himself that he'd stubbornly repressed all these years, and the journey had been a troublesome one. With Doc gone, everything had changed. He hadn't realized it before, but he needed people. He needed his friends for balance, for the camaraderie and support they gave him. Without that, he was drained.

Outside Franklin's establishment, he dismounted and tethered the horse to the nearest hitch. Things around the bar seemed abnormally still, quiet. Or was it just him? Had the apprehension changed his perception?

"At least the building is still here," he mumbled to himself as he tied the loop securely.

"Hey, Zach. Where'd you get the horse?" a familiar voice asked from a short distance away.

Zach turned to greet the man, almost grateful to see someone he knew still around. "I found him. Do me a favor and scare up some feed and water for him, will you, Sam."

"Sure thing," Sam agreed.

Zach stood in the center of the gravel lot and pondered the man's willingness to help, thinking about community and what it had once meant, to him and to others. These people had it, even during this horrible time. They knew what was important. Each other. They weren't crusaders. They were just getting by, trusting one another. Scraping along. And it worked for them somehow.

Maybe it was time for him to settle in, stop being a crusader. He was tired of the fight. Weary to the soul. Maybe he should give in to it, retire to the mountains, become a farmer like Pete. Build a new life for himself, a new direction, and let the world rage on. As long as it didn't touch him anymore.

Sam glanced up and saw Zach watching him. "Something wrong, Zach?"

Zach came back to the present and gave himself a mental shake. "No, Sam. Everything's fine," he mumbled, then turned and walked to the door of the bar. He felt sad, weighed down by it, and didn't know why.

Inside, Zach warmed a little. The familiar sights were reassuring. Grady sat in his usual spot, and there was Franklin behind the bar. Grady noticed the bartender's broad smile and turned around. He broke into a grin when he saw Zach standing in the doorway.

"Zach. Good to see ya, friend." Grady left his barstool and met Zach halfway across the room. He gave him a hearty slap on the back and drew him to the bar. Zach could only stare at him as if he weren't quite real. He almost expected him to disappear into thin air. "Haven't seen you in a few months," Grady said.

“We were wondering if you were okay up there in them mountains of yours,” Franklin commented as he passed a whiskey to Zach.

Zach stared at the glass.

“I’m flat busted, Franklin. Don’t have a thing to pay you with,” Zach told him, taking the seat next to Grady’s. It all seemed so foreign to him, perhaps because he’d been gone too long. Or maybe because he had changed. Greeting his friends without the barrier of indifference he had erected was a new experience. It made him edgy.

“It’s on the house,” Franklin replied, his eyes searching Zach’s haggard face. “You look a little under the weather. Everything okay?”

Zach nodded, just barely.

“Say, what’s with the new scar?” Grady had noticed the newly healed wound on Zach’s shoulder.

“I got into a little scrape with some Pirates,” he admitted.

“Pirates? Here?” Franklin suddenly looked worried. With good reason. No one wanted any dealings with the likes of those men.

Zach took a long, appreciative swig of whiskey and then shook his head. “Not here. Down south. In Florida.”

“Florida?” Grady eyed him curiously. “You been in Florida?”

“Yeah.”

“And here we were thinking you were hidden away in the mountains,” Franklin commented, chuckling a little. “A top secret mission, ay?”

“Something like that. Only it wasn’t nearly as successful as I would have liked it to be.”

“Well, you can’t win ‘em all, Zach,” Grady offered. “Not one man alone.”

“I’m beginning to realize that,” Zach admitted, unable to hide the bitterness he felt.

Annoyed by the vulnerable timbre in his voice, he shrugged and took another pull of whiskey. It was familiar to him when everything else seemed so damn unfamiliar. Perhaps it would take the edge off, take that awkward feeling away.

“Damn, this tastes good. It seems like eons since I’ve had a good drink, a good meal. Hell, this feels so good I might just retire and spend the rest of my days in the mountains. Maybe I’ll start brewing my own whiskey. I could be your supplier, Franklin.”

“Doubtful,” the barkeep observed, watching his friend closely. He seemed to have marked the odd change in him. “Men like you never retire.”

“Maybe. Maybe not,” Zach said without much conviction. He didn’t want to discuss his odd frame of mind with his friends. “What’s the news, Grady?”

“Same ole.”

“That’s what I was afraid of.”

“Still got the plague. Still got no leadership.”

Zach nodded and took another shot of whiskey. “Anyone seen Tadpole?”

“Saw him the other day. Said he’d been over to Pete’s place,” Franklin told him.

“Really?” Zach perked up a little. Maybe there was hope yet.

“Said he was helping him with a fuel tank, or something like that.”

“The Hummer.” Zach nodded absently, his eyes distant, thoughtful. “So, they’re all right then. All of them? Pete, Sara, Tadpole?”

His friends looked perplexed by the question and the note of hopefulness in Zach’s voice.

“Sure, they’re okay,” Franklin said. “Why wouldn’t they be?”

“No reason.” Zach shrugged. “Just wondering about them, that’s all.”

Silence lapsed between the three men while they each pondered their own private thoughts. Over the rim of his glass, Zach saw his two friends exchange an odd glance. Something was up. That much was clear by the way the two were hedging. Zach put the glass down on the counter, a little more heavily than he intended. The harsh sound got the attention of both men.

“You got something to tell me? Something I should know about?”

Franklin glanced at Grady again.

“What is it?” Zach asked, a little more forcefully this time. A horrible feeling had crept into the pit of his stomach, the threat of bad news squeezing the breath up into a tight little wad in his throat.

“Tell him,” Grady told the bartender.

With a heavy sigh, Franklin glanced back at Zach, then spilled it. “There was a man here looking for you. Wouldn’t say his name. We didn’t tell him anything, but he hung around for a few days. He was pretty persistent. Then he just disappeared, never said another word to us.”

Zach was annoyed. He wasn’t taking on any more cases. He had already made that clear, and he didn’t intend to change his mind. Not for anyone. No matter how desperate they were. It was over for him. Finished.

“He didn’t find me, did he?”

Franklin shook his head.

“Good. I’m not in business anymore. I’ve already put away my shingle.”

Grady and Franklin remained silent.

There was a moment of awkwardness, then Zach abruptly stood up. “Thanks for the drink, Franklin. I should go see how Pete and Sara are getting along. They didn’t know I was out of town either, and it’s time I paid them a visit.”

At the door he turned back and called, “If anyone sees Tadpole, tell him I was in town looking for him. Tell him.... Ah, hell. I’ll probably be seeing him at Pete’s.”

Franklin opened his mouth to say something, but Zach was already out the door. Outside, he mounted the horse and urged him into a gallop. He was eager to see his friends. He needed that reality, needed it in the worst sort of way. These people, this settlement kept him grounded. He realized that now, realized how much his survival had always depended on them. They were something to look forward to, something to come home to. Without them...who knew what he would have become.

When he arrived at Pete’s farm, the yard was quiet. No sounds of activity in the barn. No wash hanging out on Sara’s line. No Tadpole to run out and greet him. A twist of dread slithered up his spine. He didn’t like the feeling. He couldn’t stand the thought of anyone taking his family from him a second time.

Stifling the anxiety, he dismounted and tied the horse outside Sara's front porch. On the top step, he raised his hand and was just about to knock when the front door flew open and Sara threw herself into his arms, squealing in delight. Relieved to know she was still alive, he submitted to the smothering hug, reveling in the comforting feel of her.

"We were so worried about you," she said. "It's so good to see that you're okay."

"Worried?" That was puzzling. Why would they be worried? They'd never worried about him being in the mountains before.

"Yes, worried." She drew back and looked into his face. "You look so tired. And..." Her gaze fell on his scarred shoulder. "What happened?"

Zach shrugged. "Nothing important. It's okay."

"Zach," she chastised. "Of course, it's important. I want to know what happened."

"Got another scar on that shoulder to match the other one, ay?" Pete queried from somewhere behind him.

Grinning, Zach whirled around to greet his friend. "Nothing I can't handle, old man."

"Who you calling old?" Pete's eyes sparkled with humor. After only a brief hesitation, he dragged Zach into a bear hug and slapped his back with teeth jarring force, obviously pleased to see him. But when he finally pulled away, his expression was serious. "We've been worried about you, Zach."

"That's what Sara was saying."

"When you didn't answer the signal, I got concerned."

"Signal? You left a signal for me?"

"Yeah. There at the old creek bed. Just where you told me to."

It was the message system the two had devised in case of emergencies or when someone was looking for him. Even Pete didn't know precisely where the cave was located, and a signal was the only real way of getting in touch with Zach when he was in the mountains. Pete always left a red strip of cloth tied in the lowest branch of the old pine at the mouth of the creek bed. If Zach was in the vicinity, he checked for the flag whenever he could and usually met Pete halfway down the mountain. But this time he hadn't been there to meet him. It must have worried them silly.

"You can imagine what went through our heads. I camped in them mountains for two weeks, kept checking on the flag, but no Zach. We didn't know what to think. We didn't know if you'd been killed, maimed, or if you were laying half-dead somewhere. We just had no way of knowing. We're glad to see you're all right." Pete's face crinkled into a scowl of disapproval. "But I'd sure as hell like to know what you were up to all that time."

"Okay, dad. I'll confess," Zach teased. "I guess I owe you an explanation, considering."

"You damn straight you owe me an explanation. We haven't spent these last seven years worrying about you, looking after you, only to have—"

"Whoa, slow down." Zach held up his hands in mock surrender. "When you're right, you're right."

Pete stopped his tirade and just stared at him, his arms folded across his barrel chest.

"Truth is, I took on another job. I didn't want to worry you, so I snuck out without saying anything."

"Worry us? Hell, that's all we've done for the past few months is worry," Pete roared.

A grin started to spread across Zach's face. He couldn't help it. The situation just struck him as ironic.

It was strange, him acting like a scolded boy and Pete standing in front of him like an angry father. Zach was so tall that Pete had to look up to meet his eyes, by several inches, not to mention he wasn't really old enough to be Zach's father. It was ridiculous really. But it felt right. It felt good. These people were his family. They cared. That was enough.

"What are you laughing at?" Pete demanded.

Zach grabbed the man's shoulders and gave them an affectionate squeeze. "I'm just glad you two are still here, that's all."

Pete looked even more perplexed.

"Oh, Zach. It doesn't matter where you were. All that matters now is that you're okay," Sara said, stepping forward to give him another hug. "Will you stay for dinner this time?"

He looked down at her for a long moment, taking in every detail of her face. He never wanted to forget what she looked like at that very moment, the love in her eyes. Love for him.

"Sure, I'll stay," he agreed.

She smiled. He rarely ever stayed for dinner, never wanted to impose, and his agreeing to stay obviously made her happy. When she finally released him, he could see the glimmer of tears in her eyes. "You're family, Zach. Don't you forget that."

Her words touched him. Zach felt some long forgotten emotion resonate from somewhere deep inside and had to look away to prevent it from spilling over and becoming known to them.

"Well, I have a lot of work to do," she said, turning away and dabbing at her eyes with her fingertips. "I'd better get inside and get to it."

Lost in an odd jumble of emotions he couldn't seem to sort out at the moment, Zach watched her go, then turned his steely gaze on Pete, who was still standing with his arms folded across his chest.

"Where's Tadpole? Didn't he come to live with you?"

Pete shook his head.

"Damn," Zach whispered under his breath. "I was sure I'd convinced him."

"He's been spending a lot of time up in the mountains. Some mornings I find him sleeping in the barn. I just go away quietly and let him think I don't know. He's always gone by the time I come back to check on him." Pete paused. "I think he's up there looking for you, hoping."

Zach frowned as he contemplated the news.

"Near as I can figure, there ain't no better father for that boy than you. He's chosen you, Zach. And he ain't gonna back down. He won't accept anyone else. Oh, he likes me and Sara well enough, but we're more like an aunt and uncle to him. But you.... You're his father."

Zach didn't know what to say, didn't even know how to feel about Pete's comment. He had known about Tadpole's desire for a long time now, and he'd tried to ignore it. The idea of being anything more to the boy than just a friend was impossible, so foreign. That was precisely why he'd tried to keep his distance all these years. He couldn't be a father to the kid. His lifestyle wouldn't let him. Besides, he didn't want children. They only got in his way. He didn't need the responsibility. Not now. Perhaps not ever.

"And Sara?" Zach asked. "How is she taking all this?"

Pete glanced away into the distance, and Zach could see the sadness etched in every line of his face. "She'll manage all right. It's a disappointment to her, but she has...." Pete looked back at Zach, and

they both knew what he'd been about to say. "But when she thought you were dead.... Now that was another matter." He heaved a shaky sigh. "Tadpole near went crazy from it. He missed you bad. We all did."

"I'll try to keep you better informed in the future," Zach promised. "I don't plan on taking any more cases, anyway. I'm tired of being a one-man army. I can't fight this battle alone. I never should have started. One man alone—you just can't win, Pete. This country needs unity. Something it hasn't had in a hundred years."

Pete put a hand on his uninjured shoulder and gave it a little squeeze. He didn't say anything. There was nothing to say. They both knew Zach was right. The country did need unity. It was the only thing that could stop the chaos, the confusion, the hate, the fear. Hell, it might even stop the plague. But unity was something they didn't have, and it was unlikely they would ever have it. The place was going to hell and all of them with it. They both felt the frustration. They both understood it, and they both realized any effort to change things was futile.

To ease the awkwardness, Pete drew him out to the barn, and the two of them tinkered around out there until Sara called them to dinner. After a comfortable meal, they remained seated at the table, talking and sharing Sara's blackberry pie.

"You didn't tell me why you were signaling for me," Zach reminded Pete.

"There was a man looking for you. Said his name was Coon-ass or something. Hell of a name for a man."

Zach couldn't keep a reign on his exuberance. "Coon-ass? Are you sure?"

Surprised by the sudden interest, Pete eyed him with curiosity, then nodded.

"Big guy? Arms like tree trunks? Army fatigues?" Zach crowed, too excited to contain it.

"That's him," Pete said.

"Take me to him," Zach said, standing up.

Pete shook his head. "Can't. Don't know where he is. When I told him you weren't available, after I'd tried to get hold of you for days, he just disappeared. We never heard from him again."

"Damn!"

"What is it, Zach? Do you know this man?" Sara wanted to know. She looked agitated, worried about Zach's odd reaction.

When Zach lifted his eyes to meet hers, Sara's lips parted and trembled, and for a moment, it looked like she might reach out to him. Zach felt awkward. He knew why she looked so shocked. She'd seen the helplessness in his eyes, and it was clearly a shock to her. He'd always been so strong, so sure of himself. Nothing ever affected him. Ever. Until now. The loss of Doc reminded him too much of things he wanted to forget. It upset the balance of his life. But she didn't know that, and he wouldn't tell her.

"Yes, I know him," he said, his voice gruff.

It must have been Coon-ass who'd been looking for him down at Franklin's. Now it was too late. Zach had no way of knowing where his friend had gone. There was no way for Zach to track him. The cajun was a consummate woodsman, and if he didn't want to be found, all of hell wouldn't be able to find a trace of him. All Zach could do was sit in impotent frustration.

"Damn," he muttered again.

Pete and Sara sat in silence, at a loss.

“I’ll stay with you for a few days,” he finally said. It wasn’t a question. It was more like a command. Pete and Sara didn’t argue with his choice. They were both glad to have him.

“Maybe he’ll try again,” he muttered, although it didn’t seem likely.

He hoped Coon-ass hadn’t come looking for him to tell him Doc was dead. He would rather believe for the best, but he was too afraid to allow himself the luxury just yet. Anything could have happened in that swamp. He would never know the truth unless he could find Coon-ass. Not an easy proposition. He was weary and didn’t relish another long search. He would stay put for a few days, just in case the big cajun came calling again.

His expression grim, Zach excused himself from the table and went outside. He wanted to take care of the horse before putting it in the stable for the night. Besides, he needed some time alone, to think. Not that it would do him any good.

In the barn, he found an old brush and gave the horse a thorough rubdown before putting him in the only stall available and then filling a bucket full of water. He would have to find some feed for the animal. Maybe Sara could help him out with that task. He’d already decided to give the animal to Pete. His friend could use it. A horse would be a great asset to a farm.

As he secured the stall door, a slight whisper of perception got his attention. All his senses were instantly on alert as a prickle of warning raced down his spine. He was not alone in the barn.

It wasn’t anything he saw. No shadow had fallen across the sunlight streaming into the open end of the barn to catch his eye. It was more like something sensed. A presence. Zach turned his head and saw the silhouette outlined in the doorway. A familiar figure. As the stranger stepped out of the shadow and into the light, Zach’s heart lifted. Coon-ass? Good Christ, it *was* Coon-ass!

As silent as always, the cajun crossed the barn and came to stand just inches from him, an old machine gun slung over one shoulder, his fatigues grimy from travel. Zach’s eyes took in every detail of his person, searching every inch of his face for signs of calamity. But Coon-ass seemed unharmed. Healthy. Not even a scratch. No sign of war.

“Doc sent me,” he said simply.

Zach tried to hide his elation. It might be a bit premature. After all, it wasn’t clear what Doc’s health status was just yet.

“He’s all right?”

Coon-ass nodded.

“And the others?”

Another nod.

“Take me to him.”

* * *

It took an hour to prepare for the trip. Pete helped, plying him with questions while Sara packed food for the men to take with them. Zach didn’t yet know where they were going. Coon-ass would tell him on the way there.

Zach learned that the big cajun had traveled for weeks to find him. When they discovered Zach had

gone missing, Coon-ass didn't take it as gospel. He needed to see for himself, so he'd surreptitiously followed Pete into the mountains and watched him leave the red flag at the creek bed. While Pete watched and waited, Coon-ass settled in to watch and wait, as well. But Zach never emerged. Despite Zach's absence, the cajun stuck around, waiting for any signs of his return. Zach was grateful for the big man's tenacity. At least now he knew his friends were safe.

"I finished that new fuel tank for you, and I buried the other one you brought back from that last trip," Pete told him. "It's out there about twenty paces behind the barn. There's still some fuel in it. This one here's already topped off. These two tanks together should get you where you need to go."

Pete rattled on nonstop, explaining all the changes and improvements he'd made in the Hummer. Occasionally, he glanced at Coon-ass. He was still nervous around the man. Zach understood Pete's trepidation. The cajun took some getting used to. He was silent, dirty, scraggly, big. Almost as unusual as Zach. Pete seemed to have forgotten that he hadn't been too sure of Zach either when they'd first met so many years ago. Still, any friend of Zach was a friend of Pete.

Zach put the last pack into the back of the Hummer and prepared to leave. Everything was in order, ready to go. He hugged Pete, gave him a slap on the back, and climbed into the Hummer. Sara came forward and pressed a gentle kiss against his cheek.

"There's a new light in your eyes, Zach," she whispered. "I don't care what put it there. I'm just glad to see it."

He gave her a smile and squeezed her outstretched hand. It felt so strange leaving them when he'd only just arrived. But he must.

He turned to Pete. "The horse in the barn is yours. If you see Tadpole, tell him...."

He couldn't finish. He didn't know what to say to the boy. When Tadpole discovered Zach had been there and hadn't made any move to see him, the kid would be hurt.

"Maybe I should see if he's at Franklin's before I leave," he mused, half to himself.

Pete nodded his understanding and motioned him on, putting an arm around his wife and drawing her up against his side as Zach revved the engine and pulled away.

Zach headed straight for Franklin's bar. He couldn't leave without making an attempt to find Tadpole. He had to say goodbye, or at least try. He owed Tadpole that much. Whether he wanted to admit it or not, he had ties to the boy. Strong ties.

At Franklin's, Coon-ass accompanied Zach into the bar and stood silently while he made his inquiries. Franklin and Grady couldn't mask their astonishment at seeing Zach with the very same man who'd been looking for him just a few weeks ago.

"Thought you weren't going to take any more cases," Grady observed.

"It's not a case. This is a friend of mine. Coon-ass, I'd like you to meet Grady and Franklin."

Coon-ass took each man's hand in turn and gave it a brisk shake.

"You look like you're ready for another war. You leaving?" Grady had to ask.

Zach nodded.

"Anything goin' on that I should know about?"

Zach shrugged. "I'll know when we get there."

"Mind if I tag along? It's been awhile since I've seen anything outside this bar. Maybe you could drop

me somewhere.”

Zach glanced at his cajun friend and gave a little nod to let him know Grady was okay. Coon-ass returned the nod.

“Great,” Grady said, sliding off the barstool. “I could use a little news.”

The second the words were out, Coon-ass stopped him in his tracks with a lethal look and a large hand planted firmly in the middle of Grady’s thin chest. Grady glanced at Zach for an explanation.

“I’m afraid you can’t use any of this for news, Grady. For now, you’re just along for the ride.”

He lifted his hands in agreement. “That’s cool.”

“Coon-ass here will require your word on it.”

Grady gave the cajun a critical look. “He has it.”

Zach nodded and turned back to Franklin. “Seen Tadpole?”

Franklin shook his head.

“Damn.” Zach sighed. “Well, if you do, tell him.... Tell him I’m sorry. I tried to find him to say goodbye, but....” He ended on a shrug of defeat.

Franklin nodded. “I’ll let him know. Meanwhile, do you need anything for your trip?”

“Yeah. Some of that good stuff behind the counter would be great.”

“You got it.” Franklin pulled a bottle out of his stash and passed it across the bar. “Just promise you’ll bring Grady back in one piece. I don’t know why the old has-been wants to go along and get himself into danger.”

“Who you callin’ a has-been?” Grady grumbled. “Besides, a good reporter is always willing to sacrifice himself to danger for the truth, even if I don’t get to tell anyone else about it.”

“Don’t worry, Franklin. He’s safe with me,” Zach assured the bartender. “But if he comes back with his tongue cut out....” Zach paused and glanced at the silent cajun standing next to him.

Franklin glanced at his old friend. “Maybe you should reconsider.”

Grady shook his head. “Wouldn’t miss this for the world. Haven’t been out of this town in months. It’s time I did some travelin’ before my network crumbles. Get the old bones movin’ again. Get the juices flowin’, the brain to thinkin’. Maybe there’ll be something worthy out there. Might not come back for a few months, though,” he warned his long-time buddy.

“Don’t worry. I’ll keep a candle in the window for you,” Franklin promised.

Zach gave a curt nod. “Let’s get going then. I don’t want to waste any more time. Don’t forget about Tadpole,” he called to Franklin.

Franklin nodded and waved them off.

At the door, Zach paused and turned back to cast one last sweeping gaze over the room. An odd feeling crept over him, a sense of melancholy settling somewhere in the region of his gut. He had the distinct impression he would never see this place again. A feeling so strong that he was almost afraid to leave. His instincts weren’t usually wrong.

Ignoring the sentimental angst, he turned away from the door and headed for the Hummer. For once, his instincts could go hang.

Now that he was going to see Doc, Zach was inexhaustible. They drove all through the night, and the sun was just beginning to peak over the horizon when they reached their destination. Mammoth Cave, Kentucky.

“I’ll be damn,” Zach whispered to himself as he parked the Hummer and got out. “He was almost in my back yard, and I didn’t even know it.”

“Didn’t make it any easier to find you,” Coon-ass grumbled.

Grady was still with them. He’d gleaned enough from their conversation during the drive that he wasn’t about to let go now. As he put it, “This is news in the making. I’m not goin’ nowhere.”

Coon-Ass still hadn’t explained why Doc had moved his facility, and the cajun’s silence made Zach even more anxious to see his friend and find out what was going on.

“Mammoth Cave, huh? Isn’t it a little obvious?” Zach wondered aloud, stepping around to the back of the Hummer to collect his canteen, his pistol, and a few other items.

“It’s easier to defend. There aren’t many people in this area. Guess they weren’t smart enough to figure out what they had. Perfect shelter. Some people are afraid of caves, though.” The cajun shrugged. “But Doc has another place in mind for his research.”

Zach was curious but didn’t ask. He knew Coon-ass would leave the explaining to Doc.

Grady stood beside the two men and stared at his surroundings in awe. “Haven’t been here since I was a boy,” he commented when he noticed Zach’s amused glance. “It seems so different. Empty. Natural. The way it was before man arrived to screw everything up.”

Zach grinned as he peered into the back of the Hummer. His canteen seemed to be missing, and he couldn’t figure out what had happened to it. Thinking maybe it had gotten bucked around a little and moved out of place, he reached down and yanked the tarp away from the bottom of the Hummer. He pulled back in alarm when a slight figure shot up out of the truck-bed. The boy flew past him but only made it as far as Coon-Ass before he was halted by a huge paw swooping down and locking onto his throat in a death grip. The boy squealed in alarm and kicked his legs out in an attempt to defend himself, his skin already beginning to turn purple. All his attempts to escape were in vain. Coon-ass held him so far above the ground that his feet found no leverage. He didn’t have a chance of escaping the cajun’s grip.

“It’s Tadpole,” Zach growled, his brows slamming together in a frown of disapproval. “Put him down. He’s harmless.”

Coon-Ass obliged. Rubbing at his sore throat, Tadpole warily put a few yards between himself and the cajun. His face was slowly returning to its normal shade of color, but he couldn’t quite meet Zach’s eyes. The kid knew he was in big trouble.

Zach did what was expected of him and lit into him with all the gusto of an indignant father. “What the

hell do you think you're doing stowing away like that? You could have been killed. Coon-Ass doesn't usually wait for an explanation before he finishes the job."

Tadpole glanced up at the rugged looking cajun and took another respectful step away from him, obviously not wanting a repeat performance. "You're the man who was lookin' for Zach."

Coon-Ass merely stood staring at him, his arms folded across his chest. Tadpole glanced away but still couldn't look at Zach. Instead, he looked at Grady and grinned. The black man couldn't keep from offering a smile of comfort. He liked Tadpole too well to be angry with him for a simple thing like stowing away. Besides which, he knew why the boy had done it. To be near Zach. He would risk anything to be near Zach. Everyone knew that. Everyone but Zach, anyway.

Zach crouched down on one knee to look the boy in the eye. "You knew I wouldn't approve of this, Tadpole, so why did you do it?" When the boy didn't answer, Zach added, "This isn't a game, you know. This is dangerous business."

Tadpole's response shocked all three men. "I'm not a kid anymore," he screamed, his voice breaking and peaking in a high-pitched shriek as he unloaded on them. "I'm a man! When will you believe that? When will you stop treating me like I'm a girl?"

After he'd vented, he whirled on his heel and started to run, but he didn't get far. Zach lunged forward and grabbed him by the jacket, instantly bringing him to a halt.

"You're nine years old, Tad. You *are* a kid. Whether you like it or not."

The boy turned back to stare him full in the face. One look was all it took. Zach understood everything, and he couldn't be angry with the kid anymore. Why hadn't he seen this before? Had he been so absorbed in his own personal wars that he couldn't see the war raging in Tadpole?

Zach silently drew the boy into his arms. Tadpole pressed his face against Zach's shoulder, each hand clenching a fistful of jacket as if the gesture could impart the message he couldn't bring himself to say, the reality of what he was feeling. He was afraid Zach would leave one day and never come back to him. That's why he'd stowed away in the Hummer. That's why he'd been in the mountains looking for him. He was acting out what words couldn't express, what he'd never been able to admit to Zach. Because he was a kid. Because he *wanted* to be a kid. He wanted the life he could never have.

Tadpole's bravado had slipped. He was afraid. He was alone. He needed someone. And Zach was that someone he had chosen to need. It was the first time the boy had given him any sign whatsoever that he wanted the childhood that had been taken from him, and it touched Zach in a way that nothing ever had before. Because this boy was a mirror of himself. This boy had patterned himself after a man he considered a hero, had cloaked himself in a toughness he didn't always feel. He was vulnerable. Just like Zach was vulnerable. They couldn't help it. They were human, both of them. All of them. Whether they wanted to admit it or not, they were all human.

"I had to do it, Zach," the boy sobbed into his jacket, his face buried in the heavy leather. "I couldn't let you leave again without me. Don't you understand?"

"I understand, Tadpole," Zach murmured, his big hands stroking the boy's back in a gesture of comfort. "I understand now. I admit I didn't before. But I do now."

Tadpole was unmindful of the tears streaking through the dirt on his face. It didn't seem to matter that he was crying in front of three grown men, acting precisely the way a kid should. He wasn't fighting the natural inclination anymore. He seemed resigned, almost defeated. The battle he'd waged for so many lonely years was lost. He wanted to be a kid so desperately. It was evident in his eyes, in his tears, in his fear. Zach wished he could give that childhood back to him. If only he had the power to

give him that gift, to make the world a place where children could be children again. But it seemed so damn impossible.

Tadpole raised his head to look into Zach's eyes. "You won't send me back, will you?"

Zach was so choked up he was unable to speak. There was the smallest glimmer of hope on Tadpole's face, so tiny that anyone who didn't know the boy wouldn't even catch it. But Zach saw it, and that was all that mattered at the moment.

"If you let me stay, I'll be good, I promise. I'll do anything you say. Honest, I will," Tadpole pleaded.

Zach studied the distant horizon for a moment. Not that he really needed the time to decide. He simply needed a minute to get hold of his own feelings, a vulnerability and love he hadn't felt in eons, so overpowering that he was afraid it would spill out of him in a tidal wave of emotion. *Not in front of the other men*, he silently willed himself.

He didn't need to think about it. He'd made his decision the moment he'd seen the boy's tears. Tad could stay. From now on, if he liked. It was time. Time to give back a little of what the boy was so willing to give him. Hell, it was past time, long overdue. No matter what the cost, whatever it took, the boy would know he always had a home with Zach.

"You can stay."

Tadpole's entire face lit with joy. He started to give a triumphant cry to celebrate his elation, then remembered one of Zach's unbreakable rules and clamped it off. Zach had taught him the importance of being silent in the woods, and apparently the lesson had stuck.

Zach smiled and reached out to ruffle Tadpole's cowlick. The kid would do okay.

The smile Tadpole returned was beatific, full of love, gratitude, and hope. But it was the hope that really touched Zach. He wished he could borrow a smidgen of that hope from the kid, just enough to see him through a few years.

"Come on. We have places to go and people to meet," Zach said, standing up and glancing at the other men.

Tadpole danced around his feet, his exuberance contagious. Grady gave Zach a smile that let him know he'd handled the situation well, and even Coon-ass seemed to approve. Somehow, it made his decision easier.

Tad helped unload the Hummer, and together the small group made their way down into the enormous mouth of the cave. Zach was surprised to find most of Doc's army inside. Coon-ass dispatched a man with a stilted nod, and a few minutes later, Doc appeared. Zach and Doc greeted one another like brothers, with a strong embrace and a few thumps on the back.

"Damn, I thought you were a goner," Zach said.

Doc looked puzzled.

"I went to the swamp," he explained.

Doc nodded his understanding and reached out to clamp a hand on Zach's left shoulder in a gesture of reassurance, but he pulled away when Zach winced. The memory of the pain was still clear in his mind. His wound hadn't healed well and still carried some tenderness. Doc insisted he remove his shirt so he could take a look.

"Where the hell did you get this?"

"I had another run-in with the Pirates. I patched it myself. What do you think?"

“Not bad. A little jagged, but not bad considering,” Doc admitted. He glanced up and focused on Zach’s face. “Are you okay? Something about you seems....”

“Changed?” Zach grinned. “You too. Must be something in the air.”

It was true. Doc was different. There was a new fervency about him, almost like a fever. He seemed excited, intense, more animated than Zach had ever seen him. Almost like he had a secret he couldn’t wait to tell.

“So, what happened? Why the sudden move?” Zach asked.

“The Pirates were stumbling around out there in the swamp, getting too close. I’ve been worried about it for a long time. For months, I had scouts out looking for a better place. We’d been thinking about coming here, anyway. The cooler atmosphere is better for my research.”

“Say no more. I understand.” The research was the most important thing, for all of them.

Doc glanced at Grady and the boy, naturally curious. Zach introduced the two and explained why they happened to be with him. Doc welcomed them like he would welcome any friend, trusting them without hesitation simply because Zach did.

“Come and meet the others. We have a lot to tell you,” Doc urged, leading them deeper into the cave.

“You sound like something monumental is about to take place.”

“It is.”

Doc’s answer was perplexing, but he didn’t explain himself just yet. Zach followed him down into the yawning earth in a silence of wondering. Deep into the ground, they arrived in the enormous great room of the cave, where a motley assortment of men waited. Zach was surprised. There were so many of them. Much more than Doc’s own army. What were they doing here? Where had they all come from?

Zach glanced at Doc, waiting for an answer to his unspoken question.

“Come on. I’ll introduce you around,” Doc said, stepping up to the nearest man. “This is Leo Halstrom. Ex-pilot for the Air Force,” Doc explained while the two men shook hands. “The best in his field. He brought in twenty-five of the men who worked under him, most of them pilots and mechanics.”

Doc moved on to the next man. “Jim James, the survivalist. I’m sure you remember hearing about him.”

The man took his hand in a firm grip. Zach could tell by the glint in his eyes and the power in his handshake that he was a hothead. He had trouble with hotheads. They were always dangerous.

“James brought in a hundred men with him when he came. Downright demanded to be a part of this deal,” Doc said.

“And what is this deal?” Zach wanted to know.

“I’m getting around to it,” Doc promised, turning to another man. “This is our newest member. Wouldn’t take no for an answer. Jordan Quinn.”

“I remember you. I saw you on the news during the revolt. You were a big part of the new black awareness movement.”

The black man nodded and gave him a friendly smile. Zach shook his hand, liking him instantly.

“Jordan is ex-marine. And from what I hear he’s a damn fine weapons expert,” Doc went on.

They all seemed to be ex-something. Ex-something was all they could be, considering there was no

government, no society left to be a part of anymore.

“Unfortunately I didn’t bring anyone with me. But I think I can get together a small group of brothers,” Jordan told him.

Zach gave Doc another puzzled glance.

“I guess it’s time I explained,” he mused.

“That would be....” Zach broke off and stared in dumbfounded surprise when he spied a familiar face in the crowd. She was just standing there, watching him, as if drinking him in with her eyes. All he could do was stare back.

Doc noticed the direction of his gaze and was quick to respond to it. “This is Burgess. She’s the only female among us, except, of course, for Serena. She stumbled across us when we were in the process of moving. Actually, Serena found her and threw a fit until we agreed to bring her along with us. I figured Serena needed a mother figure, and Burgess fits the bill. She’s been a great asset to us in many ways.”

Burgess stepped a little closer to Zach, her eyes raking over him in open assessment. “Your hair is longer,” she observed, reaching out as if to shake his hand.

He ignored the hand she offered. “Yours is shorter. You chopped it off.”

Burgess let her hand drop back to her side, and Zach watched a fleeting emotion cross her face. She looked hurt, maybe even a bit angry. Still, she refused to break her gaze. It was that bravado he’d seen before, the bluster she hid behind to keep people from getting close. “It was getting in the way.”

“Looks like you did it yourself,” Zach commented. He didn’t mean it in an unkind way. Actually, short hair was very becoming on her, especially now that her face was clean. He’d never really seen it clean before. She was beautiful.

Burgess nodded and glanced away, obviously self-conscious now that he’d mentioned her hair. It was an intriguing transition. That flickering moment of defensive anger, a bite of self-confidence, only to melt into a shyness that didn’t seem to fit her. Could it mean something? Something that might actually wind up being enjoyable?

Doc watched them in open curiosity. “You two know each other?”

Neither one of them had the opportunity to answer. Just then, Serena came hurtling out of the group of men, squealing in delight as she threw herself into Zach’s arms.

“Zach! I was so worried about you!”

“Me? You were worried about me?”

“Of course, silly. We all were.”

Feeling oddly uninhibited, Zach hugged her close and gave her a kiss on the cheek before releasing her. “Frankly, I was worried about you, too.”

She smiled. “I knew you would be. Didn’t I tell you, Doc?”

Doc nodded, smiling.

“I see you’re still taking good care of Hangdog,” Zach observed, eyeing the mutt. Hangdog had followed Serena and now sat beside her, tail wagging in recognition as he looked up at Zach.

Serena giggled and gave the dog a possessive pat.

Tadpole had been sticking close to Zach in a rare moment of shyness, but when he heard the welcoming shriek from the girl, he came out from behind Zach to stare at her. Zach glanced down at

him and grinned.

“Serena. I’d like you to meet a friend of mine. We call him Tadpo—”

“Tad,” the boy broke in. “My name is Tad.”

Serena’s smile broadened, and somehow it had the power to summon an answering one from Tadpole. Zach just stared at the kid, a little surprised by this sudden awkwardness from a boy who had always been too bold for his own good, and surprised that Tadpole seemed so interested in someone his own age. The kid had spent so many years trying to relate to adults, trying to be an adult himself that it seemed impossible for him to be any other way. Yet, he’d taken to Serena instantly.

“How is she?” Zach murmured in an aside to Doc.

“She’s well. But there’s no telling how long that will last.”

“Any progress on your research?”

Looking grave, Doc shook his head. “But I won’t give up. I’ll never give up.”

Zach nodded and glanced back at the girl. She looked so different, happy. He was glad for her. At least the last years of her life would be spent in security, surrounded by love.

“Serena, why don’t you take Tad and show him some of the more interesting parts of the cave,” Doc suggested.

“Oh, you’ll like it,” she exclaimed. Despite the trepidation that crossed Tadpole’s face, she reached out and took his hand, eager to play tour guide. “It’s like nothing you’ve ever seen before.”

“How do you know?” Tad made an attempt to sound manly, more worldly than she.

Zach almost laughed aloud. Even in a world of revolt, the male ego was alive and well, ready and eager to tangle with the female of the species.

Still giggling, Serena led him away. Zach watched them go. The two of them together were an unusual sight, but he was glad for both of them. It would be good for them to interact with someone closer to their own age. Good for the adults, too. So nice to see children laughing again, playing together.

Noticing a slight movement out of the corner of his eye, Zach looked up just in time to see Doc exchange a glance with Burgess. He jerked his head in the direction of the kids, but she obstinately shook her head. It was obvious he wanted her to accompany the younger generation, but she had no intention of leaving and missing out on whatever it was Doc had to say to Zach.

Tired of waiting, Zach asked, “So, what is this all about? Why the army?”

Doc didn’t mince words, just gave it to Zach straight up. “We got word recently that the Pirates have Subtropolis.”

Zach let out a low whistle of amazement. Subtropolis was an enormous underground compound, a catacomb of subterranean storefronts and business sites. Easy to defend but difficult to maintain without the proper ventilation. They would require fuel of some sort to run those generators. Doc must have read his mind because in the next breath he answered Zach’s unspoken question.

“They’ve been bleeding a pocket of natural gas, got some oil rigs chugging, and they’re using the fuel to run the facility. If they get a foothold, they’ll take over the country. We can’t let that happen.”

“Count me in,” Zach said. “Sounds like an easy job. All we have to do is sneak in, place some explosives, and close the place down.”

Doc shook his head. “I don’t want to destroy the place. It’s too valuable. I need the facility for my

research. If they do have fuel, I could use it. It would make a big difference.”

Zach considered it for a time. “All right, so we take it. When do we start?”

Doc stared at him for a moment, then passed an agitated hand through his hair before beginning. “I want more, Zach. This army is only the beginning. Once we have Subtropolis, we can use it as our base. With 40 million square feet of space, it’s big enough to suit all our purposes. I can do my research, and you....”

Looking embarrassed, Doc broke off.

Zach’s curiosity needle was buried on the high end. “Me?” he prompted.

“We’ve decided to do something about this country. We can’t just spend the rest of our lives running.”

“What do you mean *do* something about the country?” Zach felt an odd sensation of half-apprehension half-excitement creep over him. He hadn’t even heard Doc’s plan, yet it already seemed like an impossible, almost ludicrous feat. But nonetheless alluring. “What? You’re planning on taking this little army out to reclaim territory. That’s a big world out there, Doc. I think you’re gonna need a few more men.”

Zach couldn’t hide the slight edge to his voice, couldn’t seem to squelch the feeling of betrayal. Why hadn’t he been told about this before, included in on the plan right from its inception? They were friends, for chrissake. Why had he been left out? What the hell was Doc thinking, anyway? What could he hope to accomplish? It would take a much larger army than this motley assortment to change the state of affairs, to regain control of the country.

He glanced at the men. They were all waiting, watching him intently.

“We intend to change things, Zach. Whatever it takes. And we want you to help us,” Doc said.

Zach glanced back at his friend, studied his face carefully, then looked out over the group of men. They were still watching him, so intent, expecting an answer. What could he tell them? Yes, I’ll be your puppet. Yes, I’ll join your ranks and get myself killed inside a week. Yes, I’m crazy, just like all of you are crazy. Crazy enough to think I can change things.

He turned back to Doc. “How did all this come about? When did you reach the conclusion that it was time to change the world?”

“Just a bunch of guys sitting around getting drunk and talking about what used to be. What *could* be in the future.”

“We’ll have to clean him up quite a bit,” Burgess threw in. She’d been silently observing him, but now she seemed to be assessing him in a more thorough way, a contemplative way. “He needs a good shave, a haircut....”

“Wait a minute,” Zach exploded. He was annoyed with their hedging. “What the hell are you talking about? You aren’t making any sense. None of you are making any sense.”

Doc scraped a hand along the back of his neck, let out a sigh, then looked Zach directly in the eye. “We’re looking for a leader,” he said bluntly.

Zach just stood there staring at him. Now he felt even more apprehensive. He had a premonition of what was coming next, and he wasn’t sure he was going to like it.

“Cut to the chase, Doc. We’ve been friends a long time. You can tell it to me straight,” Zach reminded him, not bothering to hide the feeling of betrayal anymore. He had come to the end of his patience, was even considering leaving, but Doc’s next words stopped him, made him hesitate just long enough to be

hooked.

“We want to make things happen, Zach. Do you understand what that means?”

“Hell, yes, I understand. But—”

“We need a leader. Someone like you. We need deliverance.”

Zach felt like he'd been sucker punched. He'd suspected he wouldn't like Doc's angle. Now he was sure. Just when he had decided to retire, now came talk of him leading an entire army. Forget that one-man bullshit. An entire army!

“Why me? Why not....” Zach glanced at the men around him. “Why not any one of these guys?”

“You're the most likely candidate. You have the education, the background. You know Washington better than any of us. You were—still are—an attorney. You know the law. You know best how the system works. You can be the next President of the United States. Just think about what that could mean,” Doc insisted, his eyes burning with that new fervency Zach had noticed before.

Zach started to shake his head. He couldn't believe what they were asking. It was an honor. A burden. Both. They had chosen him out of hundreds. They felt he was worthy. But they had the wrong man. He wasn't interested in becoming a hero to the public.

“We understand. You'll need time to think about it. But don't take too long, Zach. We leave for Subtropolis next month. I want you with us.”

Zach stared at him, his mind already racing with possibilities. To change the world. To make it more livable. To create a new government. If it was possible, at all possible.... Jesus, it was too much to think about. Still, despite all his misgivings, he felt a stirring of hope, anticipation. Just a bare flicker.

“There must be other attorneys out there who survived the revolt,” he said, almost to himself. He was still in shock. Still didn't know what to say.

Doc shook his head. “Not like you. None with the drive and the integrity that you have, the fierce determination.”

“The way we figure it, you're the best man for the job,” Jordan added.

Grady stepped forward to say, “I agree. If I thought we could have somethin', you'd be the man I'd pick.”

“We all agree, Zach,” Burgess said.

“You want to change things too, Zach. I know you do. All those midnight conversations over Tennessee whiskey. I haven't forgotten them. You've always been a crusader. This is your chance to get your life back. Think about it. Just think about it,” Doc urged

“In the meantime, let's show you around and get you acclimated,” Jordan said. “There's a lot to see.”

* * *

Over the next several days, Zach did nothing but think about Doc's plan. What Doc offered was too incredible for words. It was the chance to have a life. Not this pitiable existence he'd been calling a life, but a real one, with a real future. Status, the opportunity to do more, to use his education. For the past ten years, he'd tried to stifle his feelings, the yearning for something more, for his old life back in D.C. Leaving it all behind, throwing away his dreams, had been difficult. It had haunted him for so long.

He'd come to detest the man he'd been forced to become, the person the revolt had molded. Yet, he was almost thankful for the journey. He had grown, had become stronger than he'd ever thought possible. All his experiences, no matter how traumatic, were the foundation of that strength. Maybe now was the time to use all that knowledge. Use it for something other than killing. Use it to lead.

My God, everything could change in an instant. He could have his dreams back. It would take months to accomplish, perhaps years, but it would be worth it. It would be change, for the better.

He willingly accepted command of the army Doc had gathered, and jumped right into planning their takeover of Subtropolis. But the decision to become president was another matter. He would have to think about that.

During the days of planning for the attack, Zach came to know the men well. He was irrevocably involved, elbow-deep in every aspect of strategy. They were an amazing group of men, all just as strong and determined as he was. Ex-computer technicians and programmers, ex-engineers, pilots, mechanics, and warriors. Everyone had an area of expertise, and they all worked together for the whole. Even Jim's ego didn't get in the way of the common goal.

Grady was in seventh heaven. "This is news in the making," he said over and over again. He was even working with one of the men on some of the radios they'd salvaged. "If we can get some of these going, we'd have a new network of communication."

It was amazing what they intended to do, truly amazing. Zach sometimes wondered if he was dreaming it all, but then he would wake in the middle of the night and find himself in Mammoth Cave, Kentucky. And these men, this incredible handful of men, had chosen him to lead them. He was in a constant turmoil over it. The responsibility was a heavy one to bear, almost an impossible decision to make. Could he do them justice? Could they win this thing? Could they really hope to gain control of the country again after all the years of devastation and violence?

Could he lead them?

With every day that passed, the men began to treat him more and more like he had already made his decision. They respected him and seemed fully convinced that he couldn't possibly say no. In their minds, the deal was cinched. He was their president.

Zach still wasn't sure. He didn't know if he was prepared for something like this. He didn't know if he had what it took to be a leader. He'd spent so many years being a loner.

Still, this experience was changing his perspective. Working so closely with so many men who held a common goal gave him reason to reconsider his reclusive ways. He was in the middle of it all. Heated debates, negotiations, ideas thrown forth only to be rejected, remolded, or accepted wholeheartedly. Zach found himself participating in more than just war strategy. He enjoyed the camaraderie, the plans, the renewed hopes. It was all so fresh and new, all the possibilities. This must be what the founding fathers had felt when they had decided to form a more perfect union so many eons ago.

A more perfect union.

The idea that he could help lead the world into order again was thrilling, infectious. It got down into his soul, until he began to believe that maybe he actually could make a change for the better.

* * *

"He'll be more popular if he has a First Lady."

They were all gathered together for dinner, all of them sitting around zealously discussing the future, when Zach heard snatches of a conversation between Doc and Serena. He turned his head and saw the girl eyeing Burgess, sizing her up as if measuring her for the role of First Lady.

“I’m afraid I’m not quite ready for that, Serena,” Zach told her.

It was a cute sentiment—just like a young girl to think of something like that—but it wasn’t for him. Who he chose as a mate was his decision, and he had no intention of having a First Lady. He might agree to lead the people, but he’d been alone too damn long to accept anyone into his life on a permanent basis. Besides, Burgess was a pain in the ass. She wanted to be included in on everything. She wanted to be treated like an equal. She actually thought he was going to let her go to Subtropolis and fight alongside the men.

His gaze automatically slid in her direction. She sat some distance away, but she had apparently heard Serena’s comments, and she was watching him with an odd expression on her face. Zach felt something powerful move over him and fought to repress it. The feeling scared the hell out of him.

“Serena is right,” Doc said.

“Be serious,” Zach replied, forcing himself to look away from Burgess.

Doc glanced over at Burgess and smiled. “Why not? She’s clean. I’ve already checked her for the virus and found her negative. And she’s available. Consider it a business arrangement. We could have you married by morning.” Doc was teasing now, almost humoring young Serena, but the joke was lost on Zach.

“Whoa. You people seem to think you can decide my fate for me. First things first. If—and that’s a big if—I decide to agree to do this, there will be boundaries. Starting now. My marital status is not a subject of debate.”

“She is right, though,” Burgess threw in. “The people will accept you more readily if you have a First Lady. It’s what they know. It’s familiar, and what’s familiar often becomes comfortable. Even you should agree that winning the people is the most important step in our battle to regain power. They still have to sort of vote you in. Not literally. But it would make our way much easier if they accepted and trusted you. People trust the familiar.”

“She has a point.” Doc’s brows were raised in obvious appreciation of her intuitive commentary.

“But I haven’t decided anything yet,” Zach insisted, throwing his fork down onto his plate with a loud clang. The outburst captured the attention of every man around him. Ignoring the startled looks, he stood up and began to pace restlessly.

“You people don’t seem to understand what a difficult undertaking this is. We would have to subdue all those factions that are working against us, and there are many. The Pirates, the Hunters. And we’d have to do something about the plague, something that would unfortunately have to be radical. We’d have to give the people something to hope for, something to look forward to. It’s the only way we can get their attention and their support.”

“You’ve obviously been giving this a lot of thought,” Doc interrupted. “Does that mean you’ll do it?”

Every eye was on Zach as he stopped pacing and turned to face his friend. “I didn’t say that. I’m just trying to make a point. An undertaking of this massive proportion needs to be thoroughly planned.”

Agitated, Doc abruptly stood up, almost upsetting the table in the process. “You don’t think we’ve gone over all the possibilities, all the problems, all the setbacks. We didn’t come to this decision lightly. We know what we’re getting into.” He glared hard at Zach, his eyes reflecting the frustration he felt.

“Don’t leave us hanging, man. Make your decision. Soon. We can’t afford to wait much longer.”

A muscle jumped along Zach's jaw, and his eyes narrowed in anger. He didn't like the pressure, didn't like it one bit. But, dammit, these people were trying. It was the best idea he'd heard in years, and it just might work. If it didn't, they would all die trying, and that would be the end of it. For them, anyway. No more agony, no more fighting, no more fear. It would be over. Done. Finished. What was the risk? They were all going to die sooner or later anyway.

Doc stepped to within inches of Zach, his gaze searching, almost challenging. "Let's bring order out of all this chaos, out of this hell," he whispered earnestly. "You and me."

In the face of Doc's plea, Zach's ire cooled. But he was still uncertain. It was a big step, a huge commitment, and God knew he was terrified of commitments. All except for those he created for himself.

Almost sadly, he shook his head. "I don't know. It seems so impossible."

Jordan stood up and said, "You won't be alone. We'll be backing you. We can do it. We can gather more and more men as we go."

Zach gazed at the fifty-year-old ex-marine, a man of strength and determination. A man to be trusted, respected, a man who had once challenged his black brothers to respect themselves.

"We can do it, man. Together. Nothing is impossible when people unite," Jordan said.

"Do you know what you're asking? Do all you people know what you're asking?" Zach's gaze swept over the entire assembly, men who had eagerly volunteered themselves as soldiers in the new army. They were all watching him, waiting, expectant. He saw something there in all those faces, something he'd almost forgotten existed for men like him. He saw hope. Could he deny them that hope? Could he disappoint these people?

He felt a tug on his sleeve and looked down to find Serena's tear-streaked face turned up to his.

"For me, Zach. Do it for me."

Only she could unlock his rigid set of rules and allow him to accept and take hold of the future, the leadership these people were pushing on him. She was a woman-child, intelligent beyond her years, made so by experience, yet fated to die before her time, before she had ever really known what beauty life could offer her. Only she could get under his skin this way. Could he deny her?

Do it for her? For the people?

Yes. And for himself, as well. He'd been yearning for some semblance of his old life. What these people offered him was so much more than what he could have ever hoped to obtain in his former life. They were offering him the presidency. He would no longer be a one-man army. He would be commander in chief of the Armed Forces of the New United States of America. *His* forces. Together they could do it. But only together. It was something they would all have to understand. A unified front, or nothing.

Zach turned to Grady. "You'll have to make the people love me, Grady. Like they've never loved any other president-elect."

"Don't worry, Zach. If anyone can do it, I can," Grady swore, his ebony eyes gleaming with pride, catching the hope and reflecting it.

"You'll need a vehicle."

Grady shook his head. "Not yet. Later. It's too dangerous now. But don't worry. I'll get the word around. I have a network of my own. We can get the job done. Later, when things start goin' in the right direction, we'll spread out, expand."

Zach nodded.

“Does that mean you’ll do it?” Doc asked.

“If this is gonna work, we have to agree,” Zach told him, and all of them. “You have to understand the necessity for a certain amount of power. Just look at what happened with the plague. Look at what is happening out there now. This has to be a unanimous decision. Absolute rule stops here. With me.”

An ear-splitting howl of agreement went up from the group. Doc simply smiled. Jordan reached out to shake his hand, his teeth gleaming white against his black face as he grinned broadly. All of them were smiling now, even Burgess.

“If we are to succeed, we have to take this country. By force if necessary. It’s the only way,” Zach stated, his voice gaining strength as he stepped into the role. “Do we agree?”

A collective cheer answered his question.

“If I take this job, I will be commander in chief. I will be your president. I will be your leader, your ruler. You must pledge your allegiance to me.”

Another cheer. God, it felt good. He’d never in all his life felt the way he did now. Invigorated, elated, alive like he’d never been before. He was going to do something for this nation. He was going to lead this country back to order. It was an incredible undertaking, and they trusted him to take the helm.

“I’ll start with Grady. You’ll be my press secretary. You’re in charge of media.”

Grady nodded acceptance.

“Mr. Quinn. You will be elevated to the rank of four-star general. You’re my new chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Anyone who does not respect your title will answer to me.”

“Wait just a damn minute!” James burst out, shoving through the crowd to stand in front of Zach.

Contention already. It wasn’t all that surprising, considering the source. The hothead.

“You have a problem, James?”

“I don’t think it’s such a good idea to have an ex-activist as chairman.”

“Because I’m black?” Jordan demanded. “Let me remind you that you are also an activist. Just because your skin is white you think that makes you better qualified for the job.”

James ignored him.

“Grady is black. You didn’t have any objections to his status,” Zach reminded him.

“Quinn is a loose cannon,” James began.

“Look, man. This is my country, too,” Jordan insisted, his eyes bloodshot with anger. “And it is my right to defend it, to fight for it. Whether I’m black, white, Hispanic, or Native American.”

Zach put a restraining hand on his arm, halting his speech. Jordan instantly quieted in deference to his rank.

“He’s in,” Zach said, his eyes daring anyone to defy him. No one did. Not even James.

Jordan gazed into Zach’s face for a long moment and then very slowly smiled. “Yeah. Yeah!”

Zach gave him a hearty slap on the back and then turned to James. “I won’t tolerate any form of division in this army. Unity. We’re together, or we’re nothing. Is that clear?”

Coon-Ass, who’d been standing nearby, jolted the man into addressing Zach with respect by prodding

him with the tip of his machine gun.

“I’m in,” James agreed, his eyes glittering with the anger of defeat.

Zach turned his attention to the tall cajun. “You got a name, Coon-Ass?”

The cajun glanced around uncomfortably, and Zach could have sworn he colored just slightly. But then he pulled himself up to his full height and spoke out in a clear, concise voice. “Raymond, sir. Raymond Pierce.”

“Raymond Pierce. You are now the head of the New Intelligence Service,” Zach announced, unable to keep the grin off his face now. Something was happening to him, something exhilarating and wonderful. He felt alive. For the first time in years, he felt alive.

Suddenly, it hit him. It had begun with Serena. She had planted the seed, and the experience with the alligator had nudged it into growth. He’d started to feel again. When he’d been in the swamp, facing that behemoth, he’d made the decision to live, his first conscious decision to do so after years of searching for innumerable ways to die. That’s what had changed him so on that momentous day. That’s why he was so different. He didn’t just feel alive. He actually *wanted* to live. It was a great feeling, to embrace life again.

“So, you agree?” Doc prompted.

“There’s a lot of work to be done here.”

Doc lifted his eyebrows, pointedly waiting.

Zach’s gaze was direct as he answered, “Yes. I accept the office of President of the New United States.”

Doc broke into a broad grin. “I knew you’d come through. You won’t regret this, Zach. You’ll never regret it.”

“Damn straight I won’t. Come hell or high water, I’m gonna bring this nation together again.”

Still grinning, Doc reached out to give him a bear hug while the men whooped in victory.

Burgess jumped on top of the table and raised a glass to the crowd. “Let’s get drunk!”

“Not until after our first victory,” Zach commanded. “There’s training to be done.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. President, sir,” she hooted, doing a pretty fair imitation of a soldier’s salute.

“To Subtropolis then,” Zach said simply, looking around at his new command.

“To Subtropolis!” they shouted back to him.

Damn, it felt good.

It seemed a pitifully small group to be attacking a facility that covered over fifty square miles of underground rooms. Doc's scout had told them the Pirate stronghold numbered nearly a thousand men, most of which were clustered together in one area. All Zach had going for him was the element of surprise. If they wanted to succeed, they would have to infiltrate the underground labyrinth without detection. That was the tricky part. Getting two hundred men inside, spreading out, and taking out as many Pirates as they could without explosives. It seemed impossible. But clandestine was what Zach did best.

Zach and his men had surreptitiously surrounded the place. There were several entrances to Subtropolis. Zach planned to seal them all from the outside. Once his men were inside, several of his army personnel would move into position with trucks they'd salvaged and block anyone from getting out again. Zach wanted no escapees this time. Every Pirate inside would die, or he would die trying.

Two guards stood outside the first entrance to the limestone maze. Zach and his army were holed up nearby, spread out and waiting to move. They'd decided to use Burgess as a decoy, but Zach was having some misgivings about the arrangement. The idea was hers. Zach had not approved, but she insisted, and he eventually gave in.

"But if you let those son-of-a-bitches get within a foot of me, I'll skin your balls," she warned.

Zach's flesh quivered just thinking about it. He had no doubt she would make good on her threat.

The army was decked out in charcoal gray and flat black, faces painted in black streaks, army fatigues loaded to the hilt with weapons. Every man carried a heavy personal arsenal. Bows, knives, handguns, semi-automatics, and shrapnel grenades. Cans filled with deadly metal shards and lined with enough powder to blow the container open and send the small missiles in all directions. Radios were clipped to their headgear, tiny little packets of technology that made their task a whole lot easier. Most of his men wore helmets, but Zach had foregone the cumbersome headpiece. It just didn't feel right. His headset consisted of the wire and nothing more. The wires were an asset, but the men communicated infrequently. Zach had trained his soldiers to be silent, deadly, and swift.

They waited until midnight to strike. First rush...Burgess. She sauntered out of the darkness, whistling a coy tune, her breasts practically spilling out of a top she'd ripped nearly to shreds, and her long, slender legs left bare nearly to her crotch. She was an eye-catcher, and the two guards didn't even bother to raise their weapons as she approached. They just catcalled and leered at the morsel the gods had bestowed on them.

As she drew nearer, one shifted and adjusted his dick. Zach watched from his position above, his adrenaline pumping hot and heavy. If Coon-ass didn't make a move soon, Zach's balls would be in deep shit.

Just then a shadow emerged from the opposite side of the entrance. Zach relaxed when he recognized Coon-ass's solid form. The big cajun glided up behind the nearest guard and casually slit his throat. At the gurgling sound of death emanating from his partner, the second guard started to turn, saw Coon-ass, and reached for his weapon. Before he could raise it to his shoulder, Burgess sank a long blade into his chest. The kill was swift and silent.

At Zach's softly spoken command, two men emerged from the shadows and dragged the Pirates off. Burgess disappeared with Coon-ass. A few minutes later, the two men reappeared at the entrance, dressed like Pirates. One of them scratched his nose, then spat on the ground. The signal.

"Leader Two is clear to move," Zach told Quinn through his headset.

Jordan quickly dispatched a dozen men into the yawning mouth of Subtropolis.

On the other side of the complex, two arrows silently felled another set of guards. Leo Halstrom moved into position and motioned a few of his unit inside.

Zach had divided his men into four units, headed by himself and his top men. They intended to spread out in pairs over the complex and try to take out as many Pirates as they could before they were discovered. Like a game of dominoes, each set of guards was quickly and silently decommissioned. When every tunnel had been taken, Zach's men quietly filtered inside, and then the trucks were moved into position, armed guards strung out across every entrance, ready for anything that might come their way.

The interior was much darker than Zach had expected, but he could see a dim glow deep in the distance. Apparently, the Pirates were conserving what fuel they had for the important areas of the complex. Zach adjusted his headset and spoke into the tiny mouthpiece.

"Leaders advise."

"Leader Two is inside the compound," came Jordan's reply.

"Leader Three inside," Leo said.

"Leader Four in position," Coon-ass reported.

Zach took a deep breath. "Take it slow and easy, gentlemen. Two at a time."

"Affirmative," Coon-ass answered.

Zach motioned two of his own men forward. They crept down the tunnel that led to the inner buildings and were soon swallowed in darkness. He counted to twenty before motioning another pair to follow.

He'd dispatched half his men when he suddenly heard the hum of a vehicle approaching.

"Christ, I was afraid of this," he muttered.

"Leader One?" Coon-ass's voice sounded in his ear, small and tinny.

"We have a vehicle approaching."

"Need help?"

"Not yet. Hold your position and keep the traffic flowing."

With a flick of his wrist, he commanded the rest of his unit to fan out and line the street. Zach ducked behind a nearby pillar and waited.

"No noise, boys," he told his unit. "Just hold it nice and steady."

The engine noise grew steadily closer. Zach's hand crept to the revolver strapped to his thigh. His fingers brushed the cold steel, then flitted away. The urge to shoot the occupants of the oncoming vehicle was overwhelming, but he didn't want to risk having his army found out. It was too soon. Any noise so early in the game would jeopardize the mission. But he couldn't let that Jeep make it all the way up to the entrance. If the enemy alerted the others, this attack would fail, and Zach would never get another chance. The Pirates would see to that.

He tightened his grip on his bow, then leaned forward to peer around the pillar. A set of headlights crept toward them, bobbing slightly as the vehicle moved with the roadway. A small Jeep. Just one. That meant four passengers at the most.

"Leader One to Unit One, we're about to have company."

"Unit One advised," a small voice responded.

Zach glanced across the passageway, caught his partner's eye and gave him a nod. The man, Tim, returned the nod and disappeared behind his own pillar. Zach waited in the shadows until the Jeep drew alongside. They weren't more than two hundred feet into the tunnel, but he knew the headlights of the vehicle would eventually find the truck blocking the entrance, and then it would be Katy-barred-the-door for all of them. His job was to get to the passengers before they were able to radio any of the others. The timing had to be perfect.

The Jeep's headlights sliced across a section of the tunnel near the pillar he hid behind, lighting up the street like high noon. Zach fought the urge to sink farther back. He slipped a throwaway out of his belt and positioned himself for action. But the damn Jeep ended up stopping just short of his line of vision, placing the passengers behind the pillar. Mentally cursing, Zach eased around to the opposite side of the abutment and peered into the roadway.

"What the fuck is that?" a voice queried from the Jeep.

"It looks like a truck," another voice answered.

"Oh, shit!" the driver cursed.

Zach heard gears grinding and knew the asshole was about to put it in reverse and tear back down the tunnel. Before the goons could get away, he stepped out from behind the slab buttress and stood in full view of the men. Just his damn luck. There were three guys in the Jeep, and they all had army issue automatics. No single shots here.

"Going somewhere, boys?" he asked.

Before the driver's head had even rotated around in his direction, one of Zach's throwaways imbedded itself in his neck. The passenger in the rear turned and started to raise his weapon, but a second throwaway met his chest before a shot was fired. Zach stepped closer and peered into the passenger side of the vehicle. The third man was slumped forward in his seat, a dagger sticking out of his back. Tim emerged from the shadows, grinned, and yanked the dagger out of his victim. Zach relaxed.

"This is Leader One. Problem solved. Tunnel One, dispatch cleanup. Keep the Jeep out of sight. We don't want anyone to get suspicious."

"Will do, sir," came the tinny reply.

Zach stepped closer to the vehicle and motioned for Tim to take a look inside, as well. They found a radio under the dash and just the three rifles. Zach took one and hooked the strap over his shoulder. Tim took the other two and passed them to a few of the men behind him.

"Resume positioning," Zach advised, sending another pair of men down the tunnel.

"Leader One, Leader Two has gained the west side of the compound. Looks like some of the storefronts have been converted to living quarters."

"Any goons in sight?"

"About seven."

"Take it slow," Zach advised.

"Yes, sir."

"Leader One, Leader Three has gained the battle field," Leo reported.

Coon-ass had yet to confirm his entrance. Zach was beginning to wonder about him. He hoped like hell that Coon-ass wasn't in trouble.

The last set of men had already gone ahead of him down the tunnel, leaving only himself and Tim. He counted to thirty and then motioned for Tim to start forward. Together they started down the dark road. It was a long walk. Zach took it slow, alert to any noises around him. Subtropolis was a complex maze of roadways, parking areas, entrances, and storefronts. He didn't want to fuck up and get a bullet in his back.

By the time he made it to the first group of storefronts, Zach was getting worried about Coon-ass. Dammit, the man had Burgess with him. Why wasn't he reporting?

Zach paused near a doorway that led down a narrow alley. Emergency lights ran the distance, barely lighting the way. But it was enough to see by, perfect for clandestine operations. In their black and gray fatigues, they should blend pretty well into the shadows the Pirates had created for them.

Damn, this place was big. It would take hours for his men to cover enough territory, and there would be huge gaps in between pairs. He felt like a sitting duck waiting to be picked off.

They were gonna need a whole hell of a lot of stamina to get through this ordeal.

"Leader One, Leader Four has popped the cherry," Coon-ass said.

Zach breathed a sigh of relief and bolstered himself for what was ahead. Things were about to get very hairy. Once they were inside, they would observe radio silence. They would be isolated from one another. Zach wouldn't know how many successes or failures he had achieved until all was said and done. The idea set his nerves on edge. They could all die in there, one by one, picked off by merciless men.

He didn't even want to think about it.

He checked his fatigues to make sure all his equipment was there, then motioned for Tim to follow him inside. As silently as two snakes, they slithered along the paved street, separated by several yards, until they came to the first set of cubicles. Zach forced back the rising anxiety in the pit of his stomach and made a thorough assessment of what he was facing.

The interior was a limestone tomb of rooms buttressed by huge pillars thirty feet wide, spaced forty feet apart. Perfect for cover. With all that to hide behind, given a few hours, they might be able to do enough damage to make this a success.

Men were everywhere, scattered and separated by thick walls and dark alleyways. There seemed to be nothing afoot tonight. Nothing in progress that looked important. It was just a big hive of Pirates in various states of preoccupation. All cloaked in an eerie glow from the orange emergency lights that lit the high traffic areas, leaving half the rooms, alleys, roads, and hallways dark.

In the room nearest him, he could see a group of four men. They looked to be working on an engine, a big diesel or something.

He motioned for Tim to cover him and stepped into the open, glancing back to make sure there was nothing to the right of him that would leave his back open to bullets. A small storefront sat to his immediate right. The room was dark, hopefully empty. Using the darkness to cloak his movements, Zach stepped inside and reached for his bow. On the other side of the hall, to the left of him, Tim went down on one knee and lined up a shot with his own bow.

Zach took another look around. They could easily take these goons out without anyone knowing it, just as long as no one happened to come for a visit.

Tim glanced over and caught his eye. Zach gave him a nod. A few seconds later, two arrows found their separate targets. As the men slumped forward, two more arrows were notched and readied. The two remaining Pirates had jumped away from the engine they were working on and started for the opening.

They were dead before they'd gone two steps.

Zach peered around the corner, looking to make sure no one had seen or heard, then darted across the center hall and into the room where the Pirates lay dead. Tim crossed over a few seconds later, and together the two pulled the Pirates over into a darker room. They covered the bodies with some tarps they found near the engine and went back out to peer into the compound. So far, everything looked good.

Farther down the alley, Tim took out two more Pirates, while Zach caught a third trying to escape. He strangled the man with his bare hands. Not his method of choice, but effective in a pinch.

Seven down on his part. Worse case scenario, nine hundred left to go.

With a savage grin, Zach stepped out into the compound and lined up another nook. Two more down. Tim slunk on ahead of him. A movement in his peripheral range caught Zach's attention. He turned his head just in time to see a man coming down an adjoining hallway. When he saw Zach, his eyes widened in alarm. Before the Pirate could react, Zach stepped forward and drew a blade across the man's throat, ending the cry that had been in progress. He dragged him backwards into an empty cubicle and then darted back out to rejoin Tim.

Zach's adrenaline was humming now, the heat of bloodlust heavy in his veins. He thanked the cosmos for the gift. It would get him through hours of strategy and bloodletting.

Tim and Zach moved methodically through the east wing, killing in fits and starts. The cool interior of the earth helped keep their stamina up, but after a few hours, Zach was fighting thirst and his arrows were depleted. Soon they would have to start using the guns and knives they'd filched off the dead men they left behind. They'd been careful to hide the bodies as best they could, but it was only a matter of time before some of them were found. He could only hope his comrades had been as successful.

Zach paused to take a tiny sip of water from the small canteen strapped to his belt. He rolled the liquid around in his mouth, savoring it, then clipped the canteen back into place and pushed ahead.

He and Tim were cautiously making their way through a group of buildings when Zach turned a corner and ran smack into a small, darkly dressed form. He reacted without thinking, jerking the Pirate around and locking an arm under the scumbag's jaw. His knife was poised just inches from the slender throat, ready to make the killing slice when he realized he was holding a woman.

Burgess.

Feeling like a mule had kicked him in the chest, he released her abruptly and pushed her away from him so hard that she fell against the wall. She rounded on him and clubbed him in the cranium with her canteen. Zach winced and ducked his head, raising his arm to deflect a second blow. He caught it on the leading edge of his forearm, right on the bone, and the answering pain jerked a string of curses from him.

"Damn, that hurt," he swore. "What the hell are you doing?"

Burgess stopped her attack and stared at him in shock. "Zach?"

"Burgess?"

"Shit, you scared me," she hissed. "I thought you were..."

"Yeah, I figured as much," he growled, testing the knot she'd put on his skull. "You got anything more lethal than that canteen?"

She pulled a dagger out of her belt and showed it to him. She'd changed into army fatigues, but her sidearm was missing and she had no bow.

“What the hell happened to your weapons?”

“I still have some.”

“Just knives?”

She nodded. “I can get pretty close sometimes. It’s easier than giggling frogs.”

“Where the hell is Coon-ass?” he whispered.

She jerked her chin toward the north wing. “Clandestine kills.”

“Why did he leave you?”

“He didn’t. I left him. I figured I could take out a few on my own.”

“You’re coming with me,” he grunted. He wanted to keep an eye on her. He didn’t like having her creeping around getting into danger. If it weren’t for her damn stubborn, pig-headedness, she wouldn’t be here now.

She didn’t argue, just followed as he turned and made his way down the hall.

He caught a glimpse of Tim on the other side of the passageway. The man grinned. Zach felt his hackles rise. Tim must have seen Burgess whack him with the canteen, which meant that if Zach lived through this battle, he could expect to receive his fair share of ribbing.

Zach heard an incoming crackle from his headset and then Coon-ass spoke into his ear. “Trouble. We’ve been made.”

“Damn,” Zach swore. “What’s the score?”

“About forty or so.”

“Leader Three?”

“I stopped counting, Leader One,” came Leo’s voice.

“Quinn?”

“Maybe sixty or so. Got a whole damn room full of ‘em over here in the west wing,” Jordan Quinn said.

“Coon-ass, who made you?”

“Two guys found a couple of stiffs and scattered before we could take them out.”

“Okay, keep it silent and deadly for as long as you can. If anyone spots you, break out the heavies,” Zach instructed.

“Affirmative, sir,” Coon-ass said.

Zach turned and glared at Burgess.

She glared back at him. “What has your dick in a knot?” she demanded.

“There’s trouble. I want you out of here.”

“No chance, cream puff. I’m staying.”

Zach was just about to argue when a herd of Pirates went hurtling past, out of step, out of sync, but all of them armed to the fucking teeth.

“Shit!” Zach hissed.

He shoved an M-16 at Burgess. “I hope you can figure this out. You’re gonna need it.”

“Just point and pull,” she mused.

He stepped out of his hiding place and opened fire on the backs of the retreating Pirates. Burgess came out behind him, facing the opposite direction, diligently offering him cover. When two goons came out of an adjoining hall, she let them have it in the chest, then rushed forward and pulled the spare clips out of their belts. Shoving them down into the pockets of her fatigues, she back-stepped over to where Zach was and followed him step for step, back to back, across the open arena of the compound.

“We got bullets flying,” Zach said into his headset.

“Roger,” Leo said. “Looks like you got a group heading your way. I’m gonna keep it quiet on this end. Maybe they won’t realize how strong we are.”

“Good idea,” Zach said. “You got a mile marker on those incoming?”

“Coming up from the south roadway. About a dozen. More following. Lots of shouting over here. You’re in deep, Leader One.”

“I figured that much,” Zach said.

He turned and glanced around the compound, looking for a better plan. There was a dark room on the far side. He pushed Burgess in that direction, speaking into his headset as he urged her ahead of him.

“My team will draw them with gunfire, and you boys can crawl up their ass and get them from behind.”

“Will do,” Leo replied.

“Copy,” Jordan echoed.

“Good luck, Leader One,” Coon-ass said.

“You guys do your part, and we’ll all make it out of this alive,” Zach told them. “Leader One to Unit One. Use whatever force is necessary. Alternating noise. Stay out of sight and keep your eyes peeled. Don’t let us down, Coon-ass.”

“Not as long as I’m still standing, sir.”

“To hell with radio silence. I want to know where you guys are at all times. Keep me posted,” Zach said.

It didn’t take long before they ran into a group of Pirates. Zach opened fire without hesitation. As soon as the bullets stopped flying, he heard several answering shouts from the north end of the complex. The deep, resonating thump of a shrapnel grenade silenced the voices, but more soon followed, this time from the west wing. Jerking Burgess along with him, Zach headed straight for them.

Burgess took out two men who came out of an alley leading off the road they were following, and then caught up to Zach again. A group of Pirates emerged from the darkness ahead of them, effectively cutting them off. Zach and Burgess immediately changed directions, crossing the road and running down another alley heading south again, until they ducked into a dark corner. Unfortunately, they’d been spotted. Just moments after they disappeared into the dark, a group of Pirates stepped into the mouth of the alley and let loose with a hail of bullets. Zach heard lead hitting the wall behind him and felt a sharp stab in the back of his scalp. Flying debris. He shoved Burgess down so hard that she squealed, and then flung himself on top of her. He covered her head with one hand and pumped the trigger of his weapon with the other. A few seconds later the gunfire from the other end of the alley stopped. Zach looked up and saw one of his men silhouetted in the opening, a fallout of Pirate rubbish at his feet.

“Commander, you all right down there?” a voice crackled in his ear.

“Fine, soldier. Thanks for the help.”

“No problem, sir.”

As the figure disappeared around the corner, Zach got to his feet and hauled Burgess up with him. She didn't argue as he led her out of the alley.

Deep into the cavernous interior of Subtropolis, Zach encountered another band of Pirates. They were in a small room, all of them busy loading themselves up with weapons. Zach reached for a shrapnel can, lit the fuse, counted slowly to five, and then tossed the grenade into the middle of the goons. He didn't wait to see what happened next, just ducked behind a wall, pulling Burgess with him to avoid being hit. The explosion raised the hair on the back of his neck. Damn, but it was loud. They wouldn't be safe in this place for long.

He waited a few beats and then cautiously peered around the corner. The scene he encountered was an ugly one. Two men had minced meat for faces. Most were fallen, in various stages of death, but one man had managed to escape the worst of the blast. He caught sight of Zach and started to raise his weapon. Zach shot him in the chest with his revolver just as a bullet was taking a chink out of the wall next to him.

As the bullet hit stone, Burgess cried out in alarm. Eager to get out of the area, Zach grabbed her hand and jerked her down another alley. He'd lost all sense of direction by now, lost in the labyrinth, but he hoped he was heading north.

He nearly shot Tim in the head when the man came around a corner too swiftly. They both pulled up short, lowered their weapons, and then grinned.

Zach shoved Burgess at him. “Get her somewhere safe, somewhere dark. Keep her out of the line of fire. And stay with her.”

“No,” Burgess protested. “I want to fight.”

“You're starting to fatigue, soldier. You need a moment to rest. Orders from the Commander in Chief.”

Before she could reply, Zach left them to slink back into the darkness. He didn't like leaving her behind. He felt like he was the best man to protect her. But he had no choice. War called.

Zach lost track of time. He killed until he got tired of counting and his body was exhausted, but he still kept moving. He dodged death for hours, and by the time the gunfire began to die down, he was spent. There was still some sporadic gunfire from distant parts of the compound, but he'd gotten word from Jordan and Halstrom that they'd made headway. Unfortunately, they'd both lost some men.

“There's still something going on in the north wing. Pierce has a group cornered,” Quinn told him.

“Get down there and help him. Then meet me in the center of the compound in an hour.”

“Tim? You still with me, man?” Zach queried into his headset.

“Go ahead, Commander,” Tim's small voice replied.

“Bring Burgess down to the center of the compound with you. But go cautiously. There's still some Pirates unaccounted for.”

“Negative, sir. Burgess is not with me.”

Zach nearly choked on a sudden rush of anxiety. “What the hell are you talking about? I told you to stay with her.”

“We saw a group of Pirates go by about thirty minutes ago. She thought maybe they were herding a

bigwig. She wanted to follow them and see where they were going.”

“Did you go with her?”

“Affirmative, sir.”

“Where is she now?”

“I don’t know, sir. I lost her in one of the alleys. I think she...ditched me on purpose, sir. I met up with a few others and we’ve been trying to find her.”

“Dammit! Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t know she was any more important than any other soldier, sir.”

Zach let that sink in for a moment. He didn’t even want to contemplate the depth of his fear or the knowledge that she *had* become important to him.

“Give me her last known location.”

“It’s a big place, sir. She could be anywhere.”

“Location,” Zach repeated.

“I lost her in the last alley leading off the south wing. Do you want us to proceed, sir?”

“Keep looking. I’ll come up there and help.”

“Yes, sir.”

Twenty minutes later Zach was combing the south wing, cautiously checking corners, cubicles, and alleys. Dead men were strewn in sporadic patches, the fallout of Zach’s victory. He stepped over them, sometimes gave them a kick to make sure they had no life left in them. But most of his attention was on the darkness around him. He wouldn’t feel victorious until he found Burgess, and so far that seemed unlikely. The place was chillingly quiet.

After scouring a group of shadowy storefronts, Zach paused in a particularly dark hallway to listen. His senses were on def-con four alert. Something wasn’t right. He could feel it, a warning thrumming through him like a pulse of electricity, but he had no idea which way to go to avoid the trouble.

As it turned out, the trouble found him sooner than he expected. There was a slight shifting of the atmosphere around him and then a gun came out of the darkness from the pitch-blackness to his right. Zach didn’t bat an eye, didn’t move, just stood stock-still.

“Relinquish your weapons,” a voice softly demanded.

Zach agreeably chunked the M-16 a few feet away. It landed in the dark with a heavy clatter. He thought about reaching for one of his blades, but he had no idea how many men were surrounding him. It might be a futile move.

The head dog must have sensed his wish because his next word was an unquestionable command.

“Don’t.”

Zach automatically placed his palms on his head. A few seconds later, hands roughly patted his fatigues, and every weapon he had hidden on him was removed.

“That’s better,” the voice said. “Take him inside.”

The hands snatched his arms behind his back, and he felt the bite of heavy rope being wound around his wrists. They bound him so tightly that his hands began to throb, and he wondered if he would walk away with nothing but stumps. *If* he walked away.

They shuffled him off into a room and closed the door. An old Sterno offered a little illumination, and Zach found himself peering into a narrow, evil looking face scarred by past encounters with bad acne. He moved his eyes cautiously, trying to determine how many there were. He could only see two, the man in front of him and another man standing to his right. But that didn't necessarily mean they were the only ones.

A strong hand clamped onto his shoulder and forced him to his knees. Zach felt his guts twist when a cold steel cylinder met the back of his neck. He knew what was coming. An execution style killing.

The head dog glared down at him.

"What are you waiting for?" Zach hissed.

"Who are you?" the man asked.

"I'm the hell that's going to crack your existence in half."

The man struck him on the cheek with his fist, so hard that Zach slewed sideways. A booted foot caught him in the ribs. He grunted in agony. Damn, did they always have to beat the shit out of him before they tried to kill him?

"Who are you?" the man asked again.

"Zach."

"Who sent you?"

"I sent myself."

"And you expect me to believe you did all of this on your own?"

"No. I had help. A girl, about five-eight, red hair."

The fist that slammed into his face felt like a tire iron and sent blood spurting from his mouth. The Pirate reached down and jerked the headset from Zach's head. He held it up to his gaze, twisted it around to get a better look, then tossed it onto the ground and pulverized it with his heel. Zach stared at the man's knees, his face impassive.

"I'll at least have the pleasure of killing you before I make my escape," the man said.

He slammed another fist into Zach's face. Zach's left eye twitched and a lump began to form just above his cheekbone, blocking his peripheral vision. By this time he was slumped over his knees, feeling like he might puke, and his hands were completely numb. Even if he did get loose, he wouldn't be able to use his hands for several minutes. He hadn't a prayer of getting out of this alive, and he knew his death was going to be painful and slow. He didn't look forward to it.

The man pulled him upright, patted his cheek, and leered down at him. "Now, shall we try this again? I want to know who sent you."

Zach looked up at the man who was destined to end his life and wondered if the asshole really expected him to tell him anything. He didn't have long to ponder it. An odd sensation of displaced air whistled past his left ear, and a split second later a guttural moan emerged from the man in front of him. As the scum lifted his hands to clutch at his chest, Zach saw what was buried in his heart and realized the whistling sound had been a knife flying past his ear, barely missing him to sink into the target in front of him.

"Holy shit!" Zach swore.

The man to his right was already in motion, turning toward the darkness behind Zach, his gun raising,

his finger heavy on the trigger. Zach threw all of his weight against the man's knees, and the subsequent rattle of bullets went wild, shooting chunks out of the limestone ceiling and pelting them with bits and pieces of rock. The man went down, half righted himself, lurched toward Zach, and then fell against him, nearly crushing the breath from him as he was pinned to the ground.

There was a few seconds of utter silence, punctuated by the sound of Zach's harsh breathing, and then a female voice purred from the darkness beyond the Sterno.

"I keep having to save your sorry hide. A thing like that could inflate a girl's ego."

Burgess! Good Christ, he'd found Burgess.

"I guess there's something to be said for the wiles of a woman," she drawled.

"You're pretty damn good with that knife," Zach groaned.

"Actually, I wasn't too sure I'd hit my target. I'm not the best at tossing a blade."

"I'm glad I didn't know that before. Can you give me a hand with this carcass? I'm a little indisposed."

Burgess put a booted foot on the dead Pirate and pushed the body off him. Using a fresh knife, she sawed at the ropes binding his wrists. As they fell away, Zach groaned in discomfort at the painful surge of blood flowing back into his hands.

Flexing his wrists, he stood up and stared down at the man who'd been lying on top of him. "Could you try to angle them to fall somewhere else next time? You nearly cracked my ribs."

"Sorry."

Zach took a closer look at the goon on the floor. "You shot him?" he queried in surprise.

"Yep. He was so busy killing the ceiling that you didn't hear me pop a few off," she explained.

Zach let out a rough laugh. "Damn, I'm glad to see you."

She grinned.

"But I'm also pissed off. What the hell did you think you were doing? I told you to stay with Tim."

She shrugged and pointed the barrel of her M-16 at the Pirate who had received the wrong end of her blade. "You should be thanking me. While I was lurking around in the dark, I overheard this guy talking. He had plans, Zach. Big plans. It's a good thing I followed them. Another twenty minutes and he would have managed to get out of the compound."

"How?"

"There's an executive entrance. I'll show you later."

Zach stared at the dead Pirate. "Damn."

"What can I say? Women are sneaky creatures."

Zach peered at her through the dim glow. "Yeah."

She smiled. "Good thing, huh? I guess we come in handy after all."

Zach stared at her. She looked so impish right now that he had to fight the urge to kiss her. Before the emotion could run away with him, he clamped it off and turned his back on her.

"Come on. Let's go meet the others."

He heard her delicate steps following as he made his way back down the alley. It was a comforting sound, filled with all the sentiment of a homecoming. It damn near hurt to think about it. So he didn't.

Back in the center of the compound, Jordan was waiting for them, his men organized into several units, all awaiting further instructions. Men continued to filter in as Zach took stock.

“Where the hell is Coon-ass? I lost radio contact with him over two hours ago,” Zach grumbled. “If the son-of-a-bitch went and got himself killed, I’m gonna be one pissed off Commander in Chief.”

“Sorry, sir. I lost my headgear, but I’m alive,” Coon-ass said as he stepped out of the shadows.

Zach was relieved to see him. He didn’t want to lose one of his most valuable men.

Coon-ass stepped forward and shook his hand. “We did good, sir.”

Zach nodded, then raked a curious gaze down Raymond’s arm. Blood oozed from a wound in the thick muscle of his bicep.

“It’ll be okay, sir,” Coon-ass assured him.

Zach gave a nod and turned to start issuing orders to organize his men. “Quinn, have you seen Halstrom?”

“He’s coming.”

“I want a report on losses.” Zach almost hated to have to say it, but it was necessary.

“Jordan, get some of your men up to those generators and flood the place with light. I don’t want any Pirates lurking in the shadows. Keep the tunnel units in place until we’ve combed the place.”

“Yes, sir.”

By the time everyone was gathered, Zach learned that he’d lost thirty-two men, twelve were badly wounded, and almost all the others had minor injuries. Looking at some of the other injuries, Zach felt relatively unharmed. He’d managed to escape with only a few bruised ribs, a black eye, and the crack on the head that had come from Burgess. The little hellcat had walloped him a good one when he’d come around that corner and nabbed her. The damn thing still hurt.

Jim James had a hole in his leg the size of a hand grenade, but he was grinning like a fool as he was carried into the room they were setting up as a hospital.

“What dog bit you?”

“Something I ain’t never seen before, Commander,” he moaned. “Can’t wait to take a closer look and see what it’s made of.”

“Just be glad you’re still around to get the chance. That’s a damn big hole. How did you manage to escape?”

“That black son-of-a-bitch saved my ass,” he hooted.

Jordan rolled his eyes and turned away. “Better be glad I ain’t prejudice, James, or I would’ve let that scum eat your liver for dinner.”

“I’da done the same for you, Jordan. God knows.”

Zach grinned. “Made a new man out of him, huh?”

“Shit,” Jordan cursed. “When I saw that Pirate bearing down on him with every intention of separating his balls from his crotch, I had my second thoughts. Don’t think I didn’t. But the asshole can damn sure fight. And he’s got a head harder than this fucking floor. I saw a man hit him so hard I almost puked just thinking about it, and the damn fool didn’t do nothin’ but sneeze.”

Zach laughed. For the first time in years, he really laughed. Damn, it was good to be victorious, good to

be surrounded by so many great men. Doc was right. He didn't regret this decision to lead. He was part of the pack now. His reclusive ways were behind him. And the victory was richer for it.

All around him men cheered and hooted and crushed each other in bear hugs. Zach waded into the lot of them, accepting chucks on the shoulder and calls of congratulations. He was stepping around injured men, congratulating them, shaking hands and offering encouragement when he saw Burgess standing alone near a pillar. She looked out of the loop, almost sad that she wasn't being included, and it tugged at his heart. Curse these men for not slapping her on the back, too. She'd fought just as hard as any of them.

He watched her for a moment, then sidled over and said, "Now we get drunk."

She grinned up at him. "You buying?"

He smiled. "Yeah. I'll buy. In the meantime, how are you doing?"

"Tired," she admitted.

"Me too. But there's still a lot to be done. We have to get these carcasses out of here before they stink the place up."

She nodded.

"You did good, kid. You're one hell of a warrior."

"Thanks," she whispered. "That means a lot."

He reached out and gently scrubbed at the dirt on her cheek. He just couldn't keep the fool woman clean.

The smile on her face softened, and her eyes glowed as she gazed back at him. Zach immediately dropped his hand away. He felt tongue-tied, his guts twisted into knots, and didn't know what to say to her. He was about to turn away when Coon-ass came up beside him and gave him a clap on the shoulder.

"Doc is gonna be pleased."

"Where is he?"

"Coming down to take a look-see," Coon-ass said.

"Start the cleanup, and let's see what we've got," Zach said, turning away from Burgess and heading for the east wing of the compound.

Doc found Zach a few hours later, down in the heart of the limestone labyrinth, surveying the new digs.

"Coon-ass is already talking about firing up the still," Zach told him.

"I'm game," Doc agreed.

There was a sudden crackle in Zach's headset, signaling a message from one of the others.

"Leader One," Jordan's voice sounded in his ear.

"Leader One," Zach answered. "Go ahead."

"I think you're gonna wanna see this."

"Where are you?"

"North corridor, all the way to the end. There's a storehouse. Some interesting stuff back here."

"I'm on my way."

Zach, together with Doc and Coon-ass, arrived in the storeroom twenty minutes later to find something hideous and awesome hidden in a rear chamber deep inside the earth.

“Holy God,” Doc whispered as he came alongside him.

“What the hell?” Zach croaked.

“It’s an ICBM,” Jordan explained.

“I know what it is. I just...where the hell did it come from? I thought....”

Jordan shook his head. “There never was any real nuclear disarmament, man. Never was. Government secrets.” He paused. “The satellites are still up there. That’s one thing the Pirates couldn’t take. If we can just get linkup....”

“I don’t want any part of it,” Zach said. “We aren’t gonna make that mistake again.”

Jordan stared cryptically at the gleaming missile. “If we have one, you can bet someone else might. Some other country.”

It was all that needed to be said. Jordan was right, of course. They couldn’t risk it, couldn’t risk allowing some other group to come in and use nuclear capabilities against them, not when they had the power to stop it. They needed a strong defense.

“I guess we started this war just in time,” Doc observed, stepping closer to the ICBM.

“Yeah,” Zach agreed. “God knows what they were gonna do with this.”

“Use it for leverage. Power,” Jordan commented. “You wouldn’t believe the arsenal they have in the rest of this place. We hit the jackpot here.”

Zach stepped around the missile and squatted next to a stockpile of the best looking ammunition he’d seen in years.

“Looks like we’re well on our way,” Doc observed. “It begins.”

Zach stood up, his eyes glittering dangerously. “There’s just one thing I have to do first.”

Doc didn’t even bother to ask. He knew Zach had hell on his mind, and he would be back as soon as he’d settled the score.

“Jordan, the command is yours until I get back.”

“Yes, sir,” Jordan said, and formally saluted him.

Zach turned to Doc. “Take care of Burgess for me.”

Doc nodded. “Come back in one piece. The nation needs you.”

“Will do,” Zach said, and then disappeared into the night.

It took six months to locate Snake. Zach caught up to him in a hole house, swilling bad booze and toying with two women in a back room. Always a man's downfall, bad booze, sleazy women, and a hard-on.

Zach didn't bother with invitations. He just kicked the door open and stood on the threshold, his considerable bulk blocking any hope of an attempted exit. Snake jerked away from the woman he'd been fondling and glared at Zach with murderous zeal. But the women didn't seem to mind the presence of this intruder. They just sat there, each in their own state of undress, their eyes hungrily devouring every bulging, rippling inch of Zach's physique. He ignored them. His eyes were on the Pirate.

"Remember me?"

Shocked, Snake started to rise.

"Don't bother to get up. I won't be staying long."

The man paused, uncertain. He looked confused, like he didn't understand how Zach had found him, or how he was even alive. But one thing was certain. He recognized the face, recognized the scar he'd inflicted. Zach could see it spelled out in the fear in the man's eyes. There was something immensely satisfying about that fear.

"I see you're busy spreading more of the plague around." Zach's gaze wandered to the two women. They glanced at each other, then at the Pirate, and started to slide off the bed.

"We all have to die of something," the man growled, giving the girls a threatening look. The women paused just on the edge of the bed, uncertain as to what they should do. They were clearly afraid of the Pirate. Maybe they'd had first hand experience with his propensity toward brutality. But talk of the plague made them nervous, and they didn't want to stick around.

"Some of us have to die sooner than others," Zach replied. One loud crack and the man's brains splattered all over the back wall. The women screamed and dropped to the floor to cower in the corner, terrified they would be next.

"My last bullet. I suppose you could say I was saving it for you." Zach glanced at the pistol in his hand, at the tiny spiral of smoke rising from the end of the barrel. "Now, why wasn't that as satisfying as I thought it would be?"

Ignoring the women who were staring at him in terror, he tossed the pistol onto the floor, turned on his heel, and left the man's carcass to rot. No one stopped him as he made his way back through the bar. No one dared. They just kept their eyes averted as he walked past them. If they had any curiosity about the gunshot they'd heard, they wisely kept it to themselves.

Zach stepped out into the late afternoon sunlight and peered at his surroundings. His personal war was finished. Now it was time to join his comrades in arms, to lead his army, to guide this people as he had pledged himself to do.

* * *

By the time he returned to Subtropolis, Zach had a new sense of freedom about him. He didn't feel the same sense of doom that had hung over the nation for so many years. The edge was gone. The change had already begun.

He was already hearing rumors of the new army and the man who was promising the restoration of government. It seemed strange, surreal, hard to believe those rumors were about him. When he'd left Subtropolis, Jordan was busy recruiting and training men. Grady had left with news from Zach and about Zach, for the people. The great machine was in motion. Only this time it had an undergirding of honesty to it.

The war to bring down the Pirates and the Hunters had begun in earnest. Word had spread that Subtropolis had been lost, and the Pirates were gathering to arm themselves against Zach. He swore it would be a futile gesture.

In his absence, Leo found a graveyard of planes and was excited about getting them back in the air.

"Planes mean power. If I can get them up and running, the Pirates will be dead meat."

"Good job, Halstrom."

It would be months before he saw the first one fly. In the meantime, Zach went to war with the radical factions that had abused their powers and terrorized the people for over a decade. As the rumors spread, his army grew. The people rallied around him in support, cheering his efforts. It was amazing how quickly everything was happening, amazing how one man could take over an entire country of people. Most were behind him, eager to have guidance and leadership. They adored him, embraced him, accepted him. They cheered his victories, mourned his defeats, and pledged their allegiance to him. They were a small group, but they were his. Together they would eventually change the state of the country.

It was a bloody battle. The Pirates waged an unfair war against Zach. They had no standards. They took hostages and killed innocent people to try and manipulate Zach into giving up. But Zach was just as ruthless, and he refused to bow to their demands.

Zach was a hands-on leader. He fought beside his men in some of the most brutal skirmishes in history. But he was not to stay in the midst of battle for long. They had decided, Doc and Jordan, that he was becoming too important to fight with them anymore. They couldn't risk him getting killed in action. The people loved him, and without Zach, their entire operation would fall to pieces. He already had a price on his head, put there by the Pirates. They didn't need to add risk to risk.

Zach was not happy with the decision. He wanted to be in the middle of it all. He was a warrior, and he had difficulty laying down his weapons.

"You're too important now. If something happens to you, the morale we've tried so hard to build will crumble, and the people will collapse in defeat. Think about the people, Zach. They need you," Doc said. "Don't disappoint them to please yourself. Don't let them down just because you love this war. Go to Washington. Choose your men and form a governing body. It's time. The people are counting on you."

Reluctantly, he agreed.

"Tell Pete and Sara I'll send for them as soon as it's safe," he told Grady.

More than a year after he had agreed to lead the people, Zach returned to where his nightmare had begun, Coon-ass and the New Secret Service at his side. It was a small organization, but a loyal one. He had every confidence it would grow. They would help him gather the people together and rebuild a Congress, rebuild the White House, rebuild the country, while their compatriots continued to win the civil wars and skirmishes that were everywhere.

Burgess, Serena, Tad, and even Hangdog completed the group. For a time Tadpole had been afraid of Serena, afraid of the deadly virus she carried. But he'd eventually grown accustomed to it, and now he

treated her with all the fierce protectiveness a loyal brother would give a beloved sister. He was part of her new support system. He and Burgess.

Burgess. She had become Zach's lifeline to reality. She kept him grounded, kept him calm and rational when he wanted to explode and be anything but. She was with him always now. They all were. These people were his family. Burgess, Serena, Tad, and the damn dog that was always hanging around underfoot.

Stepping back into the desecrated city, he had to wonder if they had a prayer of winning their battle. The city was in ruins. Burned and gutted, only a few hulking remains left against a bright backdrop of blue sky. The Lincoln Memorial had been completely demolished. The Washington Monument lay in a crumpled heap of white stone. The White House had long since been bombed. Parts of the city were still standing. Most of the Supreme Court building was still intact. It was a start. A small one, but, dammit, it was a start all the same.

Zach stood alone on the crumbling steps of Capitol Hill, peering out over the city, snatches of memory filtering back to him across time, bits and pieces of the new history. It had all happened so fast. Almost like a dream. But it wasn't a dream. It was real. It was happening.

Here, on the steps of a Capitol that was half gone, he knew a part of his life was ending. A part of his life was beginning. He had his name back. He had his life back. He had an entire country counting on him. It felt unbelievably good.

"Four score and seven years ago our forefathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal," he murmured the historical phrase. "In the year 18 A.R., our forefathers brought a divided nation together again, under God, to live in victory, freedom, and equality, governed with strength, temperance, and democracy. United we stand...divided we fall."

He lifted his hands and touched the sky, feeling the breeze sifting through his fingers. His eyes were stinging, but it wasn't from sorrow. It was triumph, catching in his throat, forcing emotion from him that he'd buried for nearly a decade.

"Zachary Tobias Salenger," he whispered. "You will live. And this country will live with you."

He was through killing. It was time to rebuild.

Epilogue

Three years later they buried Serena. The virus in her body had won the battle for supremacy, and Doc had been helpless to do anything about it. She'd been so brave. During the final months, she'd taken Doc's sometimes painful experiments with her chin held high and a glint of determination in her eyes, as much a warrior as the men who had protected her. Despite his intensive research, Doc's cure was still in development, promising but not quite there yet. His new lab was dedicated to Serena, the young girl who had never fully blossomed into a woman.

Zach didn't consider that a bad thing. Throughout all of it, she'd managed to hang on to those childlike qualities that made her so endearing. It was the only thing she had left to cling to, that small bit of happiness that had been given her by some merciful act of God.

Beside her grave, Zach stood rigid and straight in a dark suit, his black hair cropped close to his head, combed and clean, his arm clasped tightly around Burgess's slender waist. His wife, Serena had been right. Burgess made a damn fine First Lady.

Tadpole, clean at last, tugged forlornly at a tie that was too tight for his liking as he stood beside Zach, the man he now called father. Pete and Sara were there, having joined Zach years before. And, of course, Doc. Behind them stood fifty Secret Service men, headed by Raymond "Coon-ass" Pierce. He was always there, never far away. Eager to be of service, keenly alert and vigilant.

Zach glanced out over the crowd who had come to mourn Serena. They all loved her, and they all mourned her passing. She would be greatly missed, most of all by Tad.

Long after the others had gone, Zach remained in the cemetery, alone with his thoughts as he gazed down at the aging dog that lay atop the mound of earth separating him from his longtime companion. He could almost hear Serena's laughter flitting along the slight breeze, and the memory of her face made his chest hurt. She was gone, but the miracle she'd left behind still lived on, in Zach. She'd given him back his soul, and he would always love her for that.

He sighed and lifted his head to stare out over the horizon. It was a cold day in Washington. Bitterly cold. Fitting weather for such a bleak occasion.

"Mr. President," Raymond spoke from his respectful distance.

It took a moment for the moniker to register. Zach had lapsed back in time, and the title seemed odd to him, foreign. But that's what he was now. The President of the New United States, the first president ever to be voted into a life term, president of a country struggling for stability, gaining power inch by precious inch, a country on the rise.

He had a Vice President now, a man worthy. Half Sioux, he'd been leader of a small remainder of Oglala before Zach found him and convinced him to join the government. He brought the wisdom of the ancient ones to the New World, the fierce determination of a warrior in battle, the patience of a man accustomed to leadership, the knowledge of the environment. The perfect balance. He was a good man, a good Vice President.

"Mr. President." Raymond's voice broke into his thoughts again. "There's been an incident. Word has it that China has in their possession a stash of W-88s."

He didn't hear the rest. He just turned away from the mound he'd been staring at and accompanied Raymond back to where his congress was waiting in the new Capitol building.

To embrace the future. Whatever it might bring.