

***We The Fallen :***  
***A Dark Age Resurgent***

***#6 Burning Walls, Haste, Fates***

By Michael J. Grasso

## #6 Burning Walls, Haste, Fates

### Labels

“What was it that Mom said happened a lot when you were young?”, the question broke David from his daze. “You had nightmares or something?” Luke asked. He remembered, His Mom used to often tell stories of how David had paralyzing nightmares when he was young, though he had remembered none of it now, just that he once had such things. But what she described was something more than just bad dreams. He recalled her tales of how he’d often have tremors or paralysis, apparently sometimes both. “What were they called?” his brother pushed.

David searched for the word “Night Terrors.” he said and lapsed back into silence.

Every night, more people seemed to just aimlessly wander up and down the streets. David sat on the roof and watched the sad passersby, There was little in the ways of routine in the last few days, but when he could, he’d try to spend some time on the roof away from the others. It gave him a rare chance to mentally recover, however slightly. But it was becoming painfully clear that solitude would not be an option tonight, he focused his attention down on a singular figure limping down the street as a ramshackle man drifted past the school without care.

Most people he watched just drifted about, meandering in the streets caught in whatever personal hell their minds had gone to. As the days went by, David noticed that the afflicted seemed to grow more and more sluggish and withered, he knew it was likely that whatever had broken their minds had also seemed to rob them of many base survival instincts as well. Others had observed the same thing. Not all of the unfortunates outside were showing those signs perhaps, but enough to establish an obvious trend. Whatever caused this herd-like mentality, he had hadn’t a clue, but it

certainly wasn't a coincidence that few to no 'normal' people wandered by in the night anymore. Likewise less screams echoed in the dark, and fewer gunshots were heard.

'Lost souls' Merry had called them, for lack of a better term, the name stuck.

Voices again pulled him from his reflection. "Now you see that?" Jesse pointed toward the west, Luke squinted, "The Shimmering?" They sat nearby chatting, "Yeah. What is that?"

David stared, trying to make it out, he saw the faintest oscillation of light, like the rare kind you'd see in photos occasionally, "Northern Lights... The Aurora Borealis, I think?" he offered.

Jesse shook his head, "I don't think so, it's super rare to see the Aurora this south." He paused as he sipped from a soda can, "Plus, it should be directly north, over there." Jesse pointed to a part of the sky that was dark and uneventful. "It looks exactly like the Aurora sure, but only where the storms tend to appear... I got no clue what it means."

"The Aurora Anomalous it is. I like it." Luke said. The others had been on a binge with naming things, competing on terms to describe the absurdities they dealt with on a daily basis. David supposed it was a way they could come to accept the things they couldn't understand. Kent labeled the unfortunate souls outside as 'Burnouts' because their walking catatonia apparently reminded him of more than one of his friends... Merry renamed them 'Lost Souls'. 'Lost Souls' became simply 'The Lost'. The Lost that went berserk when they were approached earned the name 'Ferals'.

The Lost, Burnouts, Ferals, Aurora Anoma-whatever. There sure were a lot of new names being thrown around like it was all suddenly normal. That kind of casual lightheartedness about it all made David a bit bothered, he wasn't sure that turning the things they were witnessing into jokes and movie catchphrases did any good. There was so much more going on here, so much to learn. Summing it all up in one word seemed a large injustice. There were actual answers out there, he was sure, but sadly he doubted that he'd be privy to most of them. Perhaps that's why the others chatted as they did, maybe that obsession with distributing all sorts of new names and terms was one of the ways they all tried to adjust. Perhaps it made the strange, unfamiliar and terrifying just a little less so.

He knew they would go on like this for hours unless he did something. David shot them a weary yet irritated glance, "You guys are ruining my quiet time." Luke looked over and smiled mischievously, "Night Terrors." David's brow furled, wondering where this would go. "That's what we'll call the Storms," his brother said.

"Too Gothic. And they come during the day too." Jesse said. "Terrors then... Just perfect," Luke said victoriously. David rolled his eyes at the other two,

silently pleading for a bit of space. "Sorry, broseff," Luke sang as he moved away, he and Jesse went over to a further alcove on the roof, one that gave a better vantage point and was almost out of earshot.

For the last several days, they had tried to keep at least one set of eyes on the roof throughout the night, but the old school was stuffy inside so often on the calmer nights at least a few of them would be hanging out up there enjoying the breeze.

If only his quiet time would allow for some sleep. Just an hour or two, he pleaded to no one specific. It wasn't that there was trouble dozing off, that much was easy, he was always beyond exhausted, it was just STAYING asleep that was the problem. Something between the transition from awake to dreaming was broken in his mind, it caused the whole process to fail more often than not, like somewhere in his sleep cycle just kicked him right back to fully awake if he rested too deeply. It was similar to the kind of broken sleep one got when they suffered from a fever, delirium and broken thoughts... Then there were the 'Terrors', they didn't help.

The last few days were fairly procedural. Their small band took turns going out and looting foodstuffs from close-by houses and stores. They'd avoid anyone they'd meet, return, eat, and then they'd debate for hours at a time how they were to escape the destruction. So far, most everyone agreed on commandeering a boat from the marina and making it to the mainland. So far, they hadn't managed to make it happen on account of the bipolar weather and the Terrors.

David shut his eyes and tried anyway. He thought of Mom and Dad, and Christina was there. He imagined them safely sheltered away in the mountains, far away from the chaos and safe.



## Good Eyes

He was tired, everyone was. But Luke had no idea how his brother handled it so well. He wanted to talk to him, he was desperate to share anything resembling a normal moment with his older brother but had learned through the years to respect David's desire for solitude. Luke knew that when he got like that, all he could do was be there when the man came out of his shell. It had always been that way, and apparently, some things even an apocalypse couldn't change. A thing that he could do, however was tend to his own weary heart.

Luke battled his exhaustion and worries much differently than his

brother. To battle his fatigue, he would usually think of something he found solace in or at least used to. It was hard to find such novel thoughts in his head, but he ran with the first one he found...

"I miss my camera," He said. Jesse just nodded as he scanned the streets. Photographing life was once his favorite way to get out of the house. They all had seen countless sights they would have been dark but photo-worthy. But, he couldn't help but wonder if he would actually want lasting evidence of such sights? Luke knew he blocked near every one he could out. He knew it was a strange thing to reflect on given the circumstances, but somehow he knew the need to cling to such a hobby was important. He missed the feeling he got when he collected a worthy photo, it was like time stamping a memory... a good memory. He could imagine himself wielding a camera now like the war correspondents did in wartime, risking it all to get the truth out. Somehow the fantasy helped calm him, and he tried to adapt it into what he was doing. Perhaps that was the thought process he needed right now, a small fantasy or indulgence to take the edge off.

The roof was the place to be, as long as no one needed to be loud. They would keep their voices low and exchange stories as they watched the Lost wandering by. Every night as the dark settled, the poor bastards took to the streets in droves, the confused masses walked like they were on autopilot. They seemed more dim and unawares with each night, hobbling out of buildings and wandering to and from, paying no heed to those on the rooftops. They looked sickly and weak as though they lost any will to thrive as they aimlessly shuffled up and down the block. Luke couldn't see eyes sunken in dark sockets from days without sleep, the rest of their pale skin that seemed to refuse to show any color at all. Some would drift into walls, some would gravitate to a seemingly random object over and over but would suddenly forget it and move on.

Jesse pointed out how each gave a wide berth to others approaching, he said it proved that they were aware of each other, but either they were uninterested or suspicious of one another to approach.

Some... The "Ferals" were much more alert than the rest, they were louder, more vocal, they often twisted their heads about investigating sounds and sights as they actively seemed to search their surroundings... Though for what anyone could guess, The most horrifying thing about them was that the other lost seemed to respond to the ferals, often mimicking them, Luke was grateful they were much more rare.

Luke witnessed inexplicable events, like one man jabbering at each car he came to yelling at it as though it was supposed to start, he would pause as if waiting for an answer and then continue his complaints as he drifted off. Luke would hear his curses echoing many minutes after the man disappeared into the distance. Another man walked around with something small and metallic

in his hand, Jesse had said it looked like a set of house keys. He hobbled about pointing them at random objects, attempting to use them, when the keys failed to work on a tree, he wildly punched the tree, flailing fist after fist into the unsuspecting bark. The man eventually stumbled away with undoubtedly broken bones.

When the sun came up, the lost would scatter. No one knew why. They had stumbled across some hiding in homes while they looted, and they tended to run in fear of the armed group. Unable to help them, the group decided it was best to just avoid such afflicted.

Luke used his newly replaced camping pack as a headrest, "What are they doing?", he whispered as he crawled back into position. "I have no idea... They just look... lost." Jesse responded. It was the same conversation they've had every few hours without answer. Luke had yet to see the car guy tonight, but the night was young. He watched with a sense of dread as a girl walked around tapping at the blank screen of her smartphone.

"Hey guys," Kent said as he joined them on the roof.

"Ssshhh," both replied. The teen crawled up next to them and broke out his own pair of binoculars. "Dad's saying tomorrow we'll try for the boat. He said the winds have died down enough." Luke was unimpressed, he doubted any of them had the stamina to even make it to a boat, much less prep and sail one. No one had rested more than an hour or two at a time.

The three were occupied with their own thoughts, they might have been scanning the grounds or the stars for their own personal answers, likely none came. Luke felt a cool breeze and tried to enjoy the moment. "Where do you think you'll go once we get out of here?"

The teen was busy scanning the horizon, "I dunno, Dad says he'll figure it out."

Luke knew his plan. He and Dave had already vowed it on the way back from the family home, "My Bro and I are gonna try to get up to Chestertown, Our sister lives there." "Where's that?" The soldier asked. Luke tried to imagine it on a map, then decided to simplify his answer "Upstate, Like way up. What about you?"

Jesse shrugged, "My Mother's in Louisiana. Might go there, I guess. But it depends, for all we know, everything's fine a hundred miles that way."

Luke nudged Kent, "What about you, Marcusos?"

"Oh shit." Kent's voice almost squeaked.

They looked to him, wondering what he was on about. The teen couldn't put it in words, he pointed north. Luke saw the light at the top of a tall building, It was far off, and Luke hadn't even seen a hint of it until it was pointed out for him.

Kent started fishing around on his person and eventually produced a

small set of binoculars, he took a quick peek and then handed off the optics to the others.

A few miles away stood the silhouette of a very tall building. Any local would have known it as the Stone Creek Hospital Center. It was just a pinprick of light to the naked eye, but looking through Kent's high-power binoculars, Luke could see a number of fires close together. The way they were evenly spaced suggested they were organized and no kind of coincidence. The lights left trails of sparks as they danced about the rooftop, trailing burning embers spit away in the wind. The burning bits tried to fight gravity as the winds carried glints of light away from the large building. He wasn't sure, but he was almost certain he could make out a figure or two moving about tending to the light... there were people at the hospital.

Jesse looked through the binoculars, and in a half-second, said, "Damn, you've got good eyes."

Luke had to confirm his suspicion, "Signal flares?"

"I think so." Jesse nodded.



## Debates

Somewhere nearby, voices were getting loud. Michael thought that he heard the sounds of a physical struggle, like waves crashing. I'm asleep. *No, you're not. You haven't slept in a week.* He told the annoying voice to shut up again, His mind rebooted, and he shook himself to full consciousness and he actually processed the news that Luke just broke... something about flares at a hospital.

The two tables in the room were piled with canned goods, candles and a wide array of tools that had been collected over the last few days. The burning sticks of light offered a flickering view of the cozy room, depth and detail danced around their shadows. The administration offices had served as their gear drop and rest quarters because of the carpeted floors, decent couches, and its only windows looked out toward a central courtyard inaccessible from the road.

"We should go there," Kent said with enthusiasm. His father held a hand up, "Wait a second, I think it's a stupid idea." "It's a better one than we got, which is sitting around here." Luke countered, "Every day we're getting more worn out, we're getting weaker by the day just like... Them outside." "Dad, we'll never be able to get a boat out of the bay as tired and dumb as we are, Not to mention the weather as it is." The boy was right, they were all

exhausted and starting to make terrible mistakes. "...and what if the Storms hit while we're on the water? We'd all drown."

"You might drown because you're just a little bitch." The officer said, all but getting in his son's face. "I'll get us through fine."

The soldier cleared his throat, "I don't like the idea of going there either. We've all seen what other people are doing out there. I'd rather not walk right into another group of murderers." Jesse's opinion surprised Michael somewhat. He had assumed the soldier would want to get in touch with more sane people, privately the medic doubted this school would be defensible forever... He was sure Jesse knew the same.

Dave tried to be a voice of reason, "What makes you guys so sure it's a trap? Couldn't it just as likely be some kind of relief center? I mean, based on what we saw, it might not even be that, all WE know is that someone lit a bunch of road flares on the roof. It could be one guy trying to call for help. But MAYBE people we know have already gotten there safely." The group looked around at each other, subtly allowing a bit of optimism to leak from their faces.

"They lit flares on the roof because they want people to see it and go there. It's obviously very calculated, and that's what makes me suspicious," Ed raged, "Do you know what happened last time there was a hurricane down in the bible belt? The red cross was so completely overwhelmed that street gangs and other forms of organized crime started their own humanitarian rackets... They'd be like Oh? You want some food today? Gonna need to suck a few dicks for that."

Michael had read on some of those stories, Ed was not wrong, though he exaggerated quite freely. Michael knew of a hospital down there that was ordered to shut down the life support units and euthanize the patients to save generator power, he read the book on it only a few months ago. Despite this, the medic chose not to support Ed's complaint, he himself was still undecided.

What he saw ahead was an existential web of nightmarish proportion. Something told him that going to the hospital was the safest bet for all, but he couldn't shake a lurking feeling that something would be missing there. Perhaps he just didn't want to give up any sense of his new found autonomy, he wasn't sure. In contrast, Taking a boat out during nigh-hurricane conditions while perpetually recovering from random convulsions offered bad prospects as well. And then there was the idea of just staying here, which he knew was temporary.

None of the choices really glowed as promising. He fought to focus on the discussion. There was little in the ways of group coherence. Ed would not budge and seemed destined to be at odds with Kent over any topic. Jesse, Luke and Dave had their own opinions, while the others in the group remained quiet, perhaps just willing to follow Ed's call.



"We don't all have to go." He said.

The officer looked at Michael incredulously. "The Brothers want to eventually go upstate, that means north, you want to go southwest via the bay. You have different end goals." "Since you're going in different directions, what does it matter if they go to the hospital on the way?"

"Because Dad's afraid we'll all go with them and give up on his plan," Kent said quietly. "You go with whoever you want, see if I care." Ed snapped.

Luke stood up, "Looks like we've all got a choice to make then. We are leaving in the morning to check on those flares, if it's not our kind of thing, then we'll work on going north. Come with us or go another way."

"What about all the stuff we've gathered?" "We'll be civil about this and just split it in half."

*They're scared.*

"How do I know that if someone catches you, you won't tell them about our safe place here? What if someone comes to this place because they heard about it from you?" Ed spit. "This isn't a fucking movie all about you man, I doubt there's anyone out there that cares about this place. And I don't think you can stop all of us."

Luke walked into the middle of the room, "Look, if you guys want to stay here until you think it's safe to try a boat, go for it. We'll make sure we tell no one about it. And, If it turns out to be safe, we will signal you somehow."

"Okay, I can accept that... I guess." Ed said.

They could hear the rumble of an encroaching storm. Michael saw faces twist with fear at the sound of the storms.

The mocking voice had quieted now that he was away from the others. He wondered what depth of his psyche it escaped from and shivered for it was a cold, lonely place.

He was thankful to have suppressed it for now, though it seemed to always happen as the Terrors crept closer. He couldn't help but feel the hairs on his neck standing and knew another one was close. He closed his eyes and tried to shut out the pain that the bolts of light were about to cause... He felt the thunder start to crash and prepared himself for yet another blinding headache.



## Orders

There was a voice somewhere far off. It was one Jesse knew, but only casually, and it interrupted his dream quite rudely. He found himself back in Japan, where he had been stationed there before his first real deployment. He walked the coastline, appreciating the mountains far away and the crashes of the waves, A trio of native birds swooped by as he looked toward her face, she was dressed in traditional garb. Her obi had three decorative sigils of her family. They had met during Moe's wedding. Moe, one of his squaddies, was far too busy that day to entertain all his buddies, and as a result Jesse found himself speaking to this lovely little thing in a corner... They had spent the entire day together, and he was pretty sure they had missed the actual ceremony. He was sad at that as he had always wanted to see a traditional Nihon wedding. It would have been a memorable sight, a black US soldier in his class As marrying a local Japanese girl all dressed in traditional garb, but fate had pulled him away from the ceremony.

He looked at her dark eyes and fell into them; missing his buddy's wedding didn't matter since he would likely repeat his own version of this day soon enough, only he would be the groom and she the bride. He kissed her, It was long and deep, and everything else seemed to melt away. Then there were three cracks of thunder, he gave her another three quick kisses... suddenly he felt a tap on his shoulder. He ignored it and continued to gaze into her Asiatic beauty. He felt another tap, and he tilted his face to line up another kiss. On the third tap, he had to accept that the persistent intruder was not going to ease up.

He had to pull away from her, and she looked morosely disappointed. Three seconds he said in Japanese, "San-Byō."

A homeless man that called himself Gary stood there wearing a gross gray beard, Yet he wore Jesse's unit cover but the homeless man's name and rank were illegible, he held an envelope in his hand, "Orders sir!"

The voice woke him from strange dreams. "I'm not the one. It wasn't me! It wasn't me! I'm sorry..." Familiar pain gave Jesse a sense of vertigo, as his senses returned to him from the dreams, he managed to force himself awake. *This Terror Storm wasn't so bad, at least I didn't wet myself again.* He roused himself from the Terrors and forced himself to his feet. He borrowed a SEAL's motto in times like this '*The only easy day was yesterday*'. There was some candlelight to go by as he tried to reorient himself to the world, all the while a voice squealed, "It wasn't me! It wasn't me! It wasn't me!"

He saw a number of figures moving slowly, Ed was squirming on the ground trying to recover, Merry winced at all the sounds, and Josh remained tranquil on the couch.

All but the fat Kid, Jesse recognized Frank's sniveling voice easily. He seemed much more awake, not groggy or lethargic like the rest, he rocked back and forth, muttering, "It wasn't me! It wasn't me!"

The kid was easily almost two-hundred-fifty pounds and likely not over 16 years old. His shoulder cut hair transitioned to a weak stubble that had grown only on the boy's chin. Jesse knew his kind well. Frank was the kid that was normally the brunt of every joke because of his size, this left him with a weak will and desperation to throw anyone else at the wolves to afford him a moment's respite, which caused him to become the brunt of even more jokes.

Jesse knew this because when he was in school, he got a lot of the same treatment, only he wasn't obese; instead, he was on the excessively skinny side, which caused almost as much grief. Then suddenly, in his last year of high school, he started filling out, the transition was so sudden that his friends lectured him on the dangers of steroid use which he never had done or ever would, but no one believed him when he told them. One thing was certain, He took care of himself, went to the gym and did karate, and mostly no one busted his balls since.

Frank however, had chosen a life of resent. It was apparent just by the limited interactions the soldier had with him, his ire and willingness to deflect that anger toward any other interaction carried more weight than any other part of his ample frame. "It wasn't me! It wasn't me!" He repeated again.

Jesse smelled the hint of iron in the air, "Frank, what didn't you do?"

The boy shook his head, denying anything and everything. He looked around like he was being accosted by unseen accusers. The soldier sensed movement behind him as Ed came to his feet, "What's he crying about?" Jesse looked toward the cop to urge him to keep calm, "I'm trying to find out..." He looked back to the fat boy and only saw a gun waving in his face.

The soldier's reflexes took over. He ducked his head out of the line of the barrel and dipped it downward. At the same time, his arms went upward to catch the receiver of the pistol and drive it upward and away. The 9mm exploded next to his left ear, producing a ring almost as loud. Jesse could see the fat boy screaming something, but he couldn't make the words out. His hands thrust the pistol upwards, his vice-like grip crushed down on the teenager's hands. With an easy vertical twist, the gun was wrenched free from its owner's hands.

Jesse held the pistol by the barrel and smashed it into Frank's face, immediately blackening the skin on impact, his forward momentum generated convenient force to follow up with a crunching kick to the chest of the big teen. Frank fell backward and crumpled in on himself in a fetal position.

"What the fuck are you doing!?" The soldier screamed.

"It wasn't me!.... It wasn't me!" the teen sobbed. Ed had his sidearm out

now and had it trained on the sobbing boy. "What just happened?" A female's voice chimed through the ringing. The high-pitched ring in his left ear began to soften and he heard thuds from the hallway, footsteps were coming.

Merry was awake and alert now. Kent was finally coming around too, Luke, Dave and Mike shouted from the hallway. "What the hell just happened?" one screamed. The fat boy continued to sob, and all the while Josh remained still on the couch beside the drama.

Kent looked toward the girl and started inspecting wet looking dots on her shirt. "Are you hurt?" he asked.

She shook her head no. and then all present turned toward the immobile form on the cushioned couch. Jesse grabbed the room's candle. Josh had three bullet holes, two in his head and one in his neck. Blood was still dripping everywhere. "Why?" Jesse asked the boy.

The teen just kept repeating his denial, "It wasn't me..."

More candles were lit, and they tried to piece together the scene, as far as anyone could tell, Frank merely woke up first and shot Josh. The other boy didn't even appear to be awake when it happened. Mike pointed to an empty holster on the soldier's chest and Jesse suppressed a moment of raw anger when he felt no weapon in it, the disarmed gun was actually his own.

The crumpled Frank started to try to stand in between thrashing his arms around at anything close. Jesse had his pistol aimed in an instant but held back from pulling the trigger. Ed was bringing up his sidearm too.

"No one shoot," Michael said as he rooted through a small black pouch. He pulled a needle, syringe and a little vial from it. Jesse inched closer as he put his weapon away and suddenly pounced on one of the boys waving arms. The medic acted a moment after.

The needle punctured the heavy boy's bicep, and the contents of the syringe streamed into his arm. Both men held the boy pinned for the next few minutes, then the medicine kicked in and his flailing slowed, eventually easing into light, slow breaths. The room was quiet again, at least until they started trying to decide what to do with the Sedated Frank.



## Mob Mentality

David felt a shred of compassion for the boy. Frank had his hands cuffed behind his back, and his ankles were tethered with some rope. As he lay there gagged and tied like some hunting trophy, he tried to hum an unknown tune that very much sounded more like a beached whale trying to plead for help.

No one could agree on how to deal with him, and the benzos that knocked him out had started wearing off. It was anyone's guess what might happen next, but David doubted it would be anything that would help him sleep better at night.

Footsteps from the stairs approached, "There's a crowd of them outside now." Luke said as he stepped into the candlelight.

Then there was that. To make matters worse, the Lost seemed to have suddenly become very interested in what was happening inside the school since Frank started to snap. They were now circling the school as though they had just noticed it. Now they looked in windows and tried the doors. Even the most groggy of the street wanderers had started to wake up.

The fat boy writhed, making noises that no one paid attention to.

"It's because of this asshole," Ed said. "We don't know that for sure, everyone's being too loud." David protested.

The others no longer regarded Frank in their conversations about him, as though he was dead already, and likely he would be soon in a real bullet in the head kind of way. David still had sympathy for him, and because of this, he was still observing him when the others had written him off. As a result, he got to see something much more frightening... the boy's rapid decline.

When the shots first rang out and Frank was taken down, David could feel real remorse and terror from the boy, at first his sobs of, "It wasn't me." Had the sting of a person who had tried to stop something terrible but had failed and now languished in their regret. When he had first woken up from the meds Michael had given him, he had to be reminded of what had happened and genuinely seemed riddled with guilt... Within the hour, however, David observed the start of a subtle transition. His words became less emotional, less terrified, they became monotone, and then they stopped altogether, replaced with the slow slurring hum he now made.

The others didn't seem to notice this, or didn't care, or discounted it as the pathetic heavy boy simply tiring... Eventually, he stopped reacting at all to the things that some of the group said they should do to him.

David did not want to kill him like Ed did, he felt an unsound sympathy where others felt rage. Perhaps part of it was just the worry that anyone of them could be next. Maybe perhaps some karma now could come back their way in the near future... He didn't know.

"I'll keep an eye out upstairs," Luke said. He left for the roof, the others were up there trying to decide what to do with the boy. Too much rage filled the room before Dave managed to get them all out... It was a small hope that separating them from the boy would allow them to think clearer. David wanted nothing to do with that discussion. He was lost enough in thought without that burden. Instead, he wondered if they all were just one lightning storm away from utter lunacy. It made him shiver to think of.

He studied Frank's eyes, how they had grown still, how the aggression had all but extinguished from the boy's frame. His heavily bruised face reminded him of his own pains.

Spasms of freezing burns shot up and down his spine. He had pulled something that first night, and it nagged at him every moment he gave it a chance. It got slightly more unbearable each day. "What do we do with you?" He asked the immobile Frank. "I don't think he understands anymore," Merry whispered.

The spasm ended, giving David a moment to clear his mind, "I think you're right. But he did an hour ago, I think he felt it happening." "It?" Merry said, "Whatever it is," David pointed to the doorway and the door outside, "Like them out there." The girl turned to where he indicated he saw her tears running freely, "Are we all going to end up like this?" She sobbed.

He struggled for an answer, the best he could do was, "I hope not."

Time ticked by at a crawl and eventually, they brought the sounds of re-approaching people. Ed and Kent walked in with grim looks. The police officer aimed his gun at the restrained teen, "No more point arguing this fatty. It has to be done." David blurted out, "Not like this!" The father and son looked over. Both were already livid, and he likely just doubled that.

He stammered a second, "Uhh, I mean, not with a gun..." He pointed to the outside windows, "I think It attracts them." "Too late to worry about that," Ed raised his gun again.

Merry Gaspd, and David could only stare. He knew that the officer would not be swayed. Frank squealed frantic sounds through his gag...

**"NOOO!"**

Everyone froze. The sound came from outside. From the masses of Lost surrounding the school, their voices were haggard yet wild. Their multiple pitches overlapped into a singular howl of protest. All in the room were wide-eyed, except for Frank, whose eyes rolled around like in REM sleep.

"What did you do down there?" Luke screamed from the stairwell. "What are they doing!?" David screamed. "Nothing. Just staring!" his brother replied. David looked to the Marcusos, "I'd say we need to go about this differently." The officer nodded, David saw the man's almost permanently stoic face show uncertainty.

There was a long pause. It was Merry that broke the hesitation, "Fuck it. They want him. They can have him."

Frank was oblivious to his surroundings as he was walked to the front door. With the exception of an occasional drooling gurgle, he didn't even make

a sound anymore. He resisted the other's forceful motions at first but now seemed to stop caring that he was being held in an awkward restrained walk by Ed, Kent and David morosely flanked the sides of the main door. Merry followed behind.

"Jesse and Luke are staying on the roof looking for any more trouble," Mike said as he joined them. "What, we don't have enough?" Ed spit. Kent spoke a hurried, "Can we just get this over with?" Everyone took their spots around the door. Outside was dotted with the lost, they mulled about the building almost curiously, they were malnourished, haggard faces that stared at the school. Fortunately, none were too close to the door at that moment.

The confused Frank looked around, he made weak signs that could be taken as recognition on the faces he saw, the boy tried to talk but only garbled sounds came out... David found it hard to read anything on the boy. Frank cast no more fear nor anxiousness, he simply looked around in a daze, seemingly oblivious to the events unfolding.

Ed slammed the boy's face into the door, pinning him in place as they shuffled around the thick gray door. He made a halfway muffled cry as the boy's gag came loose. David fumbled with the keys. He still wasn't sure if this was the right way to go about any of this. Ed forcefully removed the handcuffs while adeptly keeping the boy pinned to the wall. "Are you sure we want to do this?" Kent whispered, he looked around in a panic. The door lock went click, and he cracked the door open.

Ed did not wait for anyone to object and thrust the heavy boy through the door. His fast strides immediately caught on the heels of the slower boy. Five or six steps outside the building, Frank crashed to the ground. The Lost became aware of the boy and immediately began to approach. Ed slowly stepped back.

David watched from the window. He saw the heavy boy slowly gather his weight, eventually rising to his knees. Ed let the door close behind him and Kent locked it. Frank looked back to the door, and David saw the boy's tears running down an otherwise blank face.

Several deep breaths were taken as they stared out into the mob in horror, then David noticed it begin to change... just moments before the Fat Boy Outside was an emotional blank, now he seemed wracked with a tide of emotion, his face contorted in misery as he weakly reached toward the far away door. "Please," he pleaded, as the Lost became curious of him, part of the boy seemed to come back, part of him seemed to realize his change. Frank had turned to the entryway, where he knew on some level his friends had just banished him. "It wasn't me! Pleaaaaase." he howled.

Many in the crowd of Lost echoed the words, "Please." The words came as a shrill mumble from the dozens amassed. The crowd moved closer to him, some coming close enough to feel the boy with their palms.

Everyone in the school stared, unable to comprehend what they were seeing. The father and son Marcuso's jaws hung low. Merry covered her face, trying to hold back her own tears. Mike wore a face of pure dread. David knew Luke and Jesse upstairs wore their own faces of shock. He could feel his own face losing its color, his vision even seemed to go gray. This should not, No! could not be happening. *"Please!"* The crowd said in what almost in unison.

He watched on as the Fat boy sobbed. More of the Lost shuffled toward him out of curiosity or maybe something else. The sight of Frank was almost obscured by the crowd now, but David saw him looking around as though the building was all new to him. Suddenly he seemed aware of all the faces around him, and he shrieked. The heavy boy started flailing his arms, striking at the bodies surrounding him, trying to fight his way off. They responded by lazily flailing their arms, hitting one another as they tried to close in on him.

"No! No! No!" the boy repeated, some of the crowd echoed his words. Merry recoiled besides Kent and glanced at the keys in David's hand. David could feel the fear mixing with anger in the air, it was palpable. "Let's not do this." David offered. Perhaps they could push their way out and get the boy back inside. If any of them had heard him they gave no sign.

Frank now stumbled back toward the door, "Nooo!" his voice was no longer one of terror but of pure rage. He bellowed at the top of his lungs as he collided with the heavy door. The thud echoed through the halls, it was followed by the flailing of the fat boy's heavy arms on the metal. The others of the crowd seemed to try to mimic the action, flailing at barred windows and brick walls.

David could feel the anger swell in the crowd, he could almost see the wave surge through those outside as they reacted to the spiking emotions. It made him cower, all he wanted to do was run. It also made him feel his own anger welling in his gut... then a valid worry dawned on him, what if they got inside?



## A Door Too Far

Glass broke and metal bars groaned. It was the only reason they weren't already inside. The mob was trying to break through the windows and walls, fortunately, whatever rage that fueled this crowd didn't also pass on much intelligence. The howling Lost tried reaching for them through broken windows only to wedge themselves in safety bars.

The metal of the main doorway clanged, and someone on the other side



yelped over a stiff snap. Michael could feel the broken arm for the unfortunate thing on the other side who owned it, but it did nothing to slow the rising frenzy on the other side.

The door lock had almost completely given way, and Michael used all his strength to keep the breaking door pulled shut, he used both arms on the handle and his legs on the frames to keep the door from opening. Ed struggled to keep a rifle wedged between the frame and handle. Fortunately, only two or three of the feral beings outside could try to pull at the unlocked door at one time. Still, the effort was taxing, they wouldn't be able to keep the door shut for long.

The glass windows around them started shattering as flailing limbs managed to hit them, the mob was a tangle of wild arms, legs and butting heads, the bodies all just lashed out without sense or reason. Blood from the mob stained the windows now.

Again he had to fearfully respect what the Lost seemed to be able to do, their sudden bursts of strength were deceptive of what one would expect from their individual sizes, and they could move with just as much speed as he could when they were motivated, but their blatant disregard for self preservation was what truly made them dangerous... He had no idea much longer he could hold this door closed.

He heard Dave come from behind and Michael ducked as he wedged an aluminum flagpole into the slot where the rifle had been. This let Michael release his grip from the door and fall to the ground. He looked up at the door and saw the handle starting to come loose.

"That's not gonna hold," he said.

The round face of Frank peered through the small view port of the door, he shouted incoherently. Michael saw no spark remaining in the boy. He spat blood and foam as his bulk tried to force his way through the door.

It didn't matter ... The whole place would be swallowed in flame eventually. Michael stepped away for a moment's rest.

Ed stepped back and aimed his service pistol. He muttered, "I'm sick of this asshole!" Frank stared at Ed indifferently. He pulled the trigger and the round slammed into the feral Frank's face, blood exploded around the door, and he shrank from view. In response, the mob got louder, their cries became bloodcurdling, and they launched into every window or door with a crazed zeal... The last of the docile Lost had turned Feral.

There was a cracking, crunching sound, and the entire door frame assembly was coming out of the wall, the medic found his feet and stood back to full height. Dave handed him his weapon, and the group backed away from the entrance. Ed shouted to the girl, "Merry, grab the packs and get up to the boys on the roof." The girl stood paralyzed. "NOW!" the officer screamed, and she bolted. "Block the door off with something big," Dave said. "LIKE WHAT?"

Ed retaliated.

Michael saw the doors about to break free of their metal frame. "Not enough time," he aimed his weapon at the door. He was not scared. In fact, was rather invigorated by the rising danger though he knew he should be anything but. Never had he felt so alive... Something within him was heightened, *Just one more veil to see through*, he said to himself. He heard the girl come up behind them at the stairwell, she was lugging two of the group's backpacks and a gas lantern that clattered together, a third heavy pack was draped over one shoulder.

She made for the stairwell, Michael looked over to Dave. His friend twitched in fear, but he was resolute on what was about to happen. "Roof! Go!" they said in unison. *A King of Fire and Fury....* Michael fought to push the thought away. He heard the crash as the main doors gave way. They were inside.



## Crowd Control

Jesse kicked at the hands of one of them. Somehow the spidery man wearing a dirty dress shirt managed to almost climb the roof in the commotion, a muffled crunch sent the Feral man crashing down on top of the massing crowd, none of the others in the mob looked up. They were focused where they saw others moving.

Luke yelled that the front door was caving inward, Jesse realized that's where they were all flooding into... they were coming inside... the way the mob acted suggested nothing good would happen once they were inside. "They need you!" Luke screamed. Jesse nodded.

He took the steps four at a time and made his way to the hallways inside, and felt Luke following right behind him as they headed toward the commotion. Unfortunately, they didn't take the time to ready a light, so all they could do was charge toward the noise and a single lantern light coming from the stairwell. "Dave!" Luke cried from behind the soldier.

Shots were fired, multiple different sized calibers in rapid succession. Jesse heard the pops of 9mm, the cracks of a shotgun, and the thuds of an AK. Howling over the shots was a rabid collection of screams.

"Up! Up! Up! Go!" someone Shouted over the howls. As he reached the stairwell, he had to stop short as he almost ran into the tiny girl Merry. He stepped out of her way, and she passed carrying a candle and three backpacks by hand, her steps almost landed in slow motion with all the gear weighing

her down.

“They’re coming!” She squealed. Jesse vaguely heard Luke directing her to the roof. Dave and Mike broke from the stairway, Ed was a few steps behind with Kent. “The roof!” He gestured for Luke to get them there. “This way!” The younger Janowsky Brother shouted. The soldier brought his rifle up to the ready as he carefully stepped back. All friendlies were behind him.

The first head popped out from the stairwell, Jesse clicked the safety off on his AR. There were three stairwells that ran to the second floor, but it seemed that the Lost were all single-mindedly chasing on the heels of his friends. Still, he had to be careful that none found their way up behind him.

And a sudden thought struck, *Was the rifle the only way?* It was a discipline firmly rooted in him; it was not the first time he had thought it.

These were people... he said to himself... He knew nothing of the affliction that made so many go crazy, he knew nothing about if there was any way to fix these people. What he did know was that in the next fraction of a second, there would be no negotiation, no discussion, no reason. The stairwell doorway was narrow, but if he let them get into the hallway, he’d lose his bottleneck; then, he’d be surrounded in tenths of a second.

Three, Four, Five, Eight, Fuck. He stopped counting... too many. The soldier was backpedaling at a sprint while the others filed into the classroom with roof access. Jesse observed the mob half charging - half stumbling toward him. They piled over each other, barely aware of each other, but they all had that laser focus of rage driving them toward the sounds coming from his friends.

He had been in a situation like this before, holding a mob at bay with a rifle, it in fact was one of his worst memories of deployment... that thought right now would lock him up with doubt if he let it. He had to strain to keep those memories from surfacing... He tried to push it away. Those memories would do him no good here... He had seen his share of frightened people, Frightened people did stupid things, but in the split second he assessed this mob, he saw nothing of fear.

After seeing what happened with Frank, he knew these people had every intention of doing them harm, Yet the decision was still hard. He took a deep breath and fired as he exhaled. He lightly tapped the trigger and loosed three rounds at the closest targets. The AR’s high-pitched crack echoed down the hallway, the first two targets were hit center of mass and the third a neck shot. The three targets collapsed, and the others tripped over the husks as they responded to the sound of the shots. The entire mob did not wince from the sound of the shots, nor did they show even a moment of regard for those he had just felled. They all solely fixated on him. He fired again.



## A Burning Roof

Luke was the last to hop out the window asides from Jesse. He waited in class 202 with his AK at the ready. A single lantern illuminated the classroom, Merry Beth had left it on a desk by the door in her rush to carry the gear to safety. The sounds of the rabid were closing on them and the cracks of Jesse's rifle sparked lit up the halls, he pulled back to their exit.

Luke readied himself to join in the fight, but judging by the sounds, it would do little good. His heart raced, and his fingers shook...

Jesse burst into the room and the lantern knocked over, it erupted in a small plume of flame, igniting the papers on the walls.

Jesse Dove through the window that lent access to the roof.

Luke paused a moment, for some reason, he needed to see their attackers close up. He wanted to know if that thing he had seen on the first morning had come for him at last. He took deep breaths waiting for the crowd to appear in the doorway. But they wouldn't come... somehow, their drive to charge madly into his friends had abruptly given way to cries of fear.

He could hear enough of the mewling and gasps of anger right outside the hallway, but they just wouldn't come through the door, the once human faces peered in just slightly from the dark of the hallway. Luke hesitated for quite some time, hoping to get a better glimpse at this mob, he hoped that he could maybe see something, anything that might help him understand... As he looked at the growing flames, he thought of that first figure that lurked in the building after he searched his parent's house, he thought of how the streets were dead while the sun was up and as night hit, it would all change.

He made a makeshift torch with some shreds of curtain and ignited it on the growing fires, the balled cloth caught fast. He then threw the torch into the hallway and saw how the mob scattered. The torch tumbled into the hallway flames danced onto posters and clothing alike. The faces darted away from the flames.

Light, whatever was wrong with these people, they didn't like light or the heat.. or both.

This thought disappeared as the lantern flames spread up the wall. He climbed out the window onto the roof, and as the thick smoke started to consume the building, he felt compelled to point out the obvious, "The building's on fire," he said.

They watched as the flames started to consume the building. It wasn't lost

on him that they were now standing on the same part of the roof they had originally forced entry in with, though they were now trapped between flames and a horde.

The fire spread throughout the building. First, it engulfed the paper on the wall, then it traveled to a set of curtains, then the ceiling started to catch, the flames soon spread to the adjacent rooms and then to rooms after that.

The building went up, room by room. They were fortunate to be on a part of the roof upwind as the fire spread away from them, the moments turned into long minutes as they safely sat there watching the flammables in the stone building consume. The attacking mob that had entered the school scattered into the night, where they began to wail pained tormented sounds from the shadows. From his vantage point, Luke watched the angry mob bolt away from the growing flames through any and every door or window. They scurried like roaches away from the flames, back into the dark of the suburbia.

"Fuuuuuck!" Ed howled to the sky, "What the hell do we do now?" as he waved the increasing layers of smoke away from his face.

"I know where we can go," Luke said as he coughed.

"Stone Creek Hospital, yeah I get it," Ed said with substantial anger.

As they tried to catch their breath, the wind changed and with it the growing fire's direction. Smoke assaulted their noses, and the roof beneath them had suddenly grown unbearably hot. The offices beneath them were beginning to heat up.

Mike noticed it too. He was already looking over the edge for a safe place to drop down. "We have to get down now!" Luke said with an urgency that outdid all of that which just happened inside. "Are you kidding!? All those freaks are down there!" Merry screamed.

"The fire's beneath us," The medic said as he peered over the edge.

Luke immediately tried heading for the same pipe they had originally climbed up, but he just couldn't see it in the smoke, and the heat all but pushed him away.

"We don't have much of choice at this point. Do we?" Dave pointed out. "Over here!" Kent said, as he beckoned to the group, Luke judged it was the lowest spot to drop down.

Kent tossed the packs that Merry had managed to grab over the edge, everything else was still downstairs and Luke knew they were fortunate to have what they did, given the circumstance.

"I'll help you down," The soldier said, Jesse was easily the bulkiest of the group. Luke noted the drop. It was high, Thirteen or fourteen feet, he guessed. Low enough to make the drop without getting hurt if one was lucky, but also high enough to break bones if someone landed wrong, he watched as Jesse used his considerable strength to lower David a good length down the side.

His brother then landed with a thud but was otherwise fine. He did the same for Ed, Kent and then Merry. There were still three of them left on the roof.

Luke looked back to see Mike staring at the flames, "COME ON!" Michael turned to face him with a puzzled expression, like he was unaware of his friend's presence but quickly snapped out of it. The confused face disappeared, and he started to run towards Luke and Jesse. Flames now licked from every window beneath them, he felt his skin starting to broil, a room beneath had reached a critical temperature and flashed. The rapid consumption of the materials in whatever room was beneath them caused the heat to magnify yet again, and Luke could feel his sneakers sticking to the tar of the roof.

The three clung to the edge. Jesse screamed, "Now!" Luke knew they were out of time, lowering themselves over the side was no longer an option, flames now rose everywhere and the truss construction of the roof was quickly buckling inward. Without being able to carefully lower themselves down, the asphalt parking lot would show no mercy. It was now impossible to breathe. There was only one option, they jumped.

The hedges that lined the perimeter of the walls broke their fall, and asides from the singed hair and coughs from smoke inhalation, the three were no worse for the wear. They rejoined their allies away from the heat of the inferno but fully alive and illuminated.

And then there were the screams, wretched tortured wails of anguish. Noise howled from every shadow and every crevice where the light of the flames didn't reach. The insane lurked just outside the orange haze and paid zealous attention to the group. Surely they'd strike again now that their prey was vulnerable on the ground... Luke saw dancing shadows right beyond the edge of the firelight inching ever closer, Luke worried any moment they might decide to risk the flames and come at the group. "We can't stay here."

They all readied weapons, Luke tapped Jesse's shoulder, "No," he said, "Don't shoot." Everyone looked at him confused, "It will just piss them off and bring more on us." Ed didn't take his eyes off the regathering mob, "So what we just sit here and hope they don't charge us?" Luke shook his head 'no', and pointed toward the park on the far side of the sports fields. The one he and his brother had rested in on the first night, There didn't seem to be many in that direction. It was their best option, their only one, the others did not protest.

"Go!" Someone screamed.

The ground became a blur as they ran, they cleared the parking lot furthest from the mob, passed the sportsfields, and as the burning building got smaller behind them more the howls and shrieks registered on either side, they had managed to break line of sight to most of the rabid Lost. They vaulted a small fence that marked the perimeter of the wooded park, and the firelight began to dim with every step.

They sidestepped the few who were in their way, yet the inhuman howls

began to grow, and shots rang out. They were definitely being chased. His footsteps grew heavier, the group began to stretch apart, and the howls grew louder still. Luke panicked and tried to keep eyesight of the others, he saw Jesse and Mike in the front, he kept pace with his brother, and Ed and Kent stayed with the slower Merry.

She was hobbling on one foot, leaning heavily on Kent. Luke turned to check on them and then a Feral was on him swinging wildly, spitting and biting. The two collided in a full-speed run. They tumbled, and Luke felt something in his shoulder pop. Pain registered somewhere near there, but he was too busy fighting for his life to pay attention.

The Lost was a man of mid-twenties, he would have been fit enough to overpower Luke if a week of neglect hadn't caused him to start to wither and dehydrate. His wide arms hammered down on Luke, and he tried to block as many of the blows as he could track. Luke fumbled for his Machete and cursed as he failed to find it hanging at his side. Had it come lose either during their run? or was it lying somewhere around him torn loose from the sudden ground scuffle? A gunshot rang above him, and the weight was suddenly gone. Kent reached for his hand and pulled him to his feet.

They continued to run, and a branch whipped him in the face just as he tried to track the others, he felt its sting right across his cheek and lost all sharpness of vision, his glasses had been knocked away too. He thought he could make out blurred shapes of Jesse and the Mike ahead, they looked to have stopped at the far tree line of the park. Beyond them was an open road, beyond that were a few homes, then an industrial park. They covered both crossings with their weapons, and when the others had finally caught up, they again took off at a run.

He didn't need his glasses to know its layout. The industrial park was a mishmash of small factories, warehouses and commercial spaces. It was a place where many of the town's youth disappeared to spend energy at night and hopefully avoid trouble. Luke had many adventures in its maze of buildings when he was younger. As did his brother, as did Jesse and Michael, he had heard many entertaining stories of his elder brother's gallivants and mischiefs here in the past.

They were now in the heart of the park, and the noises of the mob were in every direction. "We can't go much further!" Kent said. Merry was supporting herself on one of his shoulders. Even in the night sky, Luke could make out the outline purple swelling of one of her ankles, "I think it's broken." She said.

Luke looked around frantically and thought he saw Jesse come to a complete stop at the corner. When he had made it there himself, he saw why... a dozen or more Lost shambled toward them from the opposite way.

He looked around, running was not an option anymore, and he was not going to leave his wounded allies. *There had to be a way.* He remembered the

games of hide and seek in the back of all these warehouses in the years past. He thought as he scanned the rooftops, there was something usable nearby, he just didn't remember what.

Then he saw it. On the top of a rectangular office building across the street was the hazy outline of a ladder or a fire escape of some kind.

It was not extended, sadly. But if he could just get up there somehow, he could lower it. He thought about the school and its gutter and thought he saw a way up.

"I need a distraction," Luke said. Jesse yelled, "I got it," Mike just smiled and followed the soldier's lead, the two broke away from the group at a full-on sprint, their guns started firing soon after, and their shots sounded more and more distant... The Lost ran towards the sounds of the gunfire without even looking in Luke's direction, "What can I do?" David asked. "Lift me up," Luke said.

He loved to climb, it was something he often did in his backyard to calm his mind. Now all their lives may depend on it. He felt the boost propel him upward, and right at the height of it, he reached for the hazy rung, it lay just a hand or two out of reach. He tried to grab it again and missed, then Luke crashed to the ground. He cursed his horrible depth perception. "Damn my back..." Dave shrieked. The brothers picked themselves up, trying to ignore the growing pains. Luke felt a warm burning in his collar bone and thought he heard a popping sound in it when he moved.

A larger boy helped straighten him, "Ready to try again?" Kent's voice urged more than questioned. That football player frame of Kent easily lifted Luke off the ground. Still, it was just barely enough, he desperately clawed for the lowest rung on the fire escape ladder. His vision blurred as he tried to connect.

The angry mob was closer, Jesse's distraction mostly worked, but it did not lure all their pursuers away. Luke could hear their babbling and almost make out individual voices. Kent made a groan, and Luke felt metal in the palm of his left hand. There was a haze of motion below him. But he held by a single rung.

When he pulled his right arm up to grab the rung, he recalled how much of a miscalculation this might have been, His collar bone burned and sent his entire arm waves of pain. He pulled upward anyway, he refused to let go.

His legs managed to get traction onto the wall, and it gave him a bit of needed support. He pulled upward.

Moving upward from the first rung was the worst pain he had ever felt. With each new rung, the pain lessened, and soon he was climbing using all four extremities, about halfway up the fire escape, he stopped at a platform. There he fumbled with some kind of a chain and a pin system, it unlocked a latch, and the escape ladder dropped.



The others began to climb to safety, and Luke paced himself the rest of the way to the roof, all the while hearing howls of “No!”, “Please!” and “It wasn’t me!” from the Lost.



## Lost

Each high-pitched crack of the AR screamed, 'Over here! Ignore them!'. It bought their friends time to get safe, so Michael fired without care. They made it about a block away, with most of the enraged mob following after them. With the haste in which the mob pursued, it should be easy enough to draw them away and loop back around. So long as they bought the others enough time.

He threw himself fully into the fight aspect of fight or flight. There would be no hesitation, no panic, just cold confidence in the fury of the moment. *For most, the abyss is where they are lost...* The thought blinked in and out of his awareness, he felt alive in a way that he never had.

Perhaps it was just a trick of the light, but everything seemed brighter. No, he decided, things were definitely brighter. He could also feel the vibrations of the horde's footsteps drawing nearer. He could feel their anger infecting everything around them. *...but for some, it is where they are found.* The thought crystallized somewhere within him.

Jesse ran beside him, fighting with just as much ferocity, he snapped shots at any that began to gain on them. Together they could make it through this...

Another crowd charged at them from the direction they were heading, it threw their entire strategy into desperation. Both crowds sensed the motion of the other and both charged forward. The two ducked to both sides as the mob converged. The mobs crashed into each other becoming one giant angry horde... after a number of flailing limbs and crushed skulls, the mass of insane shifted about, looking for the actual targets of their rage... and Michael found himself separated from Jesse.

Jesse managed to climb atop a large Shipping Container on his side of the road, but the medic was cut off on the other side of the street, His friend was safe, at least for the moment, but he himself was still in danger. Some of the Lost already saw him, and Michael was forced to take off down an alley.

Cut off from one another, he had to fend for himself. *A King of fire and Fury...* The thought popped into his head, He looked around, expecting to see

something, but he wasn't sure what. Every sense he had screamed, he felt the ground shaking from heavy footsteps, he smelled the breath of the mob, even the colors in the clouds above seemed to have more definition than before.

Then he felt it, some sort of detachment from the now, something was changing in him. The feeling was taking over rapidly, something about *Fire and Fates* whispered in his ears. He was cutting something, bullets landed in their intended target and were forgotten. His weapon clicked, and he tossed it. Another target moved, trying to cut him off. He sidestepped and kept running.

He freed the shotgun from his pack, Rationale was beginning to bleed away. Rather than the mob right behind him, his mind began to wander, how did they know to chase him? A fear struck... Would he soon be like the howling jabbering and frothing figures chasing him, or Frank, perhaps the child he had stabbed is there too, racing right behind him...

He would soon be Feral.

Fate, He pondered. Someone on fire ran toward him.

Suddenly the brick walls were crusted with ash, the asphalt was buried in dark dust, shadows echoed like sound, they writhed and swallowed objects whole. Black Lightning streaked across the sky, like the canopy of a great jungle and time itself seemed a distant notion.

It left him naught but the sense of weight and the fury of some kind of oppressive impulse. At that moment, he felt some nagging urge, like a compass pointing north, he could only go toward it. He HAD to go toward it... or drown in the flames and shadows and misery encroaching on him.

And then the vision was gone. He *was going mad*, he was sure of it. Soon he would be like those that chased him... he would not be returning to his friends.

He tried to get his bearings, Michael was somewhere behind some factory or workshop. At least he thought it was something like that, things and places seemed to overlap, like the fuzziness of the first few moments after waking from a dream, or perhaps the opposite, maybe it was more like a dream where wakefulness and awareness came exponentially closer with every moment. A dream of a place he had never been but already knew the layout.

There were heatless flames everywhere. Embers raised, yet rain fell, ashes or snow, perhaps all. Winds howled, but he didn't feel breeze. Lost in a cloud of anti-logic, trying to reconstruct how he had come to this point. Someone was nearby and took great joy from his situation, they were taking notes, learning from his mistakes. Who was he, what was his name? Images raced in his mind, faces he did not recognize, places he had not been. He tried to shake the hallucinations, Tried to sort the processes that looped and fragmented. Tried to remember his name. He couldn't, but he did know that the Pawns used the words as armor... they used their armor to kill in service of their King.

He was trapped in a dead end.

Memories came and went without correlation, strange ones that he was either unfamiliar or had long suppressed. Now seemed so distant, what were the memories and what was so dire and so present? What were memories but crumbling shards of sanity? Shadows, shadows everywhere and somewhere within a Knight who was not black or white.

**\*\* FOCUS \*\***

The Feral mob came around the corner, Michael fought off the haze and achieved lucidity. *Just one more veil to see through*, he said to himself.

There was a truck docking ramp, with assorted crates labeled 'Inter-Structures', weeds burst from neglected cracks every few feet, and months or years of sawdust congealed at the bases of ventilation ducts. There was a forklift parked next to a cage of propane tanks. A tall fence blocked him, he was trapped in a dead end.

He aimed his shotgun at the tanks.

Propane tanks rarely ever exploded like in movies. These were no exception. The jets of flame spurted from the tanks, hosing those who chased after him. Bodies caught flame and continued to give chase several steps before collapsing. The pyres of flame gave the rest a moment of pause. But the Feral horde eventually trampled right through the already fading flames.

He fired as fast as he could, but the mob kept coming. He could have tried to run, maybe climb the fence and hide somewhere, let this madness slowly eat at him until he was like the others. But there was something on the other end of this mob, something was taunting him, challenging him. *There was something in the abyss... he just had to find it.*

He would make his last stand here. He saw the manic joy in the eyes of the mob charging him. Eyes were the windows to the soul. The 12 gauge rounds left bursts of splattered crimson. The masses however, were undeterred, The buckshot tore through multiple bodies, and the Lost just kept coming.

The shotgun was dry after nine furious shots. He reloaded a few shells then burned through them too.

There were still dozens advancing only steps away, he remembered his knives, he always kept two of them. He drew them and leaped at the horde.



## Could Have Been A Nice View

The ladder clinked to the ground, and David no longer heard gunfire. They had hidden beside a collection of dumpsters eagerly waiting, watching as the deranged ran right past them, giving chase to the gunfire. He inexplicably felt guilt again, like what if they could be cured? What if this madness was only temporary? David had no way of knowing one way or the next if whatever caused this hysteria might suddenly go away. Perhaps the world would go back to being normal just as quickly as it had changed... he found himself wishing for it with his all. That uncertain optimism lurked behind every thought, and so he quietly questioned their every act of self-defense.

Luke waved for the group to climb. Kent and Merry started their ascent, but it was a slow task with the girl's injured hobbling.

The absurdity of his sudden wave of compassion was not lost on him. He had seen what they had done to Frank, or what Frank had done to them... he witnessed the transformation. He knew that if any of the drooling husks saw him, they would do to him exactly what he'd seen them do to others. The violence when the mob exploded was terrifying to behold. And yet, he felt for them.

He looked up and down the buildings, sweeping his rifle across all the while hoping he'd not need to use it. There was no more noise coming from the direction Jesse and Mike had gone, which meant in the best case, they were trying to sneak their way back, or in the worst case, they were both dead... Either way, more noise would now bring more insanity down on them.

The boy and the girl made it to the roof, and the officer was now halfway up.

It was his turn. He ran to the ladder.

As he reached for the rusted and flaking paint of the ladder, heavy vibrations rattled behind him, he turned to see a burly man running at him, several days of beard stubble and a mustache, all over his face were clotted bits of froth and bile. The man ran wildly, intent only on David.

He aimed his rifle but did not pull the trigger. Luke shouted a warning from above, but shooting this one would certainly bring others. He froze, and the man lumbered toward him. Time slowed as David saw exactly what he needed to do, he took a step back, putting the ladder between himself and his attacker.

The burly man tried to dive at David; instead, he lunged headfirst into the metal rungs. There was the crunch of bone as the ladder kissed the bearded man in the face.

Stunned as he was, he did not go down. The man's head simply swung

around, trying to find Dave.

More heavy footfalls echoed in the dark, David needed to get up that ladder now... He saw no other choice and followed up the ladder wound with several of his own, ramming the wood stock of his rifle into the crazed man's face repeatedly. He swung with all his might, even after the man had fallen to the ground, he swung again. The man reeked of a combination of sweat, urine and grime, and David whispered an apology to him.

"Bro! come on!" Luke half whispered, half shouted. David looked up and climbed.

About halfway up, Luke tugged at a rope, which raised the ground floor portion of the ladder. David climbed onto the roof and collapsed to collect his breath.

It was actually a nice view up here, he thought. He could see the tree line and the rising embers of flames. He had a clear, unobstructed view of the sky and could see most rooftops for blocks... especially the fully engulfed Lakedale Elementary school, their safe haven was now a pyre that was easily visible for miles... it could have been a nice view.

A half-hour went by, and Luke pointed out movement on the street. David looked down to see Jesse crouch running past the building. "Jesse!" he called out with hushed precision. The soldier looked up in surprise, and then his face transitioned to relief. They guided him to the ladder and after he climbed, the ladder was raised again before any of the lost noticed.

"I got lost on the way back," Jesse said. "...Mike?" Luke asked. The soldier said nothing and just looked out to the flames. David felt like he should say something, but the soldier only shrugged and sat down away from the others. There was nothing for any of them to do but wait for the crowds to disperse and daylight to come.



## Morning

The rays of sun punched through the clouds and spilled over the building tops and illuminated the roads below. The crowds scattered for shadow about forty-five minutes ago, and Kent assumed that they were probably safe... at least for the moment. There was already a great deal of heat and humidity on this early summer day, perhaps the effect was perceptibly magnified by all the dust and ash in the air, a crude unnatural insulation of sorts. No one had spoken since they decided to wait till morning, but as the beams of sunlight crawled over the tops of trees and buildings, so too did the howling and

shrieks of rage from the Lost diminish altogether.

The air was stuffy, and the heat gnawed on the flesh, yet there were still the brief moments where a random morning breeze could give just a bit of relief, now if only they weren't covered in sweat and soot to appreciate it. Kent at least felt safe for the time being.

The ladder clinked, and Jesse appeared from over the ledge. He shook his head, confirming that he had not found their friend in his search, the others were unsurprised. The soldier tossed several canned goods to the group. "We can't keep this up," the soldier began a small cooking flame, "I'm heading to the hospital after we eat."

"What? Why?" His father said. Ed pulled out a pair of binoculars and looked towards the hospital, it was well beyond the trees and at least a few miles off. In the daylight, the hospital would be visible on any big hill or high spot on the island, but there were trees and buildings and a whole lot of smoke from the remains of their previous safehouse.

"Because we won't make it through another night like that," Kent said.

"Sure we can, we were doing just fine until out of nowhere, your fat friend flipped out and started shooting. No warning. Not even a hint!" Ed said, waving an imaginary gun around in his left hand, "Alone, you and me will be fine, though." "No offense to any of you, but fuck, I barely trust anyone of you at this point. What if every one of us is just waiting to snap like that?" no one had an answer for him.

"I can't do another night like that either," David said grimly.

"None of us can," Jesse muttered as he heated the canned goods.

"You all can't maybe. I know I'll be fine." Ed stormed away from the group and readied his things to leave. About midway to the fire ladder, he looked back. "Kent... let's go get that boat."

Kent was sick of it. He looked at his father and slowly shook his head 'no..'. he had seen many of his father's angry episodes, he obviously knew better than to challenge the stubborn man, normally the man had to see his folly for himself before he'd budge in the slightest. Not that he'd ever own up to initially being wrong, of course, Ed was always right. No matter what. But battling his father's ego didn't matter to him now. What mattered to him was to protect his friend, who now hobbled along, unable to effectively walk without help... He was grateful that Merry's ankle only seemed to be a bad sprain, any worse and the Lost would have overtaken them, and he'd have had to see her die too.

"Fuckin' pussy," Ed said. But Kent had effectively made his stand, and he did so without getting loud about it. Ed climbed back to the group and partook in the canned food breakfast.

After they ate, the angry officer nodded a few times to himself and then spoke, "Alright, lets take a look at these signals." They set out in a tight column,

with Jesse and David at the front with their rifles, Ed with his pistol and Luke in the back with his rifle. Kent helped the girl limp, acting as a crutch.

A few blocks north, they stopped at the cellphone tower. Such things jutted straight into the sky, giving a good view in all directions, father and son climbed the access ladder high enough to where their binoculars could see a great distance.

Kent could see much more physical damage to the building in daylight, but rather than flares, two plumes of controlled smoke rose high above the impressive building.

A huge banner was draped from the side of the roof in black and white letters... It said 'SAFETY'. People were definitely there.

"No shit," Ed said to himself. And then they traveled, as the tall building slowly got closer and closer, they had to negotiate their walk over craters, vehicles and giant heaps of rubble. The roads were chewed to pieces, randomly torn up or buckled. Small fissures or craters made the large roads around the hospital difficult enough to walk through, there was a college built around the main hospital building, and all the structures had that angular high tech look with lots of glass. Much of that glass was broken, he assumed from kicked up rubble or gunfire.



## The Captain

The hospital itself was a monolithic structure built on the side of a small hill. A three-level parking garage sprung out from the hill and lent itself as a straight foundation to support the ten floors of building that hovered above it. It was also the tallest structure for miles... It was a good choice to observe the land around them. Militarily it made sense.

They observed the view from a few bushes just outside the line of the fence. People moved about inside and around the facility. "What if they're like Russian soldiers or something?" Merry interjected. Jesse shrugged, "I don't think we'd get this close if that were the case." He pointed to the roof two distant figures eyed them through rifle scopes, "They saw us coming miles ago." Jesse slung his weapon and told the others to do the same, then he stepped out from the bushes into plain sight.

He had reservations about meeting others since seeing what some other groups had done in the first days. He did not want to take orders from a group like that... or worse. As they approached the parking garage, the soldier pointed out numerous improvised fortifications, chain link fences had been

hastily relocated to line the perimeter of the building, concrete traffic dividers blocked off secondary approaches, he even saw at least two watchtowers under construction. People who were working on remote parts of the fence took notice and walked at a brisk pace to the building. "Clearly, they're as wary of us as we are of them," David said. "I'm beginning to think this may be a bad idea," Luke added. Jesse shrugged but did not slow down.

"If anyone on that roof wanted us dead, we'd already be... at least most of us." There was the framework of a large wall lining the perimeter, though much of it was yet to be completed, lots of temporary barricades supported the incomplete structure, Jesse imagined that the residents here had to make do with temporary improvisations of parked vehicles, chainlink and barbed wire, that they likely intended to build upon it all in time. Closer toward the building, a lot more chainlink fence and plywood haphazardly draped across the many windows of the hospital's lobby. There was a makeshift gate walling off the ramp towards the Ambulance entrance, with several vehicles stored behind. Other wrecks seemed to barricade off certain side streets from any uninvited vehicles. Small accessory doors looked welded or at least barricaded shut. A line of parked vehicles formed a secondary barricade within the walls.

There were many eyes on him right now, he could feel the uncertain anticipation, no doubt there were people who were looking at him through weapon sights right now too. He imagined those 'Wolves' with their camouflage, armor and quality weapons would love to have taken residence here. It would be a smart thing to do, rather than hunt people down, just sit back and let victims come to them. Jesse could feel the crosshairs on him, could practically feel the bullets pressing on his forehead already.

Then the first attempt at communication happened. Jesse saw a little boy peering out from broken windows, he was waving. Still, they moved cautiously toward the main entrance, and it was there they were stopped.

The large broken windowed doors to the hospital were blocked off by a metal security shutter. Ed wrapped on the gate a few times, and then they all noticed the men with rifles on the second story.

"What year is it!?" a voice demanded. They were dumbfounded. All stood in silence.

The sliding metal on metal sound alerted them to another person cycling a round into their weapon. "Uhhh..." Luke answered. He then added, "We lost a lot of friends, and then saw the signals, and thought we should check this place out."

"What about the rest of you? Anyone not quite themselves down there?" The voice was visible now, he was a man wearing the Digital Camouflage ACU of the army. His face was concealed by a helmet and a beard that was starting to take form. Most Important was the M4 Rifle that he held pointed



down at them.

"Is anyone themselves these days?" Dave asked. A second soldier laughed, "He's got a point there." "Yeah, Umm, you want to let us in now?" Ed said. Jesse judged them for reservists. They were too lax to be active duty even with all that's happened in the last week. "Hey, what unit are you guys with? I was a Sergeant with the 172nd NBC. Discharged about two years ago." Jesse said.

Kent hadn't yet said anything, he was too busy staring at the damage of the building. The soldier in the window noticed, "Is your friend there deaf or just dumb?"

The younger Marcuso snapped out of it and spoke up, "Sorry, I was just wondering how many of you are up there." "And the girl." The first soldier asked. "Just let us in already. Please!" Merry screamed.

Jesse noted the change in demeanor the moment they had all spoken, their weapons lowered, and their postures eased, Clearly they were checking for hints of the insanity. They must have to assume the group was feral or close to it until proven otherwise.. another good practice. The soldier didn't blame them for the suspicion, his group certainly looked the part. This boded well, they had a system or a routine in place for dealing with new comers. If there was a system, that meant there likely was also leadership.

Hopefully, it was led by people that didn't kill for sport, He thought.

"Aight, hang on a few seconds." The man in the window said. He then disappeared from the window. It was a few moments before the guard returned, talking to someone else they couldn't see. He leaned over the edge and yelled down, "Hang on, the Captain will greet you in a few minutes." They bullshitted with the guards, who were friendly enough about casual stuff. But when it came to serious questions like the cause of the disaster, they politely declined to answer and assured that the "Captain" would answer anything he could. Five minutes passed, and then there was a clanking on the other side of the door and the sound of hand cranking. The security gate then rolled upward in small increments.

Then the doors to the hospital were slid open by hand. After all, there was no power. Several armed men were then staring at them. The one in the center did not hold a weapon, but Jesse noticed he certainly did have one slung around his back. This man stepped forward and extended his hands. He was an average build but stood slightly taller than most of the men around him. He had hair and eyebrows with a reddish-dray tint to them and even had a few freckles, he was a pale white, yet his facial features were of heavy Latino ancestry.

He introduced himself, "Gentlemen & Lady. I'm Tomas." He let a drawn-out sigh before adding, "They call me 'Captain'.. I've been trying to get some order going on around here." He looked over the ragtag group who had been living out in the wreckage and added, "Nice to meet you."

They were welcomed inside, and the Captain walked with them as the groups swapped stories. "There's Seventy-Three of us here." Their host said. "You all bring us up to Seventy Nine."

Seventy-Nine wasn't a lot of people, not with the hordes out there. Jesse thought it was an odd choice to secure a building this size without enough people to effectively defend the facility. The hospital was adorned with assorted flags and banners of all types, many of those were spray-painted on and said such things as "Safe here." and "Come help out." They were rather obvious clues to the sane out there that this was a place they could go. Jesse realized they were recruiting, counting on more to meet here. The Captain was thinking ahead.

Jesse noticed something, despite several of the men in uniform, the group was not terribly well equipped. A few had rifles, but the group lacked most of the other logistics that would be issued to a fighting force. "So you're a Captain?" Jesse asked. "Was a Captain, retired about Ten years ago. Did too many stints in the Gulf." Tomas said. He was an older man who once had hair with the tint of red but started to fade gray.

"...Some of the other survivors here are military of some sort, and they respect that, but me and the other guys in uniform are just reservists, So honestly, Tomas is fine. I'm just a guy trying to keep things together here... accidentally got nominated to the part because I seemed to be the only one with anything resembling a functioning long term plan." Jesse respected that admission, it was his experience that most who held rank always touted it somehow, whether intentionally or not. Despite his reserved suspicion for most new people he met, Jesse wanted to like this guy.

"And what is that plan?" Ed asked.

"Well, at first, my group thought we'd come here for help, there was about ten of us, and we thought there'd be some disaster effort, a relief center, a crisis team... or something." Tomas paused his thought when he noticed David and Luke looking over the group that was assembling. He watched the two with a pained expression as the brothers searched for anyone they might know.

"But this place was empty." The Captain said. But quickly added, "Or at least we thought it was." "Then almost twenty minutes after we got here, another group of survivors showed up, they were thinking the same thing as us," He drifted off for a moment, obviously reliving the experience, "There was some shouting back and forth, but we avoided killing each other and chose to wall the place off together."

Tomas looked around proudly, "So we decided to become the relief center until we heard better."

"Sure, safety in numbers couldn't hurt either," Ed said. "Exactly," commented one of Tomas' soldiers. Four of them walked with the group, though they tried to appear friendly, Jesse saw the tension. He didn't blame

them. He looked the same way for the first week after he saw real combat too. He figured the guards, as well-armed as they were, wished just as strongly that no one did anything thing dumb.

"Turns out there was a handful of survivors already here, they walled themselves off on the higher levels and were trapped by a group of Organics, the damn things had been hurling themselves at barricaded doors for days. We cleared them out, and the grateful staff joined us. Now people keep trickling in, one or two every few hours."

They walked with Tomas through the halls, The lobby linked to the upper floors, it was mostly a collection of shattered glass and makeshift patches of wood pallets. A lone piano acted as a table for a few men in uniform. Other survivors cling-ed with their groups, many had packs and gear close at hand. Jesse assumed them to be other recent arrivals.

"So what else do we know?" Jesse asked. "Almost nothing." the Captain sighed. "You said almost nothing, what did you hear?" Jesse pushed. "A radio transmission." The guards around them brightened and sharpened to full alert, remembering their duty. "It wasn't very helpful." "What did it say?" David asked over Jesse's shoulder.

"Not a whole hell of a lot," Tomas paused to look over a group of refugees unpacking supplies, "There was one Emergency broadcast on the high band right before the air went quiet, it was in Morse code of all things." Jesse felt the rest of the group listen very intently, "What did it say?" he asked.

"Widespread Catastrophic Failure of Infrastructure... Assistance deploying to areas with greatest needs. Remain safe until rescuers can make contact." Tomas sighed.

"That's it?" Ed asked. "It repeated a few times, but yes. After that, most of the electronics were fried." Dave groaned, "I was hoping to hear something about the cause of this catastrophic failure."

"Me too." The Captain agreed. Jesse wanted to keep the talk going, "Have you learned anything else?"

Tomas was candid, "The rest is mostly just guesswork. Piecing facts together." The bluntness suggested the man did not try to paint a false picture or commit to any theory he wasn't convinced of. The Captain paused and started feeling around his pockets, looking for something. "The hope-" he emphasized the latter word "- is there are more places for refuge out there, relief areas, safe zones, some kind of organization. But we know nothing specific."

"So we made our own here. We don't know how long this is gonna last when help will come our way or how many people are gonna need us." They passed by a group of younger kids whose caretaker looked nothing like them. They eyed the group and quickly lost interest when it had become apparent there was no one familiar to them.

“Planning for the worst, Hoping for anything else.” The Captain said. He finally found what he was looking for in his pockets, he pulled out a worn pack of cigarettes and lit it, he offered one to Jesse and the others, but all declined. “Right now, we’ve got an amazing industrial-sized generator, but it’s dead, we’ve got a little water, a lot of medicines, and you saw that wall we’re almost done with.”

“We know nothing about the outside, asides from what newcomers tell us, we will have to do something about that, but we need sustainability first. We’ve been busy on that since day two, right now, we’d be happy just to have a working radio.” He delayed. “It obviously has to do with the storms...beyond that, who knows.” Tomas lit the cigarette and took a moment to let his lungs absorb it. He coughed, “And I just quit these things a few weeks back.”

“About that, we weren’t nuked, were we? Isn’t that how an EMP works?” David asked, but he was distracted as he searched amidst the many gathered. Others now gathered in what used to be the lobby, they had obviously heard about the group’s arrival, many rushed close to see if they recognized any of the newcomers.

He pulled a small flashlight out of his pocket and clicked it, nothing happened, “That reminds me, I need to get a new one.”

“I’ll get one up to you, Cap.” Replied one of the Captain’s escorts.

“You have working flashlights?” Kent said surprised. Tomas looked over, “Yeah, Flashlights and other electronics work fine... until one of those lightning storms kills them, You have to shut em down first, or they blow... wish we knew why, but we just don’t.” The Captain said. “And every time another storm hits, more gear fizzles out. So we’re relying on candles and lanterns right now... Remember to turn your electronics off before a storm hits.”

Luke was suddenly in step with Jesse, “We’ve been calling the storms ‘Terrors’...Mainly because of what it seems to do to people.” The younger brother paused then continued his line of thought, “Question Tom, before you used a word... ‘organics?’” Luke asked with sudden enthusiasm, “What did you mean?”

“The affected folk out there, crazy people. Some are just mindless husks, and some are psycho, but either way, they can’t be reasoned with, they’re just bodies. I think it’s safe to say they’re not fully ‘people’ anymore. Ya know, they’re just Organics.”

“That’s horrible.” Merry protested. “It does sound a bit more educated than ‘zombies.’” Jesse mused. “Well, you don’t turn into one if they bite you, we’ve got that going for us.” Tomas said before taking on a more serious tone, “One of the doctors got bit on night one, he is still with us, he hasn’t what’s the cliché? ‘Turned’”

Kent perked up at the bit of hopeful news, "You have a doctor with you?"

"It's a hospital, we've got four physicians, sixteen nurses, and a bunch of aides, clerks and maintenance workers that woke up here alive... A dedicated handful of them are working around the clock to figure out just what's happening to the unlucky people that change."

"We've just been calling them The lost. Like lost souls." Luke said. "Oh, I like that," one of the Captain's men said.

"Any luck figuring it out?" Dave asked.

"Not yet..no uniform set of warning signs, everyone's different. Some people degrade over hours or days... some go instantaneously. There's just no pattern, every one of us might be slowly degrading and not realize it."

"That's encouraging, huh?" the group laughed at Jesse's sarcasm.

The conversation digressed into small talk, where they came from, what they did for work, skillsets, they talked of how they could pitch in, and swapped stories of their first nights of hectic survival.

They passed by a few dozen people resting in chairs or on tables, the Captain made introductions, friendly but wary nods were exchanged, they passed by the restrooms, the library, the defunct elevators, eventually they found themselves in the lecture halls of the Science and Health Center where they were given an empty classroom to make their living area.

Their remaining worries were soon eased by the scent of meat and bread being cooked.

"You guys showed up at just the right time, Seems we're cooking off the last of the perishables today, Feel like a barbecue?" Tomas parted from the group after showing them to the cafeteria, where a vast quantity of food was being prepared. There they relaxed, laughed and ate the closest thing to a real meal in many days.

