

We The Fallen :
A Dark Age Resurgent

#4 Shattered Glass & A Daughter

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Wheelchairs and Debris

She pushed the wheelchair through clutter and debris with no plan on what to do next. That her mother couldn't sit still to let Kaylee do the work and insisted on trying to 'help' just made things worse.

"I can go just fine without the oxygen," her mother said. "But for how long?" Kay asked? It had happened before... within minutes of an O2 tank running out, she'd be panting to compensate, in an hour, she'd look exhausted like she had run a marathon simply from the lack of the extra air. They both knew it was a major problem on top of everything else, no matter how much her stubborn mother tried to hide it.

There was the scent of burning wood and plastic in the air, the rain had stopped, but the clouds threatened more downpour at any time. For at least a few minutes in the early hours of morning, things had quieted down some. A new day had come and with it many uncertainties. In retrospect, it might have been better if they had stayed at home, but sitting at home with no power just waiting for Mother's tanks to run out was not possible. Nor was the prospect of sitting there with the corpses of her Step-Father and Step-Sister any more appealing than the thought of running out of her mother's sorely needed Oxygen.

Moving mom by her wheelchair was a chore in its own, but doing so while lugging two additional O2 bottles was pushing her to the limit. The heavy iron cylinders sat awkwardly as they poked out of the top of her schoolbag, the extra weight made everything that much more arduous. Mother sat uncomfortably in the wheelchair with her wall-powered oxygen concentrator bouncing across her lap. Besides from the breathing apparatus, the women had carried little else.

There was no time for novelties or nostalgia, she knew that much. When

she had woken up those long hours ago amid the storm Kay immediately knew something big had happened, something big and something bad. She first happened across her half-sister Amanda, the younger girl was collapsed on the floor and not breathing outside Kay's room. Amanda always had a bit of a drug problem, and at first, Kay thought that it had finally happened, her half-sister had died from an overdose, Kay had collapsed in tears and cried for help, the torrent of rain and the occasional rumble shook her through the walls, and no one came. It was then she limped toward her mother's room.

The door creaked open and silence greeted her. Jack, her Step-Father, was still and cold, he was halfway crumpled against the door, almost completely blocking the entry. The quiet in the room frightened her as she had become accustomed to continuous the hum of the motorized oxygen concentrator, and Kaylee approached preparing herself for the worst.

When she reached out to check on her mother. The old woman let out a struggled snort.

It was cruel, Kaylee thought. Hadn't this poor woman suffered enough? The Lung Cancer had already taken her mobility and autonomy, 'Stage 4', 'inoperable', 'terminal' were the words used to describe her sickness. She was already living on borrowed time... Now she had to endure this, Lightning that causes seizures, mass hysteria... and all the end of the world stuff that was going along with it.

"I told you you should just leave me, you could have come back for me with help later," Mother had said, not for the first time. "No." Kaylee said, she was unsure that there was any help out there to get. And what if something were to happen to keep Kay from getting back to her? What if she was hurt or killed? Mother would sit there helplessly and wait for her tanks to run out, then she'd slowly suffocate over hours. *No*, Kay would not let that happen to her, she had been a real bitch to her mother as she was growing up, and she would do everything she could to make her Mother's last days easier... apocalypse be damned.

So far, the two had managed to avoid interacting with others, whatever it was that happened had left a strange paranoia on many other people. She had never heard people shouting as they had through the night. She had never heard shrieks of rage or the visceral pain suddenly cut short as they had all through the night, the sounds made her think of the worst artistic depictions of hellfire and suffering, all the paintings on canvas she had seen in her many art classes made more sense now. She missed school, but Mom had needed her more. She had no regrets about taking that time off, a degree in fine arts wasn't anywhere as important as being there for Mom.

Kay heard a small clamor nearby and darted her head around, looking for signs of trouble. A disheveled man of an indeterminable age was a few houses away, she hadn't seen him until he was that close because he was obscured

around an intersecting side street. He darted from one garbage can to another, rooting through the plastic bags, after tearing apart each bag he'd quickly search through the contents as the refuse scattered to the street... he'd then move on to the next.

If the man heard them approaching, he paid no mind, he just kept tearing through the garbage. The man drifted away toward the next set of garbage cans and then the next. He went his way and Kaylee took her mother going theirs, she knew putting any logic towards the man's actions was likely senseless, but amid all the insanity, she spared herself a split second to wonder just what the man was looking for.

The thought passed, and again she made sure no one was near the two women. The reality of how exposed they were out in the streets loomed over her again. *'What was the plan?'* She ran the thought process...

Mom needed air bottles and her medicines, they'd need food and safety, among other things. There had to be others out there that were not crazy, if Kay and Mom were normal, there were others out there too - she just had to find them without running afoul of the psychos. People would surely gather where the food and medicines were, at the very least, Mom's need would be met. She pushed the wheelchair harder, South Shore Community Hospital was only about three miles away. It was her only choice... She just had to hope they were somehow able to avoid any trouble on the way... and that she could trust anyone who they met when they got there.

A half-hour passed, the weather held, and the morning grew brighter. Kaylee still pushed with care, but she was tiring. Mother let out a wheeze, she needed a break too. The daughter started rooting through her backpack for mother's nebulizer treatments and, to her frustration, couldn't find them, Mother tried to look unbothered, but Kay knew that unless she got at least a few puffs of her aerosolized breathing treatment that her discomfort would just build. When they finally got to the hospital, she'd need to get more of those single-use meds as well.

As she tore through her bag a second time, she became aware of a humming sound building in volume. In a moment, it became more distinct, pulsing deep and rhythmically, the chugging sound of an old engine. On any other day, it would be an unremarkable thing to hear, but today it could mean anything. Perhaps the driver was like them, searching for survivors... maybe they could hitch a ride. It would be such a relief to be off the streets. She listened closer, and something began to not sit right in her stomach.

The chugging was closer now, its engine echoed down the roads, its loud rumbles growing closer by the second. By the sound of it, it was an old, old machine, a gas guzzler just spewing smoke as it rolled down the road. None of that was what put her on guard, it was more of the raw aggression she felt from the sounds of the engine that made her worry. The engine would idle

slow and sure and suddenly scream loud, roars and shrieks of tire skids accompanied the bursts of the engine. There were collision sounds that echoed.

Everything inside Kay told her to get off the road.

And she did. She pushed the wheelchair onto the sidewalk and then up the driveway of a nearby home, there was a small array of bushes in the front yard and a minivan in the driveway, she used them to hide the two. Mother looked confused as to the sudden change in her daughter's demeanor, she was more exhausted than she let on and it had only just dawned something was wrong. She began to speak, but Kay made a shushing gesture. The chugging engine screamed even louder, Kay heard the vehicle ripping up the street. Tires screeched around the corner, and she caught just a glimpse of a faded muscle car before ducking her head. The sounds of the engine alone spoke of aggression, just the way it revved and roared screamed malicious intent... somehow, Kay just knew if she were to be on the road while this vehicle passed, its driver might just try to run her down. She also knew that even hidden, her life and Mom's were still very much in danger. Tears rolled down her cheeks as the truck screamed by. It passed the benign house as quickly as it had approached and continued to swerve down the road angrily as it smashed into debris without care.

She waited a long time, the sound had long faded but Kay was still trying to build her previous courage. She heard Mother's wheezes and again sifted through her backpack, this time much more carefully. She finally found the pouch of medicine and dug out the mouthpiece, she ran it through mom's O2 and the nebulizer treatment started hissing while emitting a thin mist. Mom held it up to her mouth and inhaled the vapors hungrily. Her breathing deepened and the obnoxious wheezing sounds quieted.

Kay just looked at her mom, and tried not to break down into tears again. The old woman was rail-thin, her gray strands of wispy hair used to run long and black like her daughter's did now, most of that had fled when she went through her first rounds of chemotherapy. The bathrobe and pajamas she wore underneath her blanket were a sad sight, but there wasn't time for anything else. She smiled warmly to her daughter.

There was a sudden rustling of grass, they were no longer alone... Again she had let someone walk right up on them.

He was a giant of a man, heavily muscled and towering over her, easily six and a half feet tall, he looked to be in his late twenties or early thirties. He carried a large rifle in his hands, but even without it there was little she could do to protect herself or Mother should the man intend harm. Kay just looked at him, awaiting whatever was about to happen. The big man looked at a loss for anything to say, the long moment became increasingly awkward. Eventually, he managed to form words, "Umm, Uhh, Hey there." Kay replied with a dry "Hi." Mother just worked on her breathing treatment. The man

never so much as lifted the weapon or aimed it toward either of them, his voice croaked a deep rumble of a sound. "So uhh, You're on my front yard... Do you need some help?" he asked.



Choices

Generations of rocks had made their homes on the tar blacktop roof. How they'd gotten there had no kind of deliberate reason, just a common compulsion for young kids to throw a fist-sized rock on top of the building when no one was looking combined with the length of time... perhaps there was something instinctual it, a young boys programming to defy authority made manifest. Over the years that the school had stood, the roof had accumulated a substantial collection.

The red stone building that supported that rock covered roof was surrounded by an empty parking lot, fires danced in puddles of mud and debris. Smoke from the innumerable pyres reached up to the wind to merge into a single ominous cloud. A young man with a dirt-smeared face and cracked eyeglasses stood on this roof... there were bodies in the road. Luke tried to ignore them and looked past the smoldering buildings to the eastern horizon, all he wanted to do was make out the rising sun through the smoke.

"Yo man, come down here for a second," Officer Ed Marcuso said from the stairwell.

Luke nodded but didn't take his eyes off the sky as the sun tried to break through the sooty clouds. First came the storm, it sparked flames that engulfed cars & houses alike, then fires ran rampant across the suburban landscape as propane, and natural gas tanks went up. The decision to stay at the school had been a smart one, there were no adjoining buildings near enough for flames to spread and its strong construction held through any stray arcs of lightning. The cop got tired of waiting and went back downstairs, leaving Luke to stare at the suburbia.

The night had been sleepless. Each crash of thunder brought the panic that they may be taken with it. Occasionally there were the sounds of people muttering as crowds passed the school, They let no one else in, but then again, no one even tried to knock. Every now and then, people would wander by while Luke watched from two stories up, but none said much of anything coherent, let alone say the word "help". As day approached the chaos quieted down to a dead standstill, now there was an eerie calm... There was movement, dogs mostly running to and fro, occasionally one would bellow a

miserable whine, And the rains that came in the wake of the storm turned from a mist to a torrent seemingly at will.

He entered the rusting stairwell and heard the echo of another gunshot in the distance. The light of the sky behind him revealed many flakes of crusting paint, probably the asbestos underneath it as well. He had come back up to the roof right before dawn to collect his thoughts. On his way back downstairs he caught glimpses of how ramshackle the school really was, pretty much anything not viewable in the main public halls was molded, rotting or worse.

He walked down the stairwell intentionally making a little noise to let the rest of the group know he was coming, no need to startle a bunch of armed and terrified people, he figured.

He found himself leaning for the door frame as he left the stairwell, suddenly having lost his balance, the ground was shaking, and he heard a distant rumble. The floor and the walls started vibrating, it came on subtle and magnified in intensity very fast. He heard assorted objects rattle, the sounds of sliding chairs and tables echoed down the halls. His grip on that frame was all that kept him standing and just as Luke was sure the building was going to collapse, the tremors had seized, leaving the sound of dirt and dust settling.

The East coast was not known for earthquakes, there had been one or two in his lifetime or so he'd been told, but they were so mild he never even felt them. This one nearly shook his legs out from under him, Luke heard the others cursing from the next room as he took a step to test his balance and then moved on. That was the fourth such tremor since last night.

They had taken refuge in the teacher's lounge and adjoining offices since there were couches and rugs, The bare concrete of the "fallout shelter" was not really sympathetic towards rest and recovery, In fact it was stifling and practically blinded them from hearing or seeing anything going on, so they set up camp where it was cozier. The group was trying to calm down from the quake as he entered the room. Only the wounded Andy was still, a cheap leather couch from the administrator's office served as his makeshift hospital bed.

Dave lay there still half asleep, his brother let out a small snore that jostled him back awake momentarily. The others gripped their chairs and tables, testing the untrustworthy ground. Ed and Merry seemed more intent to watch over the wounded teen. Though he was already well aware, Luke asked, "How is he?" "Alive," Ed said without looking up. The younger boy Andy was breathing rapidly and his skin was nearly gray.

Frank and Josh echoed from an adjacent room behind, "I'm tellin' you man, it's gotta be aliens," the larger, heavier boy insisted, "Like did you see what happens where the lightning lands? Shit vaporizes!" "I don't want to

hear your theories anymore," The smaller of the two carried a bloodied rifle, it must have been the one from outside...

"You fuckers went outside after I told you not to?" Ed yelled while tending to the wounded boy, the two teens ignored the older man.

"We need to do something about information," Dave grumbled as he noticed his brother.

Luke agreed, "Exactly, we need to know what happened... But how?" The large boy Frank said. "Aerosolized LSD!!! that could have done it." The room groaned in irritation.

"That doesn't explain the vaporizing part, asshole," Josh said dryly. "Oh right, what about a CME?" The boy fat retorted, "What the fuck is a CME?" a skinny one retaliated.

Luke was growing suspicious that the younger of his new friends somehow were not truly appreciative of the gravity of the situation like it was all just some temporary inconvenience, that any minute the power would go back on and everyone could go about their lives and that their friend wasn't bleeding out.

"Can you all shut the fuck up?" Kent said, shooting his eyes into their wounded friend, the other two got the hint. Josh tried poking at his smartphone rather than meeting the larger boy's gaze. Luke was grateful that at least some of this group was taking things seriously.

"I don't think the cause matters so much at this point." Ed cut in... "What's important is that we take steps to guarantee our survival."

"Finding out what's going on is part of that, don't you think?" David paused a moment, then added, "Radiation? Or chemical attack? It kind of makes a difference."

"Hmm you're right. I know, I'll just check my news app real quick, Oh right." Josh snarked as he waved his useless cell. "Do any of you have any clue what to do in a true MCI?" The officer tried to assert. "What's an MCI?" The boy waving the cellphone said.

The officer enunciated the words angrily, "Mass Casualty Incident." "Only this is an MCI on an order of magnitude larger than what they probably meant that term for," David said. "True," Officer Marcuso admitted, "And the token training I get on that kind of stuff barely scratches the surface of this... whatever's going on."

The older man's mustache wriggled for a second then he continued, "It does let me make a few safe assumptions, though," The cop said as he eyeballed Dave, "If it was some sort of chemical attack, we'd all be dead already. If there's radiation, then we all will probably be dead soon. We've all been exposed for hours already. Instead, let's worry about things we can control. Like getting water and food." Ed looked over to the girl whose eyes never left the wounded boy, "...and help for our friend here."

"I thought you were planning on grabbing a boat," Josh said with a snide tone.

"And I still am, but your pal here needs some emergency care... we probably do too if I'm being honest."

"Can we move him?" Luke asked.

"If we have to, we have to," Ed grumbled, "But I'd rather not rush it blindly," Luke didn't know the boy, but he hoped the boy pulled through. Perhaps it was a blend of guilt or conscience, he was right next to the boy when it happened, he also knew it wasn't his fault, but it made it very hard to think about just leaving the kid now.

"I think he's getting better, he's stopped shivering." Frank contributed.

"I'm just saying what you're all thinking..." came the withdrawn voice of Josh from some corner of the room, "We should consider leaving him." The entire room glared at the voice. It was becoming obvious not all of their newly met friends held the same loyalties. "How would you like it if we did that to you?!" Merry scolded, it was the first time she had raised her voice.

"If I were dying, I wouldn't want to hurt your chances of living. If I'm fucked, I'm Fucked." Josh replied coldly. Luke was only a few years older than the teens, but he noticed how very arrogantly the younger boy carried himself, there was a self-righteous air of entitlement about him that only a wealthy single child could have. He was certainly the kind of kid whose parents showered him in costly toys, the boy likely never knew what it was like to work a shit job or be told 'no' to anything, he doubted very much that if the roles were reversed, the boy would be as stoic as he claimed.

"You're full of shit, Josh." The girl screamed. Everyone threw up hands and made gestures trying to get her to quiet down.... If anyone was close by outside, they'd have heard her. Despite the girl's tears and exhausted appearance, she was a pretty thing, maybe it was just the passion in defending her loved one, but it was hard not to look at her and see there was a fire there. He respected that.

The girl was enraged and came charging at the snide boy, "It's so much easier to say that when you're not the one hurt." Kent used his football player frame to come between the two, holding her back with one hand and pushing Josh out of the room with the other.

"Keep it down, All of you." Ed enforced. "The kids alive. We're gonna do what we can for him." Luke could tell it was the last thing Ed wanted to be doing, but he was committed. Luke wanted to weigh in, trying to say something that could support Ed and help bring some solidarity, but words just wouldn't form. "You don't even know him," Merry squeaked. Luke didn't really understand the connections this group had, but he was getting a sense of which ones he'd prefer to be around and which ones he could do without.

"You're right, He's nothing to me. But I'd hope at least one of you would do

likewise for my son... If I wasn't there." Ed said.

Kent said nothing during most of the exchange, Luke noticed he typically said little when he wasn't bickering with his father, he took no side but obviously thought deeply on his father's words. Everyone's tired, frightened, pissed off. Luke reminded himself, They probably weren't always so volatile. Some of us are hurt. One of us was lucky to last the evening. Everyone deals with horror differently.

Ed Checked his crude bandaging job again as they sat there and pondered what to do. Luke had to give him credit, he held together very well considering Andy's condition. He was a calm in a storm of terrified people, at least until one of the others challenged him.

Luke wanted desperately to help, to be able to tend to the wounded of those that he cared for, like the officer had done all night. But Luke was just as on edge, just as nervous, his head pounded and his heart raced, he doubted that he could handle that well under the weight of it. He could feel the panic with every heartbeat, he feared that anything he did might make the situation worse, so he did nothing, said nothing, and just let the tension linger on its own. *'There are many different ways to respond to overwhelming stress.'* he suddenly remembered his Professor from Intro to Psych class say, as true as those words were, they did nothing to guide him in this situation... If anything, it made him feel more impotent.

He tried to search for one solution to help everyone, each was unraveling and coping in their own way. Luke wondered if it'd be safer for him to go find some quiet corner away from everyone else and just sit things out until he could come to grips with himself.

They sat in silence for a while, but his brother's mind was clearly growing restless. He looked around consistently and opened his mouth several times to say something but kept stopping himself, eventually, he noticed Luke watching him and forced the words out, "So what's our plan?"

Luke still had no idea but thought it best to try to steer the talk rather than letting the others immediately derail the subject again. "Well, what do we know?"

Josh scoffed from the other room, "This again..." The others ignored him, "That people are hallucinating, or something, some are wildly aggressive, and people are straight up killing each other out there." Kent stated. "Electricity doesn't work." Merry offered. "No assurance of rescue or help of any kind," Frank stated with less than enthusiasm.

"You don't know that!." The girl in the corner retorted with as much venom as before.

"Not now! Now, what else do we have to work with here." David cut her off, preventing another exchange. "We have strong walls here, and the building seems more resistant to whatever that lightning storm was, it didn't

burn down like a lot of the smaller houses around us did." Luke hadn't made that connection prior, but the officer seemed to be right... Maybe the building hadn't burned because of its stone walls, or maybe it was just dumb luck.

"And we need more weapons," Josh said, he had snuck back in during the silence. The Marcuso's had weapons sure, it occurred to Luke that he and his brother were at their mercy if any of them decided to suddenly snap. Everyone else had either wielded a baseball bat or, in Luke's case his trusty machete.

"How bout getting off the island like we originally planned," Frank said. Luke saw Dave scowl, he could tell his brother was resistant to the idea of leaving the island. "We are. But that means travel, we will need food, water and anything we can scavenge." Ed said much more of a command-like than team-like voice. The others seemed to be satisfied with the older man taking charge, but Luke nor Dave knew much about Ed or the others and were much more skeptical.

Long Island: was basically a parking lot a hundred miles longthe hugest parking lot in the civilized world, It was a suburban paradise for New York's mediocre, New York's destitute, and a refuge for those that feared the city yet still sought to exploit it.. In a case of an emergency or extreme danger, it being surrounded by water made leaving its geography a chore at the best of times. One could only leave via bridge or tunnel, which required going through at least part of the city... Ferry or boat was the only other way because he doubted that flights were currently running, and the weather made both of those options dangerous prospects.

David had another idea. Luke could tell his brother wanted the conversation to go a completely different way, it wasn't long before he again spoke up. "Has anyone thought about their families?" David asked, "I'm not so sure I could leave without finding the rest of my fam." A pang of guilt ran through Luke at the mention of family, he had been thinking and worrying about Mom and Dad sure enough, but he had buried those worries under the immediate concern for his own well-being.

"I can understand that, but we really should take care of ourselves first," Ed said without sympathy. David disagreed, "That's easy for you to say, your family's right here. What if someone you cared for was out there right now, and they needed your help?" "Kid, have you even heard the noises out there? Everyone needs help, us included. Going anywhere is asking to get yourself killed." Luke had to agree with the officer's logic, the more one was out there exposed, the more likely they'd end up crossing paths with a person they'd have wished to avoid.

"That's more the reason to find them now! Before things get any worse." His brother wasn't going to back down. Luke himself was torn, he agreed with Dave, but he knew it was a risk, if not downright stupid. David and Luke

weren't soldiers, they were computer guys. The indecision gnawed at him more than the fear did, Luke simply did not know what he felt. All the while, the argument between his brother and the cop continued.

Ed took a more authoritative tone, it was firm and well-practiced, "No man, you need to listen to me, we have to..." David stopped him, "NO!, I don't 'need' listen to you, you are not my boss. I don't even know you." It was rare that Luke had ever seen his brother in anger, He usually took a long time to commit to any emotion, Usually too long, but for this, his brother was making it apparent he was not going to be ordered around.

"I'm trying to look out for you," the cop said. "No one asked you to," his brother said defiantly. "Okay fine, go out there and get shot ...or worse." Ed said with a deliberate passive aggressiveness. Luke had enough, despite his own reservations, he only saw one way to diffuse the fight, "Enough!" he had said it louder than he intended, the room looked at him in surprise.

Luke tried to keep his voice calm, "Look, we need food and stuff, right?" The officer nodded, and Luke continued, "You also can't just hop on a boat with this psycho weather, right?" Luke made a note of the sobbing girl and the wounded boy "...and he needs real medical attention, right?" The officer nodded again.

"Our parent's home isn't far, only a mile or two. How about we go there, check it out, and maybe we can find help for him while we're out." Ed shook his head 'no', "It's a stupid risk for you to take, nothing good can come from going out there like that." "We won't know till we try. At the very least, we might be able to grab some medical stuff and bring it back for the kid."

Ed was about to protest the idea again but seemed to notice Kent and Merry looking at the brothers with a sudden hopefulness.

"Assuming you come back," Josh said. Ed shook his head, obviously doubting the brother's intent to return, "You're both retards." Ed gave the two brothers a long hard, and thoughtful look, then sighed. The silence drew itself out, and no one seemed sure what to say, Ed suddenly lifted his right leg onto a nearby couch, He folded his pant leg up and produced a small hold-out pistol, the officer handed his back up weapon to Luke handle first, "Five shots, no safety, just pull the trigger." He then added, "Remember, once you pull that trigger, you can't take it back. So don't aim that at anything you don't intend to shoot."

Luke took the weapon with a surprised nod, he quietly said thanks. "Good luck out there," The officer said. With that, there was nothing left to debate. Luke gathered his pack and found a good spot in his waistband to stow the pistol. The others wished them well, and the two brothers left the school.



The Candy Shop

His mind wandered, not because he was fatigued, or stressed, or terrified, for he was all of those things, his mind has always wandered. Why should it do any different now? It was that fact more than any other that had led him around the world and allowed him to witness so much before he hit twenty-five. His mind has always wandered, and often his body followed right in step. So too, his heart had always been fickle, shifting in its sense of purpose like so many winds. Through the years, many had criticized him for this but Jesse had always felt that there was no reason he should deviate from something that fueled him so well. While his peers judged him on his personal inconsistencies, he was able to live life at his whim and no one else's. He could be a wandering rogue, vagabond, scholar, teacher, traveler, or tourist. For each of those winds that carried him were strong, and it was these things that nurtured his spirit.

It was also this that anchored him for several years against his will. For he joined the Army and his particular recruiters were less than straightforward with what his arrangement would be, though he had always wanted to serve, he quickly learned how counter to his nature it was. He did find many interesting things to learn through those years, but he quickly learned that having to be in specific places at specific times at the requests of others did not really do much to fuel his wanderlust. He had joined late in his twenty-sixth birthday, far older than many of his comrades. Many of his superiors were at best twenty or twenty-one and maybe only had high school on their resume, certainly not as traveled as he had been. The Drill Sergeants had done their best to stamp out his nature, and they had done a good job of it for a time... at least enough for him to be a functional Infantryman... But it didn't remove all of his wandering spirit...

He had participated in war - assuming that's what the historians end up calling Iraq, Afghanistan, or the other places he'd been... Then again, the politicians were already trying to memory hole both of those countries... he wondered if a decade from now, anyone would even be willing to acknowledge that troops had been sent to those parts of the world.

In the Army, he learned much distrust for the micromanaging hand of the bureaucracy that supposedly championed the best interests of people like him. He and his unit had been repeatedly used as target dummies to draw insurgents out of hiding or worse- his life was at risk every day due to tactics that prioritized political correctness over combat efficiency. He had voiced this time and time again, much to the anger of his unit. At some point during his military commitment, he had to come to terms that he was probably

everything a soldier shouldn't be. He proceeded to count the minutes until his discharge... Eventually, the day came where he left the service and reclaimed his freedom, but a lot of the soldier followed.

So he wandered on... most of his time in a search for something that he still couldn't even describe, but perhaps returning to civilian life brought him just a bit closer.

Until the big explosion in the clouds, he didn't know what was going on, how far the damage was, or what providence might have spared him... Especially when so many others hadn't been, but he was certain on some primal, instinctual level that the rules had changed for the rest of his life.

To him, the events of last night were an abridged form of his entire life's search. A nonstop race to determine what actually mattered in life...

...And so he broke into a gun store.

The glass shattered and fell away from them, the shards became smaller and soon nearly invisible as they scattered across the floor far beneath them, the shards broke into even tinier particles as they danced to a stop. The skylight had a small metallic sliver running through the glass, it was connected to a nearly unnoticeable wire on one side of the frame. Definitely some type of alarm... Jesse and Mike hacked apart the metal grate of the skylight with an axe they had picked up along the way, then they used two fire hoses intertwined into a makeshift rope, which they used to drop down into the almost secure building.

"No power, no alarms," Jesse said as his feet hit the ground, crunching glass echoed.

They knew the huge metal grate over the front face of the building would give them some time to figure out what to take and how the hell to get out from the inside. "I don't think there's anyone around to respond even if an alarm did go off," Michael said before climbing down.

Mike landed behind him, glass crunched between his boots too.

"Take only what you can carry. We don't want to get too slowed down," Jesse ordered using a serious tone of voice, something he rarely if ever wanted to use, "This place is a gold mine right now... don't play around, act like we've got 2 minutes before we need to leave." They both kicked into high gear. He was suddenly struck by memories of the mindless hours on field duty.

Jesse quickly grabbed a pristine AR15, a semi-automatic which suited him fine. In another state, he might have been able to grab something full auto, but not in New York, not that he really needed such a thing anyway, he thought about grabbing one of several AK47s in the store, he had earned a healthy respect for their sheer durability while overseas. But he settled on the AR because he knew how to strip one in and out, and he figured the .223 rounds would be much easier to carry and replace... maybe not in other parts of the

world, but certainly here. He made a pile of magazines on the countertop.

Jesse handed his partner in crime an AR as well, they'd be able to share ammo and mags, and he did so with haste as the soldier deftly loaded the empty magazines from the boxes on the shelves.

They changed out of their soaked clothes and refit from the racks of mil-surplus uniforms and camping clothes. Mike switched out of his work uniform and now wore a pair of dark drab pants and a matching cargo shirt, Jesse switched into a similarly multi-pocketed shirt.

Then they proceeded to appropriate anything that they could use, the backpacks were next for obvious reasons, then tactical webbing with many pockets and pouches for their armaments, they bagged a myriad of camping gear, even spare changes of clothing.

Jesse urged Mike to wear his kit similar to the way he had learned on deployment, though he adapted it somewhat based on what he had learned from the elite units he rubbed shoulders with.

Eventually, they were as prepared as they could imaginably be. But they chose to rest while they decided what to do with the rest of the store.

"Think I still need a permit for this?" Michael shattered a glass case and removed a Sig 226 9mm. "I don't think anyone's going to be checking permits on today's purchases," as he said it, it dawned on Jesse that they were living out the fantasy of every teenage boy who played too many video games, it wasn't an ironic or humorous thought, it was just terrifying.

He knew and respected firearms, but he never fetishized them, the military had imbued him their necessity as tools, much like his own hands. Only he knew what these tools could do, he had seen the red spray, he had seen his fellow human turn ashen after losing too much blood, he knew how blood could clot in large bubbly gelatinous chunks as it tried to clot outside the body. Jesse wished that he could go the entire rest of his life without having to see a gun, but he knew others out there had no such qualms.

The soldier was helping himself to the handgun selection when he reflected on the dire thought that everything suggested he would have to use these weapons at some point... if things have truly gone as south as they seemed. He and Mike agreed to risk the blatant felony they were now committing because things outside had just seemed to be getting worse. But He secretly hoped that there was a rational and non-apocalyptic reason for the last few hours, though with every gunshot he heard in the distance, he doubted it more and more.

The medic was lashing a pistol gripped 12 gauge shotgun to his newly appropriated external frame pack. "Are you sure you want to do that? It's a lot more weight." The soldier asked. Michael responded with, "Not really. But I am anyway, you can't get more common than 12 gauge." Jesse had to admit it was a fair point the shotgun may be an extra five pounds of weight, but at

least it was a somewhat practical five pounds.

They were organizing their survival tools, fire makings implements, canteens, compass, water tablets, multi-tools, rain gear. Jesse was unsure exactly what they were gearing for, so it made sense to pack for versatility. What made the most sense was to get off the island, maybe head north into the mountains and woodland.

A burst of gunfire in the distance broke his thoughts. "We should think about getting out of here sooner than later," Mike said. "Someone's bound to be wanting to stock up too."

"Or at least restock on all that ammo they're using out there," Jesse concurred but offered a different thought, "The thing is, It's light out now, so anytime there's not a roof above us, we're easy targets." "You got to think about what gives us the better chance of not being picked off by someone half a mile off." His friend nodded thoughtfully.

"This place has everything we need anyway." Michael mused. "Except ya know... food," it was not an immediate concern, but it would be soon enough, Jesse added to his point. "...Or water." Mike pointed to an end cap of an aisle. "Trail-Bars right there, though."

Jesse ignored his friend and continued his thought, "Or any real fortification." he said more to himself. The frequency of gunshots they've heard all night suggested that it would be a good idea to not be in the open for very long. "Here we have some concealment though," Michael pointed out, though they both knew it was temporary at best. There was plenty of people out there with weapons, many who were using them... frequently, a store like this will be in demand by someone soon enough.

Jesse shuddered, "Our hometown already sounded more like Raqqah, though we just armed themselves to the teeth, we're certainly weren't the only ones."

"Good point," Mike admitted.

He had given up trying to figure out what sort of disaster befell them. For all his experience in war, he had no conventional explanation, but then again, he was ultimately just a grunt. Who's to say this wasn't an entirely new form of weapon? He shook his head from thoughts of science fiction and conspiracy. There were more pressing matters for him to worry over.

His old friend seemed to be holding up okay. But how much could they trust each other? Maybe either one of them could still just snap as they'd seen so many others do.

He had to wonder what was going on out there, someone had to be out there trying to keep order in this mess... Is there anyone out there calling shots and enforcing any kind of rule of law? Is it straight up eat or be eaten out there? Or, after all the madness, would there be some sort of reckoning? With all the mass insanity, Was there a governmental body out there at all? That

seemed a more valid question to think on.

What he did know was that if they didn't claim these tools of death, others would. They could prevent a lot of harm. Jesse grabbed a worn duffel bag off a shelf.

He changed his mind about certain practicalities, "Forget what I said about taking only what you can carry. We should think long term."

They piled everything they could conceivably use later into some duffel bags, the heavy canvas sack became loaded with as much as they could fit. Spare boxes of ammunition were thrown into an entire other sack of its own.

Jesse mused how when he was in the Army, he'd be responsible for inventorying every single bullet upon completion of a mission and yet here they were, more like kids in a candy store. It was then Jesse noticed that the random gunshots had quieted in the last few minutes,

As Mike finished packing the bag, Jesse drifted for a moment, just listening to the wind howl on the metal grated window shutter and the rain landing on the rooftop above. It was an eerie form of quiet, usually the ambient pattern would be broken by passing vehicles here in his home suburbs.

He heard the canvas of the bag folding and being tied taut, the drops of rain landing in the store from the window they had broken in, and then he heard a low chugging sound, one that on any other day he'd be completely unfazed by, but today he knew it could mean danger. The soldier's brain recognized the sound of the old engine just as it came into view of the parking lot.

He ducked just as the rusty and beat-up pickup truck rolled to a stop outside the gun store. It was an old beaten up thing, the kind of thing that one normally sees parked on the side of a person's house, condemned to rust into oblivion never to see road again... this one, however, clearly had some work put into it, it was likely little more than a diesel engine and brakes... probably why it still worked Jesse thought. "Sssshhhh," He signaled for Mike to duck down and be quiet.

They ducked low behind some shelving and spied on the vehicle as its occupants dismounted. In it were men, all armed looking like they just came from some sort of hunting trip or safari, they were dirty, and their 70's era pickup truck had bedrolls, gas cans, and assorted utilities lashed to its hull. Three sat in the cab while another four sat in the flatbed, all carried various long guns.

Jesse backed away from the window. He did not know their intent, nor did he wish to find out. Their last few interactions with other survivors were not good experiences. These guys could also be friendly, and the soldier had no way of knowing unless he simply stood up and said hi. Given the last few hours, it was not an option he was going to risk.

Their concealment was about to be lost, Jesse suddenly wished they were

anywhere else.

Two of the new comers approached the metal grate and examined it. One was of shorter, more stocky build wearing a drab jacket under a drab hunting vest, while the other was taller but skinnier, wearing a light camouflage jacket. They bashed upon the gate and tried to figure what to do next. Jesse was worried for a split second that they may simply have had keys, that'd be a hell of a thing to explain... But when they started messing with the heavy-duty lock, he was partially relieved. They soon shifted to probing the edges of the metal grate, trying to decide on the best way to force it. The others sat in the bed of the truck, looking around with their long rifles.

The two started pulling against the grate while a third ran some tools toward them. They tried to pry the heavy-duty lock from its reinforced port. It proved futile, and the trio began prying the grate right from the stone walls with crowbar and maul. After a few loud strikes, the gate started to make pained noises. Sooner or later, it was going to give way...

And then they stopped. "Naw. I told you before, we can't open this without real tools." Another one said, he had a number of bruises all over his body, they showed through a white button shirt, and he carried a scoped rifle over a shoulder. "...Yeah... It's one of those round locks that the cutters can't get at." A third one said, he wore a red flannel and camo cargo pants and carried an AK. Both of their attire was covered with splotches of grime.

"What's the problem?" A voice boomed from the truck, "It ain't moving." The first voice said. "It ain't moving?" The man in the truck mocked in a whiny and whimpering tone. "No sir," The first said, Jesse thought he heard the familiar frustrated sigh of a subordinate that knew he was about to be chewed out.

The truck voice boomed, "Come on man. Are you a wolf? Or a wittle kitten?" There was a crash against the gate, but it held firm. "I'm a wolf!" The first voice said. "What was that?" The truck said. "I'M A WOLF!" the first voice screamed as he bashed at the gate again and again, the others outside screamed with him. Jesse crawled back, further into the store.

He ducked behind the counter where Mike hid, Jesse saw his friend flip the safety of his rifle off. The soldier shot a look at his friend that said 'no.' Two to seven odds are fine in a movie, but real life was far, far different.

The voice from the truck interrupted, "Alright, Stop dicking around, let's try around back." The rest immediately returned to the truck with a begrudging, "Yessirs." A few moments of banter passed between the gang, and then the pickup started rolling away.

Jesse knew they had a few minutes at least, he risked one last peek at the new comers, and his gaze immediately shifted to a man standing beside the passenger seat of the truck, a man who wore a dark beard, and had several scars, he was wearing a camo uniform, just like what he had worn in the

sandbox. This man had none of the nervous excitement that the others shared. If Jesse had to make any kind of guess, he'd have to have wagered that this man was in charge, and he had experience in this sort of thing, perhaps not here... but somewhere.

"Come on 'Wolves'." The bearded man said almost routinely, and his men all piled back into the truck...

"I don't think we should say hi to them," Mike said. Jesse shook his head, "Let's get out of here." They tied the two bags to the end of their makeshift rope, Jesse had initially planned to unlock and walk out the back door, but that was a dangerous idea now, now the best chance was to climb back out, he went first, climbing out hand over hand.

After making it onto the roof, Jesse braced himself to pull his friend up if needed. They were both in decent shape, but the soldier had a significant edge in upper-body mass. He was also used to activity weighed down by gear where his friend was not. Michael stayed back to secure their duffle bags, Jesse pulled them up one by one. Then the medic handed up his gear and began to scale up the hose-rope.

From the roof, Jesse could see what was happening, the pickup had stopped before making it around back, another group of survivors had approached them. A middle-aged man approached and began a conversation with the armed men. They spoke loud over the rumbling engine, but Jesse could only make out some of the words over the shoddy pickup's engine. Among them were phrases like 'Hey there,' 'Help us' and 'are you okay?'. The body language and tones of voice seemed friendly enough, Jesse had begun to wonder if perhaps he was just being paranoid and that it would be better to try to communicate with them. Someone from the truck said, "No problem, we're all in this together." Jesse felt a moment of relief and again reconsidered his decision to remain hidden... They needed allies, and this group seemed to really have its shit together. The world needed people like that right now...

Mike muttered a curse as he tried to pull himself out of the store, Jesse turned his attention to his friend and helped him up. No sooner had the medic gotten to his feet, gunshots exploded from the direction of the pickup. Both friends dropped prone against the black tar rooftop, and long seconds passed before it became apparent that they were not the targets.

Jesse risked a glance. The men in the pickup truck had just finished mowing down the middle-aged man whom they had just been talking to so friendly. There were two other people bleeding on the ground beside the unfortunate man, they were both dying or dead from multiple gunshots.

And the 'Wolves' continued to shoot at the bodies, they took careful aimed shots seemingly for fun.

Jesse saw where they lay, in the open with nothing around them for cover and guessed they never even saw it coming, he wasn't looking when it

happened, but there was clearly no threat there.

The men in the truck laughed. One more woman was bolting away, she zigged and zagged for her life... she had a chance at getting away.

Jesse clicked the safety of his rifle, everything in him screamed to intervene, but the fleeing woman's head exploded from one of the rifles before Jesse could line up a shot on her murderers. The Wolves cheered and jeered at their victory, and over the engine, one of them crudely joked about the size of the dead woman's tits.

They had shot those people for no reason, He realized. No. Even worse, they had made sport of it. They dismounted and started looking through the belongings of their victims.

Jesse stared in shock, he couldn't believe how quickly it had happened. Mike came up near him, rifle at the ready. Jesse thought about opening up on the Wolves, they certainly deserved it. But was it worth the risk now? They were spread out now, after the first shot, they'd be in cover, then it'd be over for them once the hunters retaliated,

The medic looked over, awaiting his lead. Jesse shook his head again, survival was rule one... "Getting ourselves killed won't change anything." he clicked the weapon to safe, his friend did the same. None of the three victims had even appeared armed, but vengeance wouldn't bring them back and might cost even worse. The soldier fought back a lingering feeling of shame, had to push away a growing feeling that he had been a coward, that perhaps he could have prevented that all from happening.

As the sport murderers in the pickup truck rooted through their victim's belongings, they used the chance to escape off the roof, and by the time the 'Wolves' returned their attention to the gun shop Jesse and Michael were holed up in an office building several blocks away.



Dead End Trails

They didn't dare move. Kaylee felt her muscles cramping as she kept still as a statue, the big man with his rifle did likewise beside her. There were only a dozen feet or so of trees between them and the Gunmen in the pickup truck. She couldn't believe that they had almost walked right up to them. If that other group of poor souls hadn't appeared first, they would have.

Ryan spoke with a hush. "So uhh, what do we do?" She had to get back to her mother, who was a hundred feet back or so. The wooded trail did not make movement with her wheelchair easy, so they had decided to check ahead

first, and she was glad they had because that sight ahead was a gruesome one, and they had witnessed it all.

The men in the truck were trying to force their way into a gun store on the other side of the road when a smaller group approached them, They talked for a few moments, and she heard both parties exchange a few laughs. Then they just suddenly executed them in cold blood. The guns were fired not from nerves or fear but something else. They had even seemed friendly as they briefly chatted with their unsuspecting victims at an inescapably close range. Now some of them sifted through the belongings on the bodies while others just laughed. "Kay?" The big man said meekly.

She nodded to him and slowly lowered herself to a crawl. Ryan took her queue and did likewise, Together they did their best impressions of soldiers some green beret movie as they painstakingly backtracked away from the gunmen.

Kaylee was small and light, she was able to move very quickly and silently. Ryan had to move with more care to avoid unnecessary jostling of branches from his extra bulk or his rifle. When the bigger man kept getting caught on branches, she looked back and gave the man an encouraging smile and waited for him to catch up. He returned it and pushed on.

Kaylee had only just met the man, but he had been a major relief to run into, he was huge compared to her. A few years older but very soft-spoken, though perhaps that was more due to the shock of all that's happened. He struck her as the gentle giant type, he was a bit timid but likable and perhaps even trustworthy. He had walked with Kay and her Mother for the last hour or two. Together they had passed some other people who had appeared more than a bit threatening, but once they got a close look at Ryan and the weapon he carried, they gave the trio a wide distance. It must have been an odd sight, a small girl pushing an infirm woman around in a wheelchair while being guarded by a giant man with a giant rifle. It was obvious he was just as unsure what to do as she was, which was probably why he let the two women slow him down so much. Whatever the reason, she was thankful for the small bit of luck that let them meet.

However, after what they had just witnessed, she'd be hesitant to approach anyone else... especially if they're armed. The two made it back to where they left her mother, some dense bushes and evergreens helped conceal them. The two stood up... "We'll have to go another way, mum." Kay said regretfully, the South Shore Hospital was only a half-mile past those men and their guns.

There were other roads they could take, it would just be longer, more exposure, but they had next to no other choice. Her mother was on her last oxygen tank, to stretch it further, she had set it to the lowest possible airflow setting, and her mother was already showing a decline from the reduced

oxygen.

"Maybe we can just wait. They'll drive off eventually." Ryan offered. Kay wasn't sure she wanted to be anywhere near the gunmen in the truck. For all she knew, they might just waltz through the woods and stumble upon the trio any moment, she was not going to risk that. "No. They're going to be at that gun store for a while, I think. I'd rather not just sit here waiting for one of them to go for a piss and accidentally find us." The large man saw her point. She began to push her mother's wheelchair, the wheels ground the dirt and momentum gained, her new friend stepped forward to lead the way with his weapon in hand.

Loud cracks of branches and crunching of leaves reached her ears, and the trio froze. Even mother who was mostly oblivious to anything not directly in view. Ryan lowered himself to his knees, Kaylee ducked to the same level as her mother sat. There were people moving nearby, and they were moving loudly.

It was the gunmen, she was certain. They must have heard their less than stealthy crawling. They would kill them as they had those others in the streets. Ryan pointed his weapon in the direction of the noise, unsure of what to do. Any second men with military-style guns would appear in the trees.

Kaylee's mother moved her head about meekly, trying to see what was going on. Kay clung to her at the shoulders as movement stirred in the furthest trees, the moments ticked by. The sounds grew softer, More hushed. She looked around for her soon to be killer, but there was only wind rustling in the trees, the sounds were almost completely gone. She took a long breath and saw Ryan waving her over. She crept up to him and looked where he pointed.

A middle-aged woman wearing sweatpants, she was all but laying in a thorn bush, there were two men on either side trying to help her up. They had their backs turned to their onlookers, seemingly unaware of Kay or Ryan at all. There were a few other people further away, some younger, some older. None were trying to hide their movement, no wonder they had made so much noise.

They were a few dozen feet shy of where Kay had witnessed the shootings, peering in the direction of the gun store, exactly where the murderers were, and they had no idea.

Kaylee looked to her mother and then to Ryan. She was suspicious of others, rightly so given the circumstances. She'd much rather slink away with her mother and avoid any unnecessary interaction with strangers who may be crazy. But could she live with herself if she let this other group walk right into a bunch of trigger-happy madmen? Whatever powers that be saw fit to introduce her to Ryan, and he had been nothing short of a godsend.

She could do some good here. Maybe even score some more help for her

mother... Ryan still had his gun pointed at them, she put a hand lightly on the barrel, and he lowered it. Kay stood up to full height, dropping any kind of cover the brush offered, she began to walk slowly up on the other group. The woman in the bush and her two helpers gasped when she saw Kay so close to them. The two men whirled about in surprise to see the petite girl and large man with a rifle behind her.

“Hi,” Kay said, “It’s a really bad idea to go that way.”



Lucky Molly

David tried to make sense of the destruction, tried and failed. Making sense demanded understanding, and that seemed in short supply as of late. Entire blocks of houses had burnt down while others, mere dozens of feet away, stood without a mark. Some of the roads they walked were so littered with debris from trees, vehicles or houses that they had to go way out of their way to pass, only then to cut by the next block that seemed entirely untouched.

The next road had large chunks of ground that had flash melted into glass and charred remains. Scars were left where the lightning struck, leaving trenches of burnt fissures. Each street brought its own unique set of obstacles.

They traveled slow and were careful to avoid drawing the attention of others. It was probably around 7am and the sun was up, albeit shrouded through pyres of smoke and storm clouds.

They had been walking for about an hour when David suddenly began to feel nauseous.

He felt weak and lightheaded, as though he no longer could feel traction beneath his feet, like the small rocks and debris were trying to slip out from under him. The weakness made it increasingly difficult to remain upright,

“I need a break,” He sat down. “You okay?” Luke asked. “Yeah, I just have no energy,” he answered, as much to convince himself as his brother.

Luke nodded and looked around, “Let’s just get off the road.”

David’s entire body protested as he stood again, the two moved behind some hedges in the front of a near immaculate house, there the two collapsed. Dave noted that the younger brother dropped to the ground in just as much exhaustion as he did.

“We need to think,” Luke mused as he stared at the angry clouds above. “About what?” David asked between long breaths. “Like, do we even want to go back to Ed and his kids? There’s a lot of bad noise between them, maybe we’d be better off on our own,” Luke shrugged and added, “I’m not so sure we

need them.”

David gave him a face, “We can think about that after we find Ma and Dad.” Luke nodded, “Good point, I just want us to be on the same page.” David silently agreed. “I feel bad for that kid, though.” He said.

“It could have been any of us, it wasn’t your fault,” Luke said, trying to restrain himself with logic... “I know.” The older brother said.

Minutes passed, David used the time to assess himself. He was weak, his entire body felt stiff like lead, and his stomach was imploding, “I’m Starving.” His brother made an unintelligible grunt which Dave assumed meant his brother felt the same.

They both looked to the pretty house in front of them, it was more or less in good condition, not a burned-out wreck like so many others. “Maybe we can borrow something,” Luke suggested. David was surprised, not because of the thought of looting a home, for he knew they were desperate, rather he was surprised that the thought simply hadn’t occurred to him. A thought crystallized in his mind, *Things are different now.*

Breaking the glass of a window and gaining entry took Luke less than a minute. Given the noise out there, David doubted anyone would notice at all unless there was someone hiding inside.

They ignored the decor of the living room, paid no heed to the flat-screen plasma television nor the collection of family photos. There was a stairway up, but neither of them wanted to be in someone else’s house for a moment longer than needed, it was right to the kitchen. The cabinets were a brown wood grain with small ornate ceramic handles. Those handles Allowed Luke to rifle through each one quickly, he flipped through the cabinets setting what he decided to take onto the counter...

David propped himself up against the wall and just watched, he was too tired to take another step. “There’s something neither of us have asked yet,” he said quietly, “Where did everyone go?”

“Yeah...” Luke nodded as he dipped through shelves.

David watched as he tried to force himself awake, “Last night there were people everywhere, they were panicked, howling or spitting nonsense, but now...” “It’s a ghost town. Yeah, I was wondering about that. Maybe the fires drove them away?” Luke started piling more assorted items on the kitchen table.

David started picking through the contents of a cereal box. “Maybe.” Crunch... Crunch. “They didn’t just disappear.”

“Or did they?” Luke added, “Mums always was waiting for the rapture.”

“Not funny,” David said dryly.

He saw Luke’s face contorted with worry, It was obvious he wanted to break down and sob, but he tried to keep calm by remaining in motion. Luke

produced a can of pasta rings and slid it over to the older brother. David discarded the cereal and set to devouring the pasta rings cold, he could feel his body turning the carbohydrates into energy the moment it hit his tongue. Luke sat at a glossy wood dining table and devoured a similarly preserved meal.

In moments, David's strength and wits began to return. He became aware of just how beside himself he was. Even the taste of the food was different, the pasta rings and tomato sauce tasting much sourer than he thought it should. He checked the expiration just to be sure. Perhaps it was the relative silence inside the home or just the first nutrients he had eaten since the chaos began. But he was able to think much clearer, the fatigue evaporated in moments but not completely. He suddenly found himself craving coffee.

It was gnawing on him that this was not just some local calamity. David had this feeling in his chest that whatever happened was very widespread, possibly global, he suspected that there was nowhere safe. That anyone who should be in a position to help was busy doing little better than him...

He desperately hoped he was wrong.

They began filling Luke's bag with canned goods and nonperishables.

But David started to feel odd, like they were being watched perhaps... perhaps not quite, but it certainly felt like they weren't alone. Suddenly the stairs in the living room had an appeal to him. He was kind of mad at himself that it hadn't occurred to him to check the house fully before pilfering it, "I'll take a look upstairs."

"You sure?" Luke questioned. David nodded, "Yeah." Luke continued to pillage the home's pantry as David made his way up the steps. As he headed up each fancy carpeted step, he found himself lost in thought. Unlike some of the others, he actually got an hour or two of sleep. But... it was actually something he regretted, there were dreams: terrible, terrible dreams.

The campfires dotted the landscape. The beautiful lightning above spoke to them, like it always would... The dream would change a little bit every time, but the feeling was always the same. He remembered admiring the campfire from afar, like on a hilltop nearby. For some reason, he was not welcome closer to the flames.

When he had woke, his mind was just as stiff and sore as the rest of his body, and he had forgotten everything else about the dream, it was only now that he had some newfound energy and started upstairs that he started to remember the fragments.

He climbed the stairs, his footsteps were slow and steady while he searched the upstairs. From the second floor, he still heard Luke rifling through supplies. David knew it would be best to just grab the food and leave as he went room to room, he had no idea what may be up there, but he simply couldn't resist the curiosity. "Anyone home?" he said softly with each new

room. "I don't want to hurt you. I'm looking to help anyone I can find." He pleaded to the air as his brain spun in circles.

Fight or flight... He said to himself. Unable to make any clear sense of the things happening, he tried to feel his way through, tried to act on instinct, Instinct...that primal fear that drives us to continue existence at any cost... *What an alien concept.* His entire life seemed to condition him further and further away from this very real process. How much of his life of constants and calculations blocked him from feeling this way? How much time had gone by relying on the static and stable? But those things were suddenly gone, replaced by only chaos and an adrenaline rush. Ironic, he thought... *after all these years, am I only now listening to my gut feelings?*

He was in the master bedroom when he saw a long wooden case sticking out from under the bed. It seemed hastily wrapped in sheets, David leaned beside the bed and pulled out the case. The case was heavy with locking latches, though he saw no keys it mattered little, the case latches were already unlocked.

Inside was a scoped deer rifle and two boxes of bullets. Hand carved into the buttstock of the rifle were two words, 'Lucky Molly' David also noticed there was a hole cut out in the case where a handgun may have once been, but it was not there now. He chose to take the rifle and thanked whoever had left it.

His footsteps were muffled as he walked around the bedroom, thick and expensive carpeting absorbed the echoes as he walked. He looked at the photo frames of a young couple and took in the picturesque comfortable quality the room had.

A door made the slightest creak, and David spun around fearing he was no longer alone. But he only saw the door to an attached bathroom sway with the wind. He inched forward and caught a draft of air from an open window. He doubted there was anything in the bathroom, but part of him had to know for sure. For some reason, he needed to know the full story of this household, and so he peaked into the dim bathroom.

It was an immaculate bathroom, very recently redone. With towels neatly stacked and a lavender scent from a deodorizer that was mixed with a strange metallic iron scent. An immaculate room to contrast the outside. "No one's home," He said aloud. He heard Luke concluding his rummaging downstairs and decided to rejoin him. They had to move on, they had to find the rest of their family.



Life Insurance

They were many blocks away when they dropped the bags of weapons and munitions in exhaustion. The heavy bags clanked as they met the floor. Michael gasped for air as he slid down beside his duffel bag, they had decided to take a breather beside some back alley dumpsters that occluded any sight of the two. The medic tried to pace his breathing, though he was no stranger to physical exertion running at the pace they had with the weight he was carrying left him on the verge of collapse.

He noticed that Jesse was equally spent, though he seemed to fair much better with the fatigue than the medic. They sat across from each other as they fought for breath. "I hate running," Jesse said in between huffs. Michael nodded, he was in decent shape, but he had been feeling the neglect starting to creep in more and more even before the effects of the freak lightning storms. Combining the two made every movement torture.

As the morning light grew, Michael did find his limbs more willing to listen and less numb, his strength was returning... which was encouraging, But with it also came the aching and stiff feelings from the injuries he'd sustained, as his body registered pain from wounds he didn't even remember taking. He tried to push the sensations out of mind, but was actually grateful they were there at all.

"Let's get going." The soldier said after some time.

Michael followed in a daze, but the pace was a cautious walk rather than an all out sprint, and he managed it well enough. His mind tried to keep pushing on despite the fatigue, and somehow he found himself in a weird gray area somewhere between sleep and panic. He knew he needed to focus, needed to be vigilant as a threat could come from any direction. But he kept drifting, finding warm, cozy spots in his mind to nap in. He was thinking of a waterfall at the base of a mountain, where that mountain led beyond he did not know.

"MINE!" A shrill voice cried. Michael looked up from his daze to see Jesse shooing away a large, round woman, she was waving a length of what looked to be aluminum guttering at him, "This is all mine, you scumbags! Find someone else to rob blind!"

Jesse had his rifle pointed in the direction of the woman thought he didn't aim it at her, not quite.

At first, he couldn't tell what she was trying to defend. Nothing immediate came to mind. They were in a commercial area, no homes visible in range, no one else nearby... She stood between the two men and a single hatchback car, but nothing seemed special about it.

"We're just trying to make it up the road, okay?" Jesse said.

"These are my things! I paid good money for them!" The woman

screamed. Michael was waking up fast, they didn't need any attention brought on them now. Jesse sidestepped around the woman, giving her a wide breadth. Michael did likewise, he tried to avoid antagonizing the woman with eye contact...

As he passed, he got a glimpse of the vehicle. With the exception of the driver seat, each was filled to the roof with plastic bags, used wrappers and assorted trash debris, he could see nothing special. He had seen many vehicles like that in the past and always wondered at the mindset that bred that sort of situation.

Whatever the cause she stood defiantly, willing to defend her horde against two men armed with assault rifles.

They put distance between themselves and the car hoarder and made a few quick turns to get out of her sight, and they continued their travels.

Jesse suddenly said, "Okay, this sack's getting heavy." The medic agreed, and they looked around for a place to stash their arsenal. It wasn't far before they found themselves walking through the unlocked doors to a lobby room of some multi-office commercial building.

It looked the same as every other mid-profile white collar business, a very typical scene, off white walls, neutral blue carpeting, wood trim on everything. Certificates in frames and one-liner lettering bragging how much money a customer could save were scrawled across every banner or poster.

There was a very cliché picture of a sailboat in a brewing storm behind the front desk. Larson & Roberts, Health Insurance Co LLC.

Michael mused on the irony of their choice of office to stash their gear, *Health Insurance*, the words connected with his past. He briefly wondered how many people this particular office had denied funding for exams or medicines, how many people out there went untreated until it was too late because of the cold pursuit of numerical profits.

He remembered his dad telling him how a company like this had denied treatments to his mother years ago, treatments that had a chance to prevent her mother's lymphoma from spreading, just not a high enough chance to be worth her insurance to front the bill.

His job had given him a very intimate knowledge of the scumbaggery that was the health care machine, in the years after she passed, he watched countless strangers make the same complaints his mother had. Sadly, none of it helped their current situation.

He tried to break away from the thoughts but couldn't, he had delivered thousands of patients to dozens of hospitals over his career. How many of those patients were pushed out the door too early for one reason or another? How many others abused the overburdened system calling every day for trivial complaints bogging it down further?

How many hospitals subsisted off of making do with 'just enough' staff,

being paid 'just enough of a wage... and how many people avoided even seeking help at all for fear of the bills that would cripple them or their family well after their eventual demise.

The mindset of a fast food society allowed for this, those that put themselves above all others and those that refused to be a burden on others... one was always more likely to fall through the cracks when they needed it, and the business machine would just keep on profiting away.

With that kind of disdain in mind, Michael devoured the humor of concealing their gear in the building of a business that was part of that system with bitter delight. The product this kind of business produced was all but intangible. Who would search a shitty office like this when most would be searching for food useful supplies.

They had secured weapons and equipment, but their stomachs were running on empty. The two munched on cliff bars that they had looted from the surplus store, it wasn't much, but it would do for now. They both knew that a better food source would have to be their next priority.

It was a lot of optimism that they assumed they'd even need those supplies at some later date. For all that was going on outside, they simply may not even last the day. Or perhaps they would both lose their minds in the next wave of lightning storms. "Remind me why we took all this stuff," Michael said. "So no one else can," Jesse said.

Something changed, a sound, or a scent, he couldn't tell.

All he knew was that there was a sudden awareness that something wasn't quite right...

They both snapped to alertness and stood to investigate. Michael looked around the room, a lingering scent was in the air, like urine or body odor, there was something behind the desk at the end of the room. They approached and laid eyes upon a dead girl who crumbled behind it. She was thin and wore a quaint professional shirt and conservative skirt. Dark, tarry blood had poured out from her eyes, nose and ears, the same tarry blood mixed with long since dried stomach froth solidified around her mouth, and she had clearly lost control of her bladder and bowels. Her limbs were stiff, and when the medic tried to move one, the whole upper body tried to move with it.

"Full rigor...died hours ago," Michael said. Jesse nodded thoughtfully, "She died working at the office on a Friday night." Jesse muttered ... Michael tried to not think of the seizures and failed, "Likely died when the storm first hit," The soldier shuddered.

He remembered very little of the first moments the storm hit, fragments of visuals maybe, but he couldn't be sure if that was all just fragments of dreams he had as he fought to wake up. He vaguely remembered a sudden flash followed by darkness. After he had come to the sky might as well have been a kaleidoscope. It occurred to Michael that Jesse had said almost nothing of what

he experienced. "I'm trying to figure it out, what did the flash look like to you?" He asked.

"Flash?" Jesse asked. "You know, when everything started happening. What's the first thing you remember?" Michael elaborated. "Oh." The soldier shrugged "I didn't really see a flash. It was more of like a high pitched tone to me. I thought my ears were going to pop... Then I woke up and things were all quiet except for that damn storm."

The medic thought on this.

A sudden crash echoed down the hallway and something hit the ground with a thud, both men pointed their weapons down the hallway. "Come on out!" Jesse commanded. There was no reply, but there was defiantly another presence, against all his better judgment, Michael moved to it.

They hopped room to room, clearing out each side of the hall as offices branched off it. Each room contained honeycombs of computer desks, fax machines, bins of paper, inoperative work lamps and coffee mugs were sprinkled around the rooms.

Jesse took one side and Michael the other, the medic's senses were stretched to the limit, as were his nerves, the lingering anxiety, the soreness bolted down every muscle. He had to overcome his own rushed breathing and the feeling of his heart pounding. And then there was the swollen eye and a hundred other physical pains that bit him from all angles. He had to filter all of it out to become aware of the ragged breathing... Somewhere close.

He could feel Jesse's footsteps, As well as the air whip around him as he pointed his rifle around the room. There was something in the room, he could feel the slow yet constant thud, another slow heart beating in the room. Air displaced from a crumpling piece of paper... Behind you. He turned.

He saw a skinny and elderly man who lay slumped against a copy machine, his face was sunken with a smooth skull and white wisps of hair near the ears, and his eyes... bloodshot would have been a weak description, entirely red, clotted, cataract laden, dry. One side of his face almost dripped uselessly, while the other side clung taught in uncontrolled tension.

He had seen this hundreds of times, just never so... pronounced. Usually, strokes were more subtle, less glaringly obvious at least at first. It occurred to the medic that this man may have been like this all through the night, slowly worsening, perhaps even crying for help with no one to hear through it all.

Michael saw the ashen gray of skin that was near starved of oxygen, his bowels had released, his one good arm reached in vain to the copy machine. An almost unnoticeable breath rose from the man's chest in irregular intervals. The old man's right hand tried to move along the copier, but it merely tensed and gave up then tried again. It took a moment for the medic to register what the old man was doing, or rather trying to.

There was a look of despair on the old man's working eyelid. With a jut of

his head and neck, his working pupil tried to focus on the copy machine, although the gaze just drifted immediately after his head moved, causing him to perpetually try to reset his head's position. Michael could imagine the horror of being little more than a camera watching as your body systematically failed bit by bit. Was the man even at all aware of his condition? Or was he stuck repeating some loop of thought as mundane as 'hit button to make copies'?

Was that part of his brain still trying to issue orders only for his body to ignore his commands as his organs slowly shut down from dehydration and starvation?

The soldier walked in, "You find anything? ...damn." He looked at the man, studying the severity of the old man's condition. "There's nothing we can do for him, is there?" ,

Michael's voice grew quiet, "Not now ... a few hours ago and at a hospital, maybe." He felt the man's carotid artery for his pulse and started counting at an agonizingly slow rate. The soldier couldn't take his eyes off the old man. "Is there even one out there?"

The medic finished his count, as he shrugged. Twenty. The old man shouldn't even be conscious at that and in all fairness, probably wasn't. The medic shook his head, from all he could tell, there was no infrastructure, no electricity, no police, no help would be coming, let alone waiting for a poor soul such as this, even if everything was functioning like a normal day patient who's presenting like this has next to no chance "I doubt there's any to get him to." The breathing had stopped, albeit a few random gasps, the good eye had closed "...He's about to go."

"What do you mean?" Jesse asked, likely already realizing,

The old man's pulse came to a stop... Michael thought about how this time yesterday, he was punching into work dreading the 12-hour tour ahead of him, but there was the prospect of jokes to be had between colleagues and making some progress in one of the many video games he had to keep him occupied.

Twenty-four hours ago, a patient like this man would have been scooped and rushed to Stone Creek Hospital's stroke center within twenty minutes, where he'd have had a decent chance of recovery... assuming someone noticed the onset of symptoms fast enough.

Today however, there were bodies in the roads, Buildings burning out of control, people acting like feral animals, psychedelic lightning storms and fat women protecting their hoarder cars, The latter of which he could hear still screaming down the road. No one would be coming to help this old man, No one would be coming to help Jesse or Michael either.

This was the new way, Nature, Fate, or God... Whichever word he could use to describe it was cascading down a path that cared nothing for those in

its wake... And whatever it was, they were nothing but leaves in the hurricane of it.

Jesse broke the long silence that followed, "We should probably get out of here." Michael nodded...they hastily stashed their bags in the ceiling tiles in a file storage room and ran.

