

THE WAR WITHIN

Episode One: VICTIMS

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To my father...

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd like to make bigger special thanks to my family. To my father, who teach me persistence and patience; I hope I make you proud. To my mother, whose passion and fervor I inherited and always said I would make it. Plus, thanks to my special beta reader, whose strong opinions almost drove me crazy; don't ever change that...

PROLOGUE

Arthur Schopenhauer once said that fate shuffles the cards and we play. Thomas Polansky experienced the real meaning of these words when the world changed. Not that Thomas actually knew what was happening in the world; he was making tourism in Brazil, he was a preteen, and had the concerns of a preteen.

Among them was the increasingly urgent question of not being beaten by a girl. That death match tournament on the videogame had already lasted two hours and the competition was fierce.

"I killed you again..." the maid said. Thomas showed his teeth as the match resumed — a few hours of digital violence can turn even the quietest boy into a rabid dog.

The television was in Thomas's room, near the large window facing the street. They were sitting on the floor, on top of an old carpet they had stained with juice. Close to them, there was a wreck of fries, popcorn, juice, and soda. Thomas's mother was already coming back, which meant they had time for just one more match. Then Olivia would clean the place and destroy the evidence — when his mother came home, it would be better if she didn't find out the maid was "poisoning" him with crap.

And his mom wouldn't take too long to return, they both knew it. Not with that odd disease out there, putting people in a coma. Mom was worried — especially because it looks they are *trapped* in the country, with all planes on the ground and the entire world at state of emergency —, and she only got out home because she had to buy some stuff.

"Home" was a funny word. Everything in that city and house was new

to Thomas. The rooms, the furnishings, even the people. He couldn't even watch TV — national programming, besides being in Portuguese, was unpalatable — and if Olivia couldn't speak his language, Thomas was sure he'd spend days talking to the walls.

It wasn't that he didn't know Portuguese, but there were times when it was preferable to speak his native language. Besides, he had no friends, apart from the maid — there isn't much time for friends when you spend most of your life surrounded by doctors and nurses.

Olivia was the only person in the world that he dares to call friend — his parents weren't in the equation, of course. The maid had been well instructed about his "special condition," as his mother liked to say.

Yeah, Thomas's mother liked to pretend that he was still a child who had no idea how things worked — she didn't seem to understand that, when his private teachers said he was brilliant, they meant that he was *indeed* brilliant.

A genius, but still unable to beat a girl!

He fought with the controls, but within five minutes his soldier was already dead — *again*. Thomas snorted and Olivia got up to turn off the video game.

"Okay, that's enough for today," she said. "I'll clean the house and—"

They listened to the thunderous barking of dogs, followed by the sound of a car stopping in front of the house. Olivia grimaced, going to the window and seeing Sarah Polansky's Land Cruiser.

"Eita..."

"Good luck," Thomas said, going to his bedroom with a smile. He didn't want to be around when his mother discovered the crime scene. Of course, the idea that he'd be spared was merely illusory, but it was still valid.

Thomas entered the room and closed the door. On top of his bed were his books on Mathematics and History, among others. He tossed the books to the floor and picked up a comic book. Like any normal child, he hated studying — unlike most, he'd read the books a dozen times, completing all the calculations and answering all the questions. The first time he did this, his teachers doubted his integrity and thought he was trying to fool them. Only later did they realize that he was very intelligent — the kind who learns to speak a foreign language in a week.

They even talked with his mother about putting him in a school for prodigies, but Sarah Polansky didn't more than say that she'd think about it. Thomas snorted, thinking about it — his mother would never let him go to a *regular* school in first place, and he had already asked for it a

hundred times. For him, it was about being in the place where the other children were, about making friends, playing ball with people of with the same stature and doing the same crazy things than he.

But nooooo, Mom would never allow it, and when Thomas pressed and asked why, Sarah dodged the subject. Maybe his father had a different opinion — that is, if his father *were present*, right? Thomas only saw his dad twice a month, his absence being justified by his work, though Thomas didn't know what kind of work it was.

It was assumed that his father was a doctor, since every time he visited his son he'd bring his medicine and pass the boy through a battery of tests. Once, when Thomas asked why his father had to leave, he said it was because of work. Thomas then asked why he and Mom couldn't go with him.

"It's complicated, son," Antoine Polansky didn't have the same evasive skills as his wife, and soon that was his favorite answer every time his son cornered him with questions.

Thomas dropped the comic book. There was somebody shouting his name or it was only his impression? Then his bedroom door opened and his mother came in, hysterical. Thomas looked at her and made no more than a face, confused. It was true that his mother was overprotective — in that particular week, she was even more paranoid about the new flu that people were catching — but *that* was too much.

"Mom, you—" He was speechless when he saw the blood on her shirt. Olivia appeared in the doorway behind Sarah, equally horrified by the red stain on the once immaculate shirt. "Mom, what happened?"

But Sarah Polansky didn't give him time to speculate. Bad things were happening and she had to be fast. She grabbed the boy by the arm, lifting him with the force of a gale.

"We're leaving now," her tone was so strict that Thomas thought she was possessed with hidden hatred. He had never seen her altered like this, as his mother was the iconic sweetness, always docile, contented and concerned for his well-being.

Only that it wasn't anger that drove Sarah — it was terror.

"Mrs. Sarah, you're bleeding," Olivia said, following them. "You have to go to a hospital..."

Sarah stopped at the house's front door and opened it. She said, "We're going, Olivia, you—" Her eyes widened with something out there and then she slammed the door shut and locked it. Before Thomas or Olivia could ask what was happening, they heard the screams and growls.

Then something slammed against the door. Olivia jumped back and Thomas flinched. “What was this?!” Olivia asked, but Sarah didn’t answer. She grabbed the maid’s hand and led the girl along with her son to her room, while the punches on the door became more intense and desperate.

Sarah locked the bedroom door as soon as they entered. She looked around, searching for something. Maybe it was a way out or a gun, Thomas couldn’t tell — he had never seen such anguish in his mother’s face, and it almost frightened him as much as the screams he was hearing.

“We have to call the police,” Olivia said. Sarah looked at her, but she didn’t seem to have heard the maid’s words. Then they heard the crash of glass breaking and people invading the house. Olivia gave a little shriek, but Sarah just ran to the wardrobe, throwing everything on the floor, still looking for something.

Thomas felt numb, not knowing what to do or think. He grabbed the brim of his mother’s shirt, trying to get her attention. Sarah continued to rummage through the wardrobe until she finally found what she was looking for so eagerly. It was a backpack, and inside the backpack there was treasure. Sarah turned to Thomas and bent one knee so that her eyes were on the same level as her son’s eyes.

“Whatever happens, don’t make a sound,” she told him, handing him the backpack.

Even without understanding, Thomas couldn’t do more than nod with his head. His mother hugged him and led him to the bathroom with Olivia. Sarah passed a series of instructions to the maid. She had to slap Olivia’s face so she wouldn’t panic, and then she hugged her son again. They heard screams and disorder in the hallway, and soon there was someone striking the bedroom door.

“I love you, I love you, I love you...”

Thomas realized that his mother was crying uncontrollably. That only made him more terrified. Why was his mother crying that way? And who was out there? What was happening? He started, “Mom—?”

“Shhh...” she cut him, kissing his forehead. “Stay here, and don’t make a sound. *Don’t make a sound*, Thomas, do you hear me? Promise me, promise me!

“Yes, yes, but—”

“Good,” she kissed his forehead again and hugged him. They heard the door of the room crack. Sarah Polansky released her son and left the bathroom. “Silence,” Sarah said, her voice solid as ice, and then, under

her son's wide eyes, she closed the bathroom door and locked it outside.

From within, side by side with Olivia, Thomas heard the screams and barks that entered the room where Sarah was waiting, death written on her forehead. Thomas couldn't stand it and he ran to the door. Olivia tried to stop him, but Thomas wouldn't try to open the door. He wants to see what was happening, he had to know.

He bent down, peering through the keyhole.

And he witnessed, in a sepulchral silence and paralyzed with horror, his mother being torn to shreds.

WHAT IF?

Ten Days After Ground Zero...

There was an old aphorism, “If the King is running, his servants must run twice as fast.” Desmond Steger put these words to analysis as the CIA director sprinted from his office, flanked by stoic bodyguards and closely followed by livid adjutants holding piles of files to their chests.

Desmond tried to intercept the assembly, holding a vanilla envelope. His stomach growled loudly — he had eaten very little in the last few days, and his body hungered for food that tasted and looked *like food*. Putting these *awful* thoughts aside, he tried to catch the Bosworth’s attention.

“Sir!” he called the director, arranging to pass under one of the bodyguard’s enormous arms, “I found something that you need to see...”

“Found something!” Bosworth repeated, mocking, and then paused to face him, his broad, bald head glistening under the phosphorescent lamps on the hallway. “Found something?”

“Yes,” Desmond said, straightening his tie. “The implications are... meaningful.”

“Desmond, you’re one of my best men, but honestly, do you really think anyone cares about your discoveries now? We have bigger problems here.”

And, with that, he was pushed aside by a bodyguard. The director and his court went marching down the hall, Bosworth’s aides looking to Desmond with clear disdain and shaking their heads.

Desmond was a big man with a very bad temper, but this time he just

stomps the floor with frustration and hurried to catch up with the director. He wasn't going to give up. He was too stubborn for that, but it was clear that the director wouldn't make it easy for him.

Best men, right, Desmond thought. It was hard to talk to a man who didn't really think he was more than an ant. And, if Bosworth was already a complicated person during usual times, what could be said now, with monsters popping up around the world.

It was in those moments that Desmond wished he had followed the footsteps of his older brother, Raymond. The "All-Mighty Lieutenant Colonel Raymond Steger," his father's favorite son — the old man had made that very clear until his last breath.

Desmond's father never comprehended why he had decided to work "for them". If he knew that his son had been influenced by Jason Bourne — the best secret agent of all time! —, then he'd have been even more disappointed.

The *real* result: a small paycheck — when there still was a paycheck — and the disdain of his superiors. Actually, the director only knew his name because they sat together once, on the dropship, and Desmond helped him buckle the seat belt.

But that didn't mean he hated his job — normally. No, sir, he was a longtime employee of Langley, loyal to the CIA to the end — although, well, he wasn't essentially a spy. In point of fact, he was an analyst — senior! —, which meant that he spent more time using his brain to save the world than driving supercars, seducing women and shooting bad guys.

The king and his court were almost running down the hall. Desmond decided to take a shortcut — he stepped through a room where a series of monitors showed satellite images of Shades running through the nation's cities. The room was crowded with people following the movement of the monsters.

Desmond shook his head.

Monsters, he thought, *yesterday they were people!*

The Plague had done what Hollywood had always dreamed of — and turned it into a nightmare. Those who contracted the disease and didn't die suffered from hallucinations, extreme paranoia, and negligible reaction to pain stimulus — plus, they went mad and started killing healthy people. A big shot on TV called them the Shades, and the label caught on. After that, it was just a matter of time before the government stopped classifying them as "victims" and started treating them as "threats" — only two weeks, just the time it took for New York to be

reduced to a post-apocalyptic desert. At that point, the president had already taken shelter inside a bunker and the Government Continuity Task Force had been activated.

Meanwhile, the infection spreads and the world plunges into hell, with humanity stopping to fight the Second Cold War just to go straight to World War III — and they are losing.

By then everyone knew the “how” — New York —, but the “why” and “who”, well, was a secret under lock and key. Scientists all around the world are claiming that the Plague was human-engineered, and every nation was accusing the other. It was a half-truth, indeed, that the Plague was a bioweapon, and only a few people in the US government are aware — a hush-hush involving a mad scientist and experiments in a clandestine facility called Blue House.

Yeah, ladies and gentlemen, only a small amount of individuals in the world knew that the Plague was an American bioweapon, a very deadly one — and then someone was exposed and the nightmare escaped from the Pandora’s Box.

And only one man knew that the Plague was not the *only* thing to escape the box.

And now, he had to get the director’s attention.

So Desmond did what no man who loves his work would do; he passed by bodyguards like a mad man and *grabbed* Bosworth’s arm, forcing the man to stop walking and look at him. Desmond could already imagine the bodyguards jumping on top of him. Instead, the whole human convoy stopped, the king, the knights and the servants, all of them looking at the plebeian with an assortment of expressions — none of them optimistic, Desmond noted.

“Five minutes, sir,” he said as gently as possible. “That’s all I ask. It’s urgent.”

Bosworth’s expression remained inscrutable for a moment, his cold gray eyes seeming to look through Desmond’s soul. But Desmond, justice be done, didn’t let go of the director’s arm. He didn’t mind he had crossed the line — sometimes a man had to do what a man had to do.

“All right, Desmond,” Bosworth said, his voice like iron. He motioned for his bodyguards to step back. “You have five minutes. Mind if we talk while we walk? General Walker isn’t a patient man. Oh, and please, *release my arm.*”



"This is Antoine Polansky..."

"Yes, I know who he is..." Bosworth said, not even looking at the picture. "He is the damn fool who created this entire catastrophe."

Desmond nodded.

"He was working under direct orders of Colonel Daniel Luther, Commanding Officer of the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases, on the Black Initiative. The original idea of the program date back to the War of Terror, the creation of super-soldiers, but it was a complete disappointment and the program was discontinued and buried. Luther reactivated it five years ago, erasing the idea of a super-soldier and favoring the development a biological weapon."

"Nothing new here, boy; I'm already aware of all this and it seems like you're wasting my time."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I don't think so," Desmond showed to him the second picture. "This man is Michael Cussler, a scientist who was working with Dr. Polansky, and also the Patient Zero of the outbreak in New York."

"And...?" The director asked, visibly impatient.

"Michael Cussler was on his way to find Luther and inform him of Polansky's findings when he was contaminated with the Plague. There is nothing new about it, with the exception of that this wasn't the first time he left the facility to take a trip."

Desmond opened the envelope again and got a sheet with a list and a few dots marked with red. "This is a record of the scientists working on Blue House, with their entrances and exits from the facility in the last six months prior to the outbreak. The red points are the absences of Michael Cussler. To a scientist working in an isolated facility, he left the lab *too many* times."

This time Bosworth took the list with his hands and read it again and again. "How did you get this?" he asked. "Luther bombed the place after the outbreak and erased all the files."

Desmond shrugged. "I think we're still the CIA, sir."

The director just shook his head, approving the answer. "Okay, what is your theory? And how does this help us now?"

"I don't think he was leaving the lab just to relax, sir."

"Selling secrets, then? Contacting terrorists?"

"No. At least, that's not what I discovered." Desmond opened his envelope again, taking another picture. "A few months before the outbreak, Cussler made several trips to San Francisco. Every time, he had a license for just 24 hours. I checked his background. His ex-wife lived in

Los Angeles, his parents had long passed away and he has no siblings. Cussler had no girlfriend or other acquaintances in San Francisco — no one, *but* Antoine Polansky's family."

"You still haven't told me your theory, Desmond."

"Sorry, I'll try to be brief," One more picture was taken from the envelope, this time the portrait of a dying boy on a hospital bed. "This is Antoine's son, sir. He was a sick boy, to say the least. Thomas spent almost his entire childhood in a clinic. Cussler's travels to San Francisco began when the boy's condition reached a critical point. After investigating his past, I discovered that Michael Cussler wasn't just a very intelligent scientist working for the government. In fact, he was also Dr. Polansky's right hand. They had worked together for almost ten years, and they were almost like father and son. If there was anyone Polansky trusted, it was Cussler."

Bosworth was looking at his watch. Desmond needed to get to the point now.

"The wife and son of Polansky lived in San Francisco," he said quickly. "And the good doctor's son was sick. More than that, he was going to die. In the last days, his parents took him home so he could pass away in peace, so to speak. Cussler started traveling to San Francisco and..." Desmond took another picture of the envelope, "This one was taken a week later by the boy's mother, and posted on Facebook."

It was the same boy, but now playing on the beach with his mother. It wouldn't be wrong to say that it was practically another person. There was color on his face and muscles in his arms. He didn't look ready to die — he looked like a child whose life was just beginning.

Bosworth gritted his teeth and scratched his chin, beginning to understand where Desmond's theory was going. Despite his bitter voice, it seemed the ant had something of value to the king.

"What the boy had?"

"Batten disease, sir."

The director whistled loudly. Desmond struggled to don't let a smile appear on his face. "I believe Cussler began experimenting with the boy, under Dr. Polansky's advice." Desmond knew how the director was going to react and he took a step forward, "A desperate man does anything for his son. I checked Polansky savings and I found out he spent a fortune trying to keep the boy alive. When the situation got to a critical point, I believe he decided to test something developed inside the Blue—"

"Polansky was working on a weapon," Bosworth said. "His work would *kill* people, not save them. Moreover, miraculous recoveries aren't

so miraculous anymore. We've heard about it all the time."

"Not from Batten," Desmond replied, lifting the envelope. "I have over 30 medical reports here, all saying that the boy's situation was irreversible. He couldn't even get out of the bed anymore. However, after Cussler's visits, the boy's doctors realized, and I quote, 'an amazing recovery' and 'an impossible and rapid motor restitution'. Cussler did something to the boy, and whatever it was, it was developed inside Blue House."

Desmond paused, trying to sort out his thoughts. He always had trouble explaining to other people the things that went through his head so they could understand and achieve what he had seen.

"I can see where you want to go with that, so I'll ask: do you think he was able to create a vaccine against the Plague?" The scorn of Bosworth's voice was barely covered up. "Do you know what the Initiative was about, right? What sort of substance they used on the experiments?"

"Yes."

The silence seemed to fill the corridor at the end of his sentence, and that made him uneasily uneasy. The director just stared at Desmond with his cold eyes. Desmond had no idea what was going on inside Bosworth's mind, so he cleared his throat and kept talking.

"I believe that, somewhere between his child's illness and the creation of the Plague, Polansky developed a kind of serum that could save him, a... I can't explain... A sort of *derivative* of the original strain, something that didn't kill or turn his son into a psychotic monster, something that did just the contrary! And I believe that, if that serum does exist, it may be the key to our salvation. It can contain the answers we need to win this fight."

"It's a good story, I must admit," Bosworth said. "But as far as I know, it's just a story and a completely useless one. The Blue House was *destroyed*, bombed by Luther on his foolish attempt to cover his tracks. Plus, our doctors said that the Plague's changes are *irreversible* at this point. There is nothing we can do to *save* the infected; they aren't human anymore, and our only option it's to finish them by going old school, with a bullet in the head."

"Yes, sir, our researchers indeed said that the Plague effects on the human body were irreversible. But what if Polansky has developed something else that could prove to be the antithesis of the Black Initiative? Maybe the key to eliminating all the monsters once and for all rests in this—"

"Luther *bombed* the place, did you forget? If such thing ever existed, it's no more than ashes now."

And once more, the envelope was opened and a photograph was taken: Cussler was packing a parcel in the mail from San Francisco.

Desmond said, "At some stage in Cussler's last visits to Polansky's family, the boy had already been living with his mother. When he went to see them for the last time, however, Cussler didn't find them at home. For some reason that wasn't clear, Antoine's wife, Sarah, had left the town with the boy. Not finding them, one of the cameras recorded Cussler putting a package in the mail. After that, Cussler stopped visiting the family, although, I should say, the licenses of Polansky itself doubled of quantity."

"And you think the 'serum' was in the mail?" This time the mockery was loud and clear in Bosworth's voice. "Ok, I will bite. Why did he not go after them? Or rather, why Cussler, and not Antoine? If it was his son who was dying, why let his assistant handling the situation, huh?"

Desmond shrugged. "Antoine was too busy taking care of the biological weapon and Cussler's license was only for 24 hours and... I don't know..." Desmond stammered and then took a deep breath. "Sir, I know it's too much to assume. Yeah, maybe there's no serum, no cure, but what if there is, sir? What if? I mean, we detained terrorists with far less evidence than that."

"And we made big mistakes because of that."

Desmond cleared his throat. "Sir, I am aware that the military has developed a plan to deal with the Shades..."

Bosworth didn't carry out more than a grunt. On the new scenario, the military was retreating from their own homeland, toward the sea, and getting ready for a counterattack. General Walker was gathering the remaining of their armed forces into a massive coordinated attack on every major city to destroy the enemy.

Walker's strategy relies on the idea of brute force to defeat the Shades and rescue any survivors in the mainland. The acting commander in chief and also the mastermind behind Operation Blood Hammer, Walker would assault their main cities with everything the military still had in their pockets — artillery, tanks, bombers, mechs and what was left of their infantry.

That mission would be the most important in the history of the United States military ever since the D-Day. And the CIA was entirely against it.

The United States Armed Forces had the most advanced weapons at

their disposal, but right now the CIA's analyses said that they didn't have the soldiers necessary to secure a victory. Walker had built an aggressive strategy that was delusional, in Bosworth's opinion. The Shades weren't stupid zombies. They were strong, fast and were evolving. the Shades represented an enemy they couldn't afford to underestimate. One error could send humankind on the no-return road to total eradication, and the director was pretty sure that Walker was making an error.

It didn't mean that Bosworth would buy that shit idea of his analyst, however. The director growled and went in silence, just looking at Desmond, analyzing the craziest, stupid theory he had ever heard. Then he asked, "What did you say about Polansky's licenses?"

"They doubled, sir. As soon as Cussler began spending more time in the lab, the roles reversed and Polansky began to travel more. And here's something curious, nobody knows where he was going. There are simply no records of his travels, and one more thing, the photos that his wife posted on the internet? They stopped..."

"I see..." Bosworth glanced at his watch and sighed. "Dammit, I'll be late for the meeting. Give me your files."

Desmond put all the photos back in the vanilla-colored envelope, closed it and offered to Bosworth. An assistant came out of nowhere and snatch the envelope from his hand. The convoy of servants surrounded their king and they began to walk away.

But then the director stopped and looked back at Desmond. "Just one more question, son," he said. "Let's suppose you're right about all this crap. Where's Polansky's family?"

Desmond smiled nervously and put a hand on his neck. Even if everything had gone well and Bosworth had bought his story, things would be complicated in this part. "Yeah, about that... I tracked his wife's credit card and saw that she bought two plane tickets. I searched if they had relatives or residences outside the country—"

"Outside the country?" Bosworth made a face. "Christ, where are they?"

Desmond quickly said, "São José dos Campos."

The director blinked. "Come again?"

"It's a city in the State of São Paulo," Desmond said, smiling nervously, "in Brazil."

I AM

Twenty-Seven Days After Ground Zero...

“Wake up.”

The sound of the waves, the melody of the ocean, ringing in his ears...

The sea breeze blowing hard over his body...

The warm sand beneath his back...

The water wetting the toes of his boots...

The right side of the head, seeming to melt, so hot it was...

These were the first rudiments he felt, announcing that he was alive. They came to him slowly, separately, shaping the world around him like blocks of a single, extraordinary structure. They circled around him and engulfed him warmly, carrying a message.

“Wake up.”

He tried to open his eyes, but the sunshine blinded him, seeming to stab his skull. As he regained consciousness, the rest of his body began to scream in pain. His breath came in jerks. For some time he just lay there, breathing, the seawater slamming against his feet, the sun heating his face, his body slowly stopping from throbbing.

Then a shadow covered his face. He opened his eyes just in time to see the woman standing beside him. “You’re hurt,” she said.

He looked beyond her, to the surroundings. A desolate beach, and beyond the waves, all that water, that unfolded eternally before him. All of a sudden he felt dizzy as he tried to assimilate the landscape around him. What place was that? How had he gotten there?

“You don’t remember,” said the woman. He looked at her, numb, and

then at himself. In his arms, there were red marks of badly healed wounds, and he could feel more wounds beneath his clothing.

By the way, he was fully clothed in a black uniform. He had a watch, and it was marking 06:23. He stared at the clock for a moment, and then glanced at his clothes. There was a badge on the shirt — it was written “BOPE”, with the design of a skull pierced by a dagger over crossed pistols. He stared at the emblem for a while.

“‘Caveira’...” the word simply came to his mind. BOPE — *Batalhão de Operações Policiais Especiais*. The black uniform was used for night-time operations — *police* operations. He was a police officer — a *military* police officer, right? Otherwise, why would he wear that uniform? During the day? On the beach?

Nothing makes sense. He concentrated. The head ached, but worse than the pain was the feeling of fear — a deep, cold and rational terror, warning him that something had happened, something extremely shocking.

He tried to get up, legs shaking. The sharp pain in his head almost knocked him back. He touched the side of his head, discovering an ugly injury that ran down his scalp and to the back of his head.

“Every now and then a bullet skips off a skull,” he heard the woman say.

Pain cleared his mind, but only slightly. “W-what?” he mumbled and turned to her.

The woman shouldn’t have more than thirty-five and had a sweet face. Her hair was an exquisite gold, loosely over her shoulders. Her blue eyes sparkled with cunning and her lips were curved into a soft, enigmatic smile. She wore a simple dress with a denim jacket. Her pink sneakers were shabby and old, and there was a silver watch on her right wrist.

Despite all her beauty, to look at her was to feel that something terrible had happened, but he still couldn’t tell what it was. Disturbed, he looked away, seeing a pistol, a knife, and a book half-buried in the sand. Moved by some irrational instinct, he took the gun and the knife. The pistol was a .45, and there were only five bullets in the magazine. But how did he know that just by looking at the gun?

Because it’s my gun, he told himself, feeling the certainty of these words. He put the knife in his pocket and stared at the pistol, the questions flooding his mind. His head hurt. He gripped his face in despair, hands brushing the beard, questions assaulting his mind.

How?

Where?

Why?

When?

Who?

Who...

"You don't remember," said the woman. He dared to look back at her, not knowing what to say, as the woman surrounded him like a lioness, that sly smile turning into a small laugh.

"Who are you?" he asked, surprised at the deep sound of his own voice — even this seemed strange and new to him. The woman only shrugged, with an exaggerated movement and a terribly false look of pure innocence.

"The most important question," she replied, "it's who are *you*..."

He opened his mouth to answer, but then clenched his teeth to keep from screaming. He shook his head and stared perplexingly at the sea. Hysterical fear began to pick up again when he realized he couldn't remember *anything*.

"I... I don't know."

The woman said nothing. She put her hand to her chin, thoughtfully. Then her blue eyes went down to the book lying on the sand. "This is yours?"

He hesitated a second before following her gaze, seeing the book. Slowly, he bent down and picked it up, shaking it off the sand. It was a science fiction book, a copy of *I, Robot*, by Isaac Asimov. The pages were stained, torn, and wet with seawater. On the back cover, someone had written a name, but it was almost unreadable. He could only discern the surname of the owner.

"Magnus," he said aloud.

"Sounds familiar?" the woman asked, over his shoulder. "Magnus? It's your last name, isn't it?"

"It is?"

The name rumbled inside his mind like a thunder within a bottle, making him ramble — he allows any images or thoughts that that surname carried to shoot freely inside his head. There was nothing substantial, but he could feel that there was *something* — there *had* to be. Because such name was no stranger to him; there was a sound too familiar to be ignored. It was comforting. A surname might not be much, but it gave him a focus, something to hold onto. He nodded, not 100 percent certain of it, but with a desire to believe that yes, that was his last name.

"Very good," said the woman, "now you only need a first name." She closed the book in his hands and looked at the author's name. "Isaac Asimov..." she repeated slowly, and then smiled slightly, "I like that name. Asimov... Yeah, it matches your face," she paused, getting to observe the reactions of the man. "Speaking of which, have you seen your face?"

"My... face...?" he questioned, but the woman's eyes already looked something beyond him.

"There's a car down there," she whispered, passing by him and walking on with accelerated steps. "Come on! Do you want to see your face or not?! Oh, and put that gun down..."

Only then did he realize that he had the pistol on hands all that time. He put it in the empty holster that was around his waist, and then, holding the fiction book, followed the woman. His body ached with every step he took. His eyes were watching over the surroundings, but he couldn't find anyone on the beach.

Where was everyone? Where was he? Questions, questions! He could hear his heart pounding, the deafening vibration in his ears and the pain in his head sharper.

"Magnus," he mumbled slowly, trying to remain calm. "I am Magnus..."

The woman didn't slow down and, although he was bigger, she wasn't easy to follow. They seemed to have run a mile around the shore before he could finally see the car. It was an old silver automobile. It was practically destroyed, with the tires blown and the windshield shattered. That was his car? Why had he stopped in the middle of the beach?

The woman called him and pointed to one of the passenger windows. The dark glass was cracked here and there, but his features were undeniable in the reflection.

He saw a tall man with broad shoulders and sun-skinned — a man in his fifties, with gray hair and beard. His face was thin and gleamed suffering from a refinement of insanity. There were lacerations and small cuts and a bloodstain on the side of his head.

Where he had been shot — but by who? Questions, more questions...

He stared at his reflection, moving his head from side to side, touching his face with his fingers as if only the physical contact could materialize what he was seeing. He ran his hands through his nose and hair, opened his mouth and counted his teeth. He noticed the dark circles of exhaustion and his eyes... There was blood on them, not much, but enough to make him be concerned.

As if I didn't have enough to worry about...

He kept looking at his reflection.

That's me...? He asked himself, and then he said loudly, "That's me..."

"This is you," said the woman, catching his attention. For a moment he had forgotten that she was there. The woman slowly approached him and put her hand on his belly. Her touch sent an electric current through his body. It was immobilizer, and he stood still as her fingers rose to his chest, her white skin contrasting against his dirty and dark uniform.

Her hands came up to his face, his heart pounding a little faster when he felt how warm her skin was. Their faces almost touched, her tongue coming out and wetting her lips. She smiled, put a finger to her lips and then pressed them against his forehead.

When she talked, it was almost a whisper, "You're Asimov Magnus."

"I'm Asimov Magnus," he found himself repeating the words.

"You're Asimov Magnus."

"I'm Asimov Magnus."

"You're Asimov Magnus..."

They kept repeating this a dozen times. And as they repeated the words, the name seemed to gain breath and life. He couldn't say why, but the combination of those two names in one was like dark gears setting into a perfect hitch, a song whose tenuous and pitiful melody he could accept and take possession.

He accepted it.

The woman pulled away from him, her face closing in a grimace, "Did you hear that?"

Before he could ask what it was, from somewhere far away came a feverish, barbaric noise, an animal choir that seemed to carry all the hatred and venom of a thousand demons. The echo of growls made his skin tingle.

"What was this?" he asked, turning his head and looking for the source of the screams.

"I don't know," said the woman, "but I don't want to find out. You'd better get out of here. The car is out of gas, but there's a rifle in the back seat."

"How did you—" He turned to the woman but was speechless.

She was gone.

DEMONIC CRY

The town was dead.

It was the first thing he understood. He didn't know why or how, but it was clear that the town had been reduced in a large cemetery. The streets were clogged with dozens of abandoned vehicles, in every possible direction. More than a few were crashed against poles, walls and others vehicles, while much more rested with their doors open, abandoned by the drivers. There were piles of luggage, clothing, trash, and, worse of all, *rotting bodies* all around the streets.

They were dropped — if it was possible to use that word when dealing with human beings — everywhere, shrunken against vehicles or on the sidewalks, in various stages of decomposition. It was as if death itself surrounded him, everywhere. The houses and buildings seemed abandoned and empty as well. Besides the dead, he found no one anywhere. Also, other than the noises he made, there was no sound at all. It was as if humanity had been suddenly plucked from the planet.

Is this hell?

It was an impossible vision, one that no conscious person would find easy to accept. He couldn't say whether he was a religious man or not, but at that moment "Armageddon" was the only word he could think to illustrate the pandemonium he was seeing.

Asimov walked slowly through the ruins, rifle ready, fighting the urge to vomit as he passed the corpse of a little girl. The stress made a terrible headache come up inside his skull. He tried to breathe more slowly and calm down a little — it wasn't working.

He stopped when he saw the police car.

It was “parked” inside a restaurant, more than half of the cruiser having passed through the shop window of the establishment. He decided to inspect it. The windshield was broken, and there was blood in the back seat. The driver’s door was unlocked. He searched the cabin. What was he looking for, anyway? The keys weren’t in the ignition, and even if it was there, he couldn’t just get out driving. The car radio was dead, too, and given what he had seen in the streets, he didn’t think anyone would answer his calls.

The glove compartment, then?

He took a look. Bingo — there were two magazines for his .45 pistol. He put the mags in his pockets and then thought for a moment. How did he know there would be ammunition there? Nah; that was a ridiculous question — the most important question was what was he going to do now, and where was he going.

God help me...

He left the car and put the rifle on his back, the sling of the gun resting on his right shoulder. The weapon was inside the silver sedan like the woman had spoken. Just by looking, he knew it was an IA3 rifle, and that there were only seventeen rounds in the magazine.

Given the scenario in which he was, it was comforting to have the gun around, but it would be better if the woman was still around. He had searched for her, but there was no sign of her whereabouts; it was as if she had simply evaporated.

Who was she? Where was she? More goddamn questions...

Asimov walked a few steps and stopped suddenly, turning to the car. There was something wrong, something detail he was letting escape. He stared at the vehicle for a couple of minutes before realizing it: the car’s police painting — more specifically, the *name* of the state that was written on the car’s sides and on the license plate.

São Paulo?

He got back to the streets and turned his eyes to another car, reading the vehicle’s plate, then the next, and the next, and the next.

São José dos Campos, São Paulo... Caraguatatuba.... Caraguatatuba... Jacareí... Caraguatatuba... Only the cities of São Paulo!!!

It was undeniable: most of the cars were from the city of Caraguatatuba, in the state of São Paulo. And the only logical answer to that would be that he *was* in Caraguatatuba, in the state of São Paulo — but why? If he was a BOPE police officer, he should be in Rio de Janeiro, *not* in São Paulo!!!

This made no sense, but since nothing else seemed to make, Asimov

saw no reason to stay questioning this. It was the logic of incoherence — he had awakened in a bewildering world where anything could be the plain truth. To complete the puzzle that was his memory, he'd have to put the pieces together according as they were given to him — the things he could see and touch, trying to find logic and bring reason to that world.

As his father used to say, "To build a house, you have to use the bricks you own."

My father...?

His thoughts were interrupted by something moving ahead, in the distance — a walking shadow. Asimov stopped and looked at the thing, taking his time to believe. Would it be a mirage? In desperation, he could be imagining things. But it was still there, moving. It was real — it had to be. There was no mistaking — it was the drawing of a solitary figure, a person.

Unbelief gave way to a ray of hope. In his desperation for a company, he didn't think twice — Asimov climbed into the hood of a car and shouted, "HEY!"

That was a mistake. He didn't know why, but as soon as the words came out of his mouth, Asimov was sure he had made a terrible error. At the sound of his voice, the figure turned to him, and Asimov struggled for breath at the sight of such thing, completely shocked.

Because the man was no man.

The outline was no different from that of a tall human corpse, like a cadaverous giant, but it was monstrous. The only garment it wore was dark trousers, so torn and ragged that it had been reduced to a thong. The pale, muscular body seemed to glow with moisture, spattered with blood.

But the worst of it was the thing's face. The eyes were two golden crevices, gleaming like ferocious spots above the open mouth, full of big fangs. The creature — because it was this, a *creature*, a *thing*, a *monster* — was more than two blocks away, but he could see all those details as if it were right in front of him.

Likewise, those gleaming, inhuman eyes stared at him with hunger and anger, arousing a primal and petrifying fear in his soul. Somewhere, he heard the woman's yelling, "RUN!"

Everything that had happened — hell, everything that *was* happening — well, it was happening too fast for a man without memories to swallow and process the data. There was no time to analyze the facts and digest them — just to react. Because of that, Asimov didn't wait any

longer, just to jump off the car and ran like the devil was on his tail.

And he didn't have to look back to know that he was being chased. He just ran down the street, the adrenaline making his heart work at its full capacity. The monster was fast, its barks and screams echoing inside his ears.

And soon it wasn't only one demonic cry behind him, but a choir.

When he came to an intersection, he looked back and saw two — no, three, no, five! — of the things. His first thought was to shoot them with his rifle, but he didn't do it. There was something inside him saying that there was no way he could win this fight. Instead of open fire, he turned left at the intersection.

And he kept running.

And then he stopped abruptly.

Ahead of him, among the sea of broken cars, there were shadows lurking — *lots* of shadows. He was surrounded. Asimov couldn't go on and couldn't go back. Cornered, he looked around, knowing that the only option was to hide, but where?

Think, man, think! He could hear the noise of the monsters rising — they were getting closer, their claws clattering against the pavement.

Where, where, where?!

There.

His eyes locked on an old truck, half hidden between a rolled up ambulance and a cab totally destroyed. Asimov dived beneath the vehicle, thinking that such idea would never truly work. The good truth, he didn't even know what he was doing until he did, if such a contradiction was possible.

Once under the pickup truck, he took the knife and cut off the fuel pipe that ran under the vehicle, covering himself with gasoline and holding his breath. That way, those things wouldn't catch his scent. Asimov didn't waste time asking how he knew these things, he simply did — and just a moment later, the creatures were there. Though he couldn't see them, he could hear them very well, sniffing, trying indeed to catch his scent, the sick sound of their knuckles snapping as they moved.

He froze, holding the rifle against his chest with iron hands. What if they had seen him hiding under the truck? No, if that was the case, they would have attacked him already. Really? What if they're just playing with him?

Focus, focus!

A second scream rang across the street. The second group was

approaching, their arrival marked by a series of snarls and sharp grunts.

They were communicating.

Asimov kept his eyes open, praying silently, all the while thinking of the hands of the beasts dragging him out and tearing him to pieces, the creatures feeding on his flesh while he was still alive...

Stop this! Just stop it!

Asimov saw bare feet moving past the truck, and the simple notion of the owner of those feet ducking and discovering him down there froze the blood in his veins. His eyes didn't move away from the monster's feet as the creature paced, sniffing, trying to find him.

He noticed the whiteness of the monster's skin. In the sunlight, the flesh was almost translucent, marked by a network of blue veins and purple arteries. However, the skin was also sprayed with blood, which ran down to the ground and left a red trail on the asphalt.

Other feet passed by the truck. Suddenly, he felt like an idiot. What the hell had crossed his mind, anyway? To hide *under* a car? Did he really think it would work? That he could hide from those things like a little boy under the bed, praying for the monsters to go away?

Dumb, dumb, dumb!

But then, as the creatures growled at each other where the man had gone, there was a loud, grave sound, a surreal, trumpet-like cry, so loud it seemed to want to tear the nerves and put down the foundations of the world. Asimov dropped the rifle and covered his ears, while the scream seemed to extend for a good ten minutes.

When it was over, there was a strange absence as the echoes reverberated through the town. He looked around and realized that the monsters that had seemed to be on the verge of discovering him had disappeared. Cautiously, he left his hiding place.

Yeah, he was all alone. But that scream... what in God's name was that? Would it be some kind of a call to the monsters?

Monsters, he thought. Asimov grabbed his hair and almost screamed, confusion and stress reaching its apex. But what were those things? How could such aberrations exist? God, what had happened to the world? He looked up at the sky, casting his questions, and then noticed the dark clouds coming from the east.

An ugly storm was approaching.

He realized he was thirsty.



Five minutes later he thought he had heard the noise of the monster coming back and almost jumped. He couldn't stay on the street — he had lucky so far, but that didn't mean he'd be lucky next time.

He needed to get shelter, rest, and plan his next actions. Asimov kept walking in the opposite direction from where he thought he had heard that terrifying cry. He kept walking until his eyes rested on a house that seemed as fit as any.

The door was open, and inside he found only dust and disregard. The dwelling was deserted, and the traces of a desperate escape from the original residents were everywhere — messy furniture, clothing, and valuables scattered on the floor. Asimov ignored it all, heading straight for the kitchen and looking for water and food. He made the foolish mistake of opening the refrigerator and the smell of rotten food almost knocked him over. He scoured the shelves, then, looking for canned goods, but didn't find anything.

Frustrated, he looked at himself, all dirty and smelling of gas. He tested the kitchen sink tap. Water! The pressure was weak, but indeed there was water, and the first thing he did was to drink as much as he could.

Slowly, he told himself, knowing that if he drinks too fast he'd eventually throw up. After quenching his thirst he splashed water on his face and arms, and then inspected the wound on his head. It was hot to the touch and very, very sore.

Shit, it's getting infected...

He went to one of the bathrooms. Asimov already knew what putrid horrors he could find there and held his breath before opening the door. Above the sink was a cabinet with a mirror and he stared at his reflection, feeling uncomfortable with what he saw. He opened the medicine cabinet and found a brown bottle of hydrogen peroxide and rolls of gauze.

Well, it's a start...

He picked up the hydrogen peroxide and the gauze, starting the slow and painful task of cleaning his wound. When the torture finally came to an end, he searched the closet for more drugs. Asimov didn't know how he had been shot in the head, but the wound was there and had to be treated. Although seeking a doctor seemed out of the question, he still needed antibiotics, otherwise, the infection would be systemic and he could very well die.

There was almost nothing useful in the closet, though. A few prenatal vitamins, flu remedies... He took it all and stuffed it in his pockets,

anyway, and that's when he saw a white bottle behind all the others.

Bingo.

Asimov picked up the bottle and shook it, listening to half a dozen clinking piles inside. After that, he headed for one of the bedrooms in the back of the house. He glanced at the deplorable state of his black shirt, torn and filthy with blood, sweat, gasoline, and God only knew what else — he wisely decided to look for new clothes.

He opened the wardrobe and pulled out a brown jacket, along with a gray social shirt, both almost of his size. He changed his clothes but kept the same combat pants.

A sudden wave of fatigue lifted his whole heart — he needed to rest, right now, and he'd certainly work better after a nap. Who knows, perhaps his memory even worked better this way. Asimov closed the bedroom door, went back to the bed and lay down on the soft and moldy mattress, staring at the ceiling with the rifle at his side.

His mind whirled in surreal, light bursts, where question after question flickered in his head, the answers being well thought-out and rejected. Above all, he felt that he couldn't stay still. His body wants to rest, but not his mind. No, the mind keeps saying he had to keep moving, that he had to get up and take action...

But keep moving to where? Asimov brought his left hand to his face — and it was then that he noticed the ring on his finger.

A wedding ring.

At that very moment, words came out of the dark, sprouting in his mind and filling his ears in a gigantic torrent.

"What do you think of this house?"

"I love it, but isn't going to it cost a lot?"

"Of course it will, silly. It's Leblon, but it's worth it..."

Memoirs, fragments of images and sounds — none of them made sense, and his head was boiling. Was he married? Yes...? Yes! Yes, he was! Somewhere, he had a wife. But what was her name? What did she look like? Where was she? Did they happen to have children? He closed his eyes, clenching his teeth. Why it had to be so hard? Why couldn't someone just come over and say everything he needed to know?

His mind was a hurricane. It was as if he could see his wife, but only her backs — her face and identity were like water slipping through his fingers, her silhouette looking altered and smoky every time he tried to catch the details. Maybe he was using the wrong strategy? Instead of trying to force the memories, it would be wiser to try to deduce the information by using the evidence at hand.

He knew he was a cop, an MP. He could think of at least a dozen articles he had infringed upon entering that house, and he also understood about guns and how to use them properly. He didn't remember anything about day-to-day work or training, but he knew he'd done the COEsp — a brutal course of six months where only a handful of officers could go through to the end — and he was familiarized to fight.

And those things, those monsters that he had come across... He couldn't tell what they really were, but he knew a few things they were capable of. After all, how did he know that they could smell his scent and the gas would hide him? If he knew that, it was because that wasn't his first meeting with those things.

This was the kind of information he had withheld. These victories over amnesia were almost insignificant, but still enough to give him a small sense of triumph — somewhere inside his head was hidden his real identity. What else? What else could be right in front of him and he just had to pay more attention?

The book.

He fumbled in his pockets until he found the novel of *I, Robot*. He took a look at the story and didn't have to read much to know that he wasn't a fan of science fiction. That only added more questions to his long list. He put the book away and stared at the ring on his finger for a long time before closing his eyes.

I have a family, he said to himself. Somewhere, I have a wife and children. I know this, I can feel it...

He dozed off.

And then the noise of gunfire nearby — Asimov opened his eyes, rolled off the bed and grabbed the rifle in a flash.

Those were shots? Yes. He could hear the noise, again. Gunshots, very close to where he was. The fragments of a past life screamed at him to hide and stay in his shelter. However, curiosity soon prevailed over prudence. After all, gunfire meant people, and these people could carry some of the most urgent responses he was pursuing.

Like, for instance, what the fuck is happening here.

With the caution of a wolf, he left the house and headed toward the gunfire.

This is:

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marcus Rodham Perry was born on 28 September 1994 in São Luís, the capital and largest city of the Brazilian state of Maranhão, and is a passionate book lover of fantasy, in addition to video game addict and a movie buff. Above all, Marcus loves a good story, and it's trying to write one since the age of 13, owner of a not-so-small obsession with anything to do with post-apocalyptic and dystopian war fictions. Nowadays, if he is not in his office working to pay the bills, he's at home thinking of new inventive ways to destroy mankind with a pen and paper. He currently resides on Caraguatatuba.