

We The Fallen :
A Dark Age Resurgent

#5 Those who searched for the lost

By Michael J. Grasso

#5 Those who searched for the lost

The Old Home

They got to their parent's home on 175 Summerdale Place, and David broke down the front door hurting his shoulder more than he'd care to admit. Their old family house still stood it was a two story box on top of a small hill, there were many trees and a garage, the back yard was a long ran lazily uphill, brick dividers separated various portions of the yard, and the dilapidated swing set that everyone had outgrown. David had missed those swings often.

They had passed through a few dozen yards and occasionally houses on the way there, and it had been a shock to see how many homes were pillaged already. They themselves hadn't taken much and more often used the homes they intruded on to hide from nearby activity and the ever-present booms from gunfire.

There was a kitchen, a living room/den, bathroom and some closets on the first floor of their childhood home. Immediately Luke pointed out that the back door in the kitchen was left unlocked. He moved around the first floor with the pistol that Dave had taken from the corpses. David moved into the house with 'Lucky Molly' on his shoulder.

David went into the living room where pictures and memories were preserved in assorted frames and small knickknacks. His Mom was a woman of heart, one filled with wisdom and caring, understanding, and to his incomprehension- faith. She was a strongly devout Christian, something that David had warred with her over very often, something he very much now regretted. She was always one to look back at the better days and look toward the promise of better ones to come, she had amassed quite a tome of memories in this house.

The memorabilia faded quickly on the other side of the large

family portrait centerpiece. From there on, the living room quickly became their Fathers. Dad was a raging technophile, and his empire was the living room. His entertainment center was left as immaculate as always, the huge widescreen television, assorted BlueRay, HD, DVD, VCR combo copiers, video camera adapters, and remote controls (hundreds of remotes all in a decorative bowl on the coffee table), let us not forget the bookshelf wall of video titles, complete with his fathers' own makeshift cataloging system. He was always a man for talk and he could go on for hours about any topic, but he had a set mind... One which no matter how well was debated, would not be swayed. David supposed father and mother were very alike in that regard, he showed this in the way he kept his den, controlled and precise. In contrast, the only taint to his ordered and controlled environment came in the form of a random few toys left out by the grandkids. They were typically heaped in a corner but were spread about the room, a further painful reminder that the family had been here until recently.

"Hellllllloooo!?" David cried. But he heard only the footsteps of himself and Luke. He checked the basement first, it just seemed to make sense to him- but found nothing. He then fought with himself every step upstairs to the second floor: he had become afraid. Not at the fact that there could be dead family upstairs, not that there may have been some psychopath upstairs waiting to beat him to bloody chunks. He feared with all his heart that he may that his parents might be upstairs but be so mentally broken that they showed nothing of their former selves... like all those others he'd seen in the night.

David made the rounds upstairs and found neatly made beds... no family. There were no signs of any looting, no signs of anyone leaving in a rush and most importantly, no horrible sights. He came back downstairs.

Luke had been staring at the portrait. As David returned, he stopped at the portrait too. Moms, Pops, David the oldest, Luke the middle, and Christina the youngest. The only logical possibility was that his sister Christina and the grandkids had come to visit, it was the only time all the kiddie toys left their storage spots. He saw some

of the old building blocks and stuffed toys that used to be his and his siblings intermixed with the action figures and other toys of the newer generation.

A hope had dawned in him, perhaps Christina was visiting and pressured the old folks to join her and the grandkids upstate for the weekend, she did so almost every visit home, Mom and dad typically refused. But maybe, just maybe, they had taken her up on the offer this time... or maybe they had it scheduled. David hoped he was right, that right now they were safe up by the great lakes playing with their two grandsons.

To David's relief, Luke said nothing to break the silence and moved away to the kitchen right as the older brother failed to hold back his tears. Several ran down his face when Luke started taking cans of food. Fury welled up in him, and he spat in cold sharpness, "What the hell do you think you're doing?" Luke looked at his brother, puzzled, "Thought we might need some of this."

"Don't take shit from here!!" David said, he balled his fists in rage. The gears of logic began turning, and he regained control of his emotion, "They might be out there looking for us, they may need this stuff; we can't rob them."

Luke looked surprised at the optimism "My Bro, they're not here.". The words infuriated the older brother even more. But Luke maintained a logical tone "This area's not very safe, right now anyone is liable to just walk in and take whatever they want. It's no good leaving it here for just anyone to loot." Luke responded, now on the defensive. "Think clearly. Mom and Dad, wherever they were, would want us to take it."

David's heart dropped, his brother had given up any kind of hope. The tears now ran freely down his face, but he added, "There's no sign of them here, and no violence, maybe they'll come back."

And then the younger brother hit him with honesty, "I think they're gone." The anger spiked again, but Luke added, "Or... They may be safe..." "I was thinking, maybe they went upstate to see the nephews this weekend." David tried to offer a shred of hope.

Silence, then the younger brother gave some ground, "I didn't talk to them this week. Did you?" "No..." David admitted. "Maybe. You're right, It's... possible. Either way, we are gonna need food, and it makes no sense to leave anything around for random strangers doing the same thing we've been doing.". His brother paused, he too was becoming too emotional, and he knew it. David was always good at separating logic from emotion, but he knew that once the two intertwined, it could mess with him in a fiercely debilitating way. He thought of the houses that they had passed through on the way here, doors caved in, senseless damage, blood. "Okay, Okay Listen we're on the same side here... It will be dark soon, I feel like we should get back to the school."

Luke nodded. They threw some things in their packs, and David put some more cans into a garbage bag, they then made sure the doors were locked. After they had done all they could, they looked over the house one last time and left a note on the coffee table that read :

'We are safe, We love you, David + Luke.'

Groceries

Jesse snacked on some trail mix they had just appropriated from a ransacked 7-11 convenience store. Ahead of them was a large grocery store and a number of smaller shopping centers, for the next mile or two, there would be very little cover and too much open terrain, a no man's land for any who knew what they were doing... He knew through experience that it was a prime location to be pinned down by sniper fire. So far, Jesse and Mike had managed to avoid most open confrontation, but the soldier still heard the echoes of gunshots and knew that the luck likely wouldn't last. After getting a fair assessment of the area, he ducked down beside his friend. To one side was a parked panel van, and a half-height brick wall dotted with bushes gave them cover on another two sides, even back the way they came was mostly concealed by building.

It was a good spot, all things considered. So he suggested a few minutes break. That way, if anything happened, they'd at least have their breath.

For one last moment, he surveyed the open area ahead of them and looked for spots where someone might be lying in wait... A habit from the desert that stuck with him. In the big sandbox, this kind of work was dangerous, and Jesse frowned when it dawned that it was just as much the case here now at home, just in a slightly different blend of danger factors. Urban warfare was a chaotic shitshow, door to door warfare involving high-powered weapons in any part of the world was a messy business any way you looked at it. Though when he was deployed, his enemies tried to maximize their chances of survival, hitting, running, trying to avoid exposure, attacking and withdrawing before a retaliation could be brought to bear, while he was shackled with strict rules of engagement... Here and now however, he also had to worry about those people with high-powered weapons also showing complete disregard for rational thought.

People were panicking, hysterical or paranoid and many were a good mix of all three, he wondered how many had died needlessly in the hours that followed the start of the storm.

“...Yeah, it's been a rough few years, trying to keep a mortgage paid off.” they had been exchanging little bits of detail in moments of rest, trying to catch up... “ Not as rough as you had it, I'd imagine...You were in Iraq? Or Afghanistan?” Michael asked.

Jesse tried to avoid talking about his time on deployment at all costs, but he had noticed his estranged friend growing more and more dismal since the old man in the office, he himself was starting to need sleep horribly, so he thought some catching up would be useful. “Both.” he said as he scanned the distance.

“But those places made sense...” they were warzones, and though he was skeptical about the reasons for those wars, he could understand the motivations behind his enemies. Here, at home, there was simply no understanding as to why this was happening. People had just started shooting when things went weird, perhaps it was the nature of the society-beast... that the more civil you are, the more savage you become when it's suddenly all taken. Could an explanation as simple as that be all there is to it? After all, Jesse had run right toward looting a gun store when things started breaking down, what did that say about him? He supposed it was all way above his pay grade. Jesse forgot he was mid-sentence and pointed to the unexplained destruction around them “...compared to this.”.

War in a remote part of the world brings with it a mental barrier of sorts, a dividing line or a convenient way to compartmentalize the trauma that war so often inflicts... The luxury of being able to say, ‘That was a different place, That's not here.’. But what about the war just around the corner in your own hometown?

He looked over to his old friend and noticed he seemed darker than he remembered. He remembered a guy who was hopelessly optimistic, someone who always had only good things to say about others. Almost thirteen years had passed since those days, Jesse couldn't help but wonder just how closely Mike saw the same kind of change in him.

“I hear you.” His friend said as he tossed a wrapper to the ground. Though one of his eyes was still swollen, he seemed quite an improvement since yesterday. Jesse was really starting to feel the

fatigue too, everything ached, But he knew that he couldn't let himself slow down now. He knew that they'd need to find a place to hold up and recover but where? He himself had the house he shared with his father... the best he could do on a mostly unemployed student's salary. It was a nice minimal home for while he tried to figure out what to do with the rest of his life, but they had passed by a number of such places in the last few hours, and many had burned down almost beyond recognition other developments looked like battlegrounds, no, his home would not be any better, it was not an option.

"We need a place to rest, how far's your house from here?" The soldier asked. "Three or four miles, If it's still there.". They could make it there with some luck. Jesse offered, "Do you want to try to get there?".

The medic looked lost in thought for a drawn-out moment, then responded with, "Eh, I don't care... There's nothing there of value anyway."

"Alright," Jesse said, he remembered that man the was much like himself, unmarried, unattached, perhaps there was little at his home he cared about, or perhaps the mention of a home was more painful a subject than his friend cared to let on.

His thoughts for better shelter and his despondent companion disappeared when he heard a single gunshot close by. The two ducked, and Jesse quickly tried to work out its direction.

He heard the echoes of breaking glass and peered over the walls that gave them their cover. A saw a small group of people and a rusted SUV. The old four-wheeler's engine chugged as it positioned itself directly in front of the storefront. They were forcing their way into the grocery store, three men ranging from their teens to their late twenties, and two women, about the same ages... They were flanked by a gruff, wide man with a shotgun who aimed the weapon away towards a different fleeing couple. They ran in a panic as they put distance between themselves and the shotgunner. The other people in the gruff man's group laughed at the event as they tried to clear out shards from the broken grocery store window so they could safely enter.

Another group they should steer clear of, perhaps half psychotic like the group from the gun store, or maybe they were just doing right by their families to the exclusion of everyone else. Either way, Jesse saw no need to confront them.

They waited in silence... they were in a good position here if they had to fight. When the looting was about finished, the gruff man dropped his guard as the others handed him garbage bags of looted foodstuffs out the window. He and another of the men ran the sacks to the SUV, which was parked half on the curb beside the newly made entrance.

They were moving fast, which was wise, but they had tunnel-visioned and lost awareness of the world around them... and didn't see what Jesse saw from his distant vantage point.

Therefore they were caught unawares as a second beat up vehicle came around the corner in direct line of sight to the looting group. Jesse and Michael were both familiar with the rust-brown pickup truck.

Jesse did a quick three-sixty around himself to make sure they weren't being snuck up on. He saw no threats but did see his friend moving about, trying to find his own angle to view what was happening.

The passengers of the Rust-brown pickup carried uniform weapons, there were more of them now too, their truck rode low as at least six men were mounted in the flatbed part of the truck.

The squat man with the shotgun was immediately cut down without warning. Full-auto fire ripped into the rest of the man's group. The others caught outside were killed almost instantly. The two that were fortunate enough to escape the initial salvo tried to disappear back into the building, it prolonged their lives by at least a few moments.

The armed 'headhunters' as they had been called, unmounted beside the SUV, Three of the riflemen entered the store while the rest began ferrying the remaining sacks of food into their own truck while a few isolated gunshots echoed from within. Afterward, the riflemen

exited the store and claimed the deceased man's SUV for themselves, it rolled away the way it had come. The entire ordeal spanned perhaps ninety seconds.

Mike lay prone just a few feet away silent, Jesse didn't need to ask if he had seen the same thing he did. They needed to find somewhere secure until random gunmen weren't roaming the streets. They agreed they'd be traveling only through side roads from now on and the two stealthily crawled away, fading away from the commercial death trap.

Please

They made it two blocks away from the old family home, both brothers were lost to their thoughts as they walked down the streets of a hometown in ruin. It was warm and muggy, everything smelled like burnt plastic, there was also the musty scent from flash flooding.

Even as uncomfortable as the air felt, Luke could not keep his mind from wandering, too many thoughts came all too scattered, friends, family, even his pet cat, but just as a thought would start to gain momentum, another would replace it as though some mental barrier in was locked in place to prevent him from feeling the sting of loss or worry associated with each new thought.

They had decided to take a different route back to the school, one that would hopefully be more direct considering the blockages and detours they had to take to get where they were currently. Thus each new road was a new threat, familiar but unknown. As they turned the corner of another street that used to be so well known to him. Another flood of memories rose up from his haze of exhaustion, how he had used to ride his bike up and down these roads from sun up till sundown. How he'd follow his brother and his friends until they'd get tired of the nuisance and start cutting through people's back yards. Dave, Mike, Joe and Pat were especially adept at giving him the slip only to double back and do it again. Hopefully, they'd think clearer as time went on.

These roads he knew intimately once. His first kiss was with a girl who lived three blocks over, they'd walk up to the gas station daily to grab nachos and candy. In retrospect, he had no idea what he was doing with her and was surprised that any of his attempts at courting young Samantha actually worked... Who knew where that girl was now.

He glanced over to Dave and saw his shoulders slumping, his rifle swung tiredly from his shoulder, His brother was lost in his own memories and exhausted grief. Simpler times, he thought, first came adulthood, then a job and then a loss of those simple things into

memory. There was no sense in letting his mind wander over people who were likely dead.

In this chaotic blend of nostalgia and worry was when he heard the voice. "Don't move!". The voice was high pitched and hidden. Luke spun around, scanning for its origin but couldn't identify the source. His body seemed to try going in every direction but any. His gut screamed 'RUN!' but his legs didn't.

"I said don't move!" The voice commanded. This time the instructions clicked, they froze. "Put the guns on the ground." the voice commanded.

From the corner of his eye, he saw David Scanning the surroundings desperately, looking for anything that might give them a hint at the better decision. His rifle was still half on his shoulder.

"Do you want to die? Stop looking for an out, look at your feet or you get shot," the voice growled.

He saw hints of motion all around, Luke knew they were surrounded. David removed his hand from the rifle and placed it on the ground. Luke held his arms up, he still had Ed's hold-out pistol tucked away under his shirt, but he wasn't going to tell them that.

"I said look down at your feet!" The brothers did. After a fraction of eternity, Luke could hear movements close around them. The gate to the backyard clinked from one way, and the bushes rustled from another. Three more came out from a house across the way. A small body dressed in drab colors stepped from behind the bush in front of them. Five or Six in total trained various weapons on the Brothers.

Luke periodically bobbed his head up enough to see base details, each wore a bandanna or something similar across their faces, they wore hats or ball caps low concealing their identities, two had sunglasses on top of all that. One of the strangers quickly scooped away 'Lucky Molly', and Luke felt it being pointed periodically at each of the brothers.

"Gimme the ammo!" the one with the rifle said in an intentionally grumbled and distorted voice. David slowly reached into his pocket

and pulled out the two boxes inside. "It's all I have, I swear!"

"Take off the pack," Another ordered, Luke did so. He heard David's garbage bag hit the ground as well. "Wallets too." It took a moment for the absurdity to register, they were being held up for their money too? They began to comply.

Then the most well-armed of their attackers intervened, the one that appeared from the bushes hidden in plain sight of them held some kind of AK47 in pristine condition, he wore a bandoleer with several magazines hanging from it, when he spoke the others immediately reacted... If there was a leader to the group, he was it. "Now, we were gonna just let you pass, but the guys wanted that nice gun you have."

"I just found it," Dave said.

As Luke handed his wallet over, he read the little facial expressions he could make out, though their body language told much more, they shuffled uncertainly erratically. They were just as scared as he was, he guessed they weren't all fully on board with randomly mugging people during an unknown catastrophe. It was somewhat encouraging to know that not everyone was so quick to abandon their principles, but it made them no less dangerous in the current moment. One or two of them were very confident, almost enjoying themselves... they seethed in quiet anger, showing annoyance at their leader for drawing out their fun, he easily imagined them the type that would like to just shoot instead of talk.

In a way, he was grateful. If some crazed gunman had been in that bush, they'd both be dead already. *They could have killed us already, why drag this out?* He thought...

He'd be willing to bet they did not want to kill them, despite the tough talk, they were probably just as scared as the brothers. He figured it was likely they'd be allowed to walk away... if they complied. Luke thought that it might be best to try appealing to their sense of humanity.

He asked very softly. "I guess it's your gun now, and we can't stop you, but we've got nothing to defend ourselves with now ...

Would you mind if I kept my machete?" He saw Dave shoot him a mortified look, one of the more aggressive of their robbers screamed, "Shut the fuck up.", "Just pop him already!" said another. The words made Luke flinch and he began to think that he had made a mistake that would kill them both. The others began telling the loud one to ease up, Luke thought he had heard one of them slip and use a name, but it didn't register. "Fuck that, it's mine now." said the bandit holding his pack. He stared down Luke, daring him to make a stupid decision.

Luke lowered his gaze back to his toes to be as nonthreatening as possible. Their attackers were not all on the same page... but he wasn't sure if that made the situation any more fatal or less for the brothers. He knew that the only action to take was to remain perfectly still. Let their captors think it through... and hope the cooler heads prevailed.

After way too long a time, the probable leader made a motion and said, "Go ahead, give it to them, you know you don't need it."

The thief who had Luke's pack grunted and pulled out the well worn machete from its sheath. He stared into Luke with insolent rage and lobbed it somewhere behind Luke, "Go get it." It clanged a dull complaint as it skidded to a halt down the road.

The leader then added, "Good luck, I suggest you get the fuck out of here." the bandits that surrounded them then made room for the two to pass. Luke began to look up to the leader but was met with a sharp "Head down." Luke did so, but not before he caught a glimpse of the AK47 the thief held, he couldn't tell what struck him as off about the weapon, not in the split second glance, but it bothered him more than it should have... he probably should mind how clean and shiny the weapon looked, or how its proportions seemed odd compared to what he knew of the weapon... given that they were walking away from being executed in cold blood. The brothers did not look back, But they heard the jibes and laughs from their robbers fade into the background of wind; somewhere far off were angry gunshots. Luke picked up his machete a few houses down, and the two turned the corner, still alive.

Intersection

They ducked low against yet more bushes, more fences and more rubble, The fatigue of scanning everything had gotten to him hours ago. Michael was unused to this sort of meticulous work, but he knew that it was likely saving his life. It turned out that Jesse was a good teacher on the fly, the soldier gave quick tips on what to look for and where to move, it was hasty, crash study learning, but Michael was grateful... He suspected his friend's knowledge was the only reason he was still alive.

They had crossed over to the bad part of town, the side of the tracks one wouldn't want to be on even without an unfolding apocalypse. With an almost deliberate irony, he made note of the familiar street signs... he was right around the corner from his job. He had seen too much of these streets for work and would have been happy to never have to come back to this part of town again, but cutting through was the simplest way to their newest destination... the small industrial area was chosen solely because there were fewer gunshots seeming to come from that direction. Time away from the populated areas seemed like a good idea, they needed time to rest without the threat of imminent death... they just had to get there.

They hunkered down in a wooded alcove right at a fork of the main road. Usually a busy intersection, the roads were a two-lane throughway running north and south and a usually congested one lane running east and west through the bulk of the town. It was spotted with bodegas, storefront churches and boarded up businesses of all types.

Where they currently hid was a small patch of trees running a hundred feet or so from the parking lot of a rundown beer distributor. It seemed like there was one of those across the road from every stack of project housing in this town. Years of windblown trash were caught in the branches and undergrowth around them. It also had a

notoriously inconsistent stoplight adorned with red light cameras. Michael had worked multiple fatal accidents in this intersection during his career. He tried not to think of them, tried to push them away, yet the vividness found their way in...

The car was upside down in the woods... flames had already started to lick through the dashboard. He was trying to control a woman who flailed about outside the vehicle. She had obvious deformities to both arms and one leg, each limb flopped about unnaturally like a wet noodle. She screamed words, but they made no sense... part of her skull was exposed from a deep cut. Something else howled from within the vehicle... a shrill gasping scream from a person much younger. He looked over to the spot and saw Jesse speaking, "Do you need a rest?"

Michael nodded and rubbed his eyes, it had to be a little past afternoon, though he felt like they'd been on the run forever.

There was a rummaging behind them, and the two spun to see one of the piles of trash wriggle and move, the head of an unkempt old man poked out from the pile. The man looked like he hadn't bathed in months, his Carhart jumpsuit was stained brown, and he wore three or four layers of sweater or jacket despite the humid heat, and his beard had chunks of unknown filth trapped within. The scent of stale sweat and body odor combined with the musk of mold and it was all topped off with the hint of excreted alcohol. Both the soldier and the medic blinked wide-eyed...

One of the many homeless that inhabited the rundown area. Michael knew there to be a dozen or so homeless encampments dotting the wooded areas around, he knew many of their names. Still, he couldn't recall seeing the man from any of them.

The man blinked at the daylight, "Well fuck me.". Jesse pointed his rifle toward the man "Stay still, dude." The hobo looked up and said, "Whatever." he hacked up a wretched cough. He sprayed nasty phlegm toward a place between the three. "You gonna arrest me?". Jesse Looked toward Michael, who was unable to make any better sense of it, he returned a shrug. "Uhh no." The soldier said.

"Well ya want a drink then?" he offered a half consumed bottle of Georgi vodka to the two, they politely declined. The Vagrant started to look familiar to Michael. Perhaps he had taken him to the hospital before, though he couldn't place when... he literally transported hundreds of people who looked exactly like this man, he briefly wondered if he had simply chosen to forget interacting with him before. It was hard to keep from becoming jaded when the world threw redundancies like that at you. Michael had dealt with many grotesque and depraved things responding to calls in those encampments, there were many sad stories there as well. It was strange how those things overlapped so consistently, all just a few hundred feet out of sight of a 'civilized society'.

The bearded man seemed oblivious to the gravity of the situation, he made another sickly cough then took a swig of his cheap alcohol. "Well, this is my part of the woods, if you gonna set up camp, you gotta move over that way. This is my spot! I ain't sharin'." He pointed to the department store up the block, "Be careful on the other side of the Budget Tool Depot though, the prostitutes will drug and rob you back there."

"You have any idea what's going on right now?" Jesse asked. "What da fuck should I care?" the hobo let out a belch. "Says you me, This place looks a bit more like hell err'eday ...".

"Uh, we're not moving in either, you realize some apocalypse emergency shit's going on out there right now, yeah?" Michael asked.

"Well, what the hell is you botherin' me for then? It's not raining, so it seems a pretty good day to me." Michael ignored the fact that it had been torrential downpour all throughout the night, "What's your name?". "It's Gary, I told you like three times, you fuckin' deaf?" Gary looked around, as if addressing a crowd much larger than the two. Michael shook his head, "No, Gary, people are killing each other out there. ".

"They always is." He made a sigh that sounded more like a sickly wheeze... "Well, you know what they say, when the abyss stares. you stare back or some shit, and... and then you steal his car and fuck his wife." The hobo half spit out a "Heh HeH!".

"Deep. But I don't think that's how the saying goes," Michael said. "Heh, are you the boss of how things supposed to go? I'm so sorry, officer man, but you ain't my boss. Heh heh." The homeless man sang, "Are you the police of how it should be? 'cause you ain't the police of me." he then broke into some form of air guitar solo, then he switched to a flamboyant dance, then Gary smoothly transitioned into making the motions for an air blowjob.

"I think we're being mocked," Jesse said dryly. Michael shot a look over, "I hadn't noticed." Usually, he'd enjoy this kind of banter all the way to dumping Gary's crusty ass at the nearest hospital. Police around here always turfed off drunks to the medics... less paperwork for them. "HeH! you boys, just stay away from the fire's now! Says you me!". The Bum hung his arms out as he danced among imaginary rain drops drifting away from the two dumbfounded and armed men. "Oh, and fuck you, ya racist," Gary screamed toward the woods away from them.

They walked onward, occasionally peering back, in case their new friend or anyone else decided to follow, but the hobo disappeared into the woods as quickly as he appeared. Later, Jesse said, "I feel bad about leaving that dude for some reason." "How so?" Michael asked. "I don't know, maybe we should have done something more to help?". Mike was surprised at the soldier's admission, especially in light of all they'd seen the night before. "Nah, I think Gary will do fine out here," The medic added, "All this might actually be an improvement to his general day to day."

They walked on for another half hour or so, and they came across an ambulance lying on its side. It was at the edge of a multiple car pileup. From where they stood, the 'bus' as he often called it while working, looked like it had been thrown or rolled away from the initial impact. Its front was smashed, and a good amount of the engine was now where the cab had been. The vehicle was dead just before the on-ramp of a major throughway.

Michael had a thought and gestured to the wreck.

"I'm not sure about this," Jesse pointed to the wide-open area around the wreck, "That's a small little no man's land right there."

The medic nodded, "Neither am I... but it may be worth it." The thought made only a bit of sense though. They had weapons, They had gotten a hold of some food and water, but they still didn't really have a plan, So why not? Certainly, medicines and bandages would prove useful in the near future.

The encounter with the illogically unconcerned Gary had broken his fatigue, his body was no longer lethargic, he moved more reminiscent of how he did in the peak days of his martial art training. Not the brutality on the body he felt during his hardcore Ju Jutsu days. But more like the reading and awareness of every detail that he had to employ learning the techniques, practicing the traditional Japanese forms, it was like the days when he was up for his black belt test. Everything was so much more precise and effortless. He felt as though he could go on forever... Though a part of him wondered if he had just hit some kind of euphoria-laced exhaustion. He had experienced plenty of that training to be a medic, twelve to twenty-four hours shifts were the norm in his line of work... certainly unhealthy, but a paycheck needed to be made.

He had to remind himself, things were a chaotic mess, and death was looming around any corner... any moment someone could open fire at them.

He had to keep his energy for when it mattered, he had to keep cool, had to treat every action as if their lives depended on it.

He studied the terrain, they ducked low between a beaten sedan which had come to a halt against some bushes, where the owners had gone was anyone's guess. There were bodies in the crumple of cars ahead of them... Nothing moved, no one around that they could see.

Jesse had taught him a system for their movement immediately, they practiced covering each other with each new block since the gun store. "I got your back," the soldier said. Michael nodded and took off at a sprint. His new gear rattled as he crossed the open ground between their safe spot and the wreckage. When he reached the ambulance wreck he ducked low and covered Jesse's approach. When the soldier ducked to rejoin him they scanned the wreckage in greater detail. Most of the carnage was in the middle of the four-way

intersection, any which way could bring trouble. *This WAS stupid*, Michael acknowledged, there was no sign of other life, but the ambulance was very exposed. He climbed inside.

There was a foul smell in the back. He tried to ignore the bodies of the patient and the techs who did not survive the crash. Michael hoped he wouldn't recognize the crew. Fortunately, he did not. The stretcher had broken loose from its anchoring, it and the two bodies had been tossed about like rag dolls. The dead paramedic dangled from a seat belt restraint, it held the overweight man in place nearly upside down. The box section of an ambulance was a very flimsy thing. Typically when a bus rolled, the backbox literally just shattered like it was made of plywood, which some older models in fact, were. This truck held together, which meant that they had crashed at relatively low speed, Miscellaneous bags of equipment had been thrown through the back as well. 5x9 bandages were mixed with IV catheters, medical tape, bags of saline, all scattered across a side panel which now served to be the floor. Cellophane and other packaging cracked under their feet, the sounds echoed within the metal box. Occasional bursts of wind kicked items around.

He grabbed a red bag and started rooting through it, most agencies used such a bag for their trauma kits. Sure enough, inside was a collection of bandaging wraps. He had no interest in the small stuff like the band-aids, ice packs, or even a cardiac monitor, which usually was a paramedic's best friend. The equipment on an ambulance typically included materials for temporary repairs, items that could stem the flow of a deep bleed, or medicines to keep an ailment stable just long enough to get a patient to a hospital for definitive care... the human version of a can of fix a flat, meant for a tire. Michael knew this all too well, however, there were a few things that could remain useful in a clusterfuck situation, and if this didn't qualify, he did not know what did.

He tore through the trauma bag quickly, pocketing the tourniquets and Quickclot wraps. They were used for last-ditch effort trauma injuries and could buy the injured time if they could then be brought to the right place for longer-term care. Right now, his medicine skills would be limited to trauma interventions only, *stop the bleeding*. He

packed out the basic red trauma bag with some other useful supplies. And then with a sense of dread, he started poking at the dead medic's pockets. He felt a small secure pouch in the man's leg pocket. It would be the narcotics pouch, most EMS agencies had a policy that the controlled substances were kept separate from the bulky bags. That way, there could be personal accountability if the opioids suddenly disappeared. He tossed the powerful drugs in the trauma bag... They might come in handy if things continued on as they were.

A thought struck him, something he had never considered in his years in the field... *there was a certain arrogance playing the role of a healer.* Usually in his work, the damage had been done well before he had ever even got to the patient's side, fate had already spoken. Then he'd show up and quite often find injuries so severe that all he could do was buy the patient time.. sometimes only a few minutes at best. How many times had that played out over the years? He wondered what had kept him in going back to it, wondered why he kept trying to beat those odds that were always stacked against him. After all, who was he to try to change the tides?

Michael was struggling to zip up the now overstuffed Trauma Bag when Jesse hissed a tense "SSH-HHHH!". He soon heard the low rumbling, a low mechanical growl with a constant rhythmic chug, crunching sound of tires rolling over small road debris came with it. Some metal and plastic scraped as it was pushed aside by a vehicle. Both readied their weapons and stared out of the wreckage.

They were in a bad spot, exposed, in danger.

A rusty SUV passed by the ambulance without even a glance, then stopped short of the blockage of the service road. The passengers and their weapons got out, Michael couldn't tell if it was the same group they had encountered already, and he didn't want to risk finding out. Neither the Soldier nor Medic breathed, let alone moved a hair, time ticked by as the hunting party bickered on how to bypass the wreckage. Finally, the group seemed to decide to find another way. One by one, the men climbed back into the SUV.

All but the last... "I Gotta take a piss," One said in a gravelly voice. He shouldered his weapon, which looked to be another AR type rifle

similar to the one Mike and Jesse both carried and started looking around. The man stood right in front of the ambulance unawares.

He recognized the red shirt and the camouflage pants, he froze in place.

The man unbuttoned his camouflage cargos, and began to urinate in the general direction of the ambulance with only a small glass window between them and the obviously hostile man. Both friends had their weapons out only a few dozen feet away... as his stream finished, the man took an interest in the dark window of the bus.

The man swaggered like he were drunk, oblivious to them as he inspected his unshaven stubble in the demolished ambulance's windshield reflection. I'm not here. Don't look at me. Michael shrank into himself as if mentally trying to fade himself into transparency. Jesse was a rock behind him.

The light shifted, either the clouds thinned or thickened, perhaps some shadows swayed in a way that altered the scene, it was a subtle change. Just a small glint of light or trick of the angles, but it was enough to blow their cover.

The stranger saw something inside the wrecked bus, and immediately his swagger was gone. He focused more and gave it a much more careful look and saw the figures inside... His eyes widened, and the bandit yelped.

He struggled with his pants for just a moment, then reached across his shoulder for his rifle. He thought of the child he had slain in the alley... *Was there no other way?*

The medic had his weapon on him from the moment he started approaching, an easy shot should he choose to take it. *But did he have to?* He hesitated as he tried to find any other way out that didn't involve taking the other's life or losing his own. The armed man started to raise his own weapon and Michael saw its sights lining up on him... he watched it right down his own.

Blood sprayed out the back of the other man's head. He collapsed to the ground. "Go!" Jesse screamed as a single round clinked to the

ground from his rifle. They could hear the other men in the SUV cursing in a panic and taking cover.

They quickly left the ambulance and dove past the wreckage to put it between them and the other strangers. The armed strangers began to give chase.

Jesse fired a few shots in the general direction, their pursuers hesitated as they ducked for cover. It bought them just enough time to clear the little no man's land. Bullets started to scream past the two as they passed a mini-mart building. Asphalt kicked up behind them.

His friend's footsteps no longer matched his own, Jesse was no longer behind him. The panic that wracked his mind, what if he had been hit? He turned to see the soldier ducked low pressed back at the corner.

He was unwounded, and his face had a serene aura to it. He lazily took several shots at their attackers. The medic took up cover at the other end of the mini-mart, Jesse snapped a last few quick shots back the way they had come and began to sprint. The suppression fire had the effect the soldier wanted, their attackers held back. Michael was not trained in the arts of squad combat, but he thought he noticed something in the way the headhunters moved, they advanced with discipline and control, not the ragged drunken swagger that he had expected when he first sized them up. They moved a lot more like Jesse, just not as confidently.

Jesse swatted the medic on the shoulder as he sprinted by, "Come On!". Michael ran as more shots started to crack nearby.

A quiet walk

They walked in silence. Luke lagged behind, while his brother pushed ahead, while both were in utter despair of the reality setting in. Luke felt control over his emotions starting to weaken. He had learned from his very first life lessons to never let his hurt show, to surround himself with the things that elevated one's spirit rather than what would only latch on to the soul without option for removal. He felt they had handled themselves as well as possible when they were held up and robbed of their possessions... that could have gone much worse. Because the thieves didn't pat them down, they had missed Ed's hold-out pistol, now it was the brothers' only real defense. Luke did have his machete, but that wouldn't really help against anyone else robbing them at gunpoint.

As they stepped over mounds of broken bricks, walked around dead vehicles, and hopped over fallen traffic lights and cables, each had their own peace to make. There was nothing positive to cling to, no silver lining. They were thrown into a situation that was well beyond their ability to deal, and despite all his attempts to maintain resolute he was failing, the fatigue was starting to gnaw on him. Luke knew they were no more than two leaves in the wind. They passed a fast food store, the kind with a slogan like "Your way every time!" they had lived their lives in a society that lied through its teeth about just how special each individual was, perhaps because of it he had already had the exact inverse feeling implanted deep down inside his gut.

They were tired, angry, and afraid. And neither of them had any idea how much longer they could maintain. There was little if anything to look forward to... and it was too soon to talk about the grief.

Luke's body walked with David, but his mind was elsewhere, he was somewhere in one of those thoughts that teetered between the past and the now, never fully taking part in the moment, never fully seeing into the past. There could be someone willing to kill them around every corner; he knew this, but it might be he no longer cared.

It was a limbo that he began to make for himself little by little every time he thought of yesterday or family or home. Maybe It was his own personal way of punishing himself, or maybe it was his way of coping, either way, it made the now difficult to tend to.

“What a difference a day makes,” he said as he stepped over some debris. He saw his brother trying to hide his own anguish and confusion, and then he found himself wondering how Ed and Kent and others were faring. He didn't know them well, but they were probably the only people they could directly affect right now. It was easier for him to collate thoughts in this manner, to only address the things one could act on in the present. That was how he'd prefer it, Yet his mind kept trying to wander back to the house, to thought limbo. There were far too many details he was ignorant of to postulate much anything else.

His feet kept moving around broken bricks, a weary body on autopilot, with a mind off waging its own battle. Perhaps this separation was actually a good thing... It may have been the only thing he could do to keep himself from focusing on the corpses all around him.

Only a few feet to his right, a burnt body lay in shreds on the street. The meat on its limbs was ripped to the bone, its legs were twisted in an impossible direction, chunks of burnt flesh left a trail- Its head was hairless, face near featureless from black burnt patches, its teeth near ground to fragments by its owner's own jaws. One eye stared through clotted and congealed eyelids, and tire marks almost cut the body in two. He forced himself to look away. He imagined himself far away, on some mountain, on some deserted island, he imagined a pocket of nothing where not past, present or future existed. Then he saw animal bites on the body, none of which helped.

“I think I'm gonna puke,” he said, suddenly not feeling so well. “Just do it then,” his brother said with a robotic level of support. David didn't look back, he was dealing with his own demons.

His brother looked bothered by the delay, but what option was there. Luke certainly wouldn't have stopped if he could avoid it at all, but all he could do was smell the acrid, foul, cooked stench from the

buildings and in the streets, he could see the faces and taste burning meat in the air...

Then there was the powerlessness of being robbed. How fast it came out of nowhere, and how it could happen again anywhere. How many of his friends now looked just like this corpse?

He let it go, coughing up a lot of water and stomach acid, he hadn't eaten much this morning, and now he was now somewhat grateful for it. Pressure relieved behind his eyeballs and his thoughts started to sharpen. He wiped his face off with his sleeve and thought about what he should do about his glasses, one of his lenses busted sometime in the night, he hadn't even noticed until morning had come.

Another gunshot was heard in the distance. The shots, that wicked popping sound, he was getting used to them like one would become used the sound of a passing car, they were no longer causing him to jump, no longer causing that fight or flight reaction. This one was much further away than some he'd heard, so it disappeared into the fog anonymously.

It was then he saw something, across the street in the shade of a collapsed home. A shape was standing by the window, it was vaguely human, but its face seemed to have lost grip with the skull, the flab meekly covered its facial features, Every part of its skin looked swollen and bloated. It was just standing there staring out as if it were waiting for the mail to show up. What was it? What was it doing? He then thought he saw its eyes underneath swollen eyelids peer into him and his brother.

Somewhere above, the sun came out from behind clouds, and when Luke's eyes adjusted to the glare, it was gone. As he stood back up from his puddle of stomach juices and moved to catch up with his brother, he was forced to debate himself, had he imagined it? Was this actually all just a dream? He hoped he was about to wake up.

When he was sure he wasn't going to wake up craving coffee and dreading work, he whispered, "I think I just Something move in a house back there...We need to go."

Dave pulled away from the scent of Luke's vomit, but his vitriol

tone was completely gone, and he managed to sound almost supportive, "What is it? Are we being followed?". "No, I don't think so." Despite his assurance, they both quickly accelerated their pace. Sometime later, they had passed a convenience store which Luke remembered made really good egg sandwiches, the thought made him hungry for a split second before the imagination of eggs gone foul nauseated him even more.

Another hour passed. Again Luke found himself delving deeper into thought, and they turned a corner and came across a middle-aged woman with a shopping cart. If she saw the brothers, she made no show of it. She looked in her forties, though her clothing looked more of that a child would be dressed in. She wore some novelty tee shirt adorned with cats, her pants were a skin tight black and white material with dots. She was standing at a drive thru menu yelling to the microphone her order and then would switch into screaming something about a seizure disorder, she seemed totally oblivious to the burned building that the drive-thru menu was part of.

They walked away, leaving her to repeat her order and medical complaints to the burger store's unattended and inactive menu screen. Another two blocks away, Luke lost his balance and grabbed for a fence. At first, he had thought it was simply weariness, but then he saw Dave prop himself against a beaten black sedan. Then The tremors became more obvious. The ground shook and vibrated, and he felt a few moments of vertigo as his assumption of gravity misplaced. He saw Dave hug for the sedan as the earthquake ceased.

There was a universal silence afterward, and it brought a moment of stillness that washed over the landscape. The tremors had shaken him to the ground, he was just content to sit dumbly on his ass and appreciate the minute of silence. Eventually, the Brothers picked themselves up and moved on.

Later, they passed an old brown brick with flaking paint that was comfortably fastened into the wall of a shattered store, as the brothers passed, it somehow felt the force of the slightest amount of additional pressure or stress... the wind perhaps. The brick gave way from its lodging and tumbled to the ground, landing on a piece of a broken window pane with more rocks and pebbles beneath it. The sounds

echoed, and its happening spread directly out in all directions.

At that moment, Luke was filled with gruesome thoughts of fates for friends and family, his imaginations leaned toward hellfire and the claws of demons. When the brick hit the ground, Luke responded as though those very claws were on his neck. He wheeled about and fired his revolver only to hit brick wall, three shots slammed into the faded red of the brick, and the bullets hurled off away from their initial impacts before nothing else happened... there was no immediate threat.

The younger brother snapped out of his daze and tried to put the pistol on safety before remembering there was none. He tried to calm himself from the sudden panic and mentally worked out he had the two shots left in the thing now.

Dave turned, looking like he wanted to yell at Luke for the startling act, but much to his relief, the older brother said nothing. Likely he knew he'd probably almost done the same thing several times with that rifle before it was taken from him, that or he was just too tired to care. The rifle was gone now, and he only carried a piece of rebar large enough to be used as a club, his brother let it hang weakly from one hand as he kept moving. It dawned on him that neither of the two had any real experience with firearms. Luke had gone to the range once or twice with a few friends, but that was it, he didn't even know what kind of gun he currently was carrying or what kind of ammo it took.

His embarrassment at the brick incident distracted him from thinking about the dark places his mind had been going, he had to force himself to accept that all the worries were just stress piling. *Stress Luke, Only Stress*, He told himself. He decided it was time to change his state of mind to something more immediate, "Do you think Ed's group will let us back inside?" Dave looked back, "I hope so, or we're going to be breaking and entering again.". Luke noticed the clouds starting to thicken, another downpour was probably on its way.

"They probably shot the annoying kid in the ass by now," Luke said. "Which one?" Dave asked.

Gunshots exploded close by. Not the normal strays in different directions that they've heard all day, not the weak thuds miles away, but many bursts in a concentrated area.

Close by... Way too close.

They were frozen on the road, Luke's curious streak reactivated. *Should they see what's going on or run for cover?..* It was a stupid thought in light of all that had happened today.

Dave answered his brother's thoughts by pushing Luke down next to a car as he dove for his own concealment. He landed beside a white hatchback which had been set fire somehow in the night, its charred remains hopefully would protect them. They kept themselves concealed as two shapes ran by and took cover behind a fence across the street from them. They were both armed with long rifles and wore backpacks laden with gear.

The strangers moved again, this time splitting up. Luke couldn't make out their features as the two passed in a blur, one disappeared out of sight quickly, and the other dove into concealment behind some bushes of a well landscaped house further down. There was a familiarity in the two, but he couldn't place it. The two had similar features, Tall and about the same height, both wore short dark hair, one was more musclebound with pointier facial features, the other was thinner with rounder features.

But were they sane? And what were they now hiding from? Luke had almost forgotten the gunshots.

The answer came too suddenly as another three men appeared in the street, they too were armed with rifles and wore bulky camouflage jackets and hunting gear. The brothers would have blundered right into them in the road if it weren't for the sudden fighting. They stood spread out, pointing different ways shouting short irritable words to one another, "Scan?" one said. "Clear," said another. The smallest one screamed, "Check downrange" There was a moment of delay before one shouted a disappointed "Clear." "Watch the windows, they probably got eyes on us right now..."

Luke kept his head down and could only track a fraction of the

scene playing out. He could hear the echoes of two men sticking to the roadsides, dipping between fence, mailbox or vehicle. The third one stood in the middle of the road, his body language matched the anger of the words he screamed, "I'ma' blow off your fuckin' heads off and leave 'em for the dogs when I find you! You fuckin' hear me, assholes?" The other two waved their weapons around, sweeping the houses and breaks in line of sight.

The loudmouthed one got closer, walking slowly down the street in Luke's direction.

Luke had no idea what to do. If they stumbled upon the brothers, would they be mistaken for those who they were actually chasing? Somehow he knew that these strangers probably wouldn't differentiate between a few bystanders and their current prey, it made standing up with arms up a very unappealing option. Then again, he had two bullets in the revolver.

The loudmouth of the group walked in front, he was shorter, unlike his two friends who towered over him. His hair was reddish-blond and cut short and, while the other two had longer, darker hair. They all had several days of beard stubble. They carried some automatic rifles.

They held still for their lives while the gunmen came closer. One hundred feet. Seventy-five. Fifty.

Then they stopped. "Jim." Said one of the larger ones as he tapped on the small one's shoulder, "Look over there" He pointed to a house about three behind where they stood. Luckily back the way they came. "Take it." Jim the loudmouth said. And the group turned around and charged toward the house.

Luke breathed a sigh of relief and shifted his weight, Which caused the driver-side mirror of the ruined car to give way and clatter to the ground. "YOUR SIX! SIX! SIX! SIX!" screamed one of Jimmy's armed figures. All three turned to face the wrecked car and opened fire. A barrage of bullets tore apart the front of their hiding spot.

Luke had never been shot at before last night. As horrifying as that was, this time, the experience was far worse. It was almost

surreal as projectiles cracked past him, he hadn't expected to be able to feel the bullets as they whipped by. The sensory overload clouded his vision as he flinched by reflex. He tried to make himself as small as possible, he didn't want an inch of himself to be exposed to the three gunmen. Luke looked toward Dave, who crumpled himself down equally tight. The bullets tore through the plastic and tin of the car, and the only reason he wasn't hit was that he lay prone on the ground cowering, more bullets tore right through the body of the vehicle... the metal frame offered not a single shred of protection, it was nothing like the movies.

After the initial salvo of rounds, more precise well-aimed shots screamed at him, he couldn't move by any control of his own the panic sent spasms of reflexes that shaped him smaller and smaller in his shrinking cover spot, he tried to will himself into the ground but physics said no. Pavement Kicked up where his head had just been.

The shots ceased, and he heard the rapid shuffling steps toward either side of the car. He knew it would only be another moment before the car no longer separated him from his attackers. He wanted to fight back, at least use his gun in defiance before he was killed. But if he even tried to aim at one of the attackers, they'd just pick him off before his eyes even focused down the sights... He didn't have enough shots left anyway.

Dave ducked equally low behind some garbage cans a few feet away. Between them, they had a pistol with two rounds and a machete and Luke had both. Their attackers were spraying automatic fire. He looked to his brother, neither of them wanted it to end like this. At least don't let them see my brother! He pleaded. A snap ripped right past Luke's head, causing his head to jerk hard enough to throw his more than abused glasses off, he shoved his head back into the pavement.

"Come out, assholes!" The skinny gunman said, "You're gonna pay for what you did!". The gunmen were right on the other side of the car, Luke couldn't move an inch.

A hazy figure came into view, or would have if he wasn't almost completely blinded without his glasses... Luke saw the splotches of

color that were the gunman's ragged camo pants and coat, he could see the blotches of shining metal from gear connected to the man's undervest, and his eyes tracked the boxy black pattern of a weapon that was very much already pointed on him.

The gunman's expression changed, Luke guessed it was because he was not whom the man had been expecting to see. The man in camo raised his weapon anyway. Luke flinched as he looked at the barrel, and all was going black. Several frantic high-pitched explosions cracked in rapid succession somewhere beyond his personal darkness. There was a split-second delay, and someone was shouting, another three loud cracks registered from somewhere else. Something wet splashed across his face. He waited for the impact of the ground and wondered why he felt no pain.

He opened his eyes when he heard gurgling sounds leaking from the other side of the car, but there was no more gunfire. He risked a peek, the three attackers were lying in the road bleeding... dying. One coughed up a red vapor as he clutched his throat, the other two did not move at all.

The other figures....One of them that had dashed off to hide came out from behind a fence, he had a face that fixed fury and shock. He aimed his weapon at Luke, then swept it back to the dying men. He inched forward, inspecting them. He eyed Luke warily, "Hey there." he said. Luke tried to put words together, but he was staring at the man's facial features and hairline. Without his glasses, it all just blended together... But there was something familiar about the stranger.

The other familiar man reappeared from behind the furthest target. After inspecting his work or ensuring their safety, he started to walk over, "That's the last of them. For now.". He looked to the taller one and nodded, then he turned to Luke, "Thanks for the distraction."

The one that said, "Hey there." handed Luke his glasses, "You're not crazy, are you?". "Umm, No?" Luke managed to finally regain his feet. As he readjusted his mangled glasses, the facial features of the man became something. Right as the recognition hit, Dave yelled, "Goddamn... Mike, You son of a bitch... it's good to see you."

Michael Agniset had been a friend of the family for years. A quick handshake turned into a hug, "It's good to see a friend alive." "I know the feeling, Hey Luke." Their old friend turned to Luke and did the hug turned handshake as well.

The other heavier set man was quickly rifling through their attacker's gear without looking up, "We should make this fast." "You guys remember Jesse Cordery?" Michael offered.

"From Walnut street?" Dave mused, "Wow." Luke remembered something about one of his brother's friends leaving for the army right out of high school.

"Yeah, been a while, I know." Jesse felt under the jackets of the deceased and got distracted for a moment. He then started piling their gear, "You trust these guys, I take it?" It was clear he was talking to Mike, who looked them over and nodded, "Yes."

Jesse moved back to the group with an armful of weaponry taken from their attackers. He thrust a rifle toward Luke grip first, and then another to Dave.

The two brothers reluctantly took the weapons. "You ever use an AK before?" Luke and Dave shook their heads no.

"Okay ill show you the basics later, they're loaded so for now just don't point them in my direction, and they're full autos, so don't hold the trigger down. Right now, we need to move."

"I thought you said that was all of them," Dave asked. "The ones chasing us yes, but they've got friends out there. Probably close, and they'll be trying to find those shots." They nodded and proceeded to cut through back yards, wooded areas, and anything else that was not able to let a vehicle pass.

Luke sensed a huge amount of tension lift as they began to cut through a small state park, so much that he allowed optimistic thoughts to start forming again. He started to remember his fatigue, but it all seemed much more tolerable now. He slowed his breathing, trying to calm himself.

Jesse's head shot up. If his ears could have stood, they would have. Then he dove prone without hesitation. Luke looked at him in surprise. The soldier explained in one word. "Truck." They all ducked low and clung to their weapons as an old beat-up pickup truck slowly lumbered up the road. Luke held his breath as the truck and two figures inside rolled by, never seeing the group.

They disappeared further into the park and then stopped for a proper rest. Luke took the time to appraise his regained friends. Jesse carried an AR-15 semi-automatic rifle and carried one of the attackers AKs on his back, he was adorned with bandoleers containing extra magazines. Mike wore a similar get-up but had a shotgun lashed to his backpack instead. Each also wore webbing with assorted pouches hanging along their backs and sides. Both carried mil-surplus packs filled with who knows what... they seemed ready for war.

Luke noticed under Jesse's open jacket were two pistols holstered neatly as well,

"So what did you guys raid an army base?" He asked humorously. "Yeah, pretty much," Mike answered. "Just a hunting and fishing store, actually," Jesse corrected.

They had slowed down enough and considered themselves safer. Luke tried fiddling with his new weapon, it was an assault rifle of the AK family, he knew that much from TV and video games, but he had never actually used one. "Here's the charging handle." Jesse gave him a quick lesson which Luke focused intently on.

Jesse handed him another new magazine, "Now try to switch it out.". It was fairly simple to do after he got used to the rocking motion to get the magazine, and he now knew this weapon, in fact had a safety.

The presence of friends changed the equations in his brain remarkably. But Mike was looking distant, just staring off, looking for signs of trouble. He was a friend of the family for a long time, practically a brother, Luke knew that the medic was probably closer to Luke's family than his own... for all the time they knew each other, Mike rarely if ever talked about his family, Luke knew for a fact that

he had very little family to speak of anyway.

The medic saw he was being stared at, "Where were you two headed when we tripped over you?" he asked. "A small group was holding up in Lakedale Elementary. We spent the night there with a cop and his family, I think? One of them was shot up pretty bad. We told them we'd try to find help."

"And how did that go?" Jesse asked as he scanned the ground ahead of them. "Not bad, all things considered, we found you guys." Luke laughed desperately at his own joke, trying his best to forget just how close he had just come to being riddled full of holes. "What about you guys?"

"We WERE just trying to find a safe place to get some sleep, but it feels like those assholes have been chasing us all day."

"Not much more of a discussion to be had about this then, we're going with you," Mike said as he nodded to Jesse, "What do you say, Captain Jesse Cordery?" The soldier sighed, "It's Sergeant actually, and yeah, best plan we've had all day... even if it is also the only one."

Arrogance

Clouds were gathering... and they were not the normal kind. Rather than the slow and relentless approach of rain, Michael noticed the sudden and spontaneous collection of dark clouds. There were slow gathering wisps of dark traveling in on the wind, there was no order to the collecting darkness, more like random patches of the day simply abandoned their posts leaving a black gaseous rage behind. He blinked, that feeling behind his eyes was too similar to what he had felt the night before.

He tried to push away the impending migraine and focused on moving as fast as he could. It was subtle, but as the clouds gathered and the sky got darker, he could feel the tension grow. He knew he could hear the increasing frequency of gunshots in the distance, but he also thought that he could hear things moving in the houses. The rain hit his clothing in soft thuds, and everyone became much more tense. It was clear the others felt this change as well.

They moved fast to the school, it was now well past afternoon, and the sun was dropping. They were greeted by three boys who had been watching from the roof, Luke had explained briefly to the two newcomers how they had all become acquainted as the group walked with hurried purpose to the front door.

The front door was unlocked for them as they got within arm's distance. "Where's the kid?" Michael asked as they entered. He doubted the likelihood that he could do any real good. His Paramedic training was meant to keep someone alive just long enough to get to an operating table, but he knew that most likely there was no operating table to get to.

"Here, Over here." pointed A stocky kid with frazzled hair that Luke identified as Kent. He led The Medic to his fallen friend, A girl and an older man who sprung up from dead sleep, besides the wounded patient, but he was focused on the kid with a grotesquely large abdominal wound.

"Who is this?" The man asked. Multiple candles lit the windowless rooms. "I brought help," Luke said. The medic dropped his recently acquired backpack containing his looted trauma supplies. "He's a paramedic, maybe he can help." Michael hovered over the boy assessing him, but he wished Luke hadn't given them any kind of hope...The others hung in silence...

The kid breathed weak, shallow gasps. His skin had taken on a white pallor, and he could tell the boy had long since stopped compensating. He was probably well into his organs shutting down. He was beyond the brink and had been for too long a time. It surprised him that the boy even lasted this long.

He saw the Old man in a Nassau Police uniform as he squeezed up beside him. Luke introduced the uniformed man as Ed Marcuso. "He's been shot once, with an exit." The officer pointed to the boy's mid-left abdomen. Michael reached for the sheets that served as the boys bandaging and then backed off. He had learned in the past to not get ahead of himself.

Instead, he reached for the trauma supplies, but there was so very little he could do.

"Hey guys! You hear that out there?" One of the others he had not yet met screamed from the adjacent room. Michael had heard it, the air was wiping around out there, it sounded like a vicious downpour was going to happen any minute, and with it would be those seizure-inducing bolts of lightning. The wind whispered warnings of the unnatural clouds and the lightning storm building above, he didn't need to see them to know they were there.

Removing the sheets entirely would likely do more harm than good, there was no more bleeding: but blood had clotted and quite possibly would be intertwined with the fabric, too much manipulation would accidentally reopen the wound and kill the kid... he couldn't even try to visualize the entrance or the exit without that risk... he opted to leave them in place. "Good bandage job. Given the circumstances," he said.

He needed a suture kit and a few liters of his blood type, and none

of it was standard fare on an ambulance, and both were beyond a medics pay grade in New York. He'd then need ultrasounds and MRI for any fragmentation, dialysis if his kidneys had already shut down, which was more than likely, he'd need IV antibiotics for infection, and none of it was the kind of thing he could do with the small trauma kit he'd liberated, most of that was left to specially trained surgeons. Even then, he'd have to hope there was no permanent organ failure already creeping in. About the only thing he could do was start an IV.

A girl was choking back sniffles as she stared at the wounded boy. Michael could hear Luke, David and Jesse gawking on the black clouds on the far side of the window. The needle punctured the boy's vein, and the plastic catheter advanced. He secured and connected it to the only bag of saline he had. He knew it would do nothing, maybe buy him five more minutes of life, but he had to try.

A loud crash roared from outside, "Holy shit!" someone shrieked. Michael could feel the shock from the lightning, his skin crawled as hair follicles stood on end. The whispers in the wind turned to a howling torrent. He smelled the ozone, the lightning had landed close. He looked over at the heavy wood desk, clearly the centerpiece of the room with its glossy shine and leather chair behind it. It was a decadent thing, Just as arrogant as his attempt at saving this dying boy.

There was a chessboard on the desk, some of it's steadfastly held on the board, while others had tumbled to the floor...

Medicine, like so many other things, was a game of moves and counter moves, an eternally shifting game of chess. It could be said that there's no such thing as a perfect move in chess. Even though a computer may statistically disagree with that notion, a human may argue that all is relative to the situation... that sometimes one can achieve a moral victory in a loss by making the enemy pay a price they are unwilling to pay. Healing, Treating a wound or illness, was often a process of finding the best solution given a suboptimal scenario just as much a game of chess.

And there were times when one knows they cannot win... and they must trade every last piece before letting the tide of fate have its

way. Lightning sparked and thunder shook.

Blood ran from the walls, and the stone walls breathed. Every motion had weight. There was some kind of humming noise getting louder. Michael felt flames pulsing through his limbs. *What gave him the arrogance to so futilely try to sway the process?*

Then there was another crash, somewhere closer by. The medic tried to turn his head, but his body no longer listened. He saw the wounded boy, the worried friends or family, he noted the off white color of the office walls and the cheap construction of office desk, the decoratively unused chess board on the desk covered with years of dust... an electrical burning smell filled his nose, white noise screamed as he saw the floor rush toward in a timeless fashion. Meat and Bone vs. Time and Gravity... A Choice and an Offering, A King of fire and fury. Pawns who wore armor made of words... A Knight not black or white.

Darkness.

It was hot, and there was an ozone scent. His eyelids were heavy, but he forced them open. Michael pushed his way off the carpet and tried to remember where he was. A girl and a police officer were nearby just now coming to. "Anyone... Okay?" the officer asked. Someone from outside the room grumbled something akin to "Think so..." it sounded like an old friend of his... David... but he couldn't be sure.

The vertigo subsided, leaving a brutal headache, he ignored the pain in every joint, ignored the pain in his ears as sounds assaulted them, ignored the light stabbing his brain through his barely opened eyes... He collected himself and looked toward the wounded boy. Others were moving now, he took that as a good sign. He looked at the boy, the boy who no longer breathed. He tried to feel for a pulse and found none. Lividity started to show, what little blood the teen had

remaining began to collect at thinner parts of the body and collected downward. The line of pale flesh contrasted against the pooling purple tint. The rumbling of the storm had gone, and the winds outside had stilled. It must have been night, Most of the candles had gone out, and he could only make out the most immediate of the faintest of details.

The police officer came up beside him. Michael heard others moving out in the hallway, "He's gone.". "Ah shit," the officer groaned. "You family?" Michael asked as he prepared to give an all too familiar speech. "Nah." The older man said.

The girl finally sat up, after gaining her awareness focused on the dead boy. The Medic and the Officer both stood with grim faces. Her understanding was instant, "NOOOOOOO!".

"He was doing better! We bandaged him really good!" Neither replied. "You killed him! You killed him!", The others hurriedly returned to the room.

"He ... He was Getting better!!! He told me so!!" She howled as her arms smashed on Michael's chest. He winced as her hands impacted on the magazines in his web gear. He did not back away.

The larger teen put himself in between the two, "Merry! calm down, it's not his fault!".

"Murderer!!" her arms flailed impotently, and just as quickly, the girl switched into grief. She had known the eventual outcome all along.

Michael had been in this exact position numerous times before, and It never became easier. "He fought very hard." He tried his very best not to let his eyes say the rest, *that the kid never had a chance.* He looked to the body, dropping his guard and inviting the girl to approach, "You must have been very tough to get this far." Michael said as he stared at the body.

"He did..." The girl whispered, "...He was..".

He learned all their names as she said her goodbyes, he later

learned the dead boy was named Andy. Kent walked the girl away as she sobbed, everyone else stayed quiet as her laments echoed through the hallways of the school. "It was her boyfriend," said a heavier voice, "He was really always a kind of a dick." The boy named Frank said. No one said anything else.

Michael had seen many people die in his line of work, he had a natural resistance to grieving. But normally, he had the advantage of getting to go home after a day of work, not witness the continuous grief of others first hand, Michael looked to Jesse, David And Luke, His friends... perhaps the only left alive in the world. With nothing to say, he looked back to the dead and thought about how best to dispose of the body.