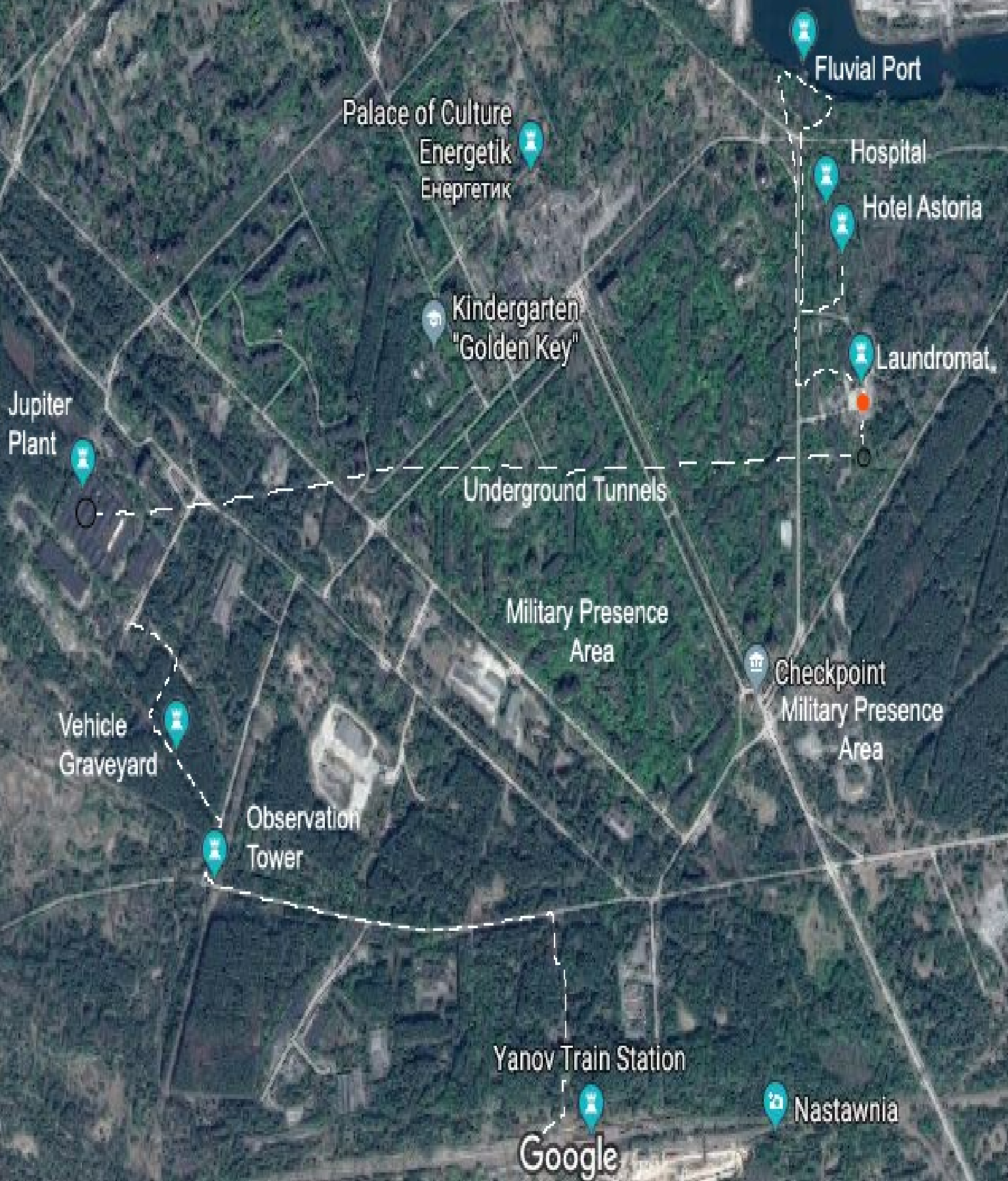


URBAN AREA #5
5-Й МІКРОРАЙОН



Book I of the White Witch trilogy.

Bridger is on another quest for an elusive treasure known as the White Witch in a place of unimaginable hostility and danger.

Compounding this, no one's ever seen or heard of the White Witch except one man known only as "Digger" and not only is he not talking, there's an aggressive competitor searching for it as well who'll stop at nothing to get to it first!

Armed only with what he can carry and hindered by an unexpected partner, this time it might be the last quest for Bridger!

The White Witch Comrades

Another Bridger Novel Series

M.C. Spangler

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The White Witch - Comrades

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Dedication

For the tireless patience of my amazing Ana who put up with all the hours I spent at the computer screen, ignoring most of her implicit requests for help around the house and my Dad who put up with my constant nagging about his opinion of the writing and later for his professional help in editing.

Acknowledgement

Special thanks to Dave Shilling.

His knowledge, experience, encouragement and advice while writing his own book about his life were priceless in the advancement of this work.

Interesting Facts about Chernobyl

While the storyline of this and all its proceeding novels is fiction based on the computer game itself, the event that led to the game and the following series of books is real.

The Chernobyl disaster, also referred to as the Chernobyl accident, was a catastrophic nuclear accident that occurred on 25–26 April 1986 in the No. 4 light water graphite moderated reactor at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant near the now-abandoned town of Pripyat, in northern Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, Soviet Union, approximately 104 km (65 mi) north of Kiev.

The Chernobyl accident is considered the most disastrous nuclear power plant accident in history, both in terms of cost and casualties. It is one of only two nuclear energy accidents classified as a level 7 event (the maximum classification) on the International Nuclear Event Scale, the other being the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster in Japan in 2011.

The **EXCLUSION ZONE**, an area originally extending 30 kilometers (19 mi) in all directions from the plant is officially called the "zone of alienation". It is largely uninhabited, except for about 300 residents who have refused to leave. The area has largely reverted to forest, and has been overrun by wildlife because of a lack of competition with humans for space and resources.

Wikipedia.

“In a surprise to just about everyone, the animals all looked physically

normal. The same was true of other species tested—radioactive but normal-looking.”

“Actually, in the early years, when contaminated dust coated everything, researchers found countless examples of the monstrous mutations imagined in 1950s horror movies: malformations, dwarfism, gigantism, strange growths, and, yes, even some glowing.”

“But those effects were seen only in plants. While *Attack of the Giant Leaves* doesn’t seem as horrible as the *Creature With the Atom Brain*, no one has ever found seriously deformed wild animals (or zombies) after the Chernobyl accident. Mutant animals born in the wild die or get eaten before they can be discovered. Whatever the biological costs of radiation to individuals, the fittest survived.”

From: Do Animals in Chernobyl’s Fallout Zone Glow? **By Mary Mycio**

The White Witch

Comrades

Book I of III in the White Witch Trilogy

by

MC Spangler

“This is a work of fiction people. Unlike the news, nearly everything in this book is fake.”

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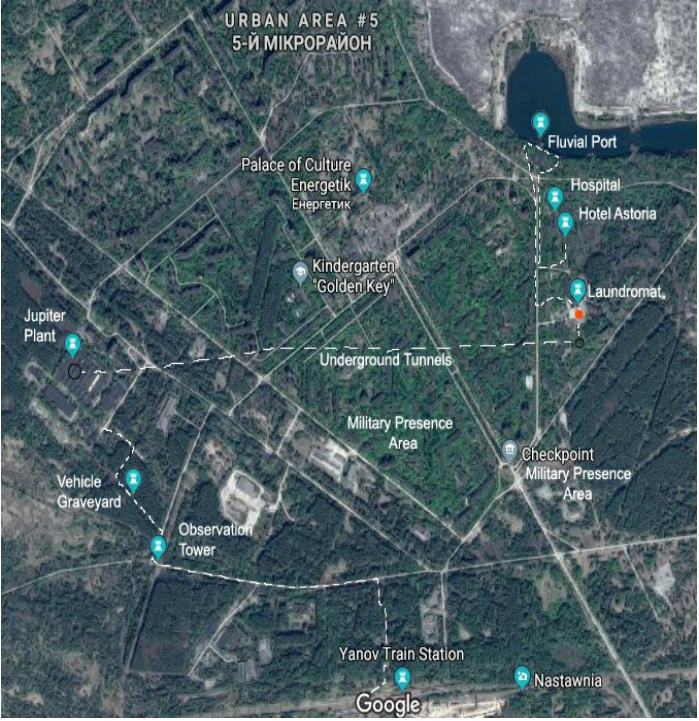
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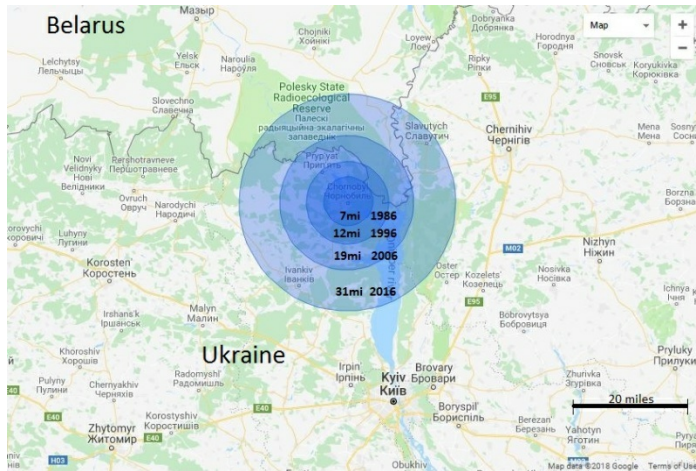
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Prologue

June 23, 1920

Soviet Russian forces overran Ukraine and by 1922 relations between the two states transitioned from international to internal within the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, a.k.a. the U.S.S.R. or the Soviet Union.

March 11, 1985

Mikhail Gorbachev was elected General Secretary by the Politburo on March 11, 1985, three hours after predecessor Konstantin Chernenko's death at age 73. Gorbachev, aged 54, was the youngest member of the Politburo. His initial goal as general secretary was to revive the Soviet economy, and he realized that doing so would require reforming underlying political and social structures.

April 16, 1985

It is rumored that early in 1985, several remote areas around Chernobyl and Pripyat were locked down by the combined forces of the Ukraine and Russian militia for use by the Ukraine Science Foundation (USF) for research and development of psychotropic weapons and the study of the noosphere, a postulated sphere or stage of evolutionary development dominated by consciousness, the mind, and interpersonal relationships.

One of the earliest such programs was undertaken at Limansk-13, a secret city where top Soviet scientists experimented with radio waves in order to harness them as a tool, to create unflinching loyalty to the Union in all affected people.

April 26, 1986

The research, though well protected by a heavy contingent of Ukraine militia, was not well controlled for safety, and consequently a surge in energy consumption near the Chernobyl Nuclear Reactor facility during one of the experiments on April 26, 1986 was one of the main reasons Chernobyl Reactor 4 exploded.

In response to the incident, Mykola Andriyovych Livytsky, then President of the Ukrainian People's Republic (UNR), unprepared for the ensuing disaster, called upon the aid of Russia's militia, and evacuated Pripyat and settlements in the neighboring areas until the Zone became almost totally deserted, save for a few die-hard citizens and scientific teams working in secret laboratories still funded by the Ukraine Science Foundation.

July 16, 1990

The Declaration of State Sovereignty adopted by the Parliament of the Ukrainian SSR defined the building of the Ukrainian army as a major task and a natural right of the future independent Ukrainian state and took a significant step toward its independence from the USSR. The military coup in Moscow in August 1991, combined with fears that Soviet troops in Ukrainian territory would act aggressively against the Ukrainian state, led the official leadership in Kiev, Ukraine to subordinate these troops to the control of Ukrainian authorities.

December 25 1991

On December 25, 1991, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, the eighth and final leader of the Soviet Union, resigned, declared his office

extinct, and handed over its powers – including control of the Soviet nuclear missile launching codes – to Russian President Boris Yeltsin. That evening at 7:32 p.m., the Soviet flag was lowered from the Kremlin for the last time and replaced with the pre-revolutionary Russian flag.

Simultaneously, Russia quietly, officially handed over all control and oversight of the militia operations over the USF facilities to Ukrainian leader Leonid Kravchuk as the informal progress of the dissolution of the Soviet Union worked its way forward till December 26, 1991, when Russia officially granted self-governing independence to the Republics of the Soviet Union.

December 26, 1991

By its Declaration number 142-H, the Supreme Soviet **Council of the Republics** acknowledged the independence of the Soviet Union. This declaration acknowledging the independence of the former Soviet republics created **the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)** and by January of 1992, by popular demand, the Soviet Union ceased to exist. In its place, a new entity was formed. It was called the “Commonwealth of Independent Republics,” and was composed of most of the independent countries of the former Soviet Union.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine held almost 5,000 nuclear weapons, about one-third of the Soviet nuclear arsenal and the third largest in the world at the time, as well as significant means of their design and production.

One hundred thirty UR-100N intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) with six warheads each, forty-six RT-23 Molodets ICBMs with ten warheads apiece, and thirty-three heavy bombers, totaling approximately 1,700 warheads remained on Ukrainian territory.

At this time Ukraine also announced as its own the Soviet military property on the soil of the newly independent state and its intention to obtain operational control over the strategic nuclear weapons deployed in its territory.

But while Ukraine had physical control of the weapons, it did not have operational control, as they were dependent on Russian-controlled electronic Permissive Action Links and the Russian command and control system which Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev refused to give up and declared that in response to any attempts to interfere with, or to damage the command and control systems of such weapons, Russian strategic troops located abroad would constitute as a direct military threat to the Russian Federation and pressed harder for disarmament.

March 1992

In partial response to that refusal, Ukrainian leader Leonid Kravchuk instituted two simultaneous strategies.

- 1) Ukraine agreed to voluntarily remove over 3,000 tactical nuclear weapons and following the signing of the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances among the U.S., the U.K., and Russia, as well as similar agreements with France and China, Ukraine agreed to destroy the rest of its nuclear weapons, and to join the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT); and
- 2) Quietly renewed its research into the still ongoing USF technologies.

June 13, 2001

During most of 2001, the area around Chernobyl was relatively peaceful until sometime around June, when a bus full of tourists in the zone inexplicably disappeared.

After a closed and tightly controlled investigation, the incident prompted the Ukrainian government to fully restrict the zone from civilians. However, despite the Ukrainian militia lockdown of the area, people were still drawn to it and due to its vast borders, could not completely be deterred from entry and a small re-population within the area began, those people becoming referred to by the Ukrainian militia as Stalkers.

March 4, 2006

The first experiment in affecting human psyche on a massive scale took place, lasting two full hours before it was shut down, likely due to unforeseen developments.

April 12, 2006

The experiment was performed again and this time it continued until its completion. However, it did not have anywhere near the expected effect it was supposed to have.

Instead, the generators created a rift in the noosphere, allowing it to directly affect our biosphere, creating a large area (not immediately discovered), where physical laws were outright broken and mysterious phenomena not understood by modern science began to become manifest.

Despite the catastrophic nature of the incident, the scientists responsible lived through the incident, and in the aftermath disputes on how to handle the incident led to half the scientists splitting off to form the sect of Clear Sky, in order to research the Zone in the field and try to find a way to remove the rift, while the remaining half stayed in the laboratories and, using available technology, merged into the Common Consciousness.

Those that stayed in the labs believed that the problem could be solved by studying the noosphere further and learning how to suppress it, and indeed, they soon learned how to control it; but with control came a price. The energy used to this end was so immense that they had to periodically release the excess, lest they were overwhelmed by it, and such destructive releasing became known to the inhabitants of the Zone as a blowout or emission.

June 10, 2006

The very first emission occurred. Unprepared military and scientific personnel were instantly obliterated, while the zone expanded a further 5 kilometers.

When the Ukraine militia guarding the facility failed to respond to any contact, the scientists were contacted and, after a delay, politely declined the offers of reinforcement, so the Ukraine government quietly formed a board to discuss the options.

On the other hand, recognizing this event as the result of the meddling of the scientists within the labs, Clear Sky began a low-level investigation into neutralizing the source of the events themselves and in response, realizing that they need more time to find a solution, the scientists created a psychic defense perimeter to protect them against Clear Sky and any other intruders interfering with their work.

The primary element of this psychic defense network was the Brain Scorcher, an experimental psi-antennae outside Pripjat which, when activated, mind-controlled any human that came within its range, allowing the C-Consciousness to enlist said human within the ranks of their agents.

Secondary elements of protection were the Monolith faction and its Protectors. One lured stalkers into the center of the Zone with promises of wealth and wishes and the second actively raided stalkers and defended research facilities.

August 13, 2007

After several failed investigative operations where the people sent in simply disappeared, the Ukrainian government finally sent out armed expeditions into the zone to determine the extent of the rumors and disappearances.

Most of these expeditions ended in failure after the explorers were reported killed by the indigenous life within the area or simply disappeared themselves, never to return.

Also during this time, rumors of delicacies and baubles available nowhere else in the world began to circulate among select groups of people within the unaffected areas outside the Zone and over the next two years both brave and foolish people began to infiltrate the Zone in search of those treasures.

By 2010

The "Stalker phenomenon" was becoming more prevalent, it being theorized at that time, that the zone was home to around 300 individuals who had adopted the title of "Stalkers" and made money by selling artifacts outside the Zone on the black markets of the world resulting in a strengthening of the Ukrainian Military to police the area.

February 2011

The first reports from Stalkers encountering "Z's" (zombies) who spoke garbled English, and unprovoked, aggressively attacked the Stalkers, finally surfaced on the outside, revealing not just the fate of the tourists but many other strange and unexplained disappearances of people within the Zone.

Meanwhile, with the increased security of the Ukrainian militia the area was stabilized and no other incidents were reported and a period of relative, uneventful quiet ensued and despite the increase in military postings and surveillance, the stalker population began to grow and a loose agreement of co-existence was adopted between the Stalkers and the Ukrainian exclusionary Militia to the extent that those already within the borders were "overlooked".

October 25, 2011

The first major skirmish between stalkers and the military occurred ending in the total loss of one of 13 militia and the military outpost "Darga", that they were assigned to prompting the military to adopt a new policy of shoot on sight.

It was later that year that a stalker by the name of Strelok and his group of his followers managed to penetrate the center of the zone and somehow trigger the second largest emission to happen in the zone's history.

A mercenary, who went by the handle of "Scar", managed to barely survive it the emission.

It was also during this time that the Clear Sky faction was thought to be destroyed after another massive blowout at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant when they attempted to stop Strelok's third incursion into the Zone.

Nov 2012

Strelok manages to deactivate the infamous Brain Scorcher and destroy the C-Consciousness. Unfortunately, the zone did not disappear and it became apparent that the previous damage done by C-Consciousness may, in fact, be permanent.

In the wake of this opportunity, then President Viktor Yanukovich organized the Ukraine military and launched, Operation Fairway, under the command of Colonel Kovalsky whose task was to secure the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant with a battalion of Spetsnaz operators, transported in 5 gunships called Stingrays.

Despite all the planning and precautions, the operation ultimately failed and all the gunships were either downed by airborne anomalies or shot down by Monolith troops.

President Yanukovich, disgusted and overwhelmingly frustrated with the previous failures, quietly turned the entire operation over to Ivan Stepanovich Plyushch, former Secretary of the Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council, thereby settling the matter into a military enforcement operational action of seclusion only and unofficially washing his hands of it.

*_

Chapter 1

June, 2004 - New York

1st Trip Out

“When the Federal authorities of 16 nations advise against going into the Zone, tell me again, why this is a good idea?”
Felicia Velier

“Tell me again, why you’re going?” Felicia had asked, her hands planted firmly on her shapely, narrow hips.

It was by now apparent that she really didn’t care why I was going, she was just stuck in the argumentative and denial mode.

“To make money.” I’d replied. I knew that she knew I was holding back on the actual reason but neither of us was ready yet to air it out.

I was trying not to face her and had my back turned to her as I packed the single suitcase I was allowed to take.

Since returning from Afghanistan, life for me had turned mundane and pointless and I was constantly warring with notions of suicide on nearly a daily basis.

I'd joined the US Army at the tender age of 18 after my Dad had

forcefully encouraged my induction to the world by kicking me out on the street the day after my 18th birthday.

Ironically, with an uncanny ability to learn and speak unusual languages combined with my seemingly unholy abilities in combat, I did so well in basic training that I was encouraged to try for the special forces unit and after several more weeks of training, was posted out to Afghanistan where I had quickly earned a reputation for search and eliminate missions and spent 8 years in the field with 9 other Green Berets comprising BBQ team, 16th Special Forces Group, inserted into the Panshir Valley and charged with carrying and operating an AN/PEQ-1 SOF Laser Marker, a piece of equipment that when combined with GPS devices, would mark Taliban positions located along the Shomali Plain for air strike missions.

Life there had been violent, to say the least and after my discharged 2/98 at the age of 26, none of us kept in touch but I was sure they were just as affected by the same PTSD issues that I suffered on a daily basis, 6 years later.

“And you spent \$10,000 on this camping trip to hell?” She was back on the money again and having covered that 3 times already and I was growing tired of going through it.

“Yes. I spent \$10,000 on this *excursion*.” I repeated, emphasizing the word excursion.

“And over a dozen nations don’t want you in there and the entire Russian military is guarding it from your entering?” She continued.

“That’s more or less right.” I confirmed remotely. “There are many nations that do not want anyone going in even though they’re not directly connected to it AND, there’s a small group of Ukrainian militia stationed in parts of it to enforce that but technically speaking, Russia isn’t involved in it anymore.”

“Whatever!” She shouted and I knew what was coming next because we’d gone through it twice already.

“It’s full of deadly radiation, deadly beasts and thieves and murderers who are there to hide from the law!” She replied again.

“Look. Felicia. This is getting old.” I started, a bit agitated.

“You and I have gone over this at least 15 times over the last 6 months and no less than twice in the last hour.”

“There are only certain areas that are hot, I have years of hunting experience and I was specifically trained and put into service for 4 years to successfully, locate, determine and eliminate bad guys.”

I chose the word, eliminate because I knew if I said the real word, it would start another morals crusade that I wasn’t interested in debating.

“The bottom line is I’m going and additional arguing about it won’t make me change my mind.” I followed up. I’m going and that’s that.”

“Why would you want to go someplace like that then?”

She asked, this time with a little hysteria in her voice.

“A place the police won’t let you go? They should know! Why do you want to break the law by sneaking in and stealing things?”

“Fel.” I started off softly, using the pet name I’d established for her.

“First off, the Zone was set up by the military. Not the police. Technically no one is breaking any laws going in, they are simply disobeying a military exclusion order.”

I knew this was just splitting hairs but again, I wasn’t interested in arguing the difference either.

“Second. Nothing within the Zone produced by man has any value to anyone. It’s old, falling apart and tainted by radiation. Ergo, nothing is being stolen.”

Third, the items that the Zone produces are valuable. Those items are worth great money and I’m looking forward to bagging some of them, and fourth, the military isn’t interested in the Zone except to the extent that it affects whatever it is that they’re doing out there behind the chain link and razor wire and I’m not in the least interested in that part.”

“What about the...” She paused, searching for the word. “The mutilates. The things out there?”

“The Mutants.” I corrected her as I continued to pack.

“Whatever.” She countered, annoyed at the correction. “What about the Mutants. You said they would eat you. What about them?”

“Like all problems, the mutants are an issue to be dealt with.” I replied. “But not that big a problem and I’m armed and trained well enough to take care of myself.”

I’d finished packing, zipped the case shut and had turned toward her.

“I’m going and that’s pretty much all there is to it Fel.” I said.

She stood there for a moment with sadness in her eyes and took one last shot.

“If you go.” She started and I knew pretty much what was coming next. “I won’t be here when you get back. I can’t do this Bridger. I can’t watch you walk to your death and then sit here and wait for the word to come back.”

“I understand Fel.” I’d said. “You need to do what makes you happy Babe.”

What I didn’t say was that if I died out there, no one would ever bring word back. It didn’t work like that.

That was one of the reasons I liked the idea of it. All or nothing.

Since I’d heard about the Zone, accidentally, of nearly all the people I’d spoken with, most had never been there, and simply said their friend or some guy they’d known went and never returned.

All, however, told the stories of great wealth from the things the Russians and Ukrainians called artifacts and everyone else called Chachkies, a yiddish word for trinkets and collectables and that’s what I was in it for. The chachkies!

Well, that and maybe to ride the edge of death again.

She stood there for another moment as tears formed and then turned, picked up her purse and walked out the door.

CHAPTER 2

Jan 2006 – 1st Trip Debrief

“People will tell you that the Exclusion Zone and the Zone are filled with deadly poisons, gases and radiation and that the Ukrainian army has all the ways into and out of them sealed.

But take a moment and reflect on this... If that’s the case, why then are chachkies and rare specimens emerging from the Zone? Why do your fellow Loners, never have a shortage of meats, booze, ammo or equipment?

Where do you suppose that comes from?”

Michael Boregoner

Zone Tours Extraordinaire!

That first trip out was an eye opener.

To this day I don’t believe that if I’d known what I was to encounter and go through, I’d have gone.

The add read.

We can get you in and we can get you out. Guaranteed!

If you want to risk your life for unimaginable treasures in unimaginable dangers, email us at...

ZoneTours@TerigonInt.com

For the ride of your life!

It took me 2 months of locating and talking to a close knit group of people who all claimed to have been and returned. Some endorsed it as the wildest, death defying adventure of their life and others called it a living nightmare akin to jumping out of an airplane without a parachute but although none would give any details on the treasures part, none refuted it either.

I spent \$10,000 to go and I came back a year and a half later with the booty I'd only heard stories about. Nearly 9 times the investment! But I paid a price too. It was so horrible and so dirty and so violent that when I finally did come back, I vowed that I'd never go again.

With this booty as proof of my venture, I'd also spent almost 6 months in New York, meeting new people who would help me to profitably, dispose of the items I'd brought back, and became secretly indoctrinated into the Stateside Brotherhood.

All were courteous and respectful to those of us who had gone and returned and all offered their knowledge and experience in everything from stateside life to dealing with mutants to disposing of chachkies, a very risky and dangerous thing in itself.

The trip had lasted a little less than 6 months and the take from it was well over \$85,000 USD and I'd lived high that year but like I said, I paid the price too.

The PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) I suffered was worse than the Afghan, infield fighting had been.

Lost sleep, horrible dreams, severe distrust, second-guessing and violent spasms of anger plagued me for the balance of the year I was home and I avoided everyone I knew before I left, including Felicia.

I frequented the roughest of the rough places and was arrested numerous times for assault and that was just when the local law enforcement actually caught me.

I carried a knife those days and never a sidearm because I didn't trust

my ability to discern from real and perceived threat and a knife gave me a little more time to think on it before I maimed or killed the other guy.

The U.S. Feds, Russian Feds and especially the Ukraine feds didn't like us. The Ukraine Feds (and by definition, Military) because we meddled too close to their secrets, the Russians, simply because they were thugs and the US Feds because we profited huge sums of money, tax-free from the exchange of items they had no control or income over. Why should we share what we'd risked our lives for?

All claimed the "Dangerous Materials" rhetoric but that was crap.

Ok. Maybe not total crap.

In all truth, the chachkies and the mutant trophies and stock we brought back were actually dangerous as hell since all contained some degree of radiation, extreme heat, cold or other sundry problems.

These things had to be transported from the Ukraine to their final destination point and the USPS, UPS and FedEx people, all frowned severely on shipping them due to early, unexpected problems in transit, like baggage compartments bursting into flames at altitude or entire cargo planes disappearing en route. That was especially troublesome.

Marine transfer or land transfer was the only safe way and marine transfer had the issue of what to do if part of the hull of the ship suddenly vaporized unexpectedly, so a lot of the transport was done by what we called "Runners".

Runners were a unique lot of people and unlike the Loners who made the trips and are almost exclusively male, were predominantly made up of women. Seems that women had a better handle on the dangers of transporting the chachkies than men did, and there were fewer "losses" (chachkies, transport vehicles or people) than when men carried them.

They were also less prone to law enforcement curiosity too.

Loners, the name we all acquired upon arrival within the Zone, were considered very volatile and dangerous people who you didn't cross. More that went out, didn't return than those that did and of those that did and

went again, even fewer came back.

There's an old adage about Loners. "There are old Loners and bold Loners but there are no old, bold Loners."

It's pretty true.

Sooner or later you bought the farm and no matter how experienced you were, you always made a mistake or two each day you were there. You couldn't help it because nothing remained the same for very long. The Zone was always changing, adapting and expanding and the hardest part of staying alive was remembering to always be alert. It wasn't IF you were going to die. It was when.

We were also part of an unofficial brotherhood and we all bore that mark on our arms. Those who wore that mark and had never been out were usually dispatched quickly and violently by the stateside brotherhood of every nation that sent out excursionists (the name you were given your first trip out).

Loners didn't talk much about their journeys. Most were not proud of what they had done or become as a result of the venture but we protected one another.

Like shadow fighters. Never in formal collusion, always as an apparent, intentional accident. A brother Stalker just happened to be there at the time and disappeared right after.

We advised one another about banking and bankers, museums and collectors, restaurant chains and suppliers. Anything and everything that connected to the Zone and the Loners therein, we always helped each other out when stateside, but in the Zone, whether it be your first time out as an Excursionist or the 5th time out collecting, you were on your own and trust was a commodity you handed out thinly.

Everybody in the Zone was there for his own personal agenda. You could chance upon a firefight, aid one side, and just as quickly be shot by them when the other side was neutralized. That was the reason most Loners either walked on by or aided from a distance.

That first trip was your baptism and if, and only if you returned did you earn the title and status change.

If and only if you lived to tell about it.

CHAPTER 3

Jun 2016 - Trilliard

*"No American service member should ever have to face a fair fight.
To that extent, we will endeavor in every way possible to always
remain technologically ahead of our enemies.*

*Reginald Fegan USMC Gen Command
Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*

It was a Thursday afternoon, mid-June and the temps in NYC were reaching the mid 80's.

I was sitting in a well stuffed, red leather armchair sipping a Graham's, 40-year-old Tawny Port on ice from a \$500 cut crystal, highball glass, in the air-conditioned office of Brian Culbert, a colleague of mine who chaired on the Board of Directors for the Triliard Institute of Research & Technology, otherwise known as the Trilliard, a science and technology institute dedicated to the advancement of hazardous and semi-hazardous research and technology.

The office was well decorated with intricately built, dark wood bookshelves lining each of the four walls, loaded with what appeared to be literally hundreds of leather-bound volumes with gold and red lettering on the spines, broken only by the bar top to my right, where he had produced the expensive booze, the window to my left that I was currently gazing out

of, and the heavy, solid wood door behind me that I'd entered after being announced by his exceptionally well built, exceptionally feminine secretary, Stephanie, just outside his office.

I'd tried for 4 years to get Stephanie to go out with me and failed every time. She was always polite and always smiled when she talked to me but unerringly always diligently off limits.

I had guessed, that because she knew I was a Stalker, starting a relationship with me was pointless. That, however, didn't quell the urge in my loins whenever I saw her or the motivation to try just one more time.

Brian and I had known each other for the last 4 years and done a good deal of Zone related smuggling business together.

The TIR&T was one of the many businesses that purchased chackies from Loners and then used that technology for purposes that were unknown to us though we suspected were closely tied to the US military.

As I understood it, I was one of now only three other "Loners" that he was currently working with, the fourth having recently been written off as KIZ (Killed in Zone) since there had been no contact with him in over a year.

I'd been stateside for almost 9 months and the urge to return to the Zone was stronger than ever. The dreams and sounds were more real and most of all, the smells. The smells seemed to come from everywhere I went, restaurants, bars, even places like grocery stores, bringing back memories of things and places I'd known in the Zone.

There was something about the Zone that was impressed on you when you went. Some say it's a psychological thing. It's all in your head they say. Others say it's a physical thing like a narcotic, but all Loners know it and few go out only once.

I was staring out the window of his office, mindlessly watching the dust floating in the sunlight shining through it and picturing the Clear Sky base doc's office inside the Zone when I realized I'd heard my name being called.

“Earth to Bridger.” Brian was saying.

“Wha? Oh. Sorry, Brian. I was drifting there for a minute.” I replied.

Brian was sitting behind a huge, mahogany desk that had a sheet of quarter-inch thick glass over it with little finger size scallops in the edge. On the desktop was a phone, a pipe stand holding 6 ornately carved pipes, a canister of what I assumed to be pipe tobacco, a black, leather blotter, a computer monitor and keyboard with no wires connected to them and what looked like a very expensive, ink pen set.

He chuckled and said. “A minute? I’ve been prattling on for maybe 5 minutes about this new order and I don’t think you heard a word of it.”

“No Brian,” I replied. “I heard you. Most of it anyway. I’m not really concerned with why you need it, just how much I get for retrieving it for you, assuming I can find it. What you’re doing with this stuff is of no interest to me.”

“That’s what I like about you, Bridger.” He replied, hands clasped behind his head as he leaned back in his black leather desk chair and smiled at me. “Direct and to the point.”

What he liked about me was that I had no apparent moral compunctions about the use of the chachkies I was supplying him with, and I took another sip of his expensive Port, rattling the ice in the crystal glass partly because I liked the sound of it and partly because I knew it annoyed Brian that I drank his Port on ice as I composed my next question.

“Like I said, Brian,” I started, “Assuming I can find this new artifact that apparently no one has found yet, and no one has actually verified, and no one has even reliably seen, what’s in it for me?”

Brian thought for a moment then unclasped his hands, leaned forward in his chair and reached for one of the pipes on his pipe stand, and I briefly wondered how he made his choice so quickly.

He meticulously reached for the container next to the stand and after opening the lid, pinched out a wad of moist tobacco that immediately made the office smell of apple, tamped it carefully into the pipe bowl, retrieved a

gold lighter from his pocket and just as carefully, commenced to applying the flame to the bowl. Drawing on the stem and puffing out the smoke till he was satisfied with the action, he snapped the lighter closed and dropped it into a pocket in his vest. A small cloud of swirling smoke lingered over his desk, changing the smell from apples to burned apple wood and he leaned back again in his chair, pipe in hand, took another draw on the ivory stem, and while looking me directly in the eyes, replied seriously.

“The Institute can see its way clear to pay you \$1.4 million for the fulfillment of this contract.”

“Plus, any other baubles you might find as well.” He added as an afterthought.

I sat there stunned for a moment.
One million, four hundred thousand dollars!
That was so much more than any other artifact I’d contracted with him for in the past that it was insane and it took me a minute more to run the number around in my head. One million, four hundred thousand dollars!

As I sat there with, I’m sure, the stunned look on my face, he took another puff and then spoke again.

“In all truth, Bridger,” He started with a dead serious look on his face, “This contract is not without a great deal of risk and my buyers have deep pockets and overwhelming needs.”

“Finding this bauble will be difficult enough. Getting it out will be a monumental task and transporting it here will be nearly impossible,” he continued.

“It may be the last contract you attempt for me. It apparently was for David.” He added, referring to the missing Stalker.

“My buyers need absolute secrecy and expediency in delivery and as such, are willing to pay me to hire you at great expense to find it.”

I was still boggling at the number and it took me another minute till I could collect my thoughts and even then, all I could manage to ask was.

“What’s this thing called?”

Brian put the pipe stem in his mouth, took another drag and slowly blew it back out through his nose, reminding me briefly of a Chinese dragon, then leaned forward and put his elbows and forearms casually on his blotter, cupped his right hand inside his left palm crossing his thumbs and while staring into my eyes said.

“This bauble is referred to as a “White Witch” and was allegedly first seen by a Stalker known only as Digger.

Second-hand reports are that this bauble has the ability to establish a field that bends light rendering the holder nearly invisible, so you can imagine what value that might have to both my buyer and to the Stalker that acquires it.

“Hence the high reward,” I said, “So, what else can you tell me about it?”

“According to reports, again second hand, the White Witch has additional traits some of which are downright nasty.” He started.

“She...” Referring to the artifact in a feminine fashion either because of his nautical background or perhaps the namesake. “...Allegedly weighs in at an extraordinary 180 kilos making her one of the heaviest baubles yet discovered.”

“180 kilos!” I exclaimed. “How the heck am I supposed to collect it much less move it to an extraction point much even less, transport it back here? It weighs more than me and my gear combined.”

“That’s just the start of it Bridger.” He said seriously. “In addition, it is rumored to be one of the most lethally irradiated baubles yet, pushing upwards of 2500 to 3500 rems.”

“Jeez.” I muttered with alarm. “That’s acute illness and early death in just days. Maybe hours.”

“Yes. And it gets better.” He mocked satirically. “It allegedly emits temps in excess of 700f making it an instant combustion accelerant to nearly anything it comes within 20 feet of, and in all probability, will be found within an anomalous field located in a fire bath someplace.”

“Oh, this just gets better and better.” I said sarcastically.

“Oh, and one other thing.” He started.

“Oh, of course,” I said, again with sarcasm, “What would life be without one other thing.”

The Ukrainian Army, Duty, Freedom and probably everyone other than Clear Sky is looking for it as well. If it becomes known that you have it, well, you can probably imagine what comes next.”

“Uh huh.” I merely said. “What’s with Clear Sky? Why aren’t they dropping their skirts to get it?”

“Unknown.” He replied. “But you know Clear Sky. They’ve always moved and acted in bizarre fashion.”

“Granted.” I acknowledged.

“But don’t automatically discount them, Bridger.” He added. “A prize like this... It wouldn’t surprise me that they’re also interested in it but just keeping it in closed ranks.”

He then chuckled, though no mirth showed in his eyes. “Look on the bright side. If you do manage to find it first, you’re set up for life.” And he smiled again when he finished.

“Ok. So how do I find this White Bitch? I asked, substituting the name.

Brian was about to correct me when I think he realized I knew what the correct name was and changed his tack.

“As I said,” he started, “From what I understand, Digger is the only one who has seen it and is still around. According to last reports, 5 weeks ago, he can be found on or near the Sharadan in Monmouth.

Bear in mind, however, that if in fact he is the only one, and no one else knows about this tidbit, he may be difficult to find, and if found, difficult to persuade to talk about it.”

“I’ll figure it out,” I said as I stood up and drained the last of the Port. “No wonder it’s named after my ex-wife. Anything else I asked?”

He thought about that a minute and replied. "As with all our contracts, should you be caught or killed..." He started, before I interrupted ...

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know, you'll deny knowing me."

"... Should you be caught or killed," He continued without recognition of my comment, "The Institute will disavow any knowledge of your actions." Then as a side quip, he added with a smile. "This tape will self-destruct in five seconds."

I had my back to him and was headed toward the door when he added the last comment and I raised my hands to my face, pinched all my fingertips together and then drew them away from my face while spreading my fingers in a gesture of an explosion.

"Boom." I muttered as I passed through the door behind me.

In the secretary's office, I closed the door behind me and walked to Stephanie's desk deep in thought.

I was about to ask her if she had papers for me but when I actually focused on her, I could see she was sitting behind her desk, staring up and into my eyes holding the familiar Black Pac in her delicate hand for me.

As I reached her desk and reached for the Pac, she withdrew it out of my range. She got up and with more grace and style than I'd ever seen any woman exhibit, walked around the desk, put her arms around my neck and kissed me so long and so deeply that I was actually embarrassed by my arousal that I was sure she could feel through the silky material of her skirt.

She put the Black Pac on my chest and gently pushed herself back, out of my embrace while sadly smiling at me.

"Please come back." Was all she said and turned and went back to her seat, turning her head away as she began pecking at the computer to her left, ignoring me.

"Hmm," I said as I stood there still recovering from the emotional high, "I might have the impression you like me."

“Whatever.” She replied, still ignoring me as she typed.

I smiled and turned away myself, headed for the exit but from the corner of my eye I saw her turn her head toward me and maybe wipe at a tear?

“I’ll be back.” I said over my shoulder in my best, Schwarzenegger, Terminator impression as I opened the door.

“I’m counting on it.” She replied softly as the door swooshed shut behind me.

Four minutes later, Stephanie’s intercom buzzed.

“Yes, Mr. Culbert?” Stephanie responded after pressing the button on the top of the desktop speaker.

“Could you step into my office a moment please,” Brian replied.

Stephanie saved her current document on the computer screen, stood up, adjusted her skirt and walked casually into Brian’s office.

After closing the door behind her she moved gracefully to just two feet from the front of Brian’s desk while he sat engaged in typing something on his computer and said. “You wished to see me, sir?” She said.

“Steph,” Brian said without stopping his typing or looking at her, “when Raymond gets here, show him in immediately, would you.”

“Mr. Culbert,” Stephanie answered slowly, choosing her words before speaking with concern in her voice, “don’t you think this particular path will lead to problems down the road, perhaps rivalry for Mr. Bridger, and possibly anger toward you as well?”

Brian stopped typing and stared for a moment over his computer monitor at the window he had just left after watching Bridger get into his car

and drive away.

“This is insurance Steph.” He said without thought or concern. “Just insurance.”

Then he went back to typing again.

Stephanie stood there a moment longer and when Brian added nothing more, she turned to leave thinking, I hope Bridger sees it the same way.

“Steph,” Brian said without stopping his typing. “piece of advice?”

“Yes, Sir?” She replied.

“Don’t get caught up in an affair with a Stalker. They typically have a short life span.” He added as he typed.

She was headed for the door when he said that and though her pace shifted a little, she showed no other outward sign that the comment had affected her.

Chapter 4

Trudore Apartments

When planning a last-minute trip, it's important to be open to a plethora of different locations. If you're planning a trip several months in advance, be as choosy as you'd like about where you're going but for last minute jaunts, it's best to be flexible... Unless Hell is your final destination, in which case you pack what you can carry and hope you still have it when you get there.
Richard Dixon - Zone Extraordinaire

I was packing again.

It was 4 days after my visit to Brian's office and I was in my apartment in Manhattan preparing to leave again. My lease cancelation had been submitted, utilities scheduled for disconnect, all the furniture was being picked up for return to the rental store tomorrow and my will and last testament updated and mailed to my attorney.

Everything I needed for the trip was now packed and my overnight lay full on the bed across the room from me, as I sat quietly staring at it, in the chair that Rebecca had put in the corner of the bedroom 4 months ago before she, too, left me.

I'd done this 4 times now and I was starting to get a bit tired of it.

Something about the impermanence of my life was beginning to bother me and that surprised me. I'd gone through this last time but last time I couldn't put my finger on it.

It wasn't that I was nervous or worried. No. To the contrary I was actually a bit excited. Maybe even longing for this trip but the thought of coming back and starting all over again was tiring.

I'd had so many names, so many occupations, so many covers in my exploits that even I wasn't absolutely sure I remembered who I was when I discharged out of the US Special Forces 18 years ago. Wow, I thought. 18 years ago. Had that much time really passed? Was I really 45 now?

Right now, though, I was just sitting quietly in the chair, staring at the overnight case in one of my far away, blank moods, and that was ok.

The Black Pac was also sitting on the bed. Just off to the side of the case.

Neatly closed again and sealed with the hook & loop strip that was intricately sewn into the soft, black suede folder, it contained all my travel documents, itinerary, schedules, several reference books on mining techniques, several spiral bound information booklets regarding heavy mining machinery and precision explosives, business cards with the title Heavy Equipment Sales and Service, a Zircon International, LTD, company, expense credit card, which was an actual company that was actually doing mining business in the Ukraine but the account numbers went to a different banking account located somewhere in Switzerland, a MasterCard and an American Express card with different account numbers that no doubt also ended up in the same expense account, a Florida state driver's license listing me as William A. Aldean, several pictures of a portly woman and three, smiling, portly children and a well-worn, nearly full passport.

The passport documented me as a frequent traveler to several regions in the Russian Federation that were currently involved in mining and fracking operations for mineral and energy resources; combined with my

corporate documentation, which showed me as a sales consultant making a business trip of unknown duration to the Ukraine for business sales reasons having to do with heavy mining equipment and mining explosives, most customs authorities respected my credentials since they were loosely connected to the Russian and Ukrainian military.

But most importantly, it also contained the PDA that I had been reading again prior to drifting off.

The PDA, or Personal Digital Assistant, is a pocket-sized electronic device meant to encompass the basic and most vital functions of a computer.

Almost every Stalker carries a PDA to keep track of each other, communicate over limited distances (no one has yet figured out how to get any kind of communication line into or out of the Zone), and store data and this one was coded to my personal key only. It contained the real mission, destination and the details on the artifact or “bauble,” as Brian preferred to refer to it, that I was looking for.

I’d read the materials in the Black Pac maybe 15 times and I was well prepared to answer any questions regarding the specifics and generalities of the equipment I was supposed to be representing, confident that I could bore the hell out of anyone that should ask me, but I was also extremely curious and somewhat frustrated about this new artifact.

No one had actually seen it short of this Loner who went by the handle of Digger and as such, I had no place to start looking for it till I managed to talk to Digger.

The background on this guy was short and general since handles never led to real identities and for the most part, real identities for Loners were almost always left behind and forgotten many years before they first set foot inside the Zone.

Name: Unknown

Handle: DIGGER

Faction: Loner

Sex: Male

Age: 45 (aprx)
Race: Hindu (?)
Nationality: ? (European Accent "Aust")
Height: 5'-7" (170cm)
Weight: 170lbs (77k)
Hair: Shrt. Mil. Grey.
Facial Hair: None
Physique: Gen toned, all limbs present
Handing: LT

Distinguishing Marks:

Rt Hand: Ms'g index finger at 1st jnt.
Tattoo rt upr arm.
Eagle inside a heart with electric bolt
Scar Rt side of face.
Outs crnr of rt eye to rt jaw.
Scar Lt side of head.
Mltpl. Ctr-Lt cranial region to Lt ear.

Distinguishing Characteristics:

Sunrise (or sim) body armor.
Lrg cal side arm worn on Lt leg.
Rifle of choice: Vintar/Mod SPSA-14.

Apparently, this guy is a Loner, preferring to operate on his own outside the influence of the other factions like Duty, Freedom and Clear Sky.

He's Hindu, has darker skin and is shorter than me by 4 inches. He's lighter than me by 30lbs, about my age, has an Australian-like accent and a short, military haircut, graying from stress no doubt. He's also relatively clean shaven and left handed.

With just that and the left-handed part, the description wasn't bad. Only 10% of the world population was left-handed and that narrowed down id's significantly but with the missing finger, the scars, (no doubt inflicted by close quarters combat with one or more mutants) and the tat, he should be easy to pick out assuming I could get near enough to him to pick him out.

The Vintar didn't hurt either. It's a unique weapon and not a lot of Loners carried it.

The Vintar BC, similar to its assault style counterpart the Avalanche, is a short, squat, easily distinguishable automatic sniper rifle.

The fatter barrel houses an integral silencer - suppressor and chambers high power, armor-piercing 9×39mm ammo. That ammo is nearly impossible to find in the field and must be replenished prior to excursions out, meaning he has to be frequently around some type of trader sooner or later, and since most Loners develop an affinity for particular traders, all I had to do to find him was find his buddy.

As I sat there running all these different thoughts around in my head, the impression of Stephanie popped up again.

It wasn't like I'd not been with a woman in months. Rebecca was still lingering on my mind as well as the dinner and romance afterward, just three days ago.

Don't get me wrong.
Rebecca is a fine woman and would make any man proud to be with her. Lean figure, chiseled features, long, blonde hair, firm butt and "C" cup breasts.

But Stephanie...

There was just something about her that I couldn't get her off my mind.
Not even the pictures of my portly wife and chunky kids that I had for cover took my mind off her for very long.

*I wonder what possessed her to do that. I thought.
She's never shown me anything but friendly interest in the past and now that I'm headed out on this new Witch hunt she has a sentimental moment. SUPER!* I scolded myself.
Just when things start to heat up at home you gallivant off on a suicide mission.

I tossed the PDA onto the bed from my seated position and then rose

to my feet, walked across the room to the window and looked out across the wooded area I lived next to.

This time next week those woods will be a whole lot less friendly, I thought. I walked back to the chair, picked up my suit coat and put it on, then to the bed where I picked up the PDA and pocketed it in my coat pocket, put the Black Pac into the briefcase sitting open on the night stand beside the bed, closed and locked the briefcase, picked it up, grabbed the overnight case in my other hand and headed for the front door.

“No sense in wasting any more time here,” I said to myself, “let’s get this show on the road already.”

I opened the door for the last time I’d ever open that door again, and walked out into the hall.

Chapter 5

RUSSIA -

Kyiv Down Town

*How well do you deal with uncertainty when you simply have
to wait for news?*

*Turns out, the most difficult part of waiting is not the wait, it's the
start and end of a waiting period.*

A balmy, 98-degree, Wednesday night.

Pitch black but for the occasional flicker of the heat lightning when it
intermittently crossed the sky and then died again.

I'd been here for almost two weeks and I was getting a little raw and
nervy.

The window on the apartment wall was still broken. Most of the glass
on the ground 6 floors down.

Something, or maybe someone, it was never a sure bet in this area,
went through it from the inside.

6 floors. 20 meters.

A long way to drop I thought, and I wondered briefly if they were
aware they were falling when they went through it.

Odd, I suddenly thought.

I'd been staring at that window for nearly two weeks and had never given it a second thought and now, having no way of knowing why the window was broken, I just assumed it was because someone went through it.

I wonder why that is... I thought.

Maybe I'm on edge or the conditioning from the previous trips into the Zone?

There's no shortage of death and violence there.

I laid there another 5 minutes, occasionally dragging on the cigarette, the glow of the refreshed, oxygenated ashes briefly lighting the room in a blood red.

I'd dropped \$20,000 USD on this trip to the Zone and started with my international flight from New York to Montenegro, hopped my way to Ukraine and arrived in Kyiv Boryspil International Airport, the final hop.

Customs was no real issue since all I had was what I was wearing, the overnight case and the PDA I was given back in New York.

Traveling through Serbia and Romania was difficult as always but there's always a route available. It was the leg through the Ukraine to get here, this run-down hotel off Hlybotska St., that was hard.

I wasn't sure if the power worked today. Since getting here I'd learned by experience, that power was sketchy. Sometimes it went off for a day or longer for no apparent reason, and since I hadn't tried anything associated with electricity since getting back from shopping just before sunset, I wasn't sure.

Getting here...

The Dwarf, an unnamed man a bit over 4 feet tall, brought me here in a small van of a type which seemed to be common here, and dropped me off on the curb.

I'd spent most of that day riding with him in that piece of crap van that

rattled and bounced even on smooth roads, and throughout the trip he'd said nothing to me when I talked to him.

I'd given up after the first hour and settled into the uncomfortable silent ride, sullenly.

"Six floor. number 612. You wait." Was all he said in broken English, ignoring me when I called out. "Wait for what? How long?" And drove away in a small cloud of blue smoke.

So here I'd waited. Six floor, number 612, for 12 days.

Daylight wasn't so bad here. People walked a lot and there was a small grocer a block down where I could get food, vodka and cigarettes.

With no fridge or hot plate in the flat, there was no sense in buying anything to store or cook so what I bought I usually ate within a couple hours. Most of it pre-cooked.

Conditioning? I thought. Maybe.

There was a common bathroom, or what you might consider a bathroom, on the end of the hall. I'd discovered it by accident the first day here when I opened it thinking it was a closet. First thing I noted when I looked in was a series of 3 holes in the floor along the right side of the room and two broken but usable wall hanger sinks on the left. You obviously used the holes to defecate and piss into but it took me a second to realize you had to squat over them to do so. I briefly wondered about the plumbing setup below the floor because the room stunk of crap and piss all the time, but after the first images started forming in my head I abandoned that train.

The entire room was dirty, including the floor, and since there was no tub or shower, if you could stomach the smell in the room, you could use the sink and paltry water pressure to wash.

I'd opted out of using it after the first day, preferring rather to walk to the grocers, twice each day to buy food, a gallon of bottled water to wash with and defecate.

rocer had paper, too.
Which he gladly sold by the roll.
Like frigging gold.

The conditioning, thought crossed my mind again.

It was my understanding that the next part of the trip was the last part.

A small fishing boat up the Dnieper River to the Pripyat River and a transfer to a smaller boat up the Pripyat River to the Outskirts.

Tyler, that silver tongued bastard, in one of his more talkative moods, told me I'd be outfitted on the boat up the Pripyat.

Sounded easy enough.

So why was I wary about it?

This trip has been totally different the whole way through it, I thought.

Last couple times the guides, the guys that organized these highly illegal and highly profitable excursions into the Zone, were pretty open about the plans.

They openly talked with you. Bragged about their own excursions and the excursions of their clients and often times, up-sold you on different things.

This time was different though.

Tyler, my guide, was quiet most of the time.

Sure, he smiled and was courteous but he never tried to play up the event, never tried to pump my ego or up=sell me on anything.

After he told me the price and half-heartedly, suggested another upgrade fee, he just took my credit transfer without a word when I declined the upgrade, and started the process.

Odd.

Someone down the hall, or maybe below or above me, cried out a couple times and then it was quiet again.

The lightning crossed the sky, the darkness settled in and my cigarette burned lower, but nothing else changed.

Chapter 6

Motel 3

(And Struggling To Stay There)

"The first step to changing a pattern is to accept it. When you're open to recognizing the pattern, you can change it by learning the pattern, and in doing so, change your life."

Opening my eyes and rubbing them, I guessed I'd finally dozed off.

The sun was soon to rise and a thin, grey light displayed the empty shot glass, mostly burned down cigarette, and half-full bottle of Stoli on the beat-up night table next to me, a reminder of my staple, sleeping aids.

I was wondering about that when the light tapping on the door started again.

That was apparently what brought me around the first time, and I'd nearly jumped when I heard it again since no one had bothered me the whole time I was there.

"Yeah?" I grumbled.

"Bridger." the voice tentatively and quietly asked through the door.

"Yeah?" I grumbled again, wishing I'd had some type of gun.

"It is time." the voice replied. It was a female voice. Maybe an Asian

dialect.

"Crap!" I replied, still a bit groggy but clearing quickly. "Right. Gimme a minute." I finished.

"Down stairs on curb. Five minutes then leave." She replied. Definitely Asian.

"Right. Five minutes." I repeated.

I didn't hear anything else and assumed she'd floated off or something, or maybe she was still outside the door waiting for me to open it and be mugged.

Dumbass thought.

It would have been simpler to just bust the flimsy door down and bag me.

As I sat up and took account of my meager possessions, deciding what to keep and what to leave behind, I reached for my shorts and trousers hanging on the chair next to me.

I grabbed the belt and threaded it through the loops, adding the PDA, still clipped inside its case to the loop area just forward of my right hip.

The cigarette pack was the last thing I grabbed after putting my T-shirt and over shirt on, and I tucked it into my breast pocket.

I opened the door quickly, and just as quickly, looked both directions for anyone waiting for me but the hallway was clear. Stepping tentatively into the hallway I made my way to the broken doorway leading into the dark stairwell, and slowly passed through it, looking up and down in the same manner.

Again. Nothing.

The trip down the stairs was difficult in the dark but the light was getting better outside, and the broken and dirty arbor windows above the stairwell allowed some of it to filter in making the steps just barely visible.

Again, I wondered. Conditioning?

I made the bottom of the stairwell and passed into the lobby, strewn with cigarette butts, broken glass and paper, and passed out the front doors to the sidewalk.

There was a new-looking black SUV of an unrecognized make waiting patiently on the curb, and when I passed through the doorway onto the sidewalk the dark passenger window slid noiselessly down revealing an Asian woman about 25 years old.

"Please to get in back?" She said in her broken English, with a smile on her face.

"Right." I repeated again and carefully opened the rear passenger door and climbed in.

The driver was also young and an Asian, dressed in a chauffeur's suit complete with cap, and never took his eyes off the front windshield.

I couldn't help but think of an old movie called Green Hornet and a guy named Kato.

"Hornet gun, check. Hornet sting, check. Let's roll Kato." I said, mockingly, but the guy showed no indication that he'd heard me.

"Not a fan huh?" I tried one more time before giving up after he again showed no indication of understanding.

After I took in the driver, I looked again at the woman.

She was indeed in her mid-20's, stunningly beautiful, and for a moment I wished she had come to me last night.

She was dressed in some type of flowered gown, with long hair tightly wrapped on the top of her head.

After I cleared all that I took notice of the car.

The interior was ultra clean and either very new or very well kept.

There was a faint smell of lilac or violets, and I assumed it was her

perfume or residual soap aroma, and I was suddenly conscious of the fact that it had been nearly 4 days since my last shower, if you could call it that, taken in a small cubical outside and behind the grocer's, with a 5-gallon bucket above it to catch rain.

I knew I didn't smell good, but to her credit she didn't reveal anything.

The kid behind the wheel gracefully slid onto the nearly deserted street and moved quickly through the town to a large hotel with lots of reflective glass further north of the hovel I was in, where he pulled to the sidewalk curb and stopped.

"What's up?" I asked as the Asian woman opened her door and got out wordlessly, opening my door and making it clear that she wished that I get out. It was clear now that she was of petite build and maybe 5 foot 5 tall.

I was already hungry and now starting to get agitated by the silence, but at the same time the thoughts of her visiting me last night quelled my agitation some.

She closed my door and then surprised me by taking my arm in hers and leading me toward the Hotel lobby door.

At the door, she produced a mag card from somewhere in the sleeve of her gown, slid it through the strip reader by the side of the reflective door and a magnetic lock on the door audibly snapped open. Replacing the card within her gown as quickly as she'd found it, and with little effort, she pushed the door open.

My curiosity was lost and awe took over, the moment I stepped through the doorway.

The lobby of the hotel was massive, but not just massive, it was massive and richer than anything I'd ever seen, and I was thunderstruck by the magnificence.

Rich tapestries, plush furniture, deep rugs and polished wood flooring with huge, ornately framed paintings of elegant people covering the polished wood-paneled walls.

I felt like an idiot dressed as I was in the lobby of this place.

"Crud. I was going to wear the black tie too." I mumbled as I quickly scanned the fixtures and furnishings.

The maître d's desk was a rich and highly polished teakwood with a large, crystal set of highball glasses on display, and a small but expensive line of liquor behind them, and I was briefly disappointed when she led me past to the elevators, pressing the up button and, after a moment's wait for the car, the 60th floor button upon entering.

"Who are we here to see?" I asked her as we rode silently up, but she just smiled at me and remained silent, holding my arm.

"Ok," I followed up, "I'll take it as a surprise."

The elevator slowed and the doors finally slid open revealing a lushly carpeted hallway with elegant-looking doors lining it on both sides.

We walked a short distance, turned a corner and walked another short distance to 6625 where she again produced the mag card, or maybe a different one, I had no way of telling and she never looked at it, just slid it through the strip reader by the door and the magnetic lock, like the lobby door, clicked open.

She let go of my arm, reached forward for the door lever, and pushing it downward, gracefully and effortlessly opened the door and stood aside for me to enter.

My first look was of a nicely painted entry hallway, standard to just about any hotel I'd been in back in the USA but as I cleared the hallway and looked deeper into the room I was again struck by the elegance.

Like the lobby, the room also displayed the rich tapestries, plush, antique furniture, deep rugs and polished wood flooring but in a different color pattern of a more burnt orange. Again, like the lobby, there were huge, ornately framed paintings of elegant people covering the polished wood paneled walls of the main room.

She let me stand there a moment soaking it in and then led me

through the room into the bedroom, also lavishly decorated around a king sized, 4 poster bed complete with draping silk, where she again paused, then continued the tour leading me into the largest bath I'd ever seen, with a sitting pool, a large Jacuzzi tub, water scented and already steaming, and a walk-in shower large enough to fit most of the Lakers basketball team.

I lost track of where I was for a moment and when I finally turned around to ask her what's up, I was stunned to see her standing in the bath doorway, her petite and astoundingly feminine form naked of all clothing except her high-heeled shoes, mesmerizingly smiling softly at me the gown nowhere in sight and I briefly wondered about that magic gown till she stepped lightly toward me and slowly started undressing me as well.

The next hour was a lavish cleaning in which she spent long periods, meticulously but gently scrubbing every square inch of my body before drying me down just as meticulously and then finished up with some type of talc powder applied with a large, soft bristle brush that made the hair in my back stand rigid, among other things.

After that she led me to the bedroom where she spent the best part of two hours instructing me gently on the many ways to please a woman and myself at the same time.

We were laying together, her head on my chest, breathing hard, and I was wondering if they had the right guy, when she looked into my eyes, smiled and said.

"You wait here?"

At a loss for words I replied.

"Right."

And she stood up, showing off her magnificent form from the back, with a stunning sheen of sweat, and gracefully walked out of the bedroom.

I heard glass tinkling and the sound of something sloshing and immediately associated it with the booze I'd seen downstairs, and after a moment longer she returned as naked as she was when she left, with an expensive, cut crystal decanter with some clear liquid inside, and two cut

crystal, highball glasses on an ornate, glass tray.

She set the tray down on the bedside table and after perching invitingly half on and half off the bed beside me, handed me one of the glasses, taking the other herself, gently touching them together and while still smiling at me, downed the bronze colored liquid.

I followed suit, tasting the Brandy and feeling it's warm body slide smoothly down my throat, then put the glass back on the table, rolled onto my back, ready for her again, and guided her gently into position. As the warm fog of the Brandy filled my head I watched her close her eyes through half-open eyes myself, drop her head backwards, her long, black, silky hair falling behind her in silent satisfaction, and the last thing I remember was her amazing face, smiling sadly at me as the fog completely settled over me, silently mouthing some word.

“Conditioning.”



Chapter 7

Hotel Astoria

*"Think of the worst place you've ever been and then multiply it by
forty!*

The only thing here that's easy, is dying."

"Beard"

When I finally regained sentience, I smiled in self-satisfaction at the last memory and lay there basking in the glow for a moment.

It may have been the stiffness of the bed, the smell of the room or the noise of a torch somewhere in the distance that bothered me enough to snap my eyes open and what I saw changed the moment.

It was dark around me but not so dark I couldn't see about the room I was in.

"Ok. This sure as hell isn't the Astoria I was in last I remember."

I was lying on my back, on a moldy rug in a dark room. My neck hurt, my back was sore and I was hungry as hell.

"What the f...?" I started in confusion and then stopped mid-sentence.

Then the memory of the Asian girl I was with came back to me and as I ran that sequence of events around in my head, I recognized the word she

was mouthing to me.

"Conditioning."

"Well this is certainly an anticlimax." I said to myself as I sat up slowly, rubbing my eyes to clear them further before looking around the room.

The room was small in size, maybe 3 meters by 3 meters and contained a small couch, a single chair, a full length, broken mirror attached to the far wall, a small shelf with a broken tv on top and a small, round table with a locker under it. The walls were covered with a peeling, striped wall paper that was dirty and torn in many places, a couple framed pictures of people that made no impression on me and an old rusted light fixture hanging from the ceiling over the table.

And it was stifling hot!

I was sweating so much my clothes were soaked!

And then I realized, not only was I not naked in that sweet bed, I was wearing what appeared to be a US, AOR-2, cotton, naval working uniform with forest green camouflage that combined patterns of three scales, in a digital, fractal pattern, black hi top boots and a web belt wrapped around my waist.

"All I need to make this outfit complete is a Kevlar camo helmet and night goggles." I thought agitatedly as I finished my personal inventory inspection.

I was rolling over to get up when my eyes caught a form on the table that I thought I might recognize and which, after walking to the table, I confirmed as a standard issue American forest wood pattern Kevlar helmet.

"What?" I said to no one in particular. "No night goggles?"

I also noted on the table, a 10" survival knife with a stainless steel, serrated blade and aluminum handle inside a nylon sheath, that I was pretty sure would fit the web belt, a nylon leg holster that I discovered held a S&W.45 and two full 14 round clips plus one in the handle, my PDA, which brought me a tremendous sense of relief when I realized I hadn't even

thought about it till now, a canteen that would also fit on the web belt, a small box of rations and a standard military issue backpack.

“Ok.” I said resignedly again to no one.

“I’m not really cool with the method of delivery Tyler, but here I am.”

I unbuckled the belt, unthreaded it to its last loop and then began picking up the items on the table one by one and installing them onto the belt as I threaded it back through the loops, till I had the holster, draped down my right thigh, the canteen on my left hip and the knife on my left thigh. I cinched the holster thigh-belt in place and tied the knife to my left thigh.

I took the .45 out of the holster, ejected the clip into my palm and set it on the table, pulled the slide back noting an empty chamber, locked it open and adjusting the gun’s angle to reflect the dawn sunlight coming from the window across the room, inspected the barrel.

“Good condition.” I said. “Nice.”

After inserting the clip again, I released the clasp holding the slide back and let it snap shut chambering a round, inserted the gun back into the holster and took a couple steps in the confined space to test everything out. I made a couple adjustments to the attachments for comfort and, satisfied with the arrangement, looked at myself in the broken and dirty mirror.

Not bad. I thought. Could be a hell of a lot worse.

I looked further around the room and determined that the light was getting better.

“It must be morning.” I mumbled as I continued to scan the room and ultimately my eyes settled on the locker beneath the table.

“Ok. What did you leave me in here Tyler?”

Pulling the chair out from under the table, I sat in it, bent over and pulled the locker by its handle from under the table. The clasp was locked and wouldn’t open, so I took out the knife, slipped it under the simple lock

hasp and twisting it forcefully, pried one of the four screws loose. A little prying, and the hasp popped off the locker.

Raising the lid, I looked inside and, although mostly empty, I found several items of interest.

2 energy drinks, ok. That's a positive for long walks.

A bottle of vodka with 3 shots left? That's all you left me Tyler! That sucks.

2 sausages, YES!!! Not an LRP but what can I say under the circumstances besides, dinner's served!

1 anti-rad pack, again good. Radiation here isn't exactly in short supply. This qill come in handy I'm sure.

3 first-aid kits, YES!!

3 bandage wrap packs. Cool. The bandages will be good for wrapping and patching wounds.

3 bottles of spring water. OH YEAH! Much better than the crap laying around here that's mostly tainted with something that isn't good for you to consume.

1 Binocular and judging by the power button on the top I'd say a thermal type. Another plus.

And last but not the least bit confusing, a PS-2 Scope?

"Ok. Tyler's not so bad after all." I mumbled, looking around the room for some type of rifle to attach the scope to and finding nothing.

"Well. No rifle, no shotgun." I noted. "Could be worse. Could be raining." I mumble to myself.

"A PS-2 scope? Odd."

"What the crap do I need a PS-2 scope for without a rifle to put under it?" I mumble again.

Perhaps another test? I thought.

You have a scope, now can you find a rifle to put under it? Hmmm."

Ok. We'll get back to that, I thought to myself.

First things first. The water and food.

When the armed services came out with the MRE's (meal ready to

eat)back in the 40's they were great for troops on patrols considering there were no other alternatives. Then the LRP's (food packet Long Range Patrol) came out and they were even better suited to the application and after that, the LRP was redesigned into the LRP-1 adding new dietary considerations and there the military stopped in food supply design. At least for the moment anyway.

The sausage was a basic, salted, cold smoked and seasoned pork and turkey product, made in some factory outside of Ukraine according to the label. They weren't LRP's but they did fill the gap. How these things got here I have no idea but there always seemed to be a lot of them, including something called Tourist Breakfast and bread which made up for when you couldn't find a trader that had LRP's in his inventory.

After finishing up one of the sausages and a quarter of one of the water bottles, (best to conserve since I have no idea when that will come again) I opened the canteen and began pouring the balance of the water bottle I'd opened, into it. Then I opened the other 2 bottles and added them as well, filling the canteen and after sealing it again, pushed it back into the nylon carry case hooked to my belt and secured it.

Now that it was daylight I figured I could see where I was, so picking up the binoculars, got up and walked to the window across from me.

"So. Are thermal imaging?" I mumble again while extracting them from the case which I immediately discarded back into the locker after hanging the strap over my neck.

Standing at the window, I inspected them and finding the familiar toggle with a circle and slash, flipped it to the slash, turning the power on, I assumed, then raised them to my eyes and to my joy, found the black, grey and white image within it indicating thermal sensors built into it.

I was looking out the rear window of the room, westward over the tops of hundreds of trees and shrubbery that had over grown the open lawns and gardens of the community development that I was currently in. Once well maintained and manicured, now after over 30 years, the only open areas were concrete parking lots and roadways and they were in

danger of being taken back again in another 30 years.

After focusing and zooming on the buildings across the expanse from me I couldn't make out anything familiar about them other than being several apartment buildings but as I panned slowly to the right, nearly out of sight from my window view I recognized the abandoned, fluvial port roughly 230 yards north and the tributary to the Chernobyl Port Bay right behind it.

Now I knew where I was. Referred to as Urban Area I, this area was a part of the Pripjat City that housed and supplied a great number of people who worked for, in or around the Chernobyl Nuclear Plant and its military counterparts. The Chernobyl Fluvial Port was one of the methods of commercial transportation to the Pripjat River, northeast and maybe a mile away from me now and from there to Belarus to the north and the Dnieper River further south on the northern border of Kyiv. The entire Chernobyl Port, Bay had been deserted almost literally overnight the day of the reactor explosion and all belongings and equipment were summarily abandoned as they were and left to slowly rot and fall apart.

At the Port, I could clearly see that an effort had been exerted to remove the foliage and maintain a clear perimeter out some 100 feet from the remains of the port building which had been neglected and was falling to pieces all over. In addition to that, The thermal images of maybe 30 people were moving in, out and around the grounds and after switching from the thermal to standard view, I noted by the looks of their uniforms and fuzzy, shoulder patches, I guessed they were Mono's.

The Monolith faction, a.k.a. Mono's, is a militant, mercenary type of fruitcake, religious cult, thoughtless idiots, hostile to just about everyone not of their cult. They have some idea that an almighty God is watching out over them and will soon be calling them home.

I stood there watching them for a couple minutes as they rotated their watch and when I grew bored, I turned and walked to the front of the room and then through the doorway to the balcony to see what was out that way.

As soon as I'd stepped through the door and glanced right, I knew I had trouble. Apparently the walkway to the elevators and stairs to my right,

was destroyed, leaving a gap about 15 feet long between the two, roughly hewn away sides and with the end of the building to my left, there was no easy way down.

On quick examination though, I noted that the railing was still in place spanning the entire gap, and I figured that I could either mount it and scoot along to the other side or simply drop from this floor to the next one below and access the stairs on that level.

Odd. I thought. If I can't get down, how the hell did I get here?

Looking out and around me I saw below what was probably once, an open parking lot and courtyard but was now filled with a small jungle of trees and brush that had overwhelmed most of the area.

Across maybe 50 feet and to the left of me was the end of another empty apartment building, maybe 150 foot long and set perpendicular to the building I was currently in, bordering the northern side of the courtyard. Directly across and on the eastern side of the courtyard forest, another apartment building about 150 feet long sat, parallel to this one, but to my right, the area was open for maybe 260yds where the low roofs of what I assumed to be the supporting commercial structures for this area started.

I knew from experience that it would be in that direction I'd find transit out of Pripyat to Jupiter.

I stood out there for a couple minutes thinking on that while absently kicking the remnants of concrete off of the edge of the walkway, down onto the courtyard area below when I caught that action and being curious, leaned over the railing to see how far they had dropped.

Boom! Ping!

The shotgun below me rang out, the shot itself ricocheting off the concrete ceiling above me, and I jump back instinctively.

FRAK!

Some sunofabitch is shooting at me from below!

Dumbass! I thought to myself. Might have been a good idea to look before kicking crap off the roof.

Pressed against the wall, I eased on over to the other end of the patio to the party wall and then gradually leaned out over the edge sideways to see if I could get a look at who was shooting.

Sure as hell looks like a Z, beading up at the patio area that I just left. The guy must have heard the concrete hit the ground. Crap. It might have even hit the goon on the head for all I knew!

Dumb, Bridger. Friggin dumb. Next time just call to him maybe.

These creatures, referred to as Z's, are zombified humans. Well, zombified things, anyway. They ceased being human somewhere along the line and have no cognitive abilities, so their behavior is the result of whatever remains of their purely animal instincts.

They are, however, similar to humans, in all other ways but brainwashed into attacking us.

They do not have any superhuman or mutated abilities, either cannot or simply won't run, they shuffle everywhere, are unable to talk other than mumbling, and will turn back once they lock in on a human target, and continue to fight till you either run away from them, hide well enough to not be discovered by them or kill them.

Another thing I knew about them from firsthand experience, is that they rarely travel alone so it was a good bet that it wouldn't be incredibly long before there was at least one more of those things below me.

I stood there for a couple minutes considering my options. One. Wait inside for it or them to get bored and leave or two. Engage in combat, the desire for the shotgun he was carrying overcame caution and I slid the .45 out of the holster on my leg and after beading in on the top of his useless, empty head I pull the trigger, then re-sighting quickly, I pull it a second time.

My ears were ringing but I saw him stand there a couple seconds, maybe wondering what hit him as the life passed out of his worthless brain, and like some slow-motion show, he dropped to his knees, then a couple seconds later, his butt hit his heels and another couple seconds after that he finally pitched sideways onto the ground where he laid quietly, most of the top of his head black with blood.

"Yeah!!" I congratulate myself quietly. "Lost two rounds but damned good shot for a pistol."

"Now to get down there and loot that guy before his buddies show up and start shooting at me."

Darting quickly into the room I opened the backpack, gathered all the loose items on the table into it, shrugged it over my shoulders and returned to the patio door.

Moving to the end of the broken walkway I tested the hand rail, and determining it to be wobbly but sound enough for my weight, I set my right foot on the bottom rail and then my left next to it and while holding the top rail, scooted out till I was a couple feet beyond the broken concrete walkway.

Then I extended my arms straight up and down, supporting my weight on the top rail and removed my boots from the bottom rail, balancing all my weight on my arms alone.

Now comes the really tricky part. I thought as I started to bend my elbows outward, sliding my stomach and chest down the top rail till I finally dropped the remaining foot or so of my arms length, hanging now above the void from the top rail, feet dangling in the air below me.

Jeez! I thought. That was not fun!

Letting go with my right hand, I quickly dropping my hand and grabbed the 2nd of the 4 rails, realigning my body weight and then repeated it with my left hand.

Now I had nothing from my chest down between me and the 70' drop and I repeated the action again, right hand let go and grab the 3rd railing down, use my right arm to lower my weight while simultaneously, let go with the left hand and grabbing the 3rd rail with it.

By the time I was hanging from the lowest rail, the toes of my boots were on top of the hand rail of the balcony below me and I I knew this would be the tricky part.

Since I couldn't get any balance on the hand rail below me I started a

slow swing, out over the 70 foot drop and back over the balcony just 40" below my feet, out over the void and in over the balcony. Three times I did this working up the courage then let go with my hands and dropped the last 40' to the balcony walkway, staggering a bit as I regained my balance. Tense with anxiety I sat down on the walkway for a couple minutes to calm down a bit before moving on.

When my pulse had finally settled down reasonably, I got up and made my way past the doors and windows on this landing, briefly considered exploring the vacant apartments beyond them and then abandoned the thought for getting down and looting the Z as quickly as I could and continued on toward the stairway and when I reached the elevator, I passed right by it assuming it to be non operational. When I got to the stairwell door I found that while it would unlatch, it was jammed and I was forced to thrust my shoulder into the door to force it open making a hell of a lot of noise as it did so.

The stairwell was dark and damp but appeared to be sound, the concrete steps leading both up and down in good condition although covered with bird crap.

I didn't have a flashlight, and that was a bummer, so I took the PDA from my pocket, shook it to turn on the light and clipped it onto the front of my shirt, lighting the way ahead for me, and then started down the stairs.

The descent took about 12 minutes and when I reached the bottom landing with the EXIT sign over the door, I tried to open it and found it too, jammed shut.

My shoulder was already a bit sore from the upper door and when I applied it again to the lower door, it began to complain even more, but to my surprise the door popped open unexpectedly and as it immediately swung back shut again I caught it with my boot, and there I tensely stood behind the nearly closed door hoping no one was looking in my direction when I burst through it.

I unsnapped the holster and raised the .45, pointing it outward toward the door and pushed the door open again with my boot, scanning quickly as

it swung shut again and seeing nothing threatening, before it closed, I pushed it open one more time and stepped through into the daylight.

It was at this point that I heard the chirps of the built-in anomaly and gas detector in my PDA, currently clipped to my shirt, singing their proximity warning.

"Great! What next!" I said as I realized I had possible bad areas very near me.

One of the app's on the PDA is an anomaly detector and mine was singing the warning of an invisible threat near me.

Reaching down to the ground I retrieved several small chunks of concrete and tossed them outward ahead of me, one by one, igniting the small, green, Zone of an acid anomaly directly ahead and out from the building.

"Wouldn't do well to walk into that." I thought.

Another cool app on the PDA was the SRTD, Short Range Thermal Detection app that used the thermometer function built into the PDA to reach out about 20 yards and detect thermal images, then display them as a red dot on a semi circular map, the center of the radius being the PDA. There was a sensitivity feature built into the app that made it possible to detect images from bird like mass to vehicular and another that would adjust the thermal temperature range so you could filter out stuff that didn't matter to you and as I'd finished tossing a couple more chunks of concrete and determined the safest way to go being against the side of the building, the SRTD lit up 2 incoming thermal forms large enough to be human sized followed shortly thereafter by the report of a close range, AK and several shots zinging around me pretty much verifying it.

Turning and crouching I scrambled toward the building wall behind me and made my way quickly through the fusillade while drawing the .45 as I ran, hoping that I wouldn't find another anomaly along the way. At the corner of the building a bush grew and I skidded around it and the corner and now out of sight of my attackers, pulled up short, turned and slid along the wall back to the corner with the .45 ready where I slowly peeked around

it for my attackers.

At first, as I peered through the bush on the corner, I saw nothing but after a minute, I saw through the shrub, one goon move and from the way he was swaggering in his movement I pegged him as a Z.

He was dressed in the standard Ukraine military ACU, carrying some type of automatic rifle from the look of it, and I felt a wash of excitement seeing my rifle, currently and temporarily in his hands. Then I noticed something else.

He was wearing a standard Ukraine BPV as well!

A BPV, or bulletproof vest consists of a pull over, two piece chest and back panel with a web of straps on both sides designed to pull the two panels together at the sides, conforming to your girth. The shaped panels in the chest and back are composed of sheets of an advanced plastic polymer composed of many layers of Kevlar and provide an advanced degree of protection from stabbing, small arms fire and some small-caliber rifle fire by capturing the projectile and dissipating its energy in the polymers without tearing apart.

The upside was that the bullet stayed on the outside of the BPV.

The downside was that the kinetic force of the impact was still conveyed through the BPV to you and while you might not actually get shot, you suffered an impact injury similar to being hit by a major league baseball batter.

But...

It was still better than being shot.

Big score! I thought. All I have to do is bag him and strip him.

But I also knew his buddy was close by somewhere, and I didn't want to race out in joyous glee and be shot in the back, so I waited a little longer and when his buddy still didn't show I started weighing the odds of fight or flight and that's when the first Z made my decision for me.

He just stopped right in his tracks and stood there still and quiet, about 30 feet away, occasionally turning around.

"I need that rifle more than you do pal." I mumble as I carefully took aim on his head with the .45 and pulled the trigger.

BOOM!

The pistol rang out as it jumped in my hand, ejecting the spent shell and loading up another I recovered the aim for another quick shot but he dropped to the ground just before I pulled trigger, laying there thrashing wildly.

Thing about Z's is that if you knock them down without killing them, after a minute of thrashing, they regain their footing and start attacking again, so I took aim again before he could recover and loosed another round into him, stopping the movement altogether.

Having recovered my aim, I started a careful search for his partner, who I could hear letting loose of his automatic somewhere out ahead of me and my PDA verified as being somewhere out there, but no joy. I could see nothing, so I took the chance and while still crouching, ran to the corpse where I squatted down again and swept the area with the .45 raised all around me before lifting his discarded rifle, noting it as an automatic Viper, 9x39 ammo, quickly checked the action sending a round flying out the port and another into the chamber behind it and then checking the banana clip extending from below the rifle, determined there to be 24 rounds still available.

I holstered my pistol, and slammed my new-found rifle against my shoulder, scanning again for the missing Z but still saw nothing.

Then I let go of the rifle with my left hand and while holding it ready with my right hand, I quickly stripped the hook and loop that held the BPV sides together, dropped the rifle to hang from its straps and after maneuvering quickly and nervously above the goons head, lifted his torso to a sitting position and jerked the BPV up and off him by its shoulder straps, smearing blood on the inside as it cleared his head and he dropped lifelessly back to the ground. Then I patted him down, finding two more clips and pocketing them grabbed up the Viper again and quickly returned to my corner at a full out run, slowing down to a trot as I rounded the corner. I moved down the south wall to the next corner, peered around the area and

then rounded the corner and ran crouching up the wall to a set of basement stairs where I quickly dropped 8 feet below grade into an ankle-deep puddle of water and muck at the base of the stairs.

Out of sight again I quietly loosened up the straps on the BPV I was carrying loosely in my left hand, and after removing my backpack, slipped it over my head and arms, and pulled the straps tight.

Then I thought about the PDA making noise and after a brief search of the PDA case on my hip I found a pair of earphones, quickly plugged them into the PDA, and inserted them into my ears, watching as the number "1" inside the little red balloon changed to a 2 and then to a 4 indicating 3 new thermals in range and pulled the backpack back over my arms.

While I waited quietly there, I took inventory again and was pleased to find I now had a Viper automatic with 32, 9x39 rounds for it, and better than that, a usable, though dirty, BPV! It was a great day!

The Viper was a priceless loot right about now and I quietly dropped the clip, opened the action and extracted the chambered round as it popped out. After a brief examination of the rifle I determined it to be dirty as hell and worn pretty good so I quickly wiped it down as best I could on my trousers, slipped the extra round back into the open bore then while holding the slide in place, unlocked it and allowed it to slowly lower onto the round in the chamber and reinsert the clip.

Never look a gift horse in the mouth. I thought to myself, and I settled tightly into the doorway shadows with the Viper ready, to wait out the search.

Four or five minutes passed and the PDA squeaks in my ear indicated the diminishing count back down to 3 contacts, then 2 then none.

Despite that, I waited another couple minutes, and then while crouching, stepped up several steps and tentatively raised my head above the stairwell wall, scanning quickly and ducking back down again quickly a couple times, but I saw nothing so I took a couple more steps up, and this time with the binoculars, scanned more carefully. Again, I saw nothing and better still, the thermal imaging in the binoculars picked up nothing as well.

All clear at the moment, I started thinking about moving again.

I needed to get to the Burakivka Station, a little under 11 miles e-se of Pripyat and the old military outpost south and east was the only place I knew where I could possibly get supplies and better gear here. Plus, there was an access there to the old Duga, supply train line tunnels that lead west, under most of the bad areas here, to the Jupiter Plant. From there I could surface, make my way south to the Yaniv, train line substation station and then follow the tracks straight to Burakivka Station.

I started making my way south along the building faces and then a thought occurred to me and I stopped suddenly.

I have no way to fight my way through the tunnels much less the way to the south base. *This Viper will be out of ammo in the first minute of combat and, as such, useless to me unless I can get close enough to swing it and I'll be dead in a short period after that.*

What I need is better equipment and more ammo. What I need to do is raid and loot the Fluvial Port!

Now you're thinking Bridger!

Turning around, I made my way directly to the hospital building and while crouching, onto the sidewalk where I stopped quietly below the knee wall level.

Pulling out the binoculars again, I rose just enough above the wall to raise and set the binoculars on it and took another look at the Fluvial Port across the parking lot from me.

From that vantage I could count a few more than a half-dozen thermals and dropping back down I started to work on a plan.

Move quickly along the fence line and *if I don't get killed*, down the river embankment to the river edge and assuming *I don't get killed*, parallel the river to below the showroom offices and then, *if I don't get killed*, up the embankment to the bath on the rear and, *if I don't get killed*, that's where the fighting will start.

Crud, there's a lotta' *if I don't get killed*, in there, but it's simple, direct and if I surprise them, it might work.

I rose up again slightly above the wall and peered through the binoculars one last time, and noting that nothing had changed since I last looked, prepared to lower them and start dashing when something from the corner of my eye screamed a warning at me, and I stopped and dropped low again.

Rising up slowly just a little I peered over the edge of the wall and to my immediate fright I saw a Z ambling mindlessly along the street just 10 meters away from me.

Ducking down again I readied the Viper for combat knowing I'd unfortunately, alert the Mono's and crap up my sweetly simple plan, but the Z never appeared, and when I finally rose slowly over the wall again, I could now see the Z to my left, still mindlessly ambling southward.

That was incredibly stupid, I thought. *Pay friggin attention Bridger!*

Then I sank back down to wait out another 3 minutes just in case, and when the time had passed, while crouching, dashed to the hospital wall, and while tucking against the wall, I quickly rounded the corner of the north end of the building, jumped over the entry door landing to the opposite side and dropped into the shadows, out of sight again.

Ok. No shooting. So far so good. I thought to myself.

Now I have a fairly good screen of bushes to help mask my advance, so while crouching I move quickly along the perimeter fence line to the end of it, about half way between the hospital and the Port, and then, leaving the cover of the bushes, I sprinted all out, down the embankment and out of sight, turned left at the water's edge and started making my way quickly north westerly along the water line to the dock.

Damned! I thought to myself as I stopped at the dock crouching to rest a second. *No one shot!*

So far, so good. I thought as I again started moving in a crouching run for the opposite side of the dock, then along the water's edge till I got to

where I thought the rear of the building was, not being able to see it from the bottom of the embankment, and in an all-out sprint, I stood and raced up the embankment, straight for the building, altering my direction slightly to make the open doorway of the rear bathroom.

In the process, I surprised the hell out of two Mono's, standing watch, enough so that they actually watched me run some 2 or 3 meters before registering me and shouting out, while trying to shoot at me, but by then I was through the doorway and safe inside the dark bath area.

I ran full out straight down the hallway with my back to the open doorway, the PDA light I'd forgotten to turn off lighting the way, and dropped to slide at the end of it and spin sharply left around the dividing wall. Still seated on the polished floor, I quickly reversed direction at the corner, flipped off the light and, taking aim back up the hallway, waited for the imminent assault.

My PDA had counted 12 thermals when I looked briefly at it outside as I ran, and I knew at least three of them were Z's.

The first to enter the doorway was a Z in military ACU's with a heavy, RP-74 machine gun.

I ducked quickly back out of sight and waited 5 seconds while it moved up the hallway, then slowly peered around the corner again and discovered him standing about half way into the hall, stopped and turning from side to side searching for a target.

Quietly drawing the .45 from my holster, I carefully bead on his head while he was looking away and pulled the trigger one time.

The roar was deafening in the hallway but the Z dropped dead to the floor and I was realigning my aim with the intent to loot the thing when a Mono appears silhouetted in the doorway, and as he takes his first step into the dark hallway, I hit him in the face with a carefully timed shot, dropping him just outside the doorway.

Two down, ten to go. I thought as I started counting back in my head the number of shots left in this clip.

Over the next 10 minutes, four more Mono's sieged the dark doorway and dark hallway behind it, and each time, went down after being shot by me from the cover within. My advantage was huge. First, I was inside, in the darkness and the only light at the end of this hallway was what filtered in from the open doorway. Next, they were coming from daylight to darkness with no time to adjust to the difference, and I was laying on the floor low, a position none had so far thought about when firing blindly into the corridor, as evidenced by the multitude of bullet holes in the wall no lower than 12", and last, I was twisted around the wall, which protected most of me, and firing up the corridor at clear, silhouetted forms in the doorway.

During a lull in the advance, I was just finishing a tally on the body count, six down and six yet to fight, when one of the Mono's slipped quickly into the hallway unexpectedly, and in my surprise narrowly missed being shot when he slid in the pooling blood on the floor, and wind-milled. My shot went off but missed during his attempts to regain his balance and keep from falling, and he finally hits the floor on his back-end, lowering his rifle, and in that moment I adjusted my aim and hit him square in his surprised face, knocking him backward onto the pile of corpses that were piling up in the hallway and outside the door, and the slide on my .45 locks back indicating no more bullets!

Having anticipated this earlier I'd set the additional 2 clips I had on the floor in front of me and I popped out the empty clip letting it fall to the floor, slammed in a full one, flipped the slide catch down and watched the slide slam down on the new round, chambering it for immediate use, but no one followed the unlucky chap on the floor, so I waited in anticipation.

After 2 minutes I was beginning to wonder if anyone out there was even concerned about me, so I risked a quick glance at the PDA still clipped to my shirt. The indicator showed 3 thermals out there but I knew that didn't mean that they were interested in me, just that they were out there.

Another 2 minutes passed and still no one assaulted my position, so knowing I had to do something about my dwindling ammo supply, I carefully sat up while still covering the open doorway, rose to a crouch and while concentrating on the currently empty doorway, moved up the corridor,

carefully stepping over the bodies and accumulating weapons through the pooling muck. At the door jamb I looked out, scanning quickly first the right side and then the left, relieved that no one shot at me.

Seeing no one and raising no alarms I moved backwards again down the hallway till I'd cleared the mess on the floor and began sliding rifles and pistols back down the hallway to the corner while searching the pockets of the dead guys for ammo clips and anything else of value, all the while nervously glancing up frequently to cover the open doorway, now holding the automatic Viper.

The first guy I came to gave up a wad of cash, two packs of cigarettes, a lighter and two full clips of 5.56x45 ammo, obviously for an AK that I knew I'd tossed behind me for collection later. If I could get one, decent condition AK and several clips of rounds, I could bug out for the balance of my trip.

I'd seen the RP-74, a light machine gun, in the hallway early and stripped it of its belt and box. It might have been a good deterrent gun for Mutants, but as I remembered it, the Z that was wielding it had to reset the bolt every dozen rounds or so, indicating it was in badly worn condition, unreliable and regrettably useless since this belt-fed machine gun is just too damned heavy to travel with anyway, so I'd dropped it and left it there.

After I'd searched the other two lying sprawled on the floor near the first, I paused briefly when, on the fourth body, I uncovered a picture of what had to be the ugliest woman I'd ever seen, and after chuckling a bit, dropped it, and finding nothing else but useless personal stuff, I again backed my way down the hallway to the inner corner and squatted down again all the while carefully watching the doorway. I picked up the first rifle and glancing at it noted it was an AK.

Allowing the Viper to dangle from its strap on my shoulder, I quickly stripped the clip from the AK and stashed it inside my utility pocket, then set the rifle aside behind the divider wall and picked up the next one, another AK, and repeating the process, pocketed another clip, stashing the rifle again behind the divider wall

It was the fourth body that I turned over that revealed the greatest

prize! A slightly worn but still usable GP37!

Sporting an internal, 4x scope and built in recoil suppression this rifle was definitely a major plus. Add to that 35 rounds of AP ammo and you get a reliable, fast and accurate automatic shooter far better than the Viper, and after checking the clip and action, I dropped the Viper's clip into my palm, pocketed it, dropped the Viper and replaced it with the GP.

All total I now had 4 AK's, two more clips making a total of 4, four useless small caliber handguns, which I quickly stripped of clips stowed in another pocket for later transfer to my backpack, and then tossed the frames away. Ammo was a commodity out here. Pistols weren't.

With the GP now on my shoulder, I moved back to the doorway and again, after a quick glance outside, dashed to the remaining five bodies and looted another 8, AK clips and yet one more prize.

I'd finished three of the five in a matter of about two minutes and while I was turning over the fourth I noticed what I thought to be a box of soap hanging on his belt but upon closer examination, to my delight, turned out to be an Echo artifact detector, a little beat-up but it looked operable.

The Echo Detector is the simplest of all detectors for artifact hunting. Though it's capable of finding chachkies, its range is very short compared to other detectors, so this device only vaguely determines the distance from the artifact by flashing a built in luminous bar and "beeping" or "chirping" as you near the artifact.

As you get closer to the artifact, the Echo flashes and beeps faster and vice versa.

It's possible to determine the direction of the artifact by turning left or right as you hold it. The flashing and beeps will slightly speed up or slow down as you align on it.

Pulling my knife out I quickly cut his belt and stripped the case from it. I figured it would go into the backpack later. I shifted my attention to the fifth body and saw what looked like an AC/92 under him. Rolling him over onto his back confirmed it.

The AC/96-2 took the same rounds as the less reliable AK's and being a high speed, 2-round burst AK-variant model, every time you pulled the trigger, fired two bullets nearly simultaneously, that would hit nearly exactly the same spot on a target up to 100 meters away. Plus I found three more clips for it.

With that in hand, I un-shouldered the AK, stripped its clip, pocketing it and discarded the rifle then, hanging the GP over my left shoulder this time, I right-shouldered the new AC and made my way back into the building.

Crouching in the relative safety of the darkness, I shrugged off the backpack and quickly transferred all but two of the clips I'd accumulated into it, then as I was starting to thread it back onto my back, a notion hit me and I reached into it, located the PS-2 scope and astoundingly, was able to attach it to the AC!

Excellent! I thought joyfully.

At that point I could probably have ducked back down the embankment and slipped away but I figured as long as I'm on a run, why not push it a little longer, so I carefully moved out of the bathroom and turned quietly into the showroom entrance.

A quick and careful search of the ground floor of the building resulted in standard supplies like vodka, bandages, sausage and med kits as well as a large supply of ammo for the AC and GP but reaching the limits of my ability to carry the weight, I took only 5 more clips of each

I was climbing the ladder to the rooftop level of the building, figuring a possible sniper up there, and as I slowly poked my head through the opening, I saw his shoulder around the edge of the wall there.

I quietly made my way up the balance of the stairs and upon clearing the floor level, quietly stepped to the doorway onto the roof, peered out and we both made eye contact simultaneously. I already had the AC out and stitched him with 3 rounds causing him to step backward in recoil but not drop.

Crap! Damned good armor. I thought, as he recovered and I stitched him again causing him again to back pedal before recovering.

What the Crap? I thought as I stitched him a third time but this time he went down dropping the SVDm-2, sniper rifle he was carrying. Keeping low to the rooftop level, I quickly looted it from him, shouldered it alongside the GP, and then grabbing up his 2 extra clips, ducked back into the tower base out of sight of the still unrevealed 2 additional thermals and started climbing to the top of the tower for a better look.

Upon reaching the top of the tower I peered cautiously out the open windows and found both crouching behind cover inside the showroom, opposite the building I was in, targeting the rooftop I'd just climbed from.

Too far for the GP or AC so I switched to the SVD and sighted in.

It took 7 shots to get the damned thing to hit them, worn as it was, but eventually I got both as they attempted to return fire, and satisfied with the count now, was about to stand and start descending when my PDA lit up two more thermals somewhere nearby, so I stopped and started looking from the tower.

I couldn't see anything so I took out the binoculars and started scanning and they popped right up outside the front of the building. Two Z's ambling westerly down the abandoned roadway.

I watched them for a while as they passed the building, and as no other thermals showed on my PDA, I abandoned the SVU and started back down to loot the Mono's in the showroom and head south.

On my way crouching down the breezeway between the buildings, the two Z's on my PDA zeroed off and no threats showed, so I straightened up and entered the Ports main room to search for the last dead Mono.

I found him where I shot him in the back of the building behind makeshift cover along with a nice looking Vintar and Winchester shotgun laying close by near the puddle of blood.

Again, I looted them finding little of interest, stashed the Vintar and the GP in the backpack this time along with two extra clips of ammo for the

Vintar, left shouldered the AC and with the shotgun and 14 extra shells, set out again southward toward the hospital and eventually the military outpost.

The whole ordeal had lasted approximately 20 minutes and I felt astounding! Pumped up on adrenaline, my heart beating fast and a throbbing in my ears.

Now I remembered why I craved these excursions!



Chapter 8

Outpost Gamma

“Have you ever been some place and thought you were the only one there and then suddenly realized you were?”

I was heading due south now, staying on some road called Druzhby something street, staying close to the building walls which meant dashing through bushes and trees between the buildings rather than using the perfectly good roadway primarily because it was well travelled by the Z's.

Why the crap did they use the friggin roads anyway? I wondered. Certainly not for convenience? Did Z's get tired? Did they get fed up with tripping over shrubs and roots? Friggin sunsabitches! I sure was!

I'd made it nearly past the 126 hospital building about half way to the laundromate with no contacts when my PDA piped 1 thermal. It turned out to be another Z lodged in the stairwell of the south end of the hospital, standing quietly in a room by a window turning his lazy circles of indecision. His form would appear briefly in the darkness of the room and set off the PDA detection.

The light was fading due to a storm rolling in and where he was, in the

darkness of the building, made him nearly impossible to see, so I rose up a couple times to taunt him out. Then staying low and below the windows, I leaned the shotgun against the building next to me, shouldered the AC, and waited till he stepped out of the shadows of the doorway 20 feet down from me where I could get a bead on him and dropped him with one double shot of the AC.

The loot was OK and I scored another wad of cash but as usual for a Z, not spectacular. The trouble I was now facing was that I was pushing the maximum weight limit of my ability to carry and it was weighing down on me pretty good.

I was already at the point of having to stop to catch my breath every couple minutes and a couple more kilos would make it impossible to carry.

Ok, I thought, No more looting till I managed to offload some of what I'd gathered.

The rest of the trip south was uneventful, the roadway was heavily over grown along the side providing good cover for me and I made it all the way to the back entrance road and turned to head in from the rear. When I got within 30 meters of the outpost building, a converted Laundromat, my PDA started pinging again.

First 1 then 2 then 4 thermals and I was hoping I was picking up the friendly PDA's inside the outpost. Four isn't a lot of bad guys but with little cover to hide behind it was like fighting 12.

I debated circling but decided the Thermals might still be far enough out of the proximity circle to be only a small threat, and I was so close to assistance in a fire fight from the other guys right then, so in the end I decided to go for it, and despite the weight I was carrying, I sprinted the last 20 meters for the door and made it inside breathless but with no issues.

The power was off and the only light was what was still filtering in through the cracks in the steel panels covering the windows as I entered so I threw the bolts on the door in place and backed up carefully, watching the door for any sign of attempted entry.

While standing there with the shotgun in hand waiting, a thought struck me and I started backing up to a column to take some cover. I figured the shotgun was a better close assault weapon than the AC, and even though I was sure it was already loaded, I jacked another round just in case, watching the good shell skitter across the floor for retrieval later.

No gun was of any use to anyone unless loaded and it was always better safe than sorry afterwards. I'd just picked up the loose shell and inserted it into the magazine when I heard the first voices. Casual but strict, issuing orders.

As I stood there watching the door and concentrating on the sounds of boots scuffing on the grade outside, I knew something was wrong inside as well.

There was no sound inside at all.

No talking, no radios, no weapons being cleaned no nothing.

Then to compound the current matter, the 4 thermals on my PDA turned into 8 and then 12 and I knew I was in for a hell of a fight if they found me, even if I stayed inside.

With the doors locked down now I took a quick glance around the main room and saw nothing.

Like I thought, there was no one here and I knew then that if I explored, I'd find the same empty rooms upstairs and down that I had here, now.

Crap! I thought, as I waited for the coming assault.

Someone outside gave an order in Ukrainian or Russian and after a couple seconds, boots jogged up to the door and someone tried it.

Discovering it locked, they shouted back something about forcing it but after the first guy returned what sounded like an order, the boots turned quickly and lopped away.

The seconds turned into minutes and the minutes rolled by, and my

PDA chirped the numbers back down 4 then 2 then none and I knew for the moment I was ok.

I was sitting there in the empty lobby, nerves tight as guitar strings, wondering how I'd have managed to skin my way through that firefight, when I remembered that the doors on the side of the building to the machine shop were blown off their hinges, allowing anyone in that wanted to get in, and a short distance through the machine shop to the double swing doors right next to me.

This WAS my lucky day. I thought cynically.

I walked carefully to the swing doors, pushed them open nervously and made a fast scan around the room finding nothing but heavy laundering equipment. I entered the machine garage and wound my way to the side of the building, where I found the door still blown off its hinges.

Approaching it carefully I raised the binoculars and scanned the outside for thermals but found nothing so I moved back into the shadows and reentered the lobby through the double doors still in place.

A quick scan of the machine bay produced some chain, but with no lock, I simply looped it a couple times through the handles and clumsily tied it, then slid a bunch of crates and furniture from the lobby in front of the doors.

Then I started for the stairs to see what was upstairs.

The stairs climbed up halfway to a broad landing then doubled back and climbed the rest of the way to the second floor. On the landing I could see into the second-floor lobby, and as expected, found it was empty as well.

Apparently, Col Kowalski and what was left of his unit had all bugged out. Not surprising considering he wanted to get back anyway, but I thought, disappointedly, for sure there'd be some faction still there.

Being as Kowalski's quarters were empty and his cot still clean as a whistle, and being as the rain was now setting in hard and night was closing in, I decided to stay the night here and I set about making myself

comfortable.

The latrine down the hall was still functional so I evacuated in it and then washed up a bit, undressing down to my pants only and washing what I could with one of the rags and soap still in there, then hanging them out to dry. Then I set about washing myself.

The water was cold but felt great and when I'd finished, I was exhausted and strung out, so I grabbed a towel that was folded crisply on the countertop, gathered up my clothes and the vest and, still dripping water, made my way naked, back down the corridor to Kowalski's quarters, being sure to close all the doors on the way. Opening doors made noise and noise was the only alarm I had here, so any closed door was a good door.

Upon entering the Col's quarters, I closed and bolted the door then slid his desk as quietly as I could, against it. Once that was done, I hung the clothes and BPV again to dry thoroughly, and using the towel, dried myself off.

As I sat on the edge of the bed contemplating sleep I noticed that the safe was standing open. Walking over to inspect closer, to my surprise, I found a fresh bottle of Stoli vodka.

I remembered a tin cup on the desk and after retrieving it I went back to the cot with the cup and bottle, sat on it and immediately opened the bottle and poured out a healthy amount.

The vodka tasted wonderful and slowly ebbed away my tenseness. After a little while I leaned back on the cot and pillow, and once again my mind was filled with memories of the Asian girl. I was half way through the second cup, picturing that woman naked beside me when I finally fell asleep.

It was probably 5:30am when I woke. The pre-dawn light was just beginning to filter through the cracks and seams of the steel plating covering the windows and I lay there on the cot thinking about how to handle the coming day.

Sleep had been uneventful and thorough and I was now feeling refreshed and a bit anxious to get started. In about an hour I'd be inside the

moldy, cold, underworld tunnels leading back into Jupiter and I was wondering whether I'd have to deal with the gas in them again, and what wild life had found its way back down inside since I was last there.

No matter how many Loners I talked to who had been through it, just about everyone told me they had to fight their way through Snorks, dogs, rats and an occasional Chimera.

Seems like you no sooner clear the way and right after you walk through, the guys start reappearing again.

Then there was the gas. I didn't have a gas mask and there obviously wasn't anybody here to buy one from. Nor had anybody I'd clipped so far had one, so looting didn't even help me. If the gas was still there, trip over, and I'm back topside looking for another route into Jupiter.

I didn't like that thought because, as I recalled, that would involve Pripyat and a particularly heavy area of PSI emission for which, like the gas, I had no protection. The Psi block capsules would work for a short time but were only so good.

On the up side though, it had been a long time since I was last down there, and I'd heard rumors that some Freedom squad had welded all the doors permanently open, so maybe by now the gas had evacked out. That would be a good thing.

Reaching into my backpack, I extracted a sausage and cut off a quarter of it, wrapping and replacing the balance into the backpack again.

As I laid there I could hear the occasional rapid fire of an automatic rifle somewhere in the distance, as well as a small group of Flesh that passed by below the window

Signs of human life here anyway. I thought.

The rifles sounded like AK's but there was also another one that was different. Maybe an IL or AR. I figured the AK's were bandits since that was the rifle of choice for that scum but the IL's and AR were harder to place because Freedom, Duty and the Loners used those rifles.

The Flesh hooves on the concrete outside the window were now

unmistakable and the snorting and mewling noises merely confirmed it.

Odd, I thought. Typically, there was a pack of dogs nearby any group of Flesh. They fed off the remains the flesh left behind and occasionally a fight would occur between them.

As the thought crossed my mind I heard the first of at least three dogs start barking in the distance.

"Uh huh. I thought again affirming my suspicions.

Time to get up I guess. I thought as I stirred and rose from the cot.

If I don't get started I'll be here again tonight and that thought didn't sit well at all. In the Zone, feet that weren't moving were usually dead feet and I got mine onto the floor stretching and yawning as I did so.

The trip to the lav was again unremarkable. I wasn't as concerned about noise this time so I moved the furniture and opened the door with little regard.

When I returned I set about getting dressed again, the clothes now dry. When I finally pulled the BPV over my head, I took a little more time to readjust the straps and elastics making it fit better and more comfortably, then made the cot backup and stowed the remains of the vodka back in the safe for the next guy that came along.

I exited the office quietly this time and moved swiftly down the corridor and stairs to the lobby again.

When I reached the floor, I made a slow and meticulous check of my arms to make sure they were loaded and chambered then moved carefully to the doors leading to the machine bay and unblocked them.

The access to the underground was off the side of the Laundromat and going out the front made no sense either distance wise or security wise.

Cracking them open quietly, I set my foot against the base of the doors and peered into the gloom. One of the things I'd learned the hard way was that if something was on the other side and saw you open the door, jumping

you was far more difficult if you still had the door between you and him, than if you didn't, and putting your foot against the base made it harder for the door to hit you when the thing on the other side hit it.

Noting no offensive smells, noises or sounds I opened the door a bit more and carefully moved into the gloom of the machine room, around a pile of abandoned furniture, and toward the broken doors leading outside.

The doorway was located on the side of the building, and turning left led to a paved parking and storage area in the rear complete with additional storage out-buildings and fenced areas. To the right led to the front of the building.

Straight out the doorway and 5 meters away led to the remains of a burned out and collapsed Quonset, the only remains being a few steel columns with barely clinging sheet metal and scattered crates. Just beyond that and slightly left some 30 meters further was the covered and fortified access hole to the Jupiter underground. A long way to go with very little cover.

After peering in all directions from the gloom of the machine bay I moved carefully and nervously across the first 15 meters to the Quonset and crouched, looking in all directions for movement, but saw nothing. Picking my way carefully through the debris diagonally while still glancing all around, I made my way to the other side and paused, crouching again behind some concrete rubble.

The access hole was 15 meters away and there was no cover between it and me, so moving into the open was no choice.

After 2 minutes of scanning I determined it to be relatively safe and bolted, still crouching, toward the hole, and that's when hell broke loose.

Rats! I sensed them before I actually heard them start scampering and screaming, and looking over my shoulder, saw them coming from one of the storage buildings toward me.

The damned things were fast and worse than dogs because their teeth and nails are iron hard and close to razor sharp and no armor held up long

against it, and knowing that all I had on my legs was the cotton weave, camo pants, that made the situation critical.

My options were limited though at that point. I knew going back for cover inside the Quonset was foolish since there was so much debris I'd never be able to protect myself, and returning to the laundromat was out of the question since it was just too far to make it and I also knew I wasn't going to make it to the access hole much less get it open, assuming it wasn't locked down, get into it and get it sealed before they got to me, so all that left me was stand and fight it out.

I stopped and spun raising the Winchester to my shoulder and aiming in the general direction I let loose two quick rounds, jacking between shots and recovering aim as quickly as I could.

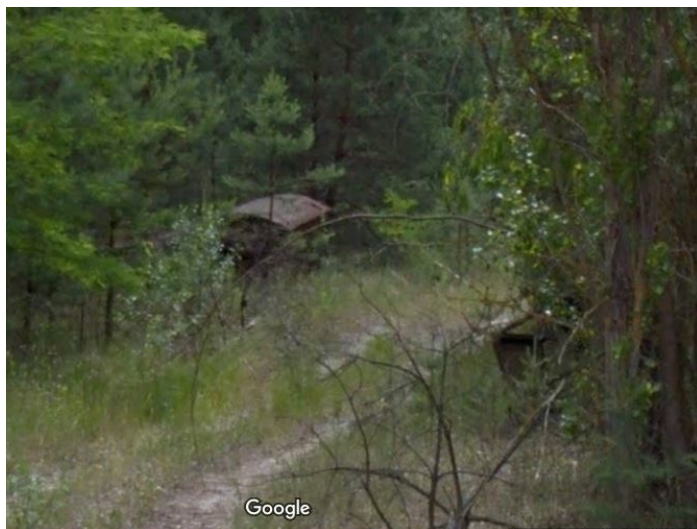
In the grey light of morning I could see three and I'd hit one full on and clipped another. The one I hit dropped dead right there and the wounded one circled back and away from me but the third one had kept on and it took another three rounds before I laid it dead just 2 meters from me.

My heart was pounding fast and the ringing in my ears from the discharge was deafening, and I immediately started scanning in all directions for additional threats that might have been alerted to my presence by the five discharges.

I was counting on seeing the new threats since I couldn't hear anything at the moment and after 30 seconds of looking that seemed like a lifetime, I again, turned toward the access hole and bolted for it. No sense in standing around waiting for new targets when some degree of safety was so near.

I made it to the access hole cover and noted to my joy that the hatch lid, though closed, wasn't locked and in fact had been welded in such a way as being incapable of being locked, further suggesting that Freedom had in fact, cleared the tunnels. I immediately raised the hatch cover, flipped on my PDA light and started down the ladder drawing the hatch lid closed over me as I descended, protecting me from assault by anything short of another human, and started a more leisurely descent down the ladder into the cool

depths of the tunnels.



Chapter 9

Jupiter Underground

There is an amazing train system that runs underground between Duga1 Transmission station some 50km N-NE of Chernoby, under the Pripjat River and the Reactor bay to Duga1 Receiving Station just S-SW of Chernobyl. I have traveled it un-noticed in the early days of the zone.

That system is also connected to the Jupiter Plant and Chernobyl Port and was used extensively prior to the reactor explosion to move supplies. Much of it is no longer passable due to collapses but much of it still is. And much of it is still used.

“Digger”

The ladder-way was shaped like an oval cut in half with the ladder on the flat side and the curved radius, a little over a meter across and behind you, leaving plenty of room for any type of armor suiting to move up or down it. The segmented, cast iron sleeve was a bit corroded and beginning to show signs of rusting but the galvanized ladder rails looked just like they did that last time I used it.

I was 6 meters down the ladder when I stopped and stepped off into an alcove, turned the light on my PDA off, rolled the Winchester around

from behind me, and while pointing it upward, looked up in the darkness for any sign of light that would indicate that someone was following me, but saw nothing.

I think I waited nearly 5 minutes before I finally turned the light on again and pointed it down the ladder.

It had been a couple years since I was last down this access hatch, so after looking down I was somewhat startled at first by the sheer depth of it when my flashlight beam simply disappeared into the darkness.

As I recalled, the depth was around 45 meters, and if I remembered correctly, there were narrow landings, or rather alcoves, just big enough that you could stop and stand or sit on a flat surface and rest, every 6 meters. The problem wasn't tiring. It was losing your grip and falling 45 meters down the shaft.

Another unintended feature of the alcoves was a certain degree of protection from being shot at from above or below as well as the defensive position you had if above the attacker. The drawback however, was that while your attacker had the luxury of being able to move about, you didn't.

As I crouched there in the darkness I turned my flashlight off again allowing my eyes to become accustomed to the sheer blackness of the hatchway and the ringing in my ears slowly faded until I could begin to hear the dripping of water and the occasional snapping ring of metal as it contracted and expanded due to the temperature.

There was no sound above me or below me other than those and after another 5 minutes I moved to the ladder again and started down for the next alcove.

The going was slow and nerve racking since I had no idea where the next rung was or for that matter, if there even was a next rung in the sheer darkness, and I debated numerous times sacrificing my night vision for light until I started thinking about red light on ships and subs and then I remembered the PDA. With a little manipulation, the color might be adjustable.

Extending my foot backward I noted that there was a great deal more void than there should have been and determining this to be a rest point, I

dropped down another rung and checked again repeating the process till I ultimately hit my sole against the shaft wall again.

Then rising two rungs, I extended my right hand out along the shaft wall and after briefly searching in the darkness, found the dismount rung I was looking for, transferred my right boot to the foot rung and then probed the darkness to the alcove floor. Finding it, I stepped into the alcove and squatted down to rest while reaching to my chest for the PDA.

After carefully removing it and touching the face it came to life illuminating the area with its display. It took a minute to cycle through the settings and locate the flash settings but the fruit of the labor was now, joyfully, a red flashlight, easy on the eyes, hard to see from a distance and strong enough to see close by objects. I carefully clipped the PDA to one of my BPV upper pockets and, pleased at the clever results, smiled as I rose to continue my descent.

It occurred to me that the continuous use might wear on the battery, but as I remembered the batteries were thermonuclear and had a half-life of like 20 years or something. Since the Zone was only about 10 years old, give or take, the batteries should still have a generous life span.

The next 3 levels were much easier with the light and I passed two rest-points before stopping at a third for several minutes. By then my arms were tiring and my calves were beginning to warm from the weight I was putting on the balls of my feet.

"Crap." I whispered.
"It's a long, friggin way down yet." I thought as I breathed in deeply.

The air had started out dry, stale and slightly cool as I began the descent but was gradually increasing in moisture and coolness the deeper I went, and I was somewhere near halfway, like maybe 18 meters down, when I slipped the first time.

I had been moving along mindlessly counting the rungs and methodically putting my left foot down to the next rung while simultaneously letting go with my left hand and grabbing the next lower rung, then dropping one rung and repeating the process with the right foot

and hand with increasing speed and agility, when my left boot slid off the rung while I was in the process of lowering and I lost my grip and started to drop.

I think I fell down the shaft about a meter before my flailing foot jammed into the ladder again and my right shoulder slammed up against the side of the cast iron sleeve stopping my fall.

My heart was racing and despite the coolness of the shaft, sweat was beginning to trail down my face and when I reached out and grabbed the ladder with my left extended hand, it slipped the first time before I managed a secure grip, and I realized there was some type of algae growing on the metal rungs.

“Stupid ass!” I silently scolded myself. “If you’d been paying attention instead of day dreaming you’d have noted the algae, dumbass.”

I stayed that way as still as I could while I mentally ran through a check of all my limbs for breaks or sprains, and to my great relief, aside from a sore ankle in the foot that had initially jammed in the ladder, everything seemed to be in working order. After a couple minutes my heart slowed to a moderate pace and I started carefully again to the next alcove point where I carefully got off and sat down to inspect more thoroughly.

“Jeez that was close.” I thought as I sat there massaging my ankle and thighs. “What I wouldn’t give for a set of cleats right now.”

After a moment I unclipped the PDA and switching it to white I shone it down the shaft and was again disappointed when I could make nothing out of the darkness.

“How far down am I?” I thought as I switched it back to red and secured it on my BPV pocket. I started recounting as best I could. “I must be at least half way. I would’ve thought I could see the bottom by now.”

“There must be something in the air that’s crapping up the light.” I thought.

Raising up again, I moved to the ladder and more carefully this time, having noted more of the algae on the ladder, I put one foot and then the

other onto the rungs and slowly started down again.

I slipped twice more on the way down, once with a misplaced boot and the second a grip failure, each time sending shivers and sweat down my spine. I finally found and stopped on the last alcove and after switching the color on the PDA, shone it down the shaft and there to my vast relief I saw the water on the floor of the tunnel just 4 meters down the ladder.

Then I heard the first sound different from all the rest I'd heard as I descended. Something not connected to the metal ladder or the iron shaft. The sound was unmistakably the splashing of boots in water and I knew at that point I wasn't alone.

I was still sitting quietly on the floor of the alcove wondering if they were friendlies or hostiles and trying to form a plan when I heard the sound of random, low muttering and I knew I had an unknown number of Z's somewhere around 5 meters away from me.

I had switched off the flashlight the second I heard the noise, but in the time that it was on I noted that the shaft opened onto a room about a meter below me, and that the ladder continued down the wall to the floor level.

That meant I would be exposed for 3 meters of descent with virtually no way to defend myself unless I dropped that 3 meters and managed to recover my gun in time. I was looking at the rungs considering this when I realized I still had the red light on and I quickly covered the LED lens dropping the shaft to total darkness.

"Darkness!"

"Ok. That's a good sign." I thought.

"Darkness means no flashlights below me." I reasoned. "I frigging hope anyway."

I uncovered the LED lens again and then slowly, carefully and as quietly as I could manage, stepped onto the ladder again and started down knowing in another step my legs would be in the open, soon followed by my ass, and trailed finally by my torso, all making a clear and slow-moving target

if anyone or anything was down there.

Chapter 10

Z's in The Dark

That was one of those moments you never forget. The thought that at any second you're going to be shot at and there's nothing you can do about it.

I descended to the last rung of the ladder above the opening and stopped there. Aside from the occasional drops of water pinging on the surface of the pools in the darkness down there and the creaks and groans of the supporting structure, I could now clearly hear the occasional splashing of boots in water so I knew I wasn't alone. I could also see that the floor below me was dry so the boots weren't too close. Or maybe the water started just outside the circle of view and they were close, or maybe there were two and the dry boots weren't making any noise. Crap.

After thinking on it a minute, I figured that if I stuck something down below me and it drew fire, it would accomplish two things. One, I'd know they were there and I could climb back up to the landing to fight it out relatively safely from the alcove a couple meters above me. Maybe.

Two. It would collect all the guys in one tight area, and since the Z's apparently never thought about battle tactics, and merely continued to shuffle to the closest point of engagement, they'd end up banging into each other directly below me firing upward. Maybe. And three. If it drew no fire it was ok to descend and once on the floor, find cover and battle it out safely.

Maybe.

Crud. I thought again. *An awful lot of maybe's.*

Once settled in, legs bent, butt near my ankles and shoulders against the wall of the shaft I started to think about the thing I was going to dangle down below me, and that's where I jammed up again. Trouble was, anything I dangled down there was likely to be hit and, at best, damaged, and at worst, destroyed. All I had on me that would dangle far enough down was what I was wearing and the rifles. Removing any clothing was going to require climbing back up the ladder to the landing and a lot of time removing crap to get to the jacket, not to mention having to drop it to get back up the ladder, not to mention later having to reverse order the removal to get it back on, and while I had the luxury of time now, I certainly didn't after the firefight started. Then there were the rifles and I wasn't at all happy about losing any of the rifles.

In the end it came down to convenience. I figured I could lose a rifle and hopefully salvage one from one of the Z's, along with more ammo, so I chose the AC since the GP was just too valuable and rare to sacrifice, and the Vintar was too damn short to extend. Plus, for some reason the Z's preferred the AK's, Vipers and AC's over just about any other rifle, or at least more that I'd run across in the past had them than any other rifle.

With the AC ready, I gripped it tensely with my left hand around the end of the barrel, and gripped the highest ladder rung I could reach with my right prepared to bolt up the ladder, and then slowly lowered it below the shaft opening.

I was so tense at that point that I nearly bolted when I heard another splash of boots but to my relief, there was no gunfire. Not down there? Or maybe they simply couldn't see it in the darkness, so I moved it gently toward the edge of the shaft and bumped it a couple times, listening acutely for the sounds of attention, and still heard nothing but the water dropping and the occasional shuffling.

I bumped it once more a little harder this time, and was horrified when it made a much louder noise than I'd intended, and I stopped dead still

and listened.

The shuffling had stopped.

I stayed there jammed up with every nerve tingling waiting for any sound at all, especially the sound of boots on the floor below me, and waited but heard absolutely nothing other than the background noises.

Were they gone? Were they quietly making their way beneath me right now? Were they... Then I heard the sound of shuffling feet again. Apparently, they were waiting too and hearing nothing else, started back into whatever it was they did when not engaged in combat.

I raised the AC back up, then slowly straightened up on the ladder and regained my footing, with every nerve pinging as I expected to be shot at any second, and made my way slowly down the ladder. Absolutely, nothing happened.

As my head cleared the access shaft I scanned quickly left and right and saw nothing but darkness, so I continued down nervously.

When I reached the bottom of the ladder and stepped gently down onto the rubble strewn floor I turned and the red light from the PDA illuminated the area in front of me and I recognized the antechamber off the main tunnel.

I'd forgotten a lot about the details of the architecture of this place but, like parts of a jigsaw puzzle that would suddenly appear as soon as enough other pieces were laid on the table, it was coming back to me in bits and pieces.

This was once another tunnel running parallel to the main tunnel but something had caused a massive collapse of the ceilings on either end, leaving only a 3-meter-high room about 18 meters long with rock and dirt blocking both ends. The only way out was back up the shaft or an archway between the two tunnels about 4 meters away on the right wall. The left wall was smooth and featureless.

Standing there now I pulled the GP37 around and quietly inspected the weapon for obvious problems. Racking another round was out of the

question since alerting who or whatever was out there in the tunnel to my presence was a bad idea all the way around, so I had to settle for a visual inspection and faith that I had, in fact, chambered a round and when the time came to pull the trigger, something much more impressive than a snap would occur.

Crud. This is going to be awkward. I thought as I edged quietly closer to the corner.

I had to peer around the corner and that meant my left eye would have to take the place of my dominant right. It also meant that if fighting was to be done, initially it was going to have to be done with the left hand rather than the right as well, and that was a little alarming too.

I reached the corner with no issues and slowly peered around it and into the darkness beyond and saw, again, absolutely nothing but darkness.

“Crap!” I thought. “What I wouldn’t give for even a trickle of light in there.”

I was formulating my next move when I saw the light. A flash of light washed left across the tunnel, briefly illuminating the far tunnel wall before suddenly stopping and washing right again, leaving the tunnel in darkness again.

“Ok.” I thought. “One guy with a body or head lamp.

If that’s all there was, super. I’d have the advantage but there probably would be more so I waited a couple more minutes for additional lights. After maybe 3 minutes the light pattern remained singular along with the splashing of a single pair of boots in the water and I figured it was time to do something.

Question was. What?

“Only two options here”. I thought; go on the assault or on the defense. If I started forward in assault I was going to draw fire. With no cover, all I had going for me was surprise and good aim and in the near absolute darkness, aim would be anything but good.

On the other hand, though, if I made a noise and drew the guy into the archway, I had cover and his light to aim at, making up a lot for the downside left handed position.

In the end I chose defend. Then there was the rifle choice. Shotgun, Vintar, GP or AC? The shotgun was good for close range but this was a little far for it, The Vintar was a fast repeater, the 9-39 ammo was really good against armor and accuracy was high but the ammo was also expensive and hard to find much less replace. The GP was a good strong round, accurate and even had a short distance combat scope but my ammo was limited, hard to find or scavenge and expensive to buy as well. The AC was the final choice. Easy to find and loot ammo and easy to replace if necessary, so I pulled it around and as I carefully took a step backward while left shouldering the rifle and wondering what kind of sound I should make that would get the guy's curiosity without starting fire, I stepped on something glass and it broke like a gunshot under my boot.

The noise was deafening, or at least it seemed that way and my dilemma was resolved right there.

"Crap!" I said out loud for the first time since leaving the laundromat, and jerked the rifle to my cheek, sighted left eye through the PS-2 scope while keeping my right eye open for more sight, and waited as the Z, still out of sight around the corner of the other tunnel, immediately turned its light to the archway and started simultaneously shuffling toward the archway while firing short, 3 round bursts of what sounded like a Viper.

As I watched the light grow stronger while tensely waiting for a target, the bullets pinged off the far archway wall tearing into the brickwork and sending shards of brick and dust harmlessly in all directions, and I heard the report of at least two more rifles further into the tunnel, so I readjusted my aim for what I hoped was a high torso and ideally, head shot that would make this engagement short and waste little ammo, and waited.

When I finally saw the shoulder first come shuffling into view behind the corner, I was tempted to shoot but I took a breath and remained as calm as I could and waited another half second for the head, adjusting again for the height and rocking motion and when it finally cleared, pulled the trigger

of the 2-round burst mode and put both rounds on the mark.

There was a satisfying puff of red mist behind its head and the Viper immediately stopped firing and dropped to the tunnel floor, clattering as it rested. The thing stood there for a moment while the other rifles continued to fire from the distance, occasionally hitting the walls around me, and I debated another shot but before I could decide, it fell forward to its knees and crumpled to the floor dead, its head lamp illuminating the white tiles on the ceiling 4 meters above me and spreading out into the tunnel giving a small amount of light in both directions.

“Excellent! “I thought. Now I have at least a little light.

I moved quickly into the 3-meter-long archway to the far corner and stopped again, carefully peering around it into the semi darkness of the main railway tunnel for the next guys, and noted several things.

First off, there were in fact two more, about 20 meters away, shuffling toward me and firing 3 round bursts in my direction. There was also a lot of debris in the main tunnel. Large culvert pipes, maybe a meter in diameter lay strewn about the floor from an overturned flat rail car between me and the oncoming threats, a plus for me since it provided cover. And finally, the floor of the tunnel was covered with water that looked to be knee deep in some places, ankle deep in others.

The Z I'd just shot was laying still on its back, half in the water and half out and I knew that the light it was wearing would stay on, lighting up this portion of the tunnel for another 20 years or so unless someone scavenged it and at the moment, I didn't have the time so I quickly chose a pipe from which to defend my position and moved out into the water in the main tunnel for it.

I was four steps out into the water that ran down the center of the tunnel and moving swiftly forward when I found the first of the two rails embedded invisibly in the floor beneath the surface of the water. My boot, now thigh deep hit it as I was moving forward and when I couldn't get my foot under me I staggered, lost balance and dropped painfully to my knees, lunging out with my left hand to stop my continued fall, while

simultaneously raising the rifle in my right hand to keep it out of the water.

I was now kneeling in water that rose to my crotch and after quickly assessing that there was no damage other than my pride, I rose swiftly, gathered my feet beneath me, and while mindful of the second rail, made my way forward to the group of pipes I was headed for.

As I neared the pipe I noted a small sack on top of it, with nothing else near it. Reaching out I squeezed the sides of the sack, and after a second, determined it to be full of bolts.

Odd, I thought quizzically and then dismissed it and assumed a position leaning forward on the pipe, relatively safely sighting through the PS-2 scope on the area where I figured the head of the first of the two guys would shortly appear. They were both about 18 meters away, shuffling their way mindlessly through the pipe debris toward me while shooting short bursts as they advanced and when the first one appeared in the open, I pulled the trigger again.

BAM, BAM! The rifle kicked as the two shots went off into the tunnel.

Recovering the sights, I was disappointed to see the Z I'd shot at merely readjust its posture as apparently only one round hit.

"Crap!" I said low and under my breath. Four rounds gone and, apparently, the rifle's not as accurate as I was hoping. I thought and decided to wait another couple seconds for them to get a little closer before trying again.

As I watched the first one through the scope, ignoring the somewhat alarming occasional pings off the pipe below my elbows, I judged the closing distance and this time noting in the dim light that the two coming at me appeared to have been Loners dressed in leather jackets, I sighted on the center, upper torso just below the neck, and pulled the trigger again loosening two more rounds.

This time I got a satisfying hit and the Viper dropped to the tunnel floor as the guy I'd hit was thrown backward off his feet, splashing to the floor. Once again however, my relief was short lived when I noted while

adjusting my sights on the second guy, that the first was thrashing in the water, definitely not dead yet.

Knowing it was at least out of the fight for the next couple seconds, I continued sighting the next guy and pulled the trigger once more, this time satisfied with the hit that removed most of its neck, toppling the head obscenely to rest on its shoulder before it too, dropped to the water dead. Then I quickly readjusted my aim for the first guy and shot again just as it was beginning to regain its balance to rise and sent it sliding 2 meters across the floor, dead.

The whole engagement had lasted all of 30 seconds and expended 8 rounds, and as I was turning to retreat back to the first guy for looting, I thought about the odd sack of bolts

There must be a reason someone would leave a sack of bolts down here, I thought, so I turned again and grabbed it, pocketing it for later inspection, and headed for the dead guy.

A fast search produced another med kit, a sausage roll, a bottle of water, one clip of ammo from the Viper and two more in its pocket, and another clip of ammo for the small caliber pistol, which I pulled from the handle, stored and discarded the pistol.

I briefly considered grabbing the head lamp, now blazing straight up but the strap for it was torn nearly through and would make it impossible to secure. Then I looked at the Military issue, Berill-5m armored suit it was wearing. This suit incorporated a PSZ-9a military bulletproof vest with beryllium coating but the thing had bled out all through it and it was obviously beat to hell and torn anyway making it only marginally better than my Assault style BPV so I just stripped the PDA from it, pocketed that and rose to check the next two.

So far there was no additional noise so for the moment I figured I had time and I moved carefully through the knee-deep water toward the other two guys.

The red lighting from my PDA was a real blessing lighting up the area in front of me well enough to see my way to where I'd shot the guys but it

didn't penetrate the rippling, mirror black surface around me at all so I had to guess at where they went down, now lying beneath the opaque surface.

I was 4 steps out, moving quickly when I nearly tripped and stumbled over something invisibly lodged in the floor beneath that surface. After regaining my balance, I readjusted my path to avoid the obstacle, no good could come of tripping over something submerged in the water, falling and being cut or impaled, and slowed my pace a little more taking more care in advancing using my boots to locate submerged crap and avoid tripping.

I was nearly to the other two guys when I heard the sound of boots shuffling, and murmuring further down the tunnel, and knew I was again faced with new threats.

It took a couple minutes to locate the first of the two other guys beneath the surface, and when I pulled him to a sitting position, water raining down from his upper torso, I decided that anything on these guys was now either worthless or subject to questionable operation and I didn't need "questionable" here so I quietly lowered the dead guy back down beneath the surface and didn't bother looking for the last guy.

I'd located both of the Vipers they were using by chance, lying near each other when I raised the first guy up but after a fast examination, determined they were shot to Crap, in far worse condition than mine and I was surprised that one even fired at all, so swapping out at that point would not be in my favor.

I was hungry again and pulled sausage I'd looted from the first guy out of my pocket, stripped off the end of the plastic wrapping with my teeth and peeled back some of the wrapping. The first bite was wonderful and after I finished half of it, rather than go to the trouble of getting it into my backpack, I just dropped the last half in the water, watching it disappear as it penetrated the surface. Then I downed the water in the unopened bottle and simply dropped the now empty bottle which, unlike the sausage, floated lazily on the surface.

I guessed that it was about mid afternoon now and I knew I'd have to find some place relatively safe to bunk for some rest soon.

In the tunnels, there was no difference between night and day. It was always dark so you had to make yourself rest and sleep or you'd simply drop of exhaustion if you didn't and that could be deadly if you happened to be in a firefight or near an anomaly.

Here, however, wasn't an option though. There were threats nearby and although some distance was between us, that didn't mean they wouldn't move in my direction while I was sleeping so I continued on down the tunnel moving close to the walls in the shallowest parts of the water to keep the noise down till I reached a dogleg ahead of me in the tunnel and caught the flicker of a flashlight ahead of that.

There was again a lot of culvert pipes here and taking cover behind one I noted the flickering of fire light reflecting from the tunnel ceiling from behind a group of other pipes about 60 meters ahead of me. I still couldn't see any threats but I could hear the murmuring and sloshing of at least two.

With the red LED of my PDA shining faintly ahead of me, I continued slowly down the tunnel crouching near the left wall till I neared the first part of the dogleg and stopped there behind some sort of oversized, steel pipe attachment. Rising slowly, I looked over the top and immediately noted two military Z's carrying AK74's and moving slowly around a clearing in the tunnel that featured a small fire in the middle that was still slightly obscured by the piping.

Z's were odd.

No one knew why but for some reason they both feared the fire and reveled in it at the same time. Maybe the light, maybe the heat, but whatever the reason, they tended to move toward it till they got within 10 feet and then would either endlessly circle it or stop and stare at it until they were distracted or it went out. That could last for hours or days depending on the flame source.

Rumor had it that if you were near the fire and remained very still, they would approach the fire and not engage you. Again, maybe your body heat didn't register against the fire's heat or your smell didn't register

against the smoke but either way, they would circle and eventually stop right next to you to stare at it.

I'd never tested that theory and I'd never spoken with anyone who admitted to having experienced it but I'd heard rumor to that affect and testing it wasn't one of the items on my bucket list.

This distance was too long for the shotgun so again, I rolled the AC around and sighted the head of the Z that was closest to me. It was facing me, weaving slowly side to side as it shuffled around the fire and I picked a spot ahead of the motion where I figured his head would eventually be, and steadied myself for the shot.

I figured that the other Z, with its back to me, would take a couple seconds to turn and acquire, giving me time to realign on it and any other guys that might be in the area would require longer as well.

As I watched the first guy bob slowly into the reticule I briefly considered making another scan but lowering the scope now would mean losing the optimum shot on the first guy and I'd have to then wait till the second guy shuffled around to the same position, and that would be another 3 to 5 minutes during which time any number of other bad things could start up, so when it shuffled into the crosshairs I pulled the trigger.

CRACK CRACK!

The tunnel lit up briefly from the flash and my ears started ringing again. Both rounds fired close to one another, and at this distance both hit home and the head jerked backward, then realigned up and I could see the top portion of the first guy's head had disappeared. It shuffled one more step then dropped the AK and fell backwards to the tunnel floor.

I was realigning for the head of the second guy, which had by now stopped shuffling and was turning slowly to acquire me, when I noted a third guy in leather that briefly appeared in my scope and then disappeared as it rose from below the pipes and moved out of the reticule.

I squeezed off another two-round burst at the second military Z but the aim was off from the distraction and the shots hit low, into the torso protected by the military Bultat vest, and though the force of the impact

knocked him backward on his ass, he immediately corrected, slowly rose and resumed advancing while simultaneously squeezing off 3 round bursts from his AK at me.

Up to now I'd had the luxury of first shot surprise and then the time it took for them to find me and start aiming at me, so their shots were going wild, but that was changing rapidly and several of the AK rounds ricocheted off the pipes near me splintering concrete into the side of my face. Adding to that, the third guy that had joined the assault was armed with a shotgun and while the spread was wide at this distance, some of the shot was also hitting near me and I felt the bee sting of at least one pellet hit me in the shoulder.

"Crap!" I muttered as my aim was thrown off and the next two rounds went over its head.

Now I was getting nervous again. I had two advancing and if I didn't get them soon, they'd be on top of me and the cover I currently enjoyed would become useless.

Another of the drawbacks to fighting with Z's is that they don't apparently fear death. Once they started advancing, regardless of the numbers of their adversaries, the degree of damage they were taking or the terrain they had to pass through, they didn't stop till they hit an impassable block or you killed them.

I've wasted 40 or 50 rounds on them occasionally because I misjudged my initial shot. Then the following firefight ran long, either my aim being bad or the rifle condition so bad that the rounds didn't hit or when they did, it only wounded the Z and it kept advancing. Typically, I would finally manage either a lucky, critical hit or a hit that shook it up long enough for me to get the time to aim for a critical hit. I didn't have enough ammo now to spend the rest of the day tearing them apart.

Plus. I had no idea if there were any more guys advancing now since the muzzle flash and report noise had destroyed my night vision and hearing for the next 4 or 5 minutes. I had to wrap this up quickly.

I twisted the rifle to the side where I found the selector switch, quickly

flipped the selector from 2 RND to Full and then raised the rifle back to my firing position, placed it against my now bleeding cheek, sighted on the advancing military Z, shockingly now only 20 meters out, and gently pulled the trigger then let off, while managing the kick of the rifle for accuracy, and managed to stitch the Military Z up the torso and through the head before losing two additional rounds above it.

That was enough, and though it didn't produce the same dramatic affect the first headshot did, the Z stopped firing, dropped the AK and then toppled over onto its side and lay still.

"Two down, one to go." I thought to myself as I relaxed just a little and realigned the rifle to the third advancing guy, now about 30 meters out and still firing double rounds from the sawn-off double barrel it was holding.

The shotgun rounds were nearly dead on now and I quickly lowered down below the pipe again to wait for a good timed shot just as several pellets hit where I was and ricocheted off the pipe fitting. The Z was firing in a quickly recognizable pattern of 2 rounds individually fired, then as it shuffled on toward me it would casually lower the gun, break it open, slip in two more shells, close the gun and realign for another 2-round discharge, repeating the pattern as it advanced, and I waited nervously for the next 2 rounds to go off.

When they did, I quickly rose again, replaced the rifle to my bloody cheek, sighted quickly on the Z as it was slipping the next 2 shells into the shotgun chamber and pulled the trigger again briefly.

By this time the Z was down to about 20 meters and I was aiming for a torso shot through the leather jacket so the 5 or 6 rounds that hit it caused it to drop the shotgun and fall to the floor of the tunnel, jerking spastically in the water. I knew I had only a minute or so to take advantage of this opportunity, so I rose higher, aimed and tapped the trigger again letting loose another 2 or 3 rounds before the rifle stopped firing, and the Z lay still in the water. I immediately dropped back to my knees for cover and waited for any additional fire.

Nothing.

No firing, no Z's, no additional flashlights. Nothing.

I was just about to rise and start cautiously forward to loot the dead Z's when I noticed from the corner of my still night blinded eye, what I thought might be a flash of light down the tunnel around the dogleg corner. I briefly considered ignoring it and had put one step forward for the side of the steel pipe I was still behind when I reconsidered.

I'd been in many a fight in the past and been wounded more than once when someone shot me because I stupidly assumed the fight was over, moved from my cover, and was surprised by another combatant who had either just arrived or was waiting for me to jump and run.

I stopped immediately, shifted my weight and returned to the firing cover I was behind, sighted the scope on my AC through the piled up pipe debris in front of the dogleg corner while peering through it and waited for whatever might still be out there.

It took about 2 minutes and then the sweep of a head-mounted flashlight became discernible behind the pipe debris and I knew I had additional company.

Another 2 minutes passed and the light grew stronger, swaying back and forth. Now I knew two things. One, they were getting closer and two, they were Z's again.

Sure enough, one of them passed my view sighted through one of the broken culvert pipes and was gone again behind the pile before I could pop off a shot.

I was waiting patiently now, knowing I had the double advantage of both surprise and distance, for the others to show.

Z's generally traveled in groups of three. Again, no one knew why, they just did. You might occasionally find them singly or in groups of 2, or four but never more than 4.

Groups of 5 would always split forming a pair and a group of 3 and I'd watched two groups of 4 from a safe distance, approach each other one day and when they intersected and crossed paths, one split off from each group, joined and started off in a third direction as if orchestrated by some

unknown, unspoken orders.

There was no indication of acknowledgement of departing, no 'goodbye's or 'so long's' and no hello's or handshakes of acknowledgement in the union. Odder still, no confusion as to which one would leave the group. They just seemed to understand the order and the correct one simply left when they discovered another individual Z to pair with.

Five seconds after the first one passed two more shuffled past the pipe orifice and all three were now moving up the tunnel, still obscured from view behind the pile of broken pipes at the dogleg, and I moved the rifle slowly to sight the place I assumed they would emerge into view from the darkness.

I had been waiting 3 or 4 seconds sighting through the scope when I decided to recheck my aim. In the near black darkness, there was no way to judge what you were seeing through the scope. With near zero light, nothing showed so you could be far left or right of your target or even too high or low and not know it till your target was on top of you. It was always a good idea in darkness, to occasionally drop the sight and allow your peripheral vision to detect, correct and realign your aim.

When I did, I saw to my surprise, that my aim was way off and one of the Z's was already out from behind the pile, now visibly lumbering up the tunnel and the other two were so close to appearing from behind the edge of the pile that their lights were plainly visible. As I raised the rifle to my cheek, I switched it back to 2 Rnd Burst, sighted on the first Z and took a deep breath, let it out slowly and pulled the trigger.

BOOMBOOM!

The report again deafened me and as the scope lowered again I saw to my joy that the first Z went down clean. In the meantime, the other two turned toward me, adjusted their aim and started firing 3 round bursts in the darkness at me.

Sighting on their lights made my aim great while they were aiming in the darkness at me and needed the muzzle flash to adjust, so I sighted on the second of the three, took another breath and let it out slowly and

squeezed the trigger again, scoring a second dead center hit, spraying Z blood and brain matter on the wall behind it and dropping it into the water, still and silent again.

The third one was more difficult. It had adjusted its motion and the new path moved it behind the pipe debris again.

Good news. It was not able to sight on me much less hit me.

Bad news. Neither could I, and it was getting closer as it moved.

I dropped the rifle sight and opened both eyes to find the Z, and when it emerged into view again 2 seconds later it shuffled into my view with just its head showing above the pile, the rifle currently firing off the hip, shooting safely into the pile in front of it rather than at me.

That was one more thing that was strange about Z's. They never fired by aiming. They always fired off the hip though their aim was amazingly accurate, and this one was following suit.

I raised the scope again and sighted on its head, adjusted ahead of its motion a little and when it moved into the cross hairs, pulled the trigger.

BOOMBOOM!

The rifle report yet again and the light on the third Z's head joyously went out indicating I'd hit it as well.

I crouched there in the darkness for another 4 or 5 minutes waiting for any more threats as my eyes and ears adjusted again, and thought about sunlight and fresh air.

Chapter 11

Unexpected Currents

I crouched there for maybe 5 minutes before finally moving. It was my bladder urging me more than the desire to move on.

As I stood and scanned the area for whatever I could see in the darkness, I stretched and cracked my back, then carefully laid my rifle down on the pipe fitting in front of me, unzipped my trousers and relieved myself in a break between the pipes where I was pretty certain it wouldn't splash back on me.

It was a bad thing to be wearing urine on your clothes. It attracted all kinds of nasty things from amazingly distant places.

After I'd finished and zipped up I picked up my rifle and moved cautiously out from behind the fitting and approached the first guy.

I stripped the clip from the AK I found near him, then tossed the gun. Aside from my disinterest in it, it was too beat up to use and not worth anything to anyone other than another Z. Further searching resulted in another clip of ammo for my AC, a partial clip for the Viper, another bottle of water, some Vinca, an artificial equivalent of vitamin K that increases blood coagulation speed, and best of all, 2 army med kits.

Aside from loose bandages and hydrogen peroxide, there were three types of medkits you found here.

Standard first aid kits, good for stopping bleeding, cleaning and patching up small wounds and bullet holes. Army Med Kits, pretty much the same thing but faster blood coagulation, as well as painkillers, antibiotics and immunity stimulators, and Scientific med kits, which include items used to stop bleeding, treat burns, clean wounds, and a variety of different injuries as well as anti-radiation pills and medicines.

When in the field, First Aid kits were fine but for combat, Army kits were much better.

I slipped out of my backpack and stashed them quickly, then moved on to the next of the 6, found another water bottle, a first aid kit, another near full clip of ammo for the AC and some moldy bread which I tossed. The rest produced a dozen shotgun shells and several full clips of ammo but little more.

Having finished the looting, I stood and quietly began to move on towards the dogleg and eventually the train barn that I knew was not that far from me. I should reach it in about an hour assuming I didn't encounter any more resistance on the way. There I could find some safe and defensible quarters to put up for the night, or day or whatever it was down here.

When I reached the dogleg in the tunnel, I veered course slightly and peered down the tunnel from the safety of the corner, exposing as little of myself as I could manage, but I could see nothing in the blackness beyond what my PDA lit up in the 4 or 5 meters it reached.

Damned darkness. I thought to myself. *What I wouldn't give for some friggin lighting.*

By now my ears had stopped ringing and I could again hear the dripping water as it splashed into the pools beneath it, and the creaks and groans of the structural members supporting this underground tunnel. The air now had an even cooler feel to it than before and I thought I could detect slight movement leading down the tunnel ahead of me.

"There's some type of opening ahead" I thought.

This part of the tunnel was narrower than the part I'd been in. That part was the travel way that the railway cars used to get back and forth and the steel rails were still embedded in the floor but the tunnel was barred off at the dogleg for some reason and when I approached it, the Geiger counter in my PDA started to crackle, warning me of radiation issues behind the bars.

The dogleg was roughly hewn through the tunnel wall and rock and then shored with rough-hewn timbers to prevent collapse and all around it the rubble and debris lay scattered on the floor.

"Probably done to bypass the radiated section barred off above it." I thought as I inspected it.

It sloped down maybe 2 meters into a fast running stream of water in a smaller parallel tunnel. Only 5 meters across, this tunnel appeared to be a catch basin or culvert with a 6-meter-high, arched ceiling, and lined with old, crumbling brick. There were walkways on both sides, about a meter wide, three meters up and I could see old, forgotten steel doors along it on both sides every 15 meters or so.

The new opening broke out through the wall nearly 3 meters below the walkway so unless you could manage to scale the brick wall to the walkway, you were faced with entering the water on the floor ahead. Water that ran freely and swiftly through it.

"Maybe a service tunnel or drain way." I thought as I peered at it in the dim red lighting, wondering how deep it was and how difficult navigating it would be.

"At least it's moving in the direction I want to go so I won't be fighting the current." I thought as I watched debris moving along on the surface.

I again looked at the broken opening trying to figure some way to get to the walkways above and after a couple minutes considering futile options, settled on the water below and took my first step into the inky blackness of the water.

The opening into the new drain way was hewn in such a way that there was a pool of water before you were actually into the drain way

current, so the water below me was relatively calm and debris swept out of the current into it was chaotically swirling around, trapped inside this pool until sucked back out again.

The first step wasn't that bad. My boots were already filled with water and my trousers, soaked from above with water that had adjusted to my body heat, but when the water rose over my boots to my thighs and started washing into my boots I realized the temperature was shockingly cold and stopped for a moment to re-evaluate this decision.

Crap that's cold! I thought as I stood still, adjusting to it.

This is definitely not, going to be fun. I thought as I started forward again, deeper into the water.

I was in just over my knees and had just extended my left boot from the calmness of the entry pool into the main throughway when I was stripped off my feet by the fast moving current.

My left boot was jerked forward down the drain way and I was spun slightly, losing balance as the rest of my leg was pulled in, and after throwing out my left hand into the water with my right holding the rifle above the surface, I landed on my ass, leaning backward slightly against the current, in freezing water up to my neck.

This would be a hilarious moment were it not for the life or death events around me but I chuckled anyway at the absurdity of it. After chiding myself for the misjudgment, I slowly adjusted and rose out of the water to a standing position, bracing against the current coming at me from the darkness behind me. Judging the push of the current, I shifted my balance and took a step forward, readjusted my balance and followed with the next step, alternating till I found a pattern of adjusting weight and balance in stepping that didn't result in falling again, and moved carefully along the drain way.

I'd been moving along in the darkness for what I assumed to be 2 hours when I heard it. The sound of rats, similar to my last encounter snorting and squealing in the distance ahead of me and I stopped in the current, shivering, and waited a couple minutes.

No way around this, I figured. If they were on the ledge above me I was a target for a jump, and if in the water, swimming was one thing they were good at. On the other hand, the current was swift and might be swift enough to drag them along away from me leaving only the ledge above to deal with.

Moving slowly and carefully I made my way to the center of the drain way and started forward again straining my eyes in the dim, red lit darkness for my targets ahead but again, saw nothing.

I rounded a slight curve in the drain way and my light suddenly and shockingly lit up the end of the tunnel. Ahead of me 15 meters or so, the drain way floor stopped at a brick wall and then rose to the height of the walkway above me and continued further into the darkness. There were two, one-meter diameter culvert pipes embedded in the lower portion of it, three quarters full of the water that was racing into them and disappearing and to top that off, they appeared to be barred with what looked like rebar from where I stood, maybe 8" apart. Enough to allow most of the debris to pass through but definitely not wide enough to allow me passage.

With absolutely no way much less desire to get through the bars and no way to reach the walkway I was contemplating the depressing thought of backtracking two hours back to the entrance again when I caught the motion of the rats on the walkway at the end of the tunnel ahead.

Freaking fantastic! I thought miserably. Even if I did backtrack 2 hours, then could manage somehow to get up to the walkway, then came back here another 2 hours, I could look forward to battling the rats on a walkway only one meter wide.

Then

To make matter worse, my spine froze when I heard the sound of a snork moving out there in the tunnel continuation and that made the entire scenario even more complicated.

Rats were one thing. On a narrow attack path, the shotgun would help

tremendously as long as the ammo held out. A few rats, no issue. An unending number on the other hand meant end of game but it was unlikely that there were that many. They simply didn't commune in large numbers.

Snorks on the other hand changed everything.

Thought to be the result of broken-minded soldiers left to "guard" the Zone after the first "blow out", Snorks are recognized by the loud growling noise they constantly produce.

The Snork is a horrifically mutated human soldier or Stalker and usually found wearing the tattered remains of uniforms and clothing scavenged from the bodies of other dead humanoids including boots, a GP-4 gas mask and a flailing hose.

Exposure to radiation and anomalies in the wake of the second Chernobyl disaster pretty much destroyed the human mind, leaving a feral, vicious beast psyche in its place, and twisted the body, creating a dangerous, relentless, fast, and vicious predator with claws that raked with razor-like results.

Bullet proof vests didn't last long against their onslaught because the outer material just tore up and the plates eventually fell out. On some occasions, Snorks have also been seen talking to each other, although the "language" they use is barely recognizable.

The best defense for hitting them was either distance and a high caliber rifle, or shotgun for close-up, and while I had a shotgun, when it came to Snorks, I vastly preferred running to standing to fight.

After debating the trip back to get to the walkway I'd just decided to do it when I noticed something on the right side of the wall that I hadn't seen before.

My red light just barely lit up what looked a lot like a doorway, rising out of the water, cut into the channel wall about half way between me and the end of the channel.

If the door was in fact open. I shifted my position in the water slowly and carefully to the left side wall to try and verify, but the frame of the door itself, assuming it was a door frame, obscured my view from this distance

and angle. Nonetheless, assuming there was a door, I could maybe sneak down and through it, bypassing entirely the need to engage in combat.

I decided to go for the door instead of the walk and made my way back to the right wall and, while holding the rifle above the water, slowly lowered my frame down into the icy water till it reached my neck. When I'd lowered my torso into the water the PDA's light went dark as soon as it submerged and though it continued to glow red beneath the surface, the darkness swooped in above the surface and I lost all visibility so I braced there against the current, removed the PDA from my jacket and raised it above the surface again, lighting up the area ahead of me, and then let the current assist in moving me down the channel while occasionally dragging my boots on the floor to keep me against the right wall.

It didn't take long since I was actually moving faster in the current than I had been when walking upright,, and I first noted to my relief that not only was it a door, it was standing open and second, that it like the channel was flooded. I could still hear the rats and occasionally the low grunting of the Snork, but to this point nothing had noticed me and if I was just a little lucky, wouldn't while I got out of the channel and further along.

I was 4 meters from the doorway when I actually became aware that I was moving faster than I had been when I started out. Apparently the narrowing of the culvert pipes was affecting the current and it was growing a lot stronger. What's more was I was also being pulled more to the center of the channel and it was becoming more difficult to keep near the right-side wall, and suddenly I had the idea that I might miss the doorway and end up sucked against the culvert pipe grating, impossibly fighting to free myself as the rats descended upon me.

I had my right and left boots dragging on the bottom of the smooth channel floor now and was exerting great pressure to keep me close enough to the right wall so that I could grab the frame as I swept past, but I was losing that battle as I swept along.

At 2 meters, having no choice I let the rifle drop below the surface from my right hand, knowing the sling would keep it on my back, dropped my left hand with the light into the water to help with balance. I jammed my

left boot down onto the floor as hard as I could while reaching out for the frame and as I did so, my upper torso was swept hard by the current turning me over and out of control face down into the water. My fingers managed to grab onto the framework and I was immediately swept along and through the doorway into the eddy behind the framework, still holding securely to it.

I forced control over the coughing I was suddenly experiencing and simply held on tight as I lay there sideways, head above water, half in the current and half in the eddy behind the frame, where I waited for the onslaught of rats and the Snork.

1 minute turned to 3 and nothing happened and I was getting tired.

I figured that if they hadn't attacked me by now, they either didn't know I was here or simply couldn't get to me and I started to pull myself to a crouching position within the doorway pool.

As I did so I raised my AC out of the water and with the PDA now above the surface, I watched as water drained from it and knew it was now dubious as to safe use having been immersed and filled with water.

Thing about immersing a rifle is that water left in the barrel may become an issue because.... water is not compressible. Water that either can't or won't get out of the way of the projectile *can* deform the barrel as it creates high pressures between the projectile and the bore, and while that may or may not be enough of a consideration to be worried with in a safe Zone, it was not worth taking a risk on in this combat area. I stood slowly in the waist deep eddy pool with my back to the left wall of the opening, lowered the rifle to hang on the strap and worked at controlling my breathing.

The noise of the water hitting the wall at the end of the channel then being funneled into the 2 culvert pipes was loud. Apparently loud enough anyway that any noise I made was masked, and to my relief nothing took notice of me while I struggled into this position.

I clipped the PDA back onto my sopping jacket, took inventory of my pockets and noted to my relief that everything was still with me including the Echo detector.

Next, I opened the back pack and extracted the Vintar.

Though not thoroughly, it was amazingly dry and appeared as though it had just been picked up and I thanked the Gods for the water-resistant pack seals. After that, I put the AC into the pack along with the 6 full ammo clips I had in my pocket, pulled out 2 more ammo clips for the Vintar and inserted them into my pocket replacing the AC clips, pointed down to minimize moisture issues.

As I stood there, I looked more closely at the steel door, opened inward to its full extent and noted that the hinges were welded making it impossible to close the door and again suggesting that Freedom or Duty had made this the proper way through, despite the water issue. I turned my gaze quickly to my left and scanned up the new tunnel.

Chapter 12

Rodents In The Hall

The first thing I noted in the red glow of my PDA light in this new tunnel was how narrow it was. Maybe a meter and a half at most and maybe 4 meters high with a slew of conduits running its length above me, maybe 3 meters up, and even more above them. This was apparently either a communication or power transfer tunnel used for maintenance purpose, and also the only means of egress to the channel bottom outside the doorway that I'd seen since I started down it.

I also noted a set of steps rising out of the water just 3 meters away from me, to a level roughly equal to the walkway in the channel behind me, and I started moving toward them slowly and quietly.

When I reached a point where I figured the first step should be I slowed my pace, extending my left boot cautiously forward till it suddenly slid about a pace ahead of me on the slick algae that had apparently grown on the floor of this pool with no current to prevent it. I managed to control my fall and slowly brought my right boot forward then slid my right boot out exploring the depths for the first step till it bumped and stopped moving.

With Vintar in hand I brought the left boot forward to the same location and started my careful climb out of the water. I was nearly clear of the water and less than a meter below the floor level above, so I raised the Vintar to my cheek assault-style with my right hand and let go with the left, placing it on the handrail beside me for balance, and

continued the climb.

As I neared the floor level I started crouching till I was 4 or 5 steps from the top. I stood up and scanned.

No threats.

The water behind me was still loud here so I couldn't be sure if what I was hearing was water or grunts, so I moved slowly to the top of the steps, then crouched and scanned down this new tunnel as far as my dim red light would penetrate and saw nothing but the continuous running conduits above me.

Unfortunately, the light only went 15 meters or so and I could make out nothing beyond that point so while still crouching I started moving along as carefully and slowly as I could, down this new tunnel.

I think I made about 20 meters when the noise from the water finally faded to the point that the only noise I heard was the sloshing of my water-logged boots and I could see the open doorway ahead of me with, blessedly, a faint, strobing, orange light behind it and as I neared the doorway my Geiger started clicking slowly again.

Crap! Radiation. I thought as I neared the door.

No. the noise was different. A higher pitch clacking.

Not radiation. Some type of chemical or acid fumes outside the tunnel.

When I got to the doorway, I could smell the sulfur smell and hear the gentle throbbing hum of an acid anomaly.

Great. I thought. *All the ground I've covered so far and now I have to turn back because my outfit won't last 3 seconds in that acid.*

As I stood there weighing options and wishing the anomaly was more visible the thought of the bolt sack crossed my mind, and putting one and one together, I guessed that someone had used those bolts to get there then left them there. I reached into my pocket, pulled the sack out and withdrew 2 of the dozen, 2" long bolts inside.

I tossed one into the hallway outside the door and watched as nothing happened.

Peering around the corner first I noted that this hallway was blocked on the left by a cave in and on the right by a brick wall. I could also see another doorway about 7 meters down on the right side near the end wall and the faint green shimmering of acid anomalies down the hallway.

As a second thought, I stepped into the hallway, picked up the bolt I'd just tossed and tossed it again, underhanded down the center of the hallway, and located three acid anomalies triggered by the bolt, their intermittent, green iridescent Zones flashing on and off, between me and the far door.

"Ok." I thought. On the upside I can weave through them if I'm careful.

By now the flashing Zones had ceased, so I moved against the left side wall and stepped forward three steps outside the radius of the first that I knew was there, and tossed a second bolt.

The next Zone lit up a couple meters ahead on the left side wall and I adjusted and moved diagonally across the hallway to the right wall and took a couple additional steps and tossed the third bolt, igniting a third anomaly, again on the right wall so once again, moving diagonally left I crossed the hallway floor and stepped forward 3 paces and looked at the open doorway ahead of me noting the strobing light outside, and picking up the third bolt lying at my feet, tossed it out the door. I didn't get any response, indicating the path was clear, so I moved cautiously toward the door and froze mid-way when I heard the rats again.

Chapter 13

The Train Depot

The Jupiter factory, abandoned in 1986 during the initial evacuation, is located in the outskirts of Pripyat in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone of Ukraine. Officially, it was a manufacturing plant for cassette recorders and components for home appliances, but secretly the factory had produced semiconductor components for the military, and had test workshops for robotic systems.

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

What was not known at the time though that It also served as a hub for a secret underground railway system that moved military equipment and personnel between the Duga-1 north radar transmitter located 50 kilometers north and east of Chernobyl, and the Duga-1 radar antenna receiver near Chernobyl, under the Pripyat river and the nuclear power plant. The Depot served as a turn style, hub system aiding in the transfer of materials between the north and south Duga-1 radar installations and the Jupiter plant itself.

I could hear them pretty clearly now so I switched to the shotgun and crept carefully, closer to the doorway. It sounded like they were just outside so when I got to the doorway and stuck my head out I had no more time to notice anything other than a large, square, clear area lit briefly every 3 seconds by a constantly strobing, orange light mounted to the wall outside the door, before they noticed me and started high balling for me.

I backtracked into the hall two steps and briefly considered my options before quickly weaving my way back down the hallway between the acid anomalies. It wouldn't do well to step into one of those at this point.

When I got to the doorway I'd just passed through, I stopped and turned, raising the shotgun to my cheek and sighted toward the doorway just as the first rat cleared it into the hallway. With the rat on the end of my sight, I pulled the trigger once and the shotgun exploded loudly in the confines of the hallway, and as I was jacking another round into the chamber, I noted to my relief the torn remains that skidded across the floor into the corner.

Recovering my aim from the recoil, I sighted a second one as it skidded through the doorway right behind the first, and as I was pulling the trigger for a second shot, I caught a glance of a third, hot on the heels of the second and I automatically jacked and pulled a third shot even though the second had done all the work needed.

The shotgun exploded a second and third time and both rats followed the first, into the far corner of the hallway, silent and still.

I again recovered my aim and stood still watching the doorway for anything else but nothing came so I lowered the shotgun some and crept carefully between the anomalies to the doorway again and peered out.

As I cautiously peered out and around the corner of the doorway I discovered that the square area opened onto a cavernous area that contained the train barnyard and turntable system for the railway. a monstrously large area maybe 100 meters across and at least 35 meters high and filled with abandoned train cars and several engines scattered about, some on the tracks and some off, everywhere I could see in the dim, unnatural lighting coming from the fixtures mounted in the ceiling way above me

There appeared to be nothing living out there so I moved cautiously through the doorway and slowly into the open.

As I stood there taking in the view, I remembered the control room should be somewhere near here and gazing further to my right I located it

just 30 or so meters away from me, on a raised floor about a meter high and behind some shipping containers.

I stepped out of the culvert and noted to my right, the sealed off-track system I'd abandoned earlier that ran into another tunnel and terminated in a pile of rubble from the collapsed ceiling.

"That would be why they opened the culvert channel". I thought as I stepped over the first of the two rails and continued toward the control room.

"I wonder how they knew it would come out here." I pondered some more as I walked quietly forward.

By now the water in my boots had all squeezed out and the noise was just a faint wheezing with every step. Nothing that sounded out of the ordinary, and I adjusted my pace a little to a less rhythmic step. What got you killed wasn't so much the noise you made as it was the difference in the noise you made when compared to the noise the tunnels made.

Rhythmic noises were typically made by something or someone moving in the tunnel. Out of rhythm noises on the other hand could be attributed to the odd sounds of the tunnel itself. Varying your footsteps by varying your stride without changing your speed made a lot of difference in whether you were detected because the footsteps were not regular and were easily taken for the sound of water or dirt dropping from the ceiling.

Even the sound of a gun hitting the floor wasn't totally a disaster unless it made a lot of noise for an extended period of time, like a tin saucer, rotating slowly to a stop over a long period.

Slamming it down was often a better way to disguise the noise than simply stopping it in mid-spin.

I was nearly to the raised floor and I could just start to hear the audible warbling noise that all anomalies make when a thought struck me. Seems to me, when I was here a couple years ago I found an artifact somewhere near here. I couldn't remember just where but I was sure it was near here.

I stopped at the raised floor where the anomaly warbling was now exceptionally loud, opened the backpack and stuffed the near empty

shotgun into it. Then, after retrieving the Vintar, placed the strap over my shoulder and pulled the Echo, detector from its case on my belt.

After extracting it, I scanned the control surface for the controls and I wondered if it had power and if so, whether it would work since it was in the backpack of one of the Z's and Z's weren't known to hunt chachkies.

Locating the on/off switch, I held my breath and flipped the switch to the on position and nothing happened. I was about to pronounce it dead and discard it when the power light slowly lit up red indicating it was operating but nothing else happened. It remained silent and dark. I was contemplating turning it off for further investigation later in a safe place and then thought about it requiring proximity to work and decided to leave it on for the moment and continue my path to the control room.

With the detector in my left hand I reached into my pocket for the bolt bag and extracting a couple more bolts, turned right and started for the stairway, three meters down that led up to the raised floor.

As I neared the stairs, the Echo, detector started to slowly chirp and the crystal tube with its aqua-toned viscous material inside, began to phosphoresce slowly and dimly with the chirping, indicating some type of artifact disturbance was present but not close by yet.

Bingo. I thought as I swung the detector left then right then left again to determine the direction.

When I reached the steps, the chirping and blinking had increased slightly indicating I was coming closer to the artifact, and when I turned to start the climb, they slowed again.

Turning slightly right produced the increase in tempo that I had thought it might and I noted a 10m x 10m, chain link-fenced, storage area with several 7-meter-long by two and a half meters high by two-and-a-half-meter wide shipping containers in it, about 15 meters away from me and attached to the right side of the control room.

Ahh. I thought. It's further in that direction probably inside the fenced area.

At the top of the stairs I turned right toward the enclosure and tossed a bolt toward the open gates and was pleased to see nothing happen.

Ok. I thought. Clear to the opening. And I set off toward it.

As I walked toward the gates I noted two things; one, the chirping and blinking of the Echo was increasing in both tempo and volume and two, the gate was torn nearly from its hinges.

Wonder what that was about. I thought as I looked at the shipping containers inside the enclosure.

Stooping to recover the bolt I'd just tossed, I was still pondering this when I noted that one of the containers was open and as I moved closer toward it, the Echo started to run a nearly continuous chirp and light and I knew I was very close.

When I reached the container doorway, I could see in the dim red lighting that the container was nearly empty save for several boxes stacked in the rear and something else on the floor that I couldn't make out.

I was about half way into the container when I stopped, realizing now that what I saw in the right rear corner was the shredded remains of a Stalker sitting in the corner with his back against the far wall, apparently the victim of a Snork feast.

Great. I thought. The first real person I meet here turns out to be a frigging corpse.

As I was thinking this I took another step forward to investigate and an odd thing happened.

Where there had previously been no light other than my red, headlamp, suddenly the space in the rear of the boxes lit up luminously in tones of red and blue but more disturbing than that, my PDA suddenly started clacking its radiation warning and I stopped again to consider this.

Crap! Rads. I thought as I retrieved the PDA from my pocket and noted a mild, 10 milirems written in green script on the face.

Ok. I thought nervously. Mild exposure. Like a chest x-ray. No worries if

I get in and out quickly.

But as I took the second step the exposure level jumped dramatically to 100 mrads and I was now concerned.

Crap! If this keeps climbing, much as I hate to think it, I'll have to give this up, I thought, and took one more tentative step forward and watched in shock as the screen changed to yellow script and displayed 150 mrads while the Geiger clacking increased in its tempo as well.

I quickly stepped back and the PDA Geiger screen reflected the distance by changing back to a green 98 mrads. At that point, I decided to give up and come back another time when I was better protected with at least anti rad medicine if not a rad proof suit and took one more step backwards, stopped there and noted again the screen drop to a green 8 mrads.

I reluctantly switched off the Echo detector to conserve power and was about to turn to leave when the next odd thing happened.

Shortly after I switched the detector to off and the red power light died, the chirping died, and the luminescent crystal died, oddly so did the red and blue luminescence behind the stacked boxes and I was now bathed in a dim red light from my headlamp and near absolute silence and I stopped yet again.

What's bothering me about this situation? I thought to myself as I stood there quietly. *What am I missing?*

And then it hit me.

"It's absolutely quiet." I muttered and snapped the side of my head with my index finger. "There are no rads tripping my Geiger counter." "What's that about?" I muttered again and turned toward the rear of the container again.

Sure enough, there was no luminescent glow and no radiation problem and I carefully raised the Echo again, flipped the switch to on and after a minute the detector again started chirping and flashing but no light from behind the boxes and no Geiger clack.

Taking one step forward though changed all that as the currently luminous source reappeared and the Geiger started its slow warning clack again and I immediately put the two factors together and came up with.

Light up the artifact at max proximity and draw it into this plane and you get radiation, I thought.

Then to test that theory, I flipped the switch again to off and watched as the power shut down and after a little less than 2 seconds, the luminous source behind the boxes died again and so did the Geiger.

Ok. I thought. *Let's leave the thing off for the moment and see what I might find on yon Stalker.* And I moved carefully forward toward the pile of torn body parts to investigate.

As I approached the Stalker a couple observations jumped out at me. The small amount of remaining parts of carcass other than bone, were dry and odorless, indicating death was some time ago; the shredded and torn Sunrise suit he was wearing didn't protect him much from the onslaught; there was a Clear Sky patch still visible on his left shoulder making him, most likely, not my guy; and his AK was dry when I picked it up and checked the bolt and clip.

Poor bastard spent his last round defending himself and still lost. I thought.

I laid the AK back down across the remains of his lap, looked briefly around for his pack but didn't find it and was about to turn empty handed to go when I noted something under the torn remnants of the trousers of his left hip.

I stooped down again in front of him, reached up and turned on the white light of my headlamp changing the dim red luminescence to white LED and waited a moment, blinking against the bright lighting till my eyes cleared and I identified to my delight, what appeared to be the exposed upper corner of an older model, AAC!

Carefully and respectfully I raised his corpse enough to get a hand on the AAC and gently pulled it out from under him, then settled his corpse

back into the seated position again and began examining my prize.

Every Stalker that comes to the Zone finds out pretty quick that you can't carry an artifact in your pockets.

They're typically too big to fit and unbelievably dangerous to be exposed to. So how do you forage them?

You use an artifact container of some type, typically supplied by a trader or occasionally looted from another, dead Stalker.

There are two types of Artifact containers.

The standard transport Lead Lined Containers or (LLCs) which will cancel all ill effects emitted from that artifact, rendering it inert and safe for transport, but cannot be attached to your belt and thus cannot be used to access the artifact's abilities and the Artifact Application Containers (AACs) which can be attached to your belt, thus enabling you to access the artifact's abilities with little or no ill effects.

There are three models of AAC and each offers varying levels of protection based on their manufacture dates, the latest being the best use/protection variable.

This one was a mid-manufacture model known as an LAM or Limited Artifact Module and offered a rotating belt clip so that it could be attached to a waist belt or a shoulder strap. The module fork was still in good shape and attached to the side of the container.

Now I had a method to transport whatever it was that was tripping my Geiger! I thought as I stood and backed away. Odds are it ain't the witch but it's something.

I'd backed off to midway along the container, stopped and picked up the Echo again and turning it on I noted the same red light and after a couple seconds the now familiar glow reappeared, the device started screaming and my Geiger started a slow count associated with less than 10 mrad.

I dropped the volume down on the Echo and started to slowly move toward the boxes hiding the artifact from my view while the Geiger continued to increase in tempo.

When I'd reached the boxes, the Geiger was steady at 175 mrads and I knew I had some working time to bag the artifact.

I leaned over the boxes and to my amazement, there it was, bobbing up and down as if on a current of air and glowing in bright shades of red, green and blue.

Probably, the most dangerous thing about chachkies is how alluring they are. Once you see it, it's real hard to get it out of your head. It kind of calls to you.

No.

Rather it kind of sings to you making you feel like you have to get it. That in turn leads you to make stupid decisions, like walking into boiler anomalies to get it, without a heat retardant suit.

What it was, I wasn't sure. But it was amazingly beautiful and my head swelled with the desire to simply grab it, but from lots of previous experience I knew better now and I controlled the urging.

It had been a while since I'd seen the last artifact and I couldn't readily identify this one but I was sure I could get some info from one of the traders on the Sharadan and whatever its abilities were, I'd have that benefit as well from the AAC while getting it there.

Glancing again at the AAC, I detached the tongs from the side of it and, after a little fiddling with it, located the catch and popped it open.

Grasping the artifact with the tongs while my arm tingle in the familiar fashion, I lifted it and deposited it into the AAC, closing the lid and latching it, noting afterwards the silence of the Echo and the Geiger.

I stood slowly and waited for a moment expecting some type of indication as to whatever benefit it might award me but after a couple minutes I realized that I didn't feel anything but stupid.

Whatever properties this puppy donated to its holder were subtle enough to be undetectable till they were needed I guessed, so I switched the Echo off and depositing it back into its case on my belt, clipped the AAC to the side of my backpack, and with the shotgun in hand, started making my

way back out of the container, switching the PDA light from white back to red again as I went.

Have to make the doughnuts. I thought as I headed for the doorway.

As I stepped through the open doorway of the container onto the platform again I could hear the familiar warbling of the anomalous field again and the slow chirp of the PDA warning in my earphone started again.

Making my way back out of the gated yard area the chirping continued to rise in intensity and when I was about 3 meters from the open gate of the control room yard I reached into the sack and recovered three more bolts, tossing one ahead of me toward the gate and noting the familiar ripping vacuum action of the anomaly as it tore the bolt apart and finally vaporized it.

Ok, I thought, a direct path is out of the question. Let's try an alternate route.

Since none of the fencing was damaged from the Anomaly I assumed there was some distance between it and the fence so stepping slightly more right till my shoulder was nearly against the building I tossed another bolt along the wall a couple feet out. This time the bolt skittered past the first gate post and settled just short of the second post unaffected.

Clear path, Bridger, I thought and started forward keeping my right shoulder against the building till I came to the first fence post at the corner, then again keeping my right shoulder against the fence I continued forward till I came to the gate, stopped and picked up the bolt and turned sharply right into the yard and stood still there.

Might be a good idea to check again, I thought as I tossed one of the bolts I was holding toward the control room door steps, and noting no anomaly reaction, started forward again toward the doorway, picking up the bolts as I reached the steps and depositing them all back into my pocket.

I stood there a minute, just shy of the three steps up to the landing of the control room door, shotgun ready, and stared into the dark, murky interior wondering if I was going to meet anything else in there when I

entered. Then, with the shotgun shouldered I started forward, up the steps and toward the doorway.

As I entered the building I was aware of the musty smell of a long period of disuse but no other signs of habitation, temporary or otherwise. The anomalies outside the gate yard probably kept the local varmints from venturing in.

I was standing inside a large room, roughly circular in shape but for a straight wall in the back. Of the two doors in this room, the one I'd just passed through led back out to the front courtyard and the other, standing open on the far wall, led further into the building's interior.

The room was littered with papers and overturned office furniture making passage to the rear door challenging but not impossible, and I stepped carefully around the debris, slowly closing on the rear doorway.

When I got to the doorway I stopped just short and warily peered into the gloom lit somewhat by the red light. Noting nothing threatening, I stepped through the doorway into the second room and stopped for a better look.

I was now standing in what appeared to be a storage room off the office. The ceiling was higher than the office area with a stair system that started just to my left, rose up to a landing in the left corner and turned right along the back wall up to another landing, then turning right again, continued up to another doorway above my head, leading into an area over the office.

There were boxes and crates everywhere in this room leaving only a path to the stairs, most still stacked neatly but some broken, and the contents and packing strewn about the floor by an unconcerned previous visitor.

Recognizing that if I was going to stay the night I needed some security, I turned around to the door, inspected it for operation and determining it to be sound and unbroken, attempted to close it. The chore was difficult, the floor had to be cleared of a mass of papers and broken crate packing and wood debris but after a minute or two of dragging my

boot along the floor sweeping the debris out of the door way, it closed.

There was no lock on this side, I guess because no one needed to lock it from the inside so after testing several crates, I found two I could pick up, and set them stacked against the closed door, then turned and set off for the stairs.

The stairs were clear and I carefully and as quietly as possible, made my way up to the first landing paying close attention to the open doorway of the second floor that awaited me.

The doorway ahead of me was more impressive than that behind me. This one, two landings up was a secure heavy metal door complete with heavy bolting and a security pad mounted on the wall next to it.

With the boxes barring easy and stealthy entry behind me I had little reason to keep watch on my rear so my attention was all forward on the approaching, dark, second floor doorway currently standing open two landings ahead of me and I continued to climb the stairs slowly and quietly, shotgun ready as I made the second landing and turned right for the final ascent to the final landing outside the doorway.

I was two steps up the final riser when I sensed something and stopped.

It wasn't anything I could put my thumb on, it was just a feeling that raised the hair on my neck and I stood there still and quiet while I waited for something else.

Two minutes passed, seeming like two hours, and still nothing happened and I was beginning to think either there's nothing there or whatever is there is more patient than I am, when I heard a slight shuffling noise from behind the open, dark doorway ahead of me and I went into combat mode again.

I could see nothing through the open doorway, and heard nothing more, and I briefly considered retreating, but this area held some greater degree of safety for an overnight stay than any I'd been through and I wasn't that excited about continuing on without some rest and food, so I stepped

lightly up another step and then another keeping the shotgun aimed into the gloom, till I was waist high to the floor and the dim lighting of my PDA showed nothing in the narrow room behind the door.

Left shoulder against the wall using the doorway ahead of me for some cover I continued up the stairs till I was on the landing then edging forward to the door jamb, I peered into the darkness lit dimly by my PDA and noted another, debris strewn narrow room with two littered desks and papers scattered across the floor, leading about 10 meters to yet another doorway similar in build to the one I was now looking through.

With nothing threatening me I started through the doorway and was about two thirds of the way into the room when I heard the noise again, this time behind me and I spun quickly with the shotgun ready to fire and found nothing there.

I was pondering this oddity when from the corner of my eye I detected motion below one of the desks and with the shotgun aimed at the desk, I quickly backed to the far wall and edged my way slowly sideways till to my utter amazement, I could see the form of a Stalker hiding below the desk, apparently in panic and fear.

“Pasholta?”

“Yeno gavadee?”

Chapter 14

A Surprise Visitor

*"The saying goes something like this.
Surprise visitors are like hemorrhoids.
When they show up and then go away they're tolerable.
When they show up and don't leave though, they're a real pain
in the ass."
"Ashot"*

I was still working at grasping this new situation and several things really bothered me about this.

First, the language was Russian, or maybe Ukrainian. I wasn't adept enough at the differences to distinguish the dialect but with my limited Russian language comprehension, I recognized what I thought to be the words, 'Please' and 'do I have any water'.

Next, the Stalker below the desk was dressed in a standard Woodland, Operational Camouflage Pattern (OCP) uniform, the condition of which from what I could see, was filthy.

This was odd for several reasons not the least of which being it offered no protection whatsoever from anything but nakedness and chill.

Typical Loners wore at the least, a POS (Piece Of Shit) leather vest or better still, a sunrise or Stalker uniform built for the Zone with oversized pockets,

padding and protective inserts.

Even the Clear Sky wore better protection than this OCP.

Second, I had apparently walked right by him without looking below the desk and that really pissed me off.

Had he wanted to jump me, there I'd have been with my back to him.

Obviously I was slipping in attention to my surroundings, a critical mistake.

Third, what the hell was he doing hiding under the desk?

Any Stalker I knew would have taken either a neutral acknowledgement or an offensive position to the unexpected appearance of another Stalker.

I was still pondering this and my next action when the new Stalker said in a weak and timid voice.

"Please don't hurt me. Please. I'll do whatever you want for some water please?"

At that point a couple things cleared up and some new questions formed.

This was no Stalker I knew of. This voice belonged to a woman. What the hell was a woman doing out here?

Don't get me wrong now. I have nothing against women in the Zone but I'd never seen one and only heard rumors to that end about it and all those rumors were about women that were either fat and short or as muscular as most Loners and she obviously didn't fit that description, folded up below the desk.

"Pasholta?" She repeated from below the desk. "Yeenogavadee?"

Again, she asked if I had any water and I realized then that I'd been standing there pointing the shotgun at her and staring for some time without responding, and I lowered the barrel of the gun some, still leery about her unexpected appearance.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I asked in my broken Russian mainly because it was the only thing I could think of to start out with.

"I've been in here for a long time." She replied in Russian. "Hiding

from things outside. Maybe days. I don't know. Much time has passed since here.

I had water before but it's all gone now." She replied in her meek and tired voice while indicating the empty bottles on the floor.

"Please. I'll do whatever you want for just a little" She repeated again in a plaintive voice obviously hinting at carnal satisfaction in return for the water.

That part I definitely understood. She was offering herself in return for the water.

"Yeah, yeah. I have water." I responded a little annoyed at the transaction offering. Why would she think she needed to offer herself in exchange for water?

The unwritten code in the Zone was you provided water to any Stalker who was out if you had it to offer.

Food and commodities on the other hand, were another story.

"First off, come on outta there, slowly." I said, and I stepped back another step to put some reaction distance between us, still keeping the shotgun aimed low in her direction. I made the mistake of missing her on the first pass and I wouldn't make that mistake again.

As I stood there patiently waiting, she slowly unfolded and scooted out from under the desk, standing still facing me with her arms hanging limp at her sides, 3 meters from me.

She was about 5'-5" (140cm) tall with dark hair pulled back in a ponytail, had lean facial features and appeared to be in her mid-30's maybe younger.

The uniform was somewhat loose on her but it was clear she wasn't fat but most odd of all was that it appeared that she wasn't armed either.

That was strange because nobody, and I mean *nobody*, ventured very far into the Zone without arms and lived to tell about it, and we were a long way in.

I was still leery about this and still a bit annoyed so I opted for better safe than sorry approach, and commanded in a low tone. "Turn around

slowly and put your hands on the desktop and don't move."

"Do whatever you want. Please some water after?" she repeated again as she turned, bent forward and put hands palm down on the desktop.

"Knock that Crap off!" I replied angrily and at the same time, indignantly. "I'm not interested in banging you. "I need to know you're not armed," I followed up, calming down a little myself. "I'm going to search you. That's it! You got that?"

"Yes." She said timidly, still turned away. "Water after?"

"For Christ sake, yes!" I snapped as I stepped forward to frisk her. "Water after."
"Now shut up a minute!"

The OCP's were a bit baggy on her and though dry to the touch, it was clear that she'd crawled through a considerable amount of mud and water at some time in the past and she stunk like hell. Her dark hair was tied in a ponytail with what appeared to be something that looked like an old bootlace and her hair and face were dirty as well.

I unlatched the strap over the .45 on my leg, ready for a fast draw if necessary and stepped forward behind her. Then setting the shotgun down on the desktop to my left out of her reach, I started the process of searching her.

As I ran my hands down her left and then right arm I noted not only no items attached to them but also that her arms were lean with only light muscular development indicating she hadn't been carrying any sort of weapons for any sort of extended period lately.

I was a little uncomfortable when I started the next part of the search that included her upper torso but it was necessary, so extending my hands under her armpits and bumping her arms up I commanded in a softer tone.

"Raise your arms please." And I ran my hands down her sides to her hips, again finding nothing more there than a lean body that matched the arms I'd just searched. Her back produced nothing more than her sharp,

shoulder blades as well.

As I placed my hands on her upper chest in preparation for the frontal search I felt my desire grow and it didn't help that after running my hands down and across her breasts I noted her own rigidity beneath the uniform, but again, after reaching her pelvic area, other than confirming that she absolutely wasn't fat, I found nothing threatening.

To this point she had remained silent but I could feel the tautness rising in her body and she started to shake a little so I told her "Relax. I'm almost through here. I'm sorry about this part." And I cupped her tight, left buttocks in my right hand then satisfied of no threat, the right and finally, crouched down and put one hand on the outside of her left leg and my right hand on the inside of the leg, and with my thumb tight to her pelvic area, found nothing there. I took a deep breath as my desire raged, and ran my hands carefully down her left, firm leg to her boot lace and then repeated the process on her right leg. Unlike her arms, her legs were in great condition and my mind briefly conjured up a picture of her in a bikini at a beach bar someplace in Florida before I trashed the thought and tried hard to erase it from my mind.

Having completed the search and found nothing, I stood again, picked up the shotgun and stepped back to both put some distance between us and get some air in order to get a grip on my raging desire.

Simple undergarments were a necessity here. The heat was at barely tolerable and the cold, bitter. Hours of walking and sweating were the way of life here and hydration was the difference between 5 days in the Zone and death. As such, underwear, t-shirts and socks were an absolute must as a minimum and most Loners doubled up on all.

Outside of the not finding any weapons on her, it was apparent that she wore absolutely nothing beneath the OCP's. How she had avoided chafing, assuming that she had anyway, and freezing, was another mystery and if she had no socks on her feet inside those boots, they must be chafed as well.

“Stand up and turn around please.” I said.

She again stood straight and then as commanded, turned to face me again. “Water?” She asked again tentatively.

Without taking my eyes off her, I settled the shotgun in my right armpit, still pointed in her general direction, and fished the canteen off my belt then took a step forward and held it out to her.

She accepted it politely but it was evident that it was a forced gesture on her part. She visually shook with anticipation as she removed the cap and raised it slowly to her lips, tilting it slightly to drink from it while closing her eyes and settling her firm ass on the desk edge to rest as she pulled from the canteen.

I had pretty much figured that she was at least a couple days down without water when I noted her starting to gulp at the water.

“Easy there, woman!” I commanded in a low tone and her eyes snapped back open with fright as she quickly removed the canteen from her lips. “Take it slow or you’ll choke it back up.”

She stood there a minute longer staring at me through her dark, concerned eyes then timidly extended the canteen back to me.

“No. I have plenty more. Get what you need, just be easy about it.” I replied without reaching for it.

Then she raised the canteen again and more slowly this time, began pulling from it.

After a couple seconds she lowered it, apparently satisfied and handed it back to me which I then took again without changing my aim on the shotgun.

Now that I had a grip again on the situation, I was getting a bit concerned with the current area we were in and with security measures to protect it.

I had at least one more door I could close behind us and although that

would limit the noise from anything coming through the downstairs door, it would also limit the noise we were making from there as well.

Turning slightly left I also noted another doorway leading to some sort of narrow control room and that bothered me a bit as well.

“Ok. I need to buckle down this area. You sit there on the desk a minute and don’t move, huh?” I told her and watched her as she raised her rear end up and onto the desk, arms still shaking a little, and stared at me with concern in her dark eyes now.

I scooted past her toward the entry doorway without losing eye contact and when I reached the doorway, stepped out onto the landing quietly and quickly scanned the storage room below me, noting most importantly, no changes to the boxes behind the door below me, then back to her seeing that while still staring at me, she hadn’t moved from the desk at all.

Stepping lightly again back into the room, I tested the metal door hinges and discovering no overly loud noises of protest, pulled the door shut till it latched. The lock was on my side so I wasn’t overly concerned about being trapped inside plus there was still the additional room on the other end of this clerical room to retreat to and from if necessary.

Then I stepped past her again, moving toward the far door leading into the next room.

I figured if she wanted to bolt, more power to her. I wasn’t about to engage a fleeing person but although her gaze never left me during this time, she didn’t move and I started to think that if she did move it might have been to follow me if I disappeared from sight.

As I stepped through the doorway and into the control room area I noticed a couple things.

First, it was 3 meters wide and about 7 meters long, apparently extending out beyond the front wall of the building’s face that I’d initially entered. On the ground, in the gloom outside the control room I’d not noticed that.

I also noted that the floor, littered with more papers, cardboard, and broken glass, was constructed of a metal grating, filled with a clear epoxy resin allowing a view below of the fenced courtyard that was in front of the control room entrance, and aside from the banks of low panels that ran along both sides and wrapped around the end of the room, there were windows above them with only remnants of glass remaining, affording an unlimited view of the entire train yard from a height of maybe 13 meters.

Somebody or somebodies, ran the operation of this entire subterranean train yard from this room at one time. It was also evident from the dust, dirt and rust that had accumulated all over the room from the open window for whatever reasons, that it had been a great deal of time since anyone was here last.

Glancing back suddenly I was slightly alarmed when I noted that the distance between us had grown to a point that I could no longer see her in the darkness that my dim, red PDA light would penetrate and I backtracked quietly, shotgun raised and ready till I had almost reached the doorway.

The thought that she might be hiding a gun someplace and use the limited sight time as an opportunity to get it crossed my mind, but in the dim light now reaching her I noted her still seated on the desk as though she hadn't moved at all, watching me move about in the shadows.

I stood there a minute considering the pros and cons of moving further into the control room and then opted to stay put in the clerical area instead. It offered more privacy and less chance of being overheard, and the odds of an assault coming from the control room were slim because of the inconvenient accessibility.

I again examined the door and after testing it, also determined it could be shut with little disturbance, and stepping through it into the clerical room, pulled it gently shut behind me, latching it this time.

Standing there now in the dimly lit room, staring at the woman I began to think about the next part of this on-the-fly planning.

The trouble with traveling anyway other than alone is that you have to include them consciously or otherwise in your planning. That trouble

compounds when you don't have some sort of trust relationship because of the necessary attention you need to pay them while you conduct your other actions.

This becomes four-star alarming when it comes to sleeping.

How do you sleep with someone you don't trust?

Answer. You find some way to restrain them.

"Look. I don't know who or why you're here and frankly, I don't really give a crap, odd as this situation appears, but I have to eat and sleep a bit before I push on."

So you got two choices here near as I can see it.

One, you pick up now and move on out of here..."

It was at that part that I noted the look of horror spread over her face.

...Or two, you allow me to tie you up so I can get some shut eye till we part tomorrow, or later today or whatever time it becomes.

It was obvious from the terrified look still on her face, that the second option didn't appeal to her either.

"Look. I'm sorry but I don't know you and again, I have no idea why you're here and as such, I don't trust you. To sleep, I have to tie you up or throw you out.

"But you can't leave me here!" She cried in alarm. "I have no water, no food and no way to protect me!

You must take me with you! You must!"

I was now waving my hands frantically in calm down and quiet down gesture while shushing her as strongly as I could.

"I give you anything you want of me." She wailed on. "I have nothing left to give! You may own me, forever, but please take me with you when you leave!" She implored, near hysteria as tears having formed from her wide frightened eyes started streaming down her dirty face.

"Whoa!!" I told her in a raised but not yelling voice. "You're going to bring every friggin bad guy in the tunnels down here if you start that again!"

She was now fully crying and sobbing frantically while staring at me with her dark wide eyes, and not being certain how to proceed, I said.

“Ok! Ok! I’ll take you along. Just knock that crap off and quiet down.”

It took a couple minutes of patient waiting as she wound down but now she looked exhausted and I knew if it was days since the last water, it had been at least as long since the last meal.

“You hungry?” I asked.

Her eyes again went imploringly wide but she said nothing and I started to wonder if my Russian was so bad she didn’t understand me.

“Food?” I said. “Hungry? You?” I repeated in broken Russian this time to help aid in the understanding.

This time though, it brought a slight smile to her face and she replied “I understand. “

“Yes. I’m hungry.” But the smile vanished even before she had finished the sentence, short as it was.

“I have some sausage.” I replied. “It’s not the Hilton buffet but it serves as excellent travel food on long car trips.”

I turned to the second desk next to the one she was now sitting on and set the shotgun down. Working my backpack off my back I set it on the desktop in front of me and opened it. After rummaging a bit I found what I was looking for and pulled the sausage out.

While I was going through this she never let her gaze wander from the backpack and when the sausage appeared, she focused almost entirely on it as I extracted it and peeled back some more of the wrapping.

Reaching down to my side I unsnapped the strap holding my 10” hunting knife and suddenly remembering the auto I had unsnapped earlier, I re-secured the strap and then drew the knife out.

As I did this, her gaze shifted to the knife and fear again registered on her face as she raised her eyes to mine in question.

“Relax.” I said and I sliced off a section of the sausage about 3” long, skewered it with the knife and offered it to her on the tip of the knife.

She took it carefully from the knife still watching my eyes and while I stood there she took a small bite and began chewing, then took another larger bite and before I could say anything, she popped the rest into her mouth and looking like a hamster, cheeks puffed up with food, she finished chewing all that, swallowed and then looked at my canteen again.

“Crap!” I said a little embarrassed. “I should have offered.”

I unhooked the canteen again and handed it back to her and she tipped it and pulled from it again, this time a bit more heavily and I let it pass.

“You want more?” I asked.

She looked at me a minute with embarrassment then lowered her gaze and replied under her breath.

“Please?”

I cut off another 3” section and again offered it to her on the tip of the knife which she accepted and started eating a little slower this time.

I turned my back to the 2nd desk and put my palms on it and boosted my ass up and onto it myself, working back to lean against the wall in a relatively comfortable, cross legged sitting position. I took the remaining piece and started eating it myself.

She watched me eat a minute and offered me the canteen from which I took a healthy slug as well.

“Come here often?” I said sarcastically.

The confusion on her face gave away her lack of understanding of the humor of my question.

“That was a joke.” I said in a deadpan voice. “To make a tough situation, lighter.”

Then my curiosity kicked in.

“What’s your name?” I asked quietly.

“Alina Kolisnyk.” She replied softly, still staring into my eyes with concern.

“You can call me Bridger.” I said.

“Thank you, Bridger.”

“Excuse me?” I said. “Thank me for what?”

“For coming to help me?”

“Listen sweetheart.” I started with a little more authority in my voice. “I didn’t come here to help or rescue you. Frankly, you’re a weight I’m saddled with dragging. I came here for other reasons that I need to continue to pursue.

You can ride along with me as long as you can keep up but if you slow me down I’ll leave you behind to fend for yourself and if you jeopardize my safety, I’ll cut your throat.

Do you understand?”

“Yes.” She replied. Her eyes dropping to the desktop surface. “I understand. I’ll be no trouble to you.”

“Super.” I replied.

“If you don’t mind my asking, what the hell are you doing here?” I asked.

She raised her eyes to mine again and replied. “I came with another Stalker. He left me here. Outside.” She started. “I wait quietly in a train car for a long time but he did not return. I think now that he is no more.”

I thought back to the stalker in the container but that corpse was too dry for having been killed 3 days ago.

“After maybe 2 hours, who knows time down here.” She continued. “I hear the crawlers and I’m scared and leave the train car for this place.

I ran fast through the anomalies without being hurt into this building and up to here to hide.”

At the mention of the crawlers, I guessed she was referring to the Snorks and my blood ran cold. Any encounter with Snorks was bad.

“Outside?” I asked.

“Yes.” She replied.

“Any idea how many?” I asked.

“y!” She replied with a tinge of fright.

“They move back and forth in tunnels to right.

Some go. Some stay.

Never all go.”

Crap! I thought. Figures they’d be right where I need to go.

“If we go the other way...” She started and I cut her off.

“Not going the other way.” I stated flatly. “I came here with a purpose and that purpose has priority.

“Besides. There’s probably just as much trouble behind us as there is ahead anyway.”

“Through them?” She asked with great concern.

“Through them.” I confirmed.

I was considering this new information and how it would affect me and her when another thought struck me.

“Why are you not armed?” I asked. “And for that matter, why do you not only have no provisions but no backpack?”

At that, she frowned, turned away quickly and remained silent.

Interesting. I thought as I watched her frowning face. Whatever business she has or had here apparently has nothing to do with taking care of herself. Perhaps that was left to the other Stalker?

After a minute of silence that made it clear she wouldn't respond, I moved on.

"Ok. Where are you headed, or were you headed?" I asked.

"I don't know for sure." She replied and then added in a softer tone. "I was not told."

Now that struck a note.

"Don't know?" I asked.

"I was traveling with the Stalker. My destination was originally one of the outpost communities near Clear Sky."

"Singapore City?" She asked with a small smile, apparently hopeful that I knew of it.

I shook my head negatively and she continued.
"But several days after we arrived, that changed and here I am now."

I'd heard stories of situations similar to this.
People who came to the Zone to hide from authorities in communities now popping up all over the Zone.
Loners advertised their services in getting them to their desired destinations and then instead delivered them to other endpoints less desirable, such as work and sex slaving.
If you weren't accustomed to the Zone's way of life, you couldn't easily separate yourself from those Loners and some of them wouldn't allow that anyway.

In Alina's case, her obvious looks and structure pointed to a dire endpoint, and add to that the fact that the Stalker she was traveling with, apparently bailing on her, it was likely that having been paid upfront and faced with the Snorks, he decided to cut and run.
Wherever she was bound for it more than likely wasn't good. At least not for her.

And the Stalker was another issue as well.
Someplace out there, up ahead of me was another, less reputable Stalker who may have a re-stoked interest in Alina if she were to suddenly appear.

That didn't bode well.

We sat quietly for a few more minutes sharing the water in the canteen and then after she declined any more, I carefully wrapped the empty paper and put it back into the backpack for disposal later, careful to clean the residue oil on the desktop with a small piece of cloth I also deposited into the backpack.

People, rodents and animals weren't the only biology affected by the meltdown and subsequent emissions. There were various alterations to insect life as well and one of them, the "Pede", was particularly nasty.

These massive centipedes started out about 12" long, hatching from chicken sized eggs. Their eyesight being incredibly poor, they relied on a developed sense of vibration to interpret their environment and while young, were nervous, pretty much harmless insects that scattered the moment they sensed anything larger than them nearby.

As they age however, they grow both in size (upwards of 2' long, and 3" in diameter) and aggressiveness, ready to strike if agitated or interfered with and with mincers 3 to 4 inches long, will prey primarily on insects or other predatory arthropods (like spiders) although they're large enough to overpower small vertebrates like mice, squirrels, rabbits, snakes or small reptiles, and will readily attempt to consume them.

They were also known to attack people, and though death wasn't usually the end result, a lot of debilitating pain and sickness from the venom would slow you down considerably.

I was confident however, that the airtight doors would keep them out but didn't want to test it.

She watched me closely as I tidied up but if she had any questions about the action, she didn't ask. Maybe she figured it was better if she didn't know the answers. In any case we sat there a bit longer in silence till I thought of the vodka I was carrying and pulled the backpack over to get it.

I reached in, found it and pulled it out. Tilting it slightly I unscrewed the lid and lifting it to my lips, took a long pull on it.

I was dead tired and I knew the alcohol would put me to sleep pretty quickly but I was really longing for the feel of the heat dropping down my throat.

It was at this point that I remember Alina and the potential threat she posed and when I turned to look at her, noticed her watching the bottle.

"You want some?" I asked.

"Please." She replied, so I wiped the top of the bottle off with my sleeve and handed it to her.

She accepted it again gracefully and again I wondered about her history.

She certainly wasn't a peasant. She showed a great deal of style and grace despite the crappy conditions and circumstances and that meant she was educated to some degree.

She tilted the bottle up and took a pull equal to the one I had taken and seconds later was coughing and spewing while trying without great success to remain quiet.
I couldn't help but chuckle.

"Don't drink much do you?" I asked, again catching on to this new, subtle sign that she wasn't a Zoner.

"I never did." she replied. "My father and brother were chronic alcoholics as I grew up. There was a great deal of pain connected to that."

"Yeah." I responded quietly as the smile disappeared from my face too.

"Here, it is done everywhere and hard not to I suppose. Here it serves as medicine. Helps you get through the night."

"Some nights it's all you have." I added as I screwed the lid back on the bottle and put it back into my backpack.

"Look, Alina." I was approaching another difficult point here and figured direct was the best way to handle it.

“Like I told you earlier, I have to get some sleep and I can’t do that with you free to roam.”

“I’m sorry but I have to tie you up or I’ll get no sleep at all.”

She was staring into my eyes again with concern, and I felt like a total crap bag, but the fact of the matter was I didn’t know who she was or what her agenda was, I just knew I couldn’t get any sleep if I thought she was free.

“I understand.” Was all she said in a sad, tired voice.

“I’ll untie you when I wake. That I’ll promise you.” I said, more to assuage my conscience than to create any security for her.

She said nothing. Just continued to sit on the desk with her knees pulled up to her chin and stare at me so I finally got up, walked over to the desk she was sitting on, told her to lay down on her stomach and put her hands behind her back, where I lashed them together with a short length of cord I kept in the backpack for tenting purposes.

I pulled a blanket out of the backpack, wadded it up and told her to roll onto her side, lifted her head a little and slid it under her left cheek while she watched my eyes.

“Listen,” I started, “I’m going to go back to the other desk, layout on it and turn off the light.”

“It’s going to get bitchin dark in here but it’s ok. I’m here and I’m armed. Ok?”

I was standing in front of her and I watched her nod slowly thinking about how young she was and more than likely terrified.”

“Nothing will get in tonight without my knowing it. Get some sleep. We have a really crappy path ahead of us tomorrow.”

She just laid there staring at me till I finally turned and not without some degree of guilt, made my way back to the other desk, laid down on it scooting all the way back to the wall and pulled the backpack under my head. While I was thinking about the Snorks, and the rest of the tunnel, the vodka did its magic and I drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 15

And Then It Got Worse

It was pitch black and I had no concept of what time it was when I finally woke. I just laid there on my side in the absolute darkness with a vague feeling that several hours had passed.

The PDA had a clock of course but it was useless here. Time inside the Zone moved differently than time outside the Zone. The days lasted what seemed like 12 hours but according to the clock on the PDA was less than 4. It didn't make sense but it was what it was.

I was laying there in the blackness, thinking on this when I was startled suddenly by the realization that I wasn't lying there in the darkness alone and I stopped breathing and held absolutely still.

Something warm had lodged next to me and I was curled up tight on it with my frigging arm draped over it and part of it, maybe a tentacle, was under my left cheek and smelled awful!

Jeezus! I thought. *What the hell had come in without my hearing it?* And thoughts of blood suckers came to mind, their appendages probably stunk.

As I lay there I thought in a slight panic about the rifles I left in the backpack, leaning against the desk at my feet and I knew that I would most assuredly wake whatever it was before I could get to them and while I knew I still had my .45 in my leg holster, it was strapped in and getting to that would probably wake it too.

And then there was the problem of no frigging light in here! How the crap do you hit anything with zero frigging light? I considered in near panic.

I was laying there debating which move to make first when it stirred, nestled further into my pelvis, moaned lightly and I felt a pair of hands against my pelvis and my memory, among other things, started to return.

Apparently, while I slept soundly last night after having assured Alina of my vigil against threat, she had moved over to my desk and was now pressed into me, her stinking ponytail under my left cheek.

What was more, is that apparently while I'd slept, I had made myself comfortable as well. My right arm was draped over her right arm and my right hand, on the desktop, cupped the canvas covering her left breast.

How frigging sweet! I thought, as I chided myself once again, for failing to maintain alertness but I didn't take my hand away. At least not then.

Ok. I thought, as my head started wrapping around this new situation. *I'm not hurt, and I'm not sick. You actually feel pretty good so you apparently got a good sleep.*

Much as I'd love to lay here in bed, drink orange juice and read the paper, it's time to start moving, soldier.

Alina was still asleep and I was reluctant to wake her at first, then the reality of the situation sunk in again and I returned to the colder, steel train of thought, and pulled my hand away from her breast.

She groaned at that but didn't open her eyes and I gently shook her.

"Alina." I said in a low voice.

Again, she groaned in protest and ignored my prodding.

“Alina.” I said again, this time with a little more volume as I shook her shoulder again.

“Let me sleep a little bit more.” She said groggily with a little agitation in her voice.

“Alina!” I said this time with force. “Get your ass in gear woman.”

Although I couldn’t see her, I could tell by the way she went suddenly rigid and started scooting away from me that it woke her completely that time.

With her body away from mine, in the darkness I reached up to my PDA, still clipped to my jacket, and turned on the light, suddenly illuminating the room in its red glow.

Were it not for the rested feeling I had, it could have still been last night and when I turned to Alina, I found her sitting on the edge of first desk where I’d left her last night, watching me.

Sitting up and swinging my legs over the edge of the desk, I walked to her gently took her left shoulder and turned her around.

The rope came untied easily and she was rubbing her wrists when I gently turned her to face me again.

“Like I said before.” I started. “I’m sorry about that part.”

She merely nodded.

“You hungry?”

“Some.” She lied.

I went back to the backpack and took out another sausage, retrieved the knife and cut off a third of it, handing it to her again, on the tip of the knife.

“It was obvious she was working hard at restraining herself from putting the entire piece in her mouth. What she did bite off she chewed maybe three times then swallowed and immediately followed that with

another bite.

I cut off another third for myself then offered her the last third and simply pushed the paper off the desk and onto the floor. We'd be gone soon so I wasn't worried about the insect population any more. After finishing them we shared the canteen.

Reaching into the backpack I pulled out the paper from last night's meal and dropped that on the floor as well, then I pulled the last two water bottles out and, one at a time, opened them and carefully poured them into the canteen, crushing them afterwards and discarding them under the desk when I'd finished. I recapped the canteen and clipped it back on my belt.

"We have to get started."

Her eyes went wide when I said that, but she nodded and I noted a shudder as I turned away to finish packing up the backpack and strap it on my back.

I'd left the shotgun and AC out and packed in the Vintar and GP. I figured if I was dealing with multiple guys, the shotgun pellet spread and readily replaceable AC ammo was a better choice.

The AC used 5.45x39mm rounds developed by the Soviet Union specifically for the AK-74's that most of the military used and numerous other Loners preferred, because the weapon simply held up well in bad climates. While it wasn't always available, it was frequently available by simply looting it from corpses.

I wished briefly though that I had the Viper. That ammo was always available since it chambered standard 9-19mm pistol ammo that virtually everyone carried.

Looking into her eyes I said. "Follow me, stay close and do what I tell you, when I tell you, and we'll get through this in one piece."

While I was sure I'd make it (what else was there to be sure of?), I wasn't sure I absolutely believed I could get her through it but I figured I'd try anyway.

I slung the AC over my left shoulder and carrying the shotgun level at my hip made my way to the door leading out.

I was about to put my hand on the door latch leading to the storage room when I thought about the control room and its commanding view of the train yard from the safety of its height. Turning abruptly, I changed momentum to the opposite direction and nearly stumbled over Alina who had been less than a meter behind me.

We got tangled up briefly as I reached out to the desk and stabilized my fall but Alina hit the floor hard on her backend.

I got myself straightened up and a little angrily told her. "Not that frigging close!"

When I realized she was sitting on the floor looking up at me in shame and fear I calmed down.

"Ok. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have gotten angry, but you have to maintain at least 2 meters distance from me so I can do my job. You got that?"

She hadn't moved from her seated position and merely nodded while looking at her feet.

"C'mon." I said while extending a hand to her. "Get up."

She looked up and for a moment, didn't move, as she contemplated the gesture, then she reached out, took my hand in hers and while I pulled some, collected her legs beneath her and rose to her feet, stepping to the side so I could pass.

"Come on and be quiet. We're going to take a peek below before we scoot outa here."

She merely nodded and watched my eyes.

I walked past her to the door to the control room, pushed the lever down carefully and unlatched it then gently pushed it open till it was wide enough to allow me to pass through with all my gear without banging anything in the process, and stepped through.

The room was just as I'd left it, bathed in a soft glow of light from the overheads and still littered with glass and papers.

"Remind me to call housekeeping and complain about this." I whispered.

"Housekeeping?" She replied from over my shoulder. "Why would..."

I interrupted her when I stopped, turned my head to look at her, put a finger over my lips and shushed her as quietly as I could.

She looked baffled but she kept quiet.

Moving quietly to end of the control room I stood there a moment looking out on the train yard and scanning it for any sign of movement while at the same time straining my hearing for any type of foreign noise.

I was just thinking we were alone when I heard it and froze. In my peripheral vision I could see that Alina had heard it too and froze in her tracks as well, a look of terror on her face.

Frigging Snorks! I thought. Somewhere to the right. Maybe milling but certainly not aggressive at the moment.

You could tell the temperament of Snorks by the noise they made. When milling about, they made a slow growling sound like a wild pig rooting through a forest. When pissed off though they made a spine tingling roaring noise.

This one or these ones were not interested in us at the moment, and sounded calm, but better than that, they sounded like maybe three? Four at the most.

I pointed with the shotgun in the direction of the yet untraveled tunnel mouth with the huge roll up bay doors, thankfully in a partially up position, and she nodded her understanding, still terrified of the prospects.

After a minute more, nothing changed so I turned slightly, passed her and made my way back into the office room, pulling the door shut but not latching it after she stepped through. No sense now that we were leaving, in

taking the chance of the additional latch noise.

I could deal with that number reasonably well especially if I had some height or distance and time to aim and shoot but it was going to be a bitch with her behind me.

Plus, there was a high probability that the others were not that far up the tunnel and would come join the party as soon as the fracas started.

I needed some elbow space to get through this.

Her face had lost some of the fear since we came back into the room but that changed again as soon as I started talking.

"I'm going out there and clear the way. You need to stay here, in the control room while I do that.

She was shaking her head back and forth, slowly murmuring "Nooo", still terrified and I put my left hand gently on her right cheek to calm her down.

"Alina. I can't do this with you behind me. You'll get in the way and be shot or worse. You need to stay here. I've done this a million times, I'll be fine."

Truth be told, I was terrified myself and not the least bit sure I could make it through but the odds were not overwhelming so I figured I had a good chance.

"You understand?"

She didn't look to sure but she realized it had to be this way so she simply stared into my eyes and slowly nodded.

I stood there a moment and after consideration, turned my back on her, set the shotgun on the desk and reached down to my right leg, unsnapped the S&W.45 and drew it out.

I loved that pistol.

Due in large part to its polymer frame it was lighter than most other handguns readily available here, fit my hand exceptionally well, held 14

rounds in the clip plus one in the chamber and was double action so you could safely carry a round under the hammer with little concern for it going off accidentally.

Plus, the .45 cal. Round was powerful enough to handle most beasts if you could pump at least three rounds into them.

I quickly extracted the clip and put it on the desk as well, put my hand over the ejection port and drew the slide back, palming the round in the chamber as it started to pop out. Then I let the slide move back slightly while turning to face Alina and visually verify the empty chamber, nodded my satisfaction and let it snap back in place on the empty chamber.

I quickly checked the clip to verify the full 14 rounds, reinserted it in the grip and taking the slide in my left hand, held it out to Alina.

To shoot that gun would now require that the slide be drawn back and let loose and I figured, if she was going to shoot me, now was just as good a time to find out as later.

“You ever shot one of these?”

She nodded but didn’t reach for the gun.

“Take it.” I said. “You’re going to need it sooner or later.”

This was a turning point in our trust relationship. Either I’d trust her more in the next couple seconds or she’d be dead faster than she could chamber another round after the gun clicked on the empty chamber.

“Take it.” I said again. But she still didn’t reach for it.

“Look,” I said, “Fact of the matter is I might get killed down there before I take out all of them and you need some type of protection, so take the damned gun.”

She never took her eyes off me while I was saying that and I could see a tear forming in the corners.

“If you get killed, I have no more reason to live. Who else will come?”

When? What difference will it make?" she said in a sad voice. "You must not die."

"Alina." I said. "I'm not keen on the prospects either but I have a better chance of getting through this without you there slowing me down or distracting me."

"Take the pistol and use it to put a bullet in your own head as a last resort if you need, to but take the pistol."

I'm not sure what part of what I said convinced her, but after a moment she reluctantly reached out and took the handle of the pistol without putting her finger in the trigger guard and I let go of the slide and she lowered the gun to her hip and let it hang there.

"Pick the frigging thing up!" I commanded and startled by the force of my voice she raised the gun again.

I stood there a minute waiting for her to pull the trigger but she didn't, so in my best Terminator voice I said.

"I'll be back." Then turned, still listening for the click of the gun, opened the control room door and stood aside for her to pass.

She stood there momentarily watching me, her eyes imploring me to change my mind, then after a minute more, stepped lightly past me into the control room, to the end of it and stood watching me.

I'll signal you from the floor when it's safe to come down. I mouthed without saying. *Understand?*

She nodded again after a second and I carefully closed the door and latched it.

Now comes the fun part. I thought as I made my way back to the office door.

Opening the door slightly, shotgun ready I peered out as well as my visibility allowed and then started to slowly push the door further which this time made more noise than I was comfortable with. When it was open enough and nothing apparently on the landing, I stepped lightly out onto the

landing and scanned the stairway then down below me and seeing nothing and the door below still shut with the boxes in place, made my way carefully down the steps.

On the floor level I walked to the door and gently moved the boxes one by one from in front of it, wondering briefly what was in them, and turned the knob.

Opening the door, I was confronted with nothing more than the rhythmic sound of the anomalies outside and I moved into the reception room, pulled the door shut behind me, and putting my back tight to the wall began to move around the room to the doorway.

When I approached the first window, I looked out briefly, seeing nothing threatening.

Out the door ahead and to my right lay 3 meters of fenced patio, some of the fencing ahead clearly melted by the anomalous field that had appeared there.

It reminded me of a Terminator scene when he first arrived.

Further to the right, maybe another 7 meters there was a garage area open on this side, with a train engine facing forward, sitting abandoned and forgotten inside it, numerous tool boxes beside it.

I figured it was in the general direction I needed to go, offered great height and if I could get on top without being killed or wounded, I could snipe the Snorks as long as my ammo held out.

Most of the left side of the train and rear end of it was visible and easily accessible to me after I cleared the patio outside. The rear offered a platform I could easily scale to and from there, a ladder in the side of the engine that would allow me to climb to the roof but again, that would depend on how much time it took to get there.

Squatting down, I crouch crawled under the window to the doorway where I stood again and taking another quick look out, saw nothing. As an afterthought, I looked up to find Alina staring down at me through the control room acrylic floor, some 8 meters above me, in great concern and

still holding the gun at her side.

I gave her a thumbs up sign which she didn't acknowledge and then putting her out of my mind, refocused my attention on the outside area and getting to the train engine.

Reaching into my pocket, I extracted a couple bolts and tossed one quickly around the corner of the doorway along the wall I was hiding behind and ducked back inside.

Noting no change in the anomalies outside I determined the way to be clear and figured this must have been the way she came originally. *Now that might have been something worth asking her.* I thought satirically and geared up for the dash.

Taking one more look out the door and noting no changes I stepped through it onto the landing and turning hard to the right, quickly down the three steps to the courtyard level.

Moving as swiftly as I could quietly move I made my way nervously along the wall, past the anomalies and to the fence line that marked the border of the one meter high courtyard.

Noting that the fence was cut and peeled back probably for this very reason, I stepped around the broken fence fabric to the edge of the courtyard, scanned quickly in front of me and noting nothing, squatted and dropped to the dirt and rubble covered train yard floor.

Again, I scanned the area between me and the train and noting still nothing, I started briskly for the rear of the train engine, shotgun in hand.

I was better than halfway there when the noise from the anomalies had died down enough so that I could start to hear the growling noise of the Snorks and I could feel the hair rise on my back but I kept moving.

I was about two meters from the train when I saw the Snork casually round the front end of the train sniffing at the air through its facial appendage. I took the last 2 meters at a full run and just as I got to the rear corner, it noticed me and roared out its alarm.

I had roughly 12 meters of distance between me and it, so I knew I had

plenty of time to get up out of reach as long as nothing unexpected occurred and that's when the something unexpected occurred.

I had made the rear of the engine by now and noting the 14" wide service access walk that ran along the rear and side of the engine about 5 feet off the ground as I ran up, I also noted the break in the 48" high guard rail at the rear, over the coupling mechanism.

All I had to do was get onto the coupling mechanism, step onto an embedded foot step and pull myself to the walkway and that's where my plans went awry.

I had put my left foot on the rail line, 8" off the floor and while still moving forward, swung my right boot up and onto the coupling mechanism while reaching out with my free left hand for the railing, and my boot slid right off the mechanism.

Next thing I knew I was falling backwards toward the track bed, half under the train engine and the impact with the floor knocked the wind outta me.

Fortunately, however, the track rails were secured to the concrete floor and not a typical rail board and I had a backpack between me and the floor so while I had scrapes and bruises for sure from the rocks and litter on the concrete I'd just slid on, nothing was broken.

I was considering my next move when I realized I had to do something quick so I shoved the shotgun out from under the engine, grabbed the framework and pulled with all my strength, sliding quickly out from under the engine, rolled over onto my stomach, went into a pushup position and jerked my legs under me.

Grabbing the shotgun, I spun around and took hold of the ladder rail and as quick as I could manage, jumped completely over the coupling into the ladder step and scrambled up to the landing.

I was just clearing my left boot when the first Snork rounded the corner of the engine and took a leap at me hitting the guard rail with enough force to draw blood, and thudded back onto the concrete dazed, but not

before raking my left pant leg with its talons hard enough to rip the pant leg and draw some of my blood.

I could already hear at least two more high balling for the rear of the engine so I snapped two quick steps and hit the service ladder to the top of the engine on the fly, doubled the rungs, scrambled up and onto the roof as fast as I could, dropped to my knees and while raising the shotgun, spun onto my back aiming for the ladder I'd just left.

I lay there panting, my heart racing for maybe two minutes but despite the raging roaring and growling below, nothing followed me so I gradually sat up and crawled to the edge and carefully peered over the side to see four Snorks furiously moving back and forth on the concrete just six meters below me, every now and then springing up at me while snarling and hissing, but falling short by 1 or 2 meters.

I was briefly disturbed when one of them became entangled in the service walk handrail and was about to cut loose with the shotgun when it disentangled itself and rather than climbing onto the walkway, fell clumsily back to the concrete roaring in rage.

Apparently, the things were not sophisticated enough to understand the walkway.

Taking this opportunity to collect my thoughts I looked back toward the control room in time to see Alina turning around to face me, hands over her mouth, eyes wide in terror.

Then slowly she dropped her hands and her expression turned to joy at finding me safely on the roof after having apparently turned away in shock when she saw me slip under the train.

It was also about that time that the pain from my adventure began to seep in, and I realized I was going to be sore nearly all over my body tomorrow.

Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath and held it for a minute while I quickly went through an internal inventory of pain notices, and upon determining none of them amounted to a serious injury, opened them

again, breathed out and slowly and painfully stood up on the roof of the engine.

My right ankle was beginning to swell. I could feel it in my boot, and standing on it was not easy so I dropped back down carefully to my knees and raised the shotgun to my shoulder aiming for one of the Snorks making slow circles below me, and pulled the trigger.

The shot was close and dead on and the Snork went limp and sprawled out on the concrete bleeding from the neck and back of the head.

One down, three to go. I mumbled to myself as I jacked another round into the magazine sending the spent shell flying off over my shoulder.

Two of the remaining three had galloped off to the front of the engine someplace leaving the third moving in and out of effective range.

The idea here was one shot, one kill since I had a limited number of shells,, so every shot had to count for maximum effect. That said, the closer the target the greater the damage, the more likely the kill and I waited patiently for the guy to come back within 2 or 3 meters of the engine.

As it turned out, I didn't have to wait long. I was just considering taking my eye off the sights I'd been following it in to look for another target, when seeing me again, it loped roaring to about four meters from the train and launched itself up and into the hand rail and like the last one, became entangled.

This time however, I didn't wait to see what would happen and squeezed off another shotgun round at it just 2 meters below be.

The shotgun bucked again and when I returned it to the target I was overjoyed to find the beast wrapped in the handrail, bleeding out, dead.

' I cried in a strongly emotional but low voice.
"Who's the man now, mother fuckers!"

And I quickly jacked yet another round into the magazine ready for the next Snork but although I could hear them, none of them were coming around.

Rising up onto my good foot I carefully tested my right ankle and receiving a bolt of fire, I knew I had a serious problem now.

Despite the immense pain using the shotgun as a sort of cane, I was able to hobble to the front of the engine and once again, squatting down I took a seat on the roof and sighted in on the closest of the remaining two Snorks following it as it circled back and forth some 10 or 12 meters away.

“Come on you crap bag!” I mumbled as I watched it over the end of the shotgun barrel. “Come to daddy.”

It took another 2 or 3 minutes of patiently waiting but it too eventually moved in an unexpected close pass and the shotgun roared again!

Lowering the shotgun and jacking another round, I started searching for the fourth but while I could hear the beast, I couldn't see it anywhere.

Now I was getting just a bit worried. If I couldn't coax that bitch in close enough I'd have to go hunting it on my bad foot. I could stay up here for a while with the food and water I had in the backpack but Alina had nothing and I was considering my next move when two more things happened.

One, the Snork I'd been looking for reappeared from around the overhead roll up door frame, and two, it was followed by 6 more!

“Crap, crap and double crap!” I swore when I realized that the home team now vastly outnumbered me.

“I'll be damned! That mother went and got help.” I said in amazement.

Ok. I've had enough of this crap. I need to even the field a bit. I thought and went to retrieve the AC but found nothing hanging from my shoulder where I had left the AC hanging.

“Crap, crap and triple crap!” I swore as I realized it was gone and probably now resting on the ground, under the engine where I'd fallen.

By now all 7 had made their way to the engine and were intermittently dodging in and out of range, making target choice confusing, and after

wasting two rounds on nothing, I stopped and reconsidered the situation.

“Ok. If you’re that smart to create confusion what I’ll do is pick you out one at a time and concentrate on bagging you when you get near enough.”

Then choosing one of the slower ones I’d noted previously, I sighted in and followed it for maybe 4 minutes, frustratingly ignoring my screaming urge to reassign sights on another as it lope’d into and then back out of range, and eventually I was rewarded when it loped toward the engine and, like the others, launched itself into the air at the side of the engine.

BOOM! The shotgun rang out and number four dropped limply onto the concrete deck.

Maybe it was my imagination but that appeared to enrage the other 6 and they all began to lope into and across my field of vision in erratic and spontaneous patterns, leaping at me every couple of seconds from different directions.

I spent the next 20 minutes sighting, following and shooting till I was down to one that I’d wounded, moving to the far left of me out of range and apparently not interested in coming closer.

I tried everything I could from the roof and nothing mattered to it. I painfully rose and limped back to the rear ladder and climbed down the ladder to the access walkway, taunting it from there, but it made no difference.

It would stop, look at me, roar in defiance a bit then continue to orbit outside of my range.

After 5 minutes, against my better judgment I decided I had to go hunt it, so while watching it over my shoulder I hobbled down the walkway to the rear of the engine where I carefully climbed down to the concrete, turned and started limping toward the Snork in the distance ahead and beyond the control room.

I was 3 meters from the control room courtyard still watching the wounded Snork orbiting some 12 meters away when I caught a glimpse of movement coming from the control room bridge way above and to my left.

Glancing quickly in that direction I saw Alina frantically waving her arms and hysterically pointing down and to my rear, her face showing utter terror, and a moment after that it hit me that she was warning me of something approaching fast.

Following my instincts, I dropped down to my knees, spun left on my waist dropping toward my right shoulder and with my left hand on the shotgun magazine for control and my right hand still holding the shotgun stock as I fell, pulled the trigger when I caught the blur of motion heading over me.

The blast was close and I saw flame erupt from the barrel but I also saw the impact of the 12-gauge pellets as they hit the Snork, that had been quietly stalking me from behind, as it traveled over me and toppled dead on the concrete ahead of me.

Turning my gaze quickly upward again I saw Alina again waving frantically, but this time pointing ahead of me toward the wounded Snork I was hunting, and as I turned that direction I had just enough time to see it launch itself through the air at me while my shotgun was still pointed in the opposite direction.

Chapter 16

On The Way Out

“Sonofabitch!” I roared as I pulled the shotgun close to me and spun fast and hard to my right on the concrete while being jabbed and poked by the rocks and metal lying about.

“Sonofabitch!” I roared again when I stabilized again on my back narrowly avoiding the talons as it leaped, tumbled and came about toward me again some 4 or 5 meters away trailing its own blood.

From the supine position, I pulled the trigger, jacked another round, pulled the trigger again and fired yet another round in its direction hitting it at least once and, although not killing it, sending it off in another direction to recollect itself, as I rose to a sitting position, sighted in on it and waited.

It was now loping just out of the kill Zone of my shotgun. Maybe taunting me?

I wasn't sure now.

I'd have never thought it would go get help much less plan a diversionary tactic like that last one.

“Come on, you sonofabitch! Come on back you chicken crap asshole!” I shouted at it and to my surprise, it turned hard as if understanding my insult and suddenly charged at me.

As I slammed the shotgun into my shoulder, from the corner of my eye I saw Alina drop below the control consoles above me then I closed my left eye and sighted it through the shotgun sights and just as it was coiling to spring, pulled the trigger one more time.

Most of the shot pellets caught it in the shoulder and chest at less than 3 meters from me, stopping it dead in its tracks and sending it backward onto its back, spasming for a moment and then laying still in death.

Jeeze, what a frigging way to start the day. I thought as I sat there breathing hard, heart racing again, and began to take internal inventory.

Looking up I still didn't see Alina so I turned the shotgun barrel down to the concrete and using it as a cane, clambered painfully to my feet, and started hobbling back toward the engine to find and retrieve my AC.

I looked beneath the train, and sure enough, there it lay in the rubble, abandoned.

It took more effort to get back on my hands and knees and crawl under the engine to get it but once I'd put my hand on it, I backed out again and using the shotgun, climbed painfully to my feet, shouldered the AC again and turned back to the control room.

I still didn't see Alina and I was just starting to hobble back to the courtyard to get her when she appeared at the door, scanned the area briefly with a look of concern and upon finding me her concern changed immediately to joy. She raced along the wall to the edge of the courtyard, jumped down and ran to me, stopping short of apparently jumping on me.

She had stopped about a meter from me and stood there as her gaze dropped quickly down my body taking in the torn and dirty clothes, the blood on my leg and the shotgun I was currently leaning on. Before I could do or say anything she darted forward and throwing her arms around me, hugged me tightly, sobbing as she did so.

I had stumbled backward, shifting the shotgun to counter her impact and stepping backward on my bad ankle and as the pain shot up my leg I

squeezed my eyes shut, went rigid, gritted my teeth and groaned under my breath.

She apparently noted this and suddenly let loose and backed away a step, concern in her dark eyes.

“You are hurt?” She asked.

“Yeah,” I replied as the pain started to ease down and I could breathe again, “Just a little.”

“Where?” She asked.

“Where not.” I replied sarcastically.

“We should return to the control room and you should rest.”

“No chance, Babe.” I replied. “We have to keep moving or we’ll have to do all this crap again soon.”

“But can you go on? Like That?” She prodded again with real concern.

“Yeah. I’ll get used to the pain in a while.
After I sleep a couple hours though, that’s another story completely.”

“Why after you sleep?” She asked.

“Never mind. Where’s the pistol I gave you?” I asked her finally noticing she wasn’t carrying it.

“I left it up there when I came to you just now.”

“Jeeze, Alina!” I angrily scolded her. “Never go anywhere without a frigging gun!”

“But you had many guns.” She said, her gaze dropping to my feet.

“That doesn’t matter.” I said as I calmed down again.

“Go get the frigging gun Alina. I’ll wait out here.” I told her and I limped over to the wall, laid the shotgun on the top and hoisted myself up to a sitting position to wait.

She stood there a second watching me, then her gaze shifted to the control room and just as quickly back to me again, apparently warring over leaving me alone here.

“Go get the frigging gun Alina.” I told her again, speaking slowly and in a low tone.

She understood the gravity of that and after briefly looking into my eyes, turned quickly, scanned around us and then climbed up and onto the courtyard, dodged quickly around the disabled fencing, up to and onto the landing and disappeared into the control room.

She was gone maybe three minutes and when she suddenly appeared in the doorway of the control room vestibule, she was carrying the .45 in her left hand, jogged back down the landing, and hugging the wall, across the courtyard and through the fencing again to stop in front of me where to my shock, she pointed the pistol at me obviously intending to return it.

I snapped out my right hand and grabbed the barrel end of the slide from the top, forcing the gun down and away from me and then took it as she released it. While holding the barrel, I deftly flipped the gun up and around, ending up catching it by the grip in the palm of my hand, finger along side of the trigger guard and flipped the clip ejection button, dropping the clip into my waiting left hand.

Dropping the clip into my jacket pocket I put my left hand on the top of the slide and jacked it open, locking it in the open position as I did so, noting still no round in the chamber.

Reaching into the same pocket I produced the missing, stubby round, blew off the lint and, holding the gun so it was pointed downward away from us, inserted it gently into the chamber and flicked the slide release with my thumb sending the slide slamming forward locking the round in place under the hammer.

I retrieved the clip from my pocket, and after a quick inspection, confirmed that the clip was still full and slid it back into the handle, snapping it in place with my palm, and replaced the gun in my holster, securing the Velcro strap over the butt end.

She watched all this happen through wide eyes and after the .45 was back in my holster she looked at me and said.

“You gave me an empty gun?”

“I gave you a gun with a full clip and no round under the hammer.” I corrected her. “All you had to do was jack the slide to shoot it.”

“You didn’t explain that part to me when you left. How was I to know?”

“You told me you had used guns before.” I said without any expression. “I figured you could figure out how to load this one.”

She stood there a moment considering that, then she said.

“No. I think you did this to test me. What I would do with the gun if you gave it to me and nothing in the gun meant you had time to shoot me if I turned it on you.”

Clever girl. I thought to myself.

“I gave you the gun for protection.” I replied again without emotion as I stared into her dark eyes.

Again, I think it was a test.”

“What difference does it make?” I said as I slid off the wall and painfully onto my ankle, grimacing at the pain. “Let’s go.”

We had gotten about 15 meters toward the roll up doors separating the train depot from the balance of the tunnels, 45 meters or so away, when she broke the silence again.

“You have an extra gun.” She said, more as a statement than a question.

“No.” I replied without turning, referring to my trust level as I hobbled along on my bum ankle and makeshift cane.

I had been thinking about the shotgun barrel being pushed onto the

ground each time I took a step and I wasn't happy about the results I was conjuring up when I finally had to pull the trigger again. The weapon was too valuable to be used as a cane and cleaning each time I needed it was impractical. I had to find another cane and soon.

"But you have two in your pack." She countered after a moment.

"We're not there yet Alina." I snapped back at her.

She stopped at that point and stood there watching my back as I hobbled on. Then she jogged back up to me and started again.

"I passed test, no?"

"That's not the point." I said in a low and quiet voice.

"What is point?" she asked.

I opened my mouth to reply and no words came out. Truth is, I couldn't think of any words to say to justify my decision at this point other than "a feeling" and I knew that would just lead to accusations of paranoia so I just kept hobbling on.

While this was happening, I had been scanning the piles of debris strewn about the floor and my eye caught a particularly interesting pile just 6 meters off to my right that had a lot of items, probably metal, sticking out of it.

Alina had just started to ask another question when I turned sharply right and headed toward it.

She immediately snapped her attention back in front of us, and fearfully scanned ahead for the danger I had shied away from, but seeing nothing out there she then turned her attention to the direction I was headed and again searched for what might have caught my attention.

"What is problem?" She asked quietly.

When I didn't reply she remained silent too.

We were about 3 meters from the pile when she determined that was the destination since there was nothing else but a wall towering up into the darkness above the lights, and asked quietly again.

“What is problem?”

“I have to make something for my foot.” I replied as I hobbled on toward the pile. “I have to get off this shotgun.”

She nodded her satisfaction at that and we covered the last of the 3 meters in silence again.

When we arrived at the pile she immediately split off from me, disinterested in my mission for the moment, and chose a section of broken brick wall about a meter high, still mostly intact, made her way to it and sat down to watch my progress.

I stood over the pile roughly 5 meters wide and 2 meters high, looking at a combination of plaster, brick, wood and metal extending beneath, through and out of it, and started pulling on pieces of metal and wood that I thought might work for a crutch, but all I got loose were much too short for the purpose.

After 3 or 4 minutes of fruitless pulling and tugging I stood before the pile and looked around the area for another pile where I might get what I needed, but saw nothing in the direction we were headed.

I was debating going back when Alina, who had till that moment been silently watching me, cleared her throat calling for attention and when I turned to face her, I found her still sitting on the bricks, holding something about a half meter long in the air.

I couldn't really tell what it was and she didn't volunteer anything so I hobbled over and stopped in front of her, took the metal item she was holding out and examined it closely.

It was a 4" (10cm), angle iron about 24" (60cm) long evenly perforated along its length with large, oval holes.

At one end there was a short piece of metal shaped like a triangle, maybe 4" (10cm) long welded perpendicular into the elbow of the angle.

At first glance I noted that it wasn't long enough for a cane, and I was about to toss it disgustedly back on the pile when she realized this, and calmly said.

"For your leg dummy."

I stopped the motion and brought it back up to look at again only this time instead of looking at it as a cane, I thought about it strapped to my leg.

The angle would fit along side of my calf and it extended slightly below my knee. The triangle piece could be stepped on beneath my boot and if strapped properly to my leg, I could get support for my ankle and relieve some of the stress causing me pain, but best of all, I could walk on it without the need for a cane, relieving me of further damaging the shotgun and freeing up my hand as well.

"Clever girl." I said with a small grin as I turned it over now considering the strapping problem.

Looking briefly at her I noted the shy smile of prideful satisfaction she was wearing as she watched me mull the rest of the engineering in my mind.

Suddenly remembering something, I turned to her and said. "Stay here a minute. I'll be right back." And I turned about and started hobbling back in the direction we had just come from.

I didn't see the look of terror that suddenly replaced her grin, but I did hear her leap off the brick and rush to my side, apparently not comfortable with being left alone again.

"Where we go?" She asked in quiet alarm.

She had gripped my free arm and although she didn't try to stop me, she made it obvious that heading back to the scene of the battle and abandonment didn't set well with her at all.

"Side track." I replied as I hobbled toward the three dead Snorks I'd shot earlier. "It'll just take a minute."

Reaching the scene, I surveyed the bodies lying there and saw what I'd hoped I'd find.

Alina had stopped about 3 meters from them, refusing to come closer and merely stood quietly in fear, watching me.

Making my way through the bloody muck to the first one laying on its side, I balanced on my good foot and put my bum ankle boot on its hip, forcefully pushing it over onto its back, its arm lazily moving across the chest to rest there semi-stiffly.

Rigor mortis was already setting in and, in another hour, or so this trash would be stiff as boards.

Standing there next to the body I scanned the area around us, and determining relative safety for the moment, I squatted down and directed my attention to unstrapping the gangly, utility belt strapped around the body's waist and shoulder.

The waist belt was no issue. The belt loop came undone easily and I pulled my knife out and quickly cut the easily accessible belt loops then holding the buckle, stood back up and pulled it the rest of the way out from under the corpse.

Dragging the belt beneath it had cleared it of most of the gore and after squatting again, I grabbed up a hand full of the stinking shirt, wadded it around the belt and pulled the belt through it removing nearly all of the remaining gore.

Satisfied with the results I looped it over my neck and inspected the shoulder belt but after looking at its tattered and dried out condition closely, abandoned it for useless. If it didn't break apart in the extraction it would definitely break apart in the cinching process I needed for the brace.

Looking now at the second body I discarded that one because the belt simply wasn't there.

The third one however still had the belt intact, and apparently the blood it had shed hadn't reached the belt, so I rose again, hobbled over to it and again, after scanning the area crouched down and undid the buckle, cut the loops then stood and pulled it loose, draping it as well over my shoulders, and turned to hobble back to Alina.

Through all of this she had remained silent and merely stared at me with a look of shock and disgust as I hobbled past her and back toward the bricks we were seated on earlier. Despite the feelings however, she immediately snapped to and moved quickly to my side although maintaining a small distance from the belts as if they were alive and might suddenly bite her.

When I reached the bricks, I turned and sat down and picking up the metal makeshift splint, set about clumsily threading the belt through the oval holes and around my leg, but getting it tight was causing me great concern. I didn't have the leverage from this angle.

Alina had stopped a couple meters from me and was watching my frustration, fighting her own inner battle, and after a couple minutes of watching my growing frustration she stepped forward silently, tentatively took the belt from my struggling hands and started pulling it tighter while wrapping it through the holes and down my calf.

It took about half an hour of wrapping, unwrapping, rewrapping and adjusting but eventually we had it secured in place with my bum ankle strapped tightly in, the triangle plate beneath my boot, the angle iron straight up my leg to about knee height and the pain dulling now to a major throb and I stood up on it and tried it out.

Grimacing from the pain I knew I'd have to get used to, I said.

"Good job Alina." And she again grinned in pride at the praise.

I might be walking like a peg leg pirate but I'd be walking like a peg leg pirate holding a semi-auto shotgun and that was worth the inconvenience.

Stepping back over to the bricks where I'd rested the shotgun, since the new leg brace wasn't conducive to bending of the knee, I turned around and dropped back down onto the bricks, right leg stiff at the knee, and settled in to direct my attention to the condition of the shotgun.

Picking it up I inspected the breech, and satisfied with it, rotated the gun slightly, exposing the magazine release button. Pressing that in I jacked the magazine arm back, opening the chamber

mechanism and starting the spent shell extraction process that quickly threw the chambered shell out the port and set the new shell from the magazine in place, riding the forward motion of the lever that slid and seated it back inside the bore, but instead of quitting there, still holding the button in place I jacked the lever two more times throwing out all the shells and ending on an empty chamber, which I visually inspected for certainty.

Then, bending as much as I could I collected the shells from the floor, dusted them off and put them into the pocket of my jacket, gripped the barrel and turning it around, set the stock on the floor and inspected the business end of the gun for damage.

A 12ga. Shotgun has a barrel big enough that you can put your finger into it up to at least your first knuckle. Although I'd never actually witnessed it, I'd heard stories from other gun owners and Loners, with and without fingers, that if you put your finger into the barrel and kept it there when the trigger was pulled, the barrel would explode and though you'd lose the finger, both you and shooter would be injured only, probably saving your life in the process.

As I suspected, the barrel was clogged with dirt and stones. How far up I couldn't tell but how far was enough to split the barrel I was concerned with. Clearing it now was the goal.

Laying the shotgun across my lap I looked to my left and right and quickly spied what I was looking for on the floor.

"Alina." I said. "Hand me that small rod over there would you?"

Her attention had been on me as I went through that process but when I pointed in the direction of the debris I was interested in, her head turned and a moment after she locked onto what I was asking for, walked over, picked it up and returned with it handing it to me.

Taking the pencil thin rod, I poked it into the barrel and broke up the debris, then tilted the gun down to roll it out, and finally, using my finger and the tail of my shirt, I wiped the barrel as far up as my finger would reach.

It wasn't a great cleaning but it would do the job. The first round I sent through it now would clean it out thoroughly without splitting the barrel.

Reaching into my jacket pocket again, I retrieved the two previously ejected shells and, one by one, inserted them into the now empty, 6 round magazine through the port on the underside of the gun. Shrugging the backpack off my shoulders, I opened it, rummaged and when I found the additional shells I had in it, counted 5 more, pulled them out and inserted 4 of them the same way filling the magazine.

With the mag now full, I jacked a round into the chamber, gently lowered the hammer and inserted the fifth shell into the magazine to replace the one now in the breech. I was about to abandon the rod when I thought about its possible use again so I opened one of the side pockets and inserted it into the pocket.

All this time Alina had watched carefully, only occasionally turning briefly to scan the area. Satisfied with the job and packing, I shouldered the backpack again and clambered to my feet.

The oversize, roll up doors were close now and I was anxious to get moving again. There was no telling what might have been alerted to the noise of the battle and come curiously looking, so I started walking toward the doors to both get started and test the new leg brace. The metal made a dull metallic thump every time I set it down after swinging the leg around but it was not, unacceptably loud so I figured it would do. Plus, the weld was about a half inch up the bracket so the bracket dug into the concrete and didn't slide when it made contact.

The roll ups were open about half way making a clear 3-meter passage. You could drive a truck under it but certainly none of the train cars, but then, I doubted if any of them would operate and even if so, where would you take them anyway?

It was also now apparent that the lighting in the depot was not operating in the tunnels ahead, and as I rounded the corner of the doors, I looked out onto a grey, hazy distance where visibility ended at 15 meters and blackness stretched beyond.

Chapter 17

Into The Darkness Again

Stepping out into the tunnels again I noted a couple things different from the yard behind us. First I noticed that the floor was about 3 meters across and on both sides a walkway with a hand rail extended another 2 meters to the tunnel walls. I also noted that the train rails were embedded into the concrete floor here rather than onto it as in the train yard behind us suggesting that this part was used by both train and wheeled vehicles and had people moving along it as well, on the walkways, protected from the traffic.

The darkness here was disturbing but if memory served me correctly, we were nearly through the tunnels, approaching the loading dock leading up to the Jupiter Plant on ground level. With any luck at all we should be top side again in no more than maybe 4 hours walking.

We had traveled about another 4 meters along the abandoned roadway, my PDA red light helping our visibility, when we came to the first ghostly rail car, a flat car, loaded with what looked like excavation debris consisting of dirt and rock.

They were probably moving the tunnel digs out this direction when

things came to a stop, I thought as I looked at it while passing.

Looking back briefly I noted I couldn't see anything behind me where my red light didn't shine so I had no idea whether Alina was there or not other than the occasional boot scuffs I heard as we progressed.

I guessed she could see my silhouette in the light, and what was in front of me that wasn't blocked by my body. So long as she maintained some distance behind me we wouldn't be tripping on each other.

We had passed the first flat car and I was beginning to make out a box car ahead, wondering what that might have conveyed. Getting closer I noted the nondescript lettering on the side saying something about agriculture products, and then the door yawning open on its side.

Shouldering the shotgun, I slowed my pace a bit and adjusted it to bring me close to the side of the car as I approached the open door.

At the door I slowly pivoted as I kept moving along the opening, keeping the shotgun pointed into the blackness of the car, ready for anything that might jump, but nothing happened.

Reaching the far side of the door, I unclipped the light and held it out directing the beam into the nearly empty box car and noted nothing of interest other than a small crate on the far end of the car.

I briefly considered climbing into the car to investigate but my disability and the odds of whatever was in the crate being worthy of my interest or desire were not great enough, so I re-clipped the light and as I was getting ready to turn to continue on, noticed that Alina wasn't there.

That sent a slight shock of worry through me which disturbed me as well. Worrying about her was dangerous but on the other hand, where the hell was she?

I was about to call out when she suddenly appeared in the light from my left, scaring the hell outta me.

"Don't do that!" I whispered forcefully. I could have shot you."

I'm sorry." She apologized. "I saw you with interest in the car and as you turned I was afraid of maybe getting jumped at or perhaps shot so I backed off more and came around you."

"Yeah, well. Next time clear your throat or say something before you come up on me like that."

She said nothing in response and just stared into my eyes so after a couple seconds, I turned and started walking again.

We came on a couple more train cars, some heavy trucks and a couple jeeps as we continued but nothing happened and I was just counting my blessings when I heard the faint sound of anomalies warbling in the distance.

Stopping, I said over my shoulder "Sounds like an anomaly field ahead. Stay close but don't step on my heels."

"Ok." Was all she said from the darkness behind me.

Moving forward again I continued toward the slowly increasing volume of the sounds and after another 70 meters or so came upon a profusion of vehicles jammed up in the roadway.

Carefully threading my way through them we came finally to a clearing of vehicles maybe 7 meters across. The anomaly noise was fierce here, no doubt drowning out any of my previous noise behind us and clearly indicating a pretty big field.

That was disturbing because it was directly in the path we needed to take to get out and there was no alternative route that I knew of around it.

"Wait here a moment Alina. I want to take a look at this field."

"You will be careful?" She asked plaintively, obviously not happy with being left in the darkness.

"Absolutely." I replied and I started forward slowly into the clearing.

I was a little way in when my light lit up what appeared to be the tail ends of at least two, large panel trucks that had collided violently, and as I

progressed further I realized from the increasing light I was carrying that this was the intersection I was looking for and right smack dab in the middle of the roadway, blocking passage was a field of anomalies that had appeared suddenly, vaporizing the vehicles in their footprint and barring all progress forward.

“Crap!” I muttered as I surveyed the mess I could see in my lighted area. “Now what?”

Looking to my right, onto the landing I noted several containers and boxes stacked there and although some were damaged by the anomalous field, those near the wall were intact. I started looking at the field of vehicles out there and noticed something surprising.

I could see them.

For some reason, I could see every single vehicle within a 5-meter diameter of the anomalous field, in a stunningly beautiful, ghostly shimmering, purple light against the pitch black of the tunnel. It was like looking at an ex-ray, motion picture, undulating with the anomalous noise but instead of the image being white and grey against black, there were varying shades of lavender against black.

I'll be damned, I thought with some degree of awe. *What kind of anomalies are these?*

I was pondering that when the memory of the mission at hand struck me and I took a second to clear my head again.

The vehicles were mostly heavy trucks and as I looked across the field I was overjoyed at the discovery that if I climbed onto the boxes, jumped a couple of them and then jumped from truck to truck, I could conceivably make my way through the field to the intersection corner and continue on.

Turning back again with this new information I made my way back to where I'd left Alina. When I finally saw her in the darkness she looked greatly relieved to see me. After a brief, low volume but obviously emotional scolding for leaving her in the darkness and my promise not to do it again,

she remained quiet long enough for me to explain the problem and the solution, then she started in again angrily about the darkness I abandoned her in, and the darkness she was expected to jump in, while I waited patiently for her to wind down.

When she finally finished her tirade and stood quietly, I said.

“Look Alina,” I started sternly, “First, you can see fine there. There’s some type of UV lighting going on in that area making things visible, and second, we’re almost to the loading docks leading up to the Jupiter Plant in Yaniv.”

“You have only two choices at this point whether you like it or not. One. You follow me patiently or two, you turn back alone.”
“Your call.”

She took a couple minutes thinking on that then after looking back over her shoulder into the darkness behind us, looked into my eyes, frowned at me and simply said.

“Fine!”

I turned to head toward the anomalies again, with her in tow.

Friggin women. I thought.

Chapter 18

Now You See It. Now You Don't

We covered the distance back to the anomalies fairly quickly and were standing at the last vehicle in the pile-up in maybe 5 minutes, looking at the tail end of the destroyed panel truck in the intersection and the boxes on the walkway.

"Where are the anomalies."

She demanded in a hushed, but "I-told-you-so" voice.

"You can't see them from here." I replied. "Follow me."

Turning to my right, I started dodging around the cars between us and the walkway till I neared it.

The walkway was concrete like the road we were walking on but it rose nearly 40" above the road surface and had a guard rail on the edge. Taking all this in consideration as I approached, I figured I could grab the mid rail and hoist myself up to get a foot on the pavement but it also occurred to me she might not be able to scale that height as easily so I turned to her and said.

“Can you get up there from here?”

She then moved forward to the edge and reached up for the lowest rail with both hands, put one boot on the wall and tried to lift herself up, failing to get any higher than a couple feet, before her boot slid down the wall to the road surface again leaving her holding the rail, standing on the pavement in frustration.

She repeated this effort two more times before finally turning to me in frustration.

“No.” She nearly whined.

“Ok.” I said. “Turn around and face the concrete. I’m going to boost you up. What I need you to do is grab the second rail and hold on so I can get under you to lift. You got that?”

She looked down in embarrassment and simply nodded.

“Turn around Alina.” I said.

At that she turned to face the walkway but immediately said.

“Wait!”

Looking over her shoulder she said “I can’t see anything. It’s too dark.”

“Crap. I shoulda figured that.” I said as I realized her body was now blocking the red light clipped to my jacket.

“Turn around again.” I said as I reached up and, reluctantly, unclipped the light from my jacket. Then reaching out I took hold of her shirt and while holding it firmly, clasped the light’s clip down onto the fold where the button and buttonhole met on her shirt front, briefly exposing just a hint of cleavage, before letting loose and telling her to turn around again.

Now it was my turn to experience the darkness as I reached for the silhouette of her hips, placed both my hands on them wrapping my fingers around her almost to the centerline of her abZonen, took a deep breath as I felt my blood rushing hot again and said.

“Up and down and on three, you jump.”

She nodded acknowledgement that I didn't see and I counted to three, bobbing up and down with her and on three I gripped her hips firmly and hoisted her up while she jumped.

To her credit, she managed to catch the third, top rail and as she scraped with her feet to find the edge of the concrete I slipped my shoulder under her firm butt and hoisted her again till she managed to gain the edge, then put one foot on the low rail and carefully climbed up and swung her right leg over the top rail, straddling it.

I watched all this from the lower level feeling a nearly overwhelming heat of desire, but kept my mouth closed.

What I wouldn't give for that frigging icy drain way right now! I thought to myself as I stood there catching my breath watching as she straddled the top rail then shifted her position to face the hand rail and swung her left leg over and onto the bottom rail alongside her right foot. Stepping down onto the walkway, she smiled triumphantly down at me, leaned over the rail and offered her hand.

Shaking my head gently, I reached up and took hold of the middle rail, hoisted my good left boot up onto the ledge and dragging my bum right boot up the wall I pulled myself higher and shifting my right-hand grip quickly grabbed the top rail and pulled myself higher.

At that point I felt her hand grab my pack and pull as well till I was standing erect on the opposite side of the rail facing her less than 12" apart.

We stood there in stunned silence staring into each other's eyes till I took a deep breath and whispered.

“Step back please.”

It took a moment to register on her and I watched with some amusement as her expression went from major anticipation to confusion to understanding, and finally to what appeared to be anger, as she stepped back 5 paces and planted her hands on her hips to wait while I jumped up landing my left foot on the lower rail, then swung my stiff right one up and

over the top rail, straddling it, then rocked back slightly, shifted my weight and swung my left leg over balancing on the top rail in a sitting position. Then rotating my hips and planting my left foot on the lower rail I shifted off the top rail, turning as I did so and jumped to the floor while holding my right leg high enough to avoid contact with the floor.

Turning around to face her again I found her watching all of this silently, hands still firmly planted on her hips, pulling the oversized, heavy cotton shirt tight against her feminine figure.

Taking one more look and breathing deeply again I covered the distance between us in two steps, reached out and took her shirt again in my left hand pulling her toward me.

As I did this she kept her fists firmly on her hips and stepped back a half a step requiring me to grip her shirt more firmly and pull her toward me.

“Stand still a minute.” I whispered hoarsely as I reached for the light and unclipped it, noticing again her smooth, white bare chest and cleavage and once again feeling the heat cross my face.

When I’d unclipped it and started to step back to clip it back on my jacket, I looked at her face and noticed she was smiling at me.

Odd woman. I thought as the heat began to fade again.

“Come on.” I said, as I led her toward the first packing crate we needed to scale.

“I’ll go first, you follow.” I said as I stepped up onto the 24” high crate then to the 40” high one next to it and finally onto the 8’ high container by jumping up onto my stomach, rolling over and rising to a seated position where I could get my legs beneath me and finally stand upright looking down on her.

After a moment of watching me with the light now illuminating the crates, she sized up the procedure, and in less time than it took me to say, “Let me give you a hand.” she had scaled the height and was now standing next to me.

“Ok.” I said, somewhat taken aback as I gathered my thoughts again. “Now comes the easy part.” I added sarcastically turned and headed down the container toward the panel trucks in the intersection.

When we got to the end of the container I stopped, looking out over the anomaly field and marveling again at its stunning, ghostly, lavender beauty, and said.

“Amazing huh?”

There was a brief pause while she stood beside me, looking out over the intersection and then she said.

“What?”

Chapter 19

Two Trucks Apart

“The field.” I said as I stared out at it. “Look at it.”

“What field?” She said, confused.

At that point I turned to her, confused myself, and in the dim red light I could make her out squinting her eyes apparently trying to see what I saw as plain as day.

“You can’t see it?”

“See what!” She said again this time with a little agitation in her voice. “I see nothing. Just as before, I see nothing!”

“You can’t see it?” I repeated. “Lavender Zones all over the intersection making everything in the area glow with a smoky, lavender haze?”

She had turned to face me now, her fists back on her hips in defiance and I could see she was getting angry.

“You make fun for me!”

“No!” I replied quickly. “It’s there! Plain as day. I can see it plain as day and it’s illuminating this whole area!”

She turned her head once and then looking up at me again repeated.

"I see nothing. No anomalies, no lavender, no light. Only darkness. How am I to jump anywhere with no light?"

"Damn." I said in confusion and frustration as I turned again to face the anomalies.

"How is it that I can see them and you can't?"

I asked more to myself than as a question to her.

"Why do you ask?" She replied mistaking my self-examination for a question to her.

"This place, the Zone, is full of mysteries you think?"

"I can see it, you can't. What's different?" I asked myself.

"I have no idea." She replied.

"Alina, hush for a moment. I need to think on this."

She still had the look of defiance on her face but she kept quiet.

"I can see it, you can't." I said again thinking of what I had done or eaten or fallen into that she hadn't, and then it hit me.

I had an unknown artifact on my hip and she didn't!

Reaching down I unsnapped the safety clasp on the artifact container and took it off my hip then looked out over the field and saw absolutely nothing!

"That's it!" I nearly shouted and when I turned to face her again and found her scanning around us into the darkness with a worried look.

"Perhaps you should be quiet more?" She asked me finally still worried about detection.

Excitedly I pushed the artifact container against her breasts and pointed toward the intersection.

"That field makes more noise than we do. Look and tell me what you

see.”

Raising her hands up to cover mine holding the container against her breasts, she doubtfully turned her head toward the intersection and gasped in surprise when she saw the field, and started to take a step backward while twisting her hips to face the field, resulting in her backing into my stomach with my right arm around her right arm, holding the artifact container against her chest, her hands still covering mine.

“Oh, My Lord!” She whispered, so low that had I not been so close, my chin resting on her head, left arm dangling limply at my side because I was unsure what to do with it, I would have not heard it.

“Yeah!” I said. “Friggin amazing huh.”

We stood there for another two minutes without moving while she took in the ghostly, lavender wonderland as it pulsed and throbbed in her vision, in time with the sounds we could both hear around us, and I looked on to absolute darkness, feeling every bit of her bottom and back pressed against my pelvis and chest, desire growing all over again.

Once again, we had the problem of light with which to travel by.

I had the light but Alina didn’t have one and while I could jump first and the turn to light the way, shining even the dim red light into her eyes could mean blinding her, missing the edge and falling and that would be tragic.

Then another thought hit me. I had the light of course... But I really didn’t need it. I had the artifact!

Pushing her gently forward I removed the container from her chest, and with the show ending abruptly for her, she gasped in frustration, as I replaced the container on my belt, immediately lighting up the area again, throwing her into the darkness.

“What was that?” She asked in awe and amazement.

“That my dear, was a beneficial artifact action. A BAA as we call it for short.” As I said this I was simultaneously putting both hands on her

shoulders and turning her around to face me. Then while watching her stunned expression as she stared into my eyes, her arms hanging limply beside her, I removed the light from my jacket, gripped her shirt again from only 16" and after I'd clipped the light back on her shirt, this time however, with the shirt pulled forward, and from this short distance I was able to briefly see down and into it, exposing her firm, B size breasts.

Stunned for a second, I was about to step back and apologize when she threw her arms up and around my neck, pulling me willingly into an embrace that resulted in several minutes of kissing as we explored each other's mouth and ground our bodies together.

I'm pretty sure it would have moved to a more horizontal position had I not gently, then more forcefully, pushed her backward, both of us breathing deeply several times staring at each other as that familiar grin slowly crept onto her face again.

"We have to go!" I said sternly, but when I turned and stepped past her, out of her sight, I grinned in wolfish happiness as well.

I had started walking toward the corner of the container, it being less than 36" from the side of the first panel truck. I timed the steel of my right foot brace to land on the container's edge, and following my forward momentum, swung my left foot over the gap and onto the truck, following with my right foot, and then followed through for two more steps before turning back to face Alina, still standing concerned on the container.

"You can make this Alina."

"Just do like I did and walk forward in a big step." I called to her above the din around us.

She hesitated a moment more then stepped backward two steps and in a half run, jumped the gap, colliding with me before she could stop her forward momentum.

I stumbled backward a step but caught my balance while still holding her in my arms then gently pushed her back a step away from me, smiled at her and said.

“See? Easy as pie.”

“Easy maybe for you.” She replied, slowly smiling at her success. “For me, scary as hell.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll be ahead to catch you as we move on. You’ll be fine.” I said.

“Who will catch you?” she asked, a sly expression on her face.

“I won’t fall.”

“How to know?” she asked.

“Falling is simply not an option.” I said resolutely. “It simply won’t happen because it never has.”

“That makes no sense.” She replied.

“That makes no difference.” I said with certainty. “It is simply not an option.”

“You are an odd man, Bridger.” She said, consternation on her face.

“Come on.” I said and turned away again, stepping off the panel roof onto the truck roof, then to the truck roof beside us and onto the panel roof, before stopping to look back, finding her following me, deftly crossing the gaps.

We had done this across 4 more vehicles when we reached the center of the intersection, the area of the most anomalous activity below us and I realized the narrowest gap between the next vehicle was over 2 meters and spanning it without jumping was not possible.

There was no way I could jump that gap with my foot wrapped up like it was. The pain would be so great my ankle would collapse and assuming I didn’t slide right off the other side, I’d be stuck there with no way to move again.

“I can’t do this one first Alina.” I said.

“It’s too wide. I need you to span it first then help me when I jump.”

“Can you make this?” I asked her.

She looked at the gap before us and then down at the street below. Although she couldn't see the undulating anomaly that I could see, she did see the vaporized area that the anomaly Zones had taken from the sides of the two trucks as well as the vaporized area missing from the engines in front, and her look of concern was apparent.

“I don't know.” She replied after a moment of consideration, finally turning to look at me. “I don't know.”

“Alina. You have to make the jump. There's no way back and we're nearly there. I need you on the other side of that gap when I jump, to help me up. I can't make it all the way. All you have to do is back up a bit then run and jump. The two trucks are lined up well enough to give you room to roll if you need it.”

She stood there for a couple minutes looking back and forth between the truck we were currently on and the one 2 meters from us and I was about to add more encouragement when she finally turned around and backtracked to the rear most part of the truck and turned again to face me.

I shifted as close to the edge as I could to give her room to run, smiled at her and winked my confidence.

Truth be told, I didn't expect her to make it and I felt like a jerk encouraging her. I expected I'd see her fall short of the other truck, bounce off the side and fall screaming in pain and fear into the anomaly below us.

She had maybe 7 meters of roof to get up speed and I stood there holding my breath as she started her run, but by the time she was half way I could see she wasn't going fast enough, and my chest filled with dread as I remained silent and watched her run past me, jump and travel off the roof into the air and down.

Chapter 20

With A Little Help

She sailed through the air over the gap and almost cleared it but her foot hit the side of the truck as she landed and caused her to topple forward, her momentum carrying her forward, arms and hands thrown out to stop the fall as she landed on the roof, face first knocking the breath out of her.

I stood there for what seemed like an eternity watching till she shifted a little and then took my first breath since she jumped, gulping in the air.

I was ecstatic with joy that she had made it and watched quietly as she rolled over onto her back and lay there a minute no doubt taking inventory and probably praising the Gods for her success.

Then she sat up, looked over at me and smiled again, slowly got to her feet and stood there patiently waiting for me to back up as well.

In the lavender light, I could see her face change from joy to serious concern and then worry and read her lips over the noise asking "*What are you doing?*" when I walked to the edge, rather than turned and backed up as she had.

When I first looked at this distance, I knew I couldn't run in this brace. It was futile and there'd be no additional momentum if I tried. All I'd accomplish is to slip and fall off the edge.

If I was going to make this it had to be by launching myself across and I could tell by the distance that the best I could hope for was to catch the edge of the roof on my way down.

That's why I needed her over there. To help pull me back up before I fell.

I stood there with my left boot slightly over the roof edge, and my right boot and brace, one pace behind looking at the distance and the anomaly below, fighting the rising tide of doubt and fear, and after what seemed like 10 minutes, I gathered my courage and, balancing my weight on the left boot, left leg slightly bent forward, I swung my right boot forward till it and I were slightly over the edge and pushed off with my left boot with everything I had in me, arms stretched forward to catch the other truck, and sailed out and into the gap headed downward.

I could hear Alina screaming as I plummeted down toward the anomaly and then my face slammed into the side of the truck followed right after by the rest of my body and, unbelievably, despite being dazed by the impact, my fingers caught the edge of the roof and I held on while I rebounded off the truck side and back against it one more time, immense pain shooting through my ankle.

I hung there with my eyes squeezed shut for what seemed like days as stars blew up in my head and I fought to stay conscious and not lose my grip, but I could feel my fingers slipping off and knew I had little time left, and then I felt someone grab my jacket by the shoulder straps and pull, easing the load on my fingers some.

When I opened my eyes, it took a moment for the sight to return but when it did I could see Alina above, sitting on the edge of the truck's roof, her legs dangling down beside me, bent forward and pulling my shoulder straps with all she had.

Unfortunately, while it was enough to lessen the load on my fingers, it wasn't enough to pull me up, so I started scrabbling on the side of the panel truck trying to find some purchase with which to pull myself up, and after a moment, found what felt like a tear in the metal siding that I could just get

the toe of my boot onto and while I pulled with my hands and tenuously lifted with my foot, Alina pulled with everything she had, and I rose up to waist height, rocked forward and literally fell on top of her, unable to move, panting from the exertion.

We lay there for a couple minutes, both of us catching our breaths and when I finally raised my head from beside hers and looked at her face mere inches away from mine I saw the tears around her tightly clenched eyes and knew once again, she'd been terrified by the near calamity.

She had simply dropped her hands over her head from my shoulder straps in exhaustion when I landed on top of her after clearing the edge and lay there beneath me, legs dangling down the side of the truck absolutely still as we breathed in and out.

I ended up laying on top of her, probably crushing her, from her labored breathing, with my legs sticking straight out off the roof between her spread legs, and after a couple seconds I pushed up with my left hand and rolled onto and over her right leg, onto the truck roof to her left where I let my left leg dangle down the side like hers and my braced right leg sticking out. I lay there a couple minutes catching my breath.

I was sweating from the exertion and it felt like everything in my body hurt when I finally sat up and took stock.

We'd made it. Barely, but we'd made it, and there wasn't that much further to go now. Looking over at Alina I was momentarily alarmed when I noticed that she hadn't moved since I rolled off her, so I reached out to her shoulder and shook her a little.

"Alina! Are you ok?" I asked, now very alarmed.

She lay there still and silent and I was about to ask again when she grinned with her eyes still closed and said.

"Do I detect a bit of concern?"

Relieved at finally hearing her respond I smiled myself and said. "Get your ass up woman. We can't set up camp here. I wanna get closer to the stream." And then I chuckled when I saw her open her eyes in confusion and

heard her ask.

“What stream?” As I clambered up and onto my feet.

Reaching out to her with my extended right arm I said “Forget it. C’mon, let’s go.” And I pulled her to her feet when she took my hand in hers.

“Next time we do you on bottom, me on top, no?” she said with a sly grin as I turned to head for the next gap. “You crush me with too much weight.”

“Bitch, bitch, bitch.” I said over my shoulder, but I was grinning myself.

The next series of gaps were easy compared to the ones we’d passed through and we spent another 30 minutes stepping from roof to roof till we were at the fringe of the anomaly field and approaching another clearing in the traffic like the one we’d left on the other side of the intersection.

It now looked like the anomalies had appeared unexpectedly in this busy intersection, immediately destroying all the vehicles and causing the pile-up while the balance of the traffic came screeching to a stop and backed away from the event.

Where the people went would forever be a mystery but they abandoned their vehicles right where they were, 8 meters away from the last panel truck we were now standing on, across an open and clear roadway.

“Looks clear across there.” I said to her as she stood beside me.

“This is good.” She replied. “I have had enough for one day of this excitement.”

“Hear, hear.” I replied under my breath.

“Now we need to get down.” I said and started to look around the truck for a way, finally settling on the cab roof, the hood and then maybe jumping the rest of the way.

“Follow me.” I said. And I started across the panel roof, stepped down onto the cab roof and then jumped onto the hood. From behind me I heard

the sound of the cab roof being jumped on and knew she was following.

Looking down the front of the truck, I noted the oversized bumper and so, squatting on my left leg, right outstretched over the grill of the truck I hopped off the hood and quickly straightening my left leg, landed on the bumper on my left foot, right leg stretched out a little, off the bumper.

I hopped off the bumper and onto the ground, there looking back up to see Alina cautiously evaluating the heights of the path I had just taken.

“Sit on the hood, put your feet on the wheel well and jump to me. I’ll catch you.” I said.

She stood there a minute weighing the alternatives, and then carefully dropped to a seated position and, with her boots on the wheel well, jumped lightly into my arms putting her arms around my neck again, wrapping her legs around my waist and kissed me again as deeply as she had the first time.

When we finally parted, surprised, I asked.

“What was that for?” I asked still holding her with her legs wrapped around my waist and arms around my neck.

“That was for, falling is not an option.” She replied seriously.

“Right.” I answered as a grin slowly appeared and then disappeared from my face.

Then she loosened the grip on her legs and slid back down to put her feet on the pavement and stepped back.

Reaching forward I caught her shirt as she was turning and gently pulled her back in front of me then reached again toward her chest and with a small amount of amusement, saw her close her eyes and pull a breath, holding it in. After retrieving my light from her shirt I placed it back on my jacket as she opened her eyes in confusion, still holding her breath.

“C’mon.” I said as I chuckled, and turned toward the other cars across the clearing. “The dock is less than a quarter click up ahead. Let’s get the

hell outta here.” And I started out again.

We had gone maybe 5 meters across the clearing and were 3 meters from the first jeep in the line when I heard the growling and stopped dead in my tracks throwing my hand out across her chest stopping her as well.

Dogs! I thought. *Crap, crap, crap!*

While I knew my jacket would provide some protection for me against their jaws, I also knew her cotton trousers and shirt wouldn't last long in a vicious attack especially if there was more than one as there usually were.

Dogs, like the other mutations found here have lived and died since the first event. Each generation affected by the Zone more than the previous.

Resulting mutation has led to vast improvements in their previously peripheral abilities, frequently at the expense of primary ones.

The most notable biological change was the loss of sight, paired with an uncanny development of smell.

Unlike most of the other mutants here, dogs are easily killed. So long as you can react and aim quickly, they can be dispatched with a pistol but they hunt in packs and will try to get behind you if you're not paying attention, attacking from all sides.

I couldn't yet see them but like they knew I was here, I knew they were too, so while pulling the S&W.45 from the holster, I started looking for high ground and finding nothing but the cars in front of us I said in as forceful a low volume as I could, as I handed her the gun.

“Alina! Up on the cars quickly!” And started sprinting as fast as my bum leg would allow me toward the first car in line.

Unlike the train episode, I made it there, onto the bumper and onto the hood with no more problems than a slight slip which after wheeling my arms, holding the shotgun in my right hand, I was able to counter then step up onto the roof and scan the cars ahead for their approach.

To my right, I heard Alina make the car next to me and crunching of the roof as she topped it as well, then I saw them coming for us between the

cars.

I was just raising the shotgun barrel for the first shot when I heard the double blast of the S&W Alina held as she fired at them herself, then I was sighting an ugly black one and let loose dropping it in its tracks and exposing a second black one behind it coming at me from between the cars.

I jacked the magazine quickly, drew it back to my shoulder and I was pulling the trigger a second time as the dog veered off between the front and rear of the cars just ahead of me and I lost sight of it, maybe missing it. Racking the magazine a third time, I turned in the direction it had fled and heard Alina cry out.

"I can't see! No light! I can't see to shoot!" And I quickly turned the light back ahead and scanned over my shoulder for the missing dog that had ducked out while she let loose three more rounds.

"I hit 3!" she cried out after the gun had fired.

A fast glance ahead confirmed that there were no more ahead of me and I knew it wouldn't be long before that fourth showed back up behind us.

"Anymore?" I called out. "I need the light. One got behind us!"

"I think I'm good." She called back, and I immediately spun around, switching the light to white as I did so and flooding the clearing behind us illuminating the fourth dog as it charged for the rear of the car that Alina was standing on.

Snapping the barrel sights around, sweeping the area as I did so I pulled the trigger as it leapt for the hood of her car and caught its full side less than a meter from her, sending it careening sideways across the windshield and down between the walkway and the car she was on.

As I stood there surveying the area for additional dogs I saw her slowly drop down to the car's roof, and I immediately lowered the barrel and called out to her.

"What's wrong? Are you alright?"

"I think you shot me." She called back lightly, as I realized she was

staring at her left side and the blood soaking her pants and while I watched from my roof top she fell over onto the roof.

Chapter 21

Too Close For Comfort

Mindless of the dogs now, I leapt over the void between the two cars to the hood of the car where she was laying sprawled out, and slipped on the blood left by the dog I'd just shot, dropping unhurt to the hood surface then scrambling up to get to her.

She had dropped down to her knees then to her heels and finally to her left side where she was laying on the roof diagonally, her feet curled back behind her and the S&W laying near her open right hand.

I scanned the area quickly for additional threats and seeing none, my heart pounding with fear, dropped to my knees on the hood next to her, set the shot gun down next to the S&W and checked her pulse.

It was there and despite the blood on her left hip, it was still strong.

She probably fainted, I thought as I gently straightened her legs and rolled her over onto her back. Then just as gently, I pulled the left tail of her shirt out of her pants and raised it a bit, exposing the bleeding puncture wounds of six or seven shotgun pellets and several grazing cuts.

"Crap!" I scolded myself.

"Ok." I said as I started calming down and my heart slowed. "Light wound, minimal damage, minimal blood loss, easy field dress." And I

shrugged off the backpack while scanning the area with the light again, by rotating on my hips.

Seeing nothing threatening, I opened the backpack, rummaged in it till I located the first aid kit and pulled it out.

“No way to extract the pellets here, Babe.” I said to her unconscious face. “We’ll bandage it, wrap it and deal with it topside. You good with that?” I asked her knowing she wouldn’t respond.

“Right!” I then said.

“Ok. Here I have to ask your permission...” I started saying as I unbuttoned three of the 6 buttons on her shirt and folded the tail over to expose the wounds. “... To open your shirt to get to these wounds.”

But I quickly realized the shirt still covered several bleeding cuts and by the time I could see all the wounds, I could also see her bare breasts, the shirt lying open at her side.

“Ok,” I said to her again, “This is purely medicinal here,” I said as I set to work swabbing the wounds with a gauze onto which I had poured a coagulating solution.

The coagulation solution took just 10 seconds more of free blood flow, then the flow ebbed to a stop and I set about cleaning the wounds.

After cleaning, I applied an anti-bacterial spray and finally the bandage as best I could under the circumstances, finishing the process by drawing out a syringe and a small bottle of Vinca from which I drew 10cc’s, tapping the syringe as I depressed the plunger a little till a couple drops came out, then slowly stuck it into the side of her neck and depressed the plunger all the way in.

I rolled her over onto her stomach, turning her face sideways as I did so and pulled her shirt off her bare back and arms, wadded it and twisted it a couple times wringing out as much of her blood as I could and finally, raising first one arm then the other, slid it back onto her back, tucked the right side under her and rolled her gently back onto her back again.

“Absolutely medical, Ma’am.” I said to her as I started buttoning her shirt back up and covering her breasts, somewhat ruefully.

That whole procedure had lasted about 30 minutes and I was passing an ammonia inhalant under her nose when she spasmed, then cinched up her face and turned away coughing, her eyes fluttering open.

She lay there a minute with a faraway look in her eyes, then recollection began to settle in and fear crossed her face.

“Easy!” I said as I tossed the inhalant off to the side.

“Relax Alina. You’re ok. At the moment.”

She turned her gaze to my eyes and in a searching voice said “You shot me?”

“You’re welcome.” I replied as her expression turned to confusion.

“The dog that got behind us came at you from behind. It was on the hood of the car when I hit it. That’s its blood there.” I said as I shrugged my head over my right shoulder. “Unfortunately, I hit you as well in the collateral field. I’m sorry.”

“Will I live?” She asked, fear evident in her question as she dropped her gaze to the bloody shirt tail.

I chuckled and said.

“Yeah. You’ll survive fine.”

“It will be sore till we can get you to a med facility and they can remove the pellets, but you’ll be ok.”

She considered that a moment then turned to face me again.

“Thank you.” She said.

“All in a day’s work of a superhero.” I said, seeing her smile as I started packing up the med kit, placing it back into the backpack when it was together.

I reached out to her and asked.

"Can you sit up?"

"I think so." She replied then took my hand and slowly raised herself to a seated position, grimacing in pain as she did so.

"I cleaned the wound and added some anti-bacts along with a blood coagulant, so you should be fine for a couple days or so. That'll be plenty enough time to get you to a clinic."

She had raised the shirt tail and was looking at the bandages on her side and then something struck her as unusual and after a moment she raised her eyes to mine and with a serious look on her face said.

"It appears as though you undressed me."

"Uh, yeah well..." I stammered. "Just a couple buttons."

"No. I think more than a couple. I think all." And she smiled impishly at my obvious discomfort at the discovery.

"What would make you think that?" I said.

"My shirt is buttoned wrong. All the way."

"Oh, Ok. Maybe I did." I said. "But I swear I didn't look at your exposed breasts." I replied. "At least not in any other way than as a field medic would."

"Then that is too bad for two reasons."

"Two? I asked curiously.

"Da." She replied. "That you didn't enjoy and that I didn't either."

"Yeah, well maybe another time and place we can explore that" I said. "Right now, however. We need to go."

"Seems like I say that a lot." I muttered under my breath as I slid down off the hood onto the pavement, pulling the backpack over my shoulders as I did so, and finally grabbing the shotgun and S&W which I holstered.

Reaching up to her I took her hand and aided her as she slid down the windshield and pivoted on the hood before dropping to the floor herself.

Before I could say anything, she began unbuttoning the 6 buttons till her blood-stained shirt lay open covering most of her breasts but clearly exposing the center cleavage, looked up at me, and again smiling impishly at my growing discomfort, asked.

“Now you enjoy the view?”

Being a little off guard, I replied.

“Yeah. Now I’m enjoying the view.”

“Then it is good that we both enjoy.” She said and started buttoning the shirt again, correctly this time grimacing again at the pain.

When she finished, she looked up to find me watching closely, smiled again and said.

“Right now, we need to go?” And turned to head into the dark traffic jam.

“Yeah.” I said as I took a huge breath and held it a moment. “Right.”

We walked on for another hour, threading our way through the abandoned cars, trucks and vans till we reached a turn in the tunnel ahead.

Here, like in the train depot, there was a low level of light making our way possible even without the light on my jacket and I switched it off.

After clearing the turn, I could see the rail lift platform, currently empty in the distance and the diagonal cable way on which it traveled up and down, yawning dark and unknown behind it.

When we finally approached the platform I spotted three dried, skeletal corpses, wearing the Spetsnaz uniforms of the Ukrainian soldiers that guarded this area.

Walking over to them I noticed what I was looking for on the first soldier, squatted down, unsnapped the holster cover and pulled the

9x19mm, Martha automatic pistol out.

Pressing the mag eject button I let the magazine drop from the handle into my left palm, inspecting it and noting a full 15 rounds. Then, racking the slide back and locking it in place, I was pleased to see a single round leap out of the chamber and skitter across the floor a meter or so away, Alina hot on its tail. Looking up I found one of the lights and holding the gun out, raised it to my eye adjusting the angle till I could see light reflected in its pristinely clean barrel.

As I lowered it from my inspection, I saw that Alina had returned, fingers pinching on the stray round and without saying anything, simply handed it out to me.

I took it, turned it around and carefully pushed it into the open chamber, then while pointing the gun downward, flipped the slide lock allowing it to slam down on the now seated round, put my thumb tightly on the hammer and while holding it down, pulled the trigger releasing the hammer and then lowering it gently down onto the frame in a relaxed position.

I inserted the magazine back into the handle and turning it around to hold it by the slide, offered it to Alina.

I was about to remove the belt and holster for her when the dynamics of her wounds, the uniform she wore and the belt around her waist occurred to me.

Not a good mix. I thought. I pulled the corpse over onto its side, sounding and feeling more like a paper mache piñata than a once upon a time human, snapped open the mag pouch and pulled out two full magazines, tapped them on my knee and then handed them to Alina as well.

I was about to get up when I noticed the handcuff case attached to the belt, and figuring that might come in handy, I pulled my knife out and cut through the belt and slid it off putting it in my jacket pocket for later installation on my belt.

I thought to myself. *If he still has these goodies, I wonder what else he*

might have on him, and I dove my hand into his right pocket and found a wad of paper that turned out to be 585 Rubles.

“That we can use!” I said to no one in particular with no small amount of glee. “What else you got Ivan?”

The second pant pocket turned up a set of 3 keys on a plastic key fob that looked to belong to a motor car. I tossed those aside and pulled his wallet out of his hip pocket and opened it.

Inside I found 2,350 rubles, some pictures of a woman and some children and a house some place on the water, several credit cards and a bright yellow passkey mag card with nothing printed on it.

From the absence of any markings, it was obvious that whatever this went to was meant to remain secret to some degree. Stashing it and the credit cards in my pocket I figured if Nitro was still around he might be able to read the mag strip for me. Then I began checking his shirt pockets and after finding nothing but a lighter, which I pocketed and a pack of long stale cigarettes, Ivan had nothing more of value.

The other two guards produced 4 more clips for the Martha, another 362 rubles and two more credit cards. Nothing else worth keeping.

The door opened with just a small amount of effort and after carefully checking the inky blackness inside, we entered the stair corridor and after a brief discussion about the merits of closing the door and possibly being locked in, against the security of barring the rear approach, Alina gave in and I pulled the door closed behind us breaking all contact and light from the loading dock behind it.

The long trek here was taking its toll now. My ankle was killing me and Alina was dragging more and more, bleeding again. Although she couldn't see it in the darkness behind us, I could see it on the pavement when I would turn occasionally to check on her. That concerned me for two reasons. One, it would surely draw predators and two, I was pretty sure if we didn't find a medic soon she wasn't going to make it.

We were both hurt, Alina critically. She was seeking refuge in a town

I'd never heard of, I was looking for an impossible bauble and we had a little under 3,300 rubles to spend to aid us.

What more could possibly go wrong? I thought as we hobbled and staggered through the vault-like service access door that led to the stair system that rose some 60 meters up an incline to the Jupiter plant above us, and we started the hour-long climb up the stairs in darkness.



Chapter 22

Captive

The long trek up the service stair system was boringly uneventful and other than being worn out from the climb we reached the top landing with no events, but my ankle now felt like it was going to give out completely and Alina was stumbling, leaning on my shoulder as we climbed.

When we finally made the top landing I was literally overjoyed. The relief was palpable and though we faced another closed vault-like door that we had no idea if it would open for us, we both sat drunkenly happy on the floor to rest.

The temperature had risen slightly as we had climbed but there was some type of ventilation here and as it wasn't too hot, the sweat that soaked our clothes cooled quickly.

Alina had slid down the wall to a seated position, her head lolling slightly forward as if in sleep and I quickly dropped to my knees to check her pulse.

Slow but rhythmic at least, I thought as I pulled the canteen off my belt and lifting her chin, found her eyes closed in exhaustion. I opened the canteen and poured some over her head and as I'd hoped, the coolness of the water startled her awake again, her eyes shot open and she reached up to groggily wipe the water from her face.

“Alina.” I said. “You have to stay with me for a few minutes here while I do some more med stuff. Understand?”

Her attention returned to me, her eyes focused on mine but all she said was.

“Da.”

I had shrugged the pack off my back and was hurriedly rummaging again to find the med kit. If she drifted off again I’d have trouble getting her awake and leaving her here to go find help was not an option. She couldn’t protect herself if she was unconscious and carrying her was a last resort for me.

Opening the med kit, I pulled the vial of Vinka I’d drawn from before and after breaking open another sterile pack, soaked the pad in the alcohol-based disinfectant and drew the needle through the folded pad to sterilize it, then drawing another 10 ccs into the syringe I administered it into her neck again and withdrew the needle.

I knew without looking that the wounds would seal up again in a couple seconds, stopping the bleeding, but that was just stopping the bleeding. Replacing the lost blood was the critical part and that required a field medic or a field hospital, neither of which was anywhere near here.

“How you doing?” I asked her.

She smiled tiredly and replied.

“No skiing today ok? Tomorrow maybe?”

I chuckled at that. She may be hurt but her spirit is tough.

“Tomorrow it is then. Today though, you stay with me and we find you a doctor. Ok?”

“Today.” She replied and nodded slowly still smiling weakly.

I was trying to think of how to get her on her feet when I remembered I had a caffeine pack I’d taken off one of the dead Z’s back in the Outskirts. Slapping my pockets, I located it and pulled the pack out.

Six tabs left, I thought. That should be enough to get her to Bonsetter. Assuming Bone was still around as well, but that thought didn't deserve consideration. Either he was or he wasn't. He was all I had right now so... He was around. I decided.

I popped one of the tabs out on my palm and then popped a second one out. I knew that one in her condition was pushing it, two was downright dangerous but I also knew that two would get her moving sharper and further than one and, frankly, I didn't think at this point, that it mattered for her. Reaching for her hand I raised it up and turned it over, dropped the pills onto it and told her.

"Take these."

As she raised them slowly to her mouth I handed her the canteen and helped her hold it to her lips as she pulled from it and swallowed the pills.

While I waited out the transformation, I started packing up the med kit and stowing it again in my pack.

I was racking the AC two minutes later after refreshing its clip and chambered round when she spoke.

"Are we trapped?" She asked, obviously referring to the yet unopened vault like door beside us.

I was relieved to hear that since it meant that she was not just cognizant but she was also problem solving. That was a good sign.

"Don't know yet. I was waiting for you before I tried to open it. The latch works anyway. That much I know. How do you feel?"

"My head hurts a little, my ears are ringing and my chest is tight but I feel ok. I am ready to go when you are."

"Ok." I said.

I wasn't sure how far we'd get but for sure, we couldn't stay here any longer.

"Ok. Here's the plan." I started. "I'm going to go first and stop outside

the door. You stay here till I say the word “clear”. If I see anything, I’m going to start shooting so don’t move till you hear me say, clear. Got that?

“Clear.” She said with a little smile on her face at the pun.

I was a bit taken by the reply and simply said

“Right.”

“Anyway.” I continued. “When you hear me say, clear, you come through the door and as you move forward, scan. When you get 3 or 4 steps ahead you stop, scan the area and if it’s clear, you say, clear and cover the area while I move forward and repeat the process.”

“Understand?”

“She smiled and said.

“Like hopscotch.”

“Like hopscotch.” I repeated.

“This I can do.” She said.

I reached out to her neck and placed two of my fingers on her carotid artery and was shocked at the now rapid pulse I could feel beneath the skin.

How much of this can she take I wondered. Hopefully, enough.

Rising painfully to my feet again, I turned and helped her get up as well. She took a little time but she made it and after taking a breath, her pupils dilated, she said.

“We have to go now.” and smiled at me.

I smiled back at her and turned to face the door, stepped to it and once again, lifted the lever carefully and quietly till it was straight up then pulled gently and when the door didn’t give, jerked it gently a couple times as the seals broke loose, finally swinging open nearly silently.

Odd. I thought. *No_noise at all?* And then I let the thought pass and after stepping through, with the shotgun ready and in hand, I scanned the

area thoroughly.

After the encounter with the dogs I'd decided to trust her a bit and gave her the Martha. Call it stupid if you like but ultimately it boiled down to one logical argument. She needed me alive far more than dead regardless of what I might be carrying.

On the other hand, though, if she wasn't logical, it wouldn't really matter to me for very long.

We'd emerged in a large open and empty staging area that was obviously set up for jockeying vehicles around for the trip down. The floor was for the most part vacant of anything other than litter consisting of bottles, boxes, crates and materials that had fallen from the roofing system after being torn apart by the violent emissions known to occur periodically in this area.

Aside from the dank smell of rust, mold and standing water the only sounds we heard were those of the settling metal structure, occasional falling glass and the nasty tempered crows that flapped in and out, scolding us for disturbing the quiet.

I was leery only because I 'd expected more, but from this scene before us of metal and glass desolation I understood immediately that there was little sense for any carnivorous or herbivorous type of predator to be this far from water or food.

Crows and mold would not keep anything threatening alive for very long. We didn't have to worry about this area too much, but as we got nearer the perimeter, we'd need to be concerned. Not seeing anything threatening, I said.

"Clear."

When she walked past me with the Martha up I was grateful to see her stepping lightly, with good concentration, a marked improvement over her previous dull and lethargic behavior as I stood covering the field. She stopped about two meters ahead of me and scanned the area as instructed back on the landing behind us, and said.

“Clear.”

We repeated this action eight or nine times while staying to the perimeter of the room, partly because I wanted to keep at least one side free of attack and partly because I simply didn't trust the failing roofing and skylight system that constantly dropped something, but after moving this way with no events for 5 minutes I called a quiet end to it and we walked on cautiously, side by side, winding our way without certain direction through the labyrinth of rooms, corridors, and courtyards in what I assumed was the way out.

We were several minutes into the exploration when Alina stopped suddenly with her nose in the air sniffing.

“You smell that?” She asked.

“Smell what?” I replied as I stood still beside her.

“It is smoke. A fire for certain. Perhaps meat, cooking?”

When she started the detail, I became immediately disinterested knowing that if it was smoke, I'd have smelled it long ago, shook my head and started out again mildly annoyed at her.

After catching up with me as I walked on she said again.

“There is smoke!”

Although I continued walking, scanning lightly, I turned to face her briefly and saw her looking up at me with a great deal of concern on her face, so I stopped abruptly and turned to face her.

When I stopped short she hadn't been expecting that and she collided lightly with my arm, stumbled and quickly regained her footing, standing just a meter from me while I waited.

“Look, Alina. If there was smoke I'd know it. What you smell is this old building, the puddles of greasy water, rust and mold. Now please keep quiet, keep your eyes open and follow along.”

Before she could say anything or even move, I had turned again and

had taken one step when I seized up, still in my tracks, and looking straight ahead.

Something had changed dramatically. Maybe it was the wind turning, maybe it was my sinuses clearing whatever it was that changed. Although I couldn't smell anything cooking, I could now very distinctly smell smoke.

"Ok," I said without looking at her coy smiling face, "I got smoke now but there's nothing cooking. Trust me," I added a moment afterward to save face.

And then all hell broke loose.

We'd entered a section of the facility that was particularly cluttered and after first looking at the debris I'd been tempted to bypass it but the only other way I'd seen as we came was a long way back unless we started breaking windows or walls.

The room was dark, the windows that lined the left side having been painted over and the right wall completely brick, so that there was just enough natural light entering to make visibility possible but sketchy. The room was large, maybe 10 meters wide by 30 meters deep by 10 meters high, dirty and damp with large puddles of oily, water extending everywhere from the rain that now constantly fell through the broken and missing windows in the roof.

A large, 1 and a half meter diameter pipe, supported about 4 inches off the floor entered the room from the right wall about midway down, extended two thirds into the room and T'd into two more smaller diameter pipes supported 10" off the floor that divided the room into three sections and ran the length of the room, around the numerous heavy steel columns, through the walls and into the room we'd just left and the one directly ahead.

Along the both sides of the room there were sturdy work benches littered with any number of boxes, crates, tools, pipes, fittings and other sundry items too numerous to count much less inventory and the open steel framing above supported several, gantry cranes, heavy lifting block and tackle, rail devices obviously designed and installed to move exceptionally

heavy materials from desk to desk.

The Pipe had three, steel stair bridges over it, located over each of the three sections to facilitate movement between the different areas.

At the far end of this dark, dirty and dismal room, a metal stair system rose about 5 meters high along the brick wall to an open landing the width of the room, with a metal handrail along the perimeter and steel plates secured to it.

I'd swiftly scanned the room from the cover of the steel, double door to clear it and then seeing no problems, casually entered it and the first shots that rang out caught me by surprise narrowly missing me, the lead fragmenting on the metal doors behind me and spraying back stingingly onto my head and backpack.

Judging the shots to have come from ahead, I instantly slammed Alina's now stumbling form off to the left behind several large crates that were stacked near the doorway and ran crouching for the pipe to my left for cover and dove over it, rolling behind it as more shots rang out and exploded around me.

Using the cover of the pipe as much as I could, I crawled through the muck, further to the left to a bench and rose slowly to risk a look from between the shelves as more shots rang out and struck the part of the pipe I'd just jumped.

Apparently, they didn't see me move. I thought.

I counted at least 4 shooters on the landing behind the plates and one on the base of the stairs, the shooters on the landing providing cover for him as he made his way toward us.

He had just made the floor some 25 meters from me and was moving low toward the pipe when I raised the AC and sighted him through the scope from between the loaded and overstuffed shelving.

Bad choice buddy. I thought as I cut loose several rounds that hit him square in the chest throwing him backward onto the stair base.

The shots from the landing then abruptly ceased and then almost

immediately restarted this time pounding the desk and shelf system causing me to duck again for cover.

Now what! I thought as I crouched there in the relative safety of cover.

It was then that I remembered I'd hit Alina pretty hard back there and concerned about her condition I called out.

"Alina?"

"Are you ok?"

There was a brief pause of time and I was about to call again when she answered in a weak but loud voice.

"Yes. My chest hurts but I am ok."

"Stay low and behind the crates till I tell you. Understand?" I called back as more automatic fire erupted above and around me.

"Yes. Be careful Bridger!" She called out.

"Like that's possible." I grumbled as I turned back to the chore at hand.

Four on the landing behind good cover and one dead on the floor. The odds were turning slowly in my favor but I'd have to grind them down a bit more before I was overly confident of the outcome.

The bench I was behind was one of maybe seven that ran the depth of the room under the painted windows. Each desk had a shelving system and a gap of about a meter between it and the next and this one had a score of wood crates on the floor in front of it providing good cover. They also ran the length of the desk and if I stripped off the backpack, allowed me enough room to crawl between them and the wall beneath the windows to the next gap where I could again shoot through the shelving.

The fire had slowed now, maybe in an attempt to conserve ammo, to intermittent rounds hitting and knocking things off the desk and shelf and occasionally onto me. Shrugging off the backpack, I started crawling under the desk toward the far end of it and upon reaching it, slowly rose to a

crouch again and looked through the shelf to the landing.

There, I noted several slots about 3 inches tall by 16 inches or so wide had been cut along and through the metal plating for shooters and I could now see the barrels of 4 rifles extended through 4 of them pointed in the general direction of the desk I'd just left behind me.

Raising the AC again I sighted one of the barrels and then figuring where the shooter's head would be on the other side of the hole, I raised my sights to mid-way between the barrel and the underside of the top of the shooter's opening and tapped off 2 rounds. I was joyously rewarded by the sight of the barrel suddenly going diagonally upward suggesting a hit on the other side of the plate.

In return however, now alert to my new location, the other three rifles suddenly changed aim and started peppering the desk and shelf I was now behind, causing me to duck back down and out of sight, and I was squatting there considering my next move, forward or back, when I heard Alina scream.

Turning my attention to the right I could just see over the top of the boxes on the floor and under the desk behind me, a guy in an overcoat was holding Alina against his chest and dragging her kicking and screaming back toward the metal doors.

I raised the AC again and swung it quickly around to bag the guy but in the cramped area I was in, it struck the leg of the desk and by the time I'd readjusted the length to get it under the desk, both he and Alina were gone.

"Mother!" I shouted in anger and frustration as the shots continued to ring out from above.

Moving again to a crouch I made my way unseen back to the end of the first bench and rose to the shelves to sight another of the now three barrels firing on my previous location.

Two taps and the odds were down to two overhead shooters and one behind me on the floor as the overhead shooters adjusted aim once again for my new location. Then the shooting abruptly stopped and silence drifted

slowly back into the room.

I crouched there waiting for three full minutes before rising quickly and ducking again to see what would happen, but nothing happened.

Repeating this action a second time resulted in the same thing. No return fire so I grabbed up the pack and shrugged it on, then took the chance of moving to the edge of the crates and looking around them to the landing, but again, nothing but silence.

Either they're incredibly patient or they're friggin gone. I scolded myself, and risking injury, darted from the desk to the pipe and ducked down again but as before, nothing happened.

Rising above the pipe carefully, I sighted on the landing and sure enough, two barrels still protruded diagonally where the dead guys were but the other two barrels were gone.

"Crap!" I called as I rose quickly, rolled over the pipe and made a fast run for the door, stopping just short of it.

Leaning back against the inside of the doorway I shouldered the AC and drew the .45 from my holster, dropped the clip and counted 8 rounds in it plus one in the chamber. Nine total. Then I jerked the strap loose on the spare mag pouch sewn onto the holster, pulled it out and dropped it into my vest pocket.

Easy to get to now.

I quickly jerked my head into the room we'd just left and then just as quickly jerked it back out but didn't see anyone and no one shot at me, so with the .45 up I charged into it as quickly as my bum ankle would allow, and scanning quickly, noted a door standing open some 9 meters to my left that I didn't remember being open when we'd arrived. I immediately started loping towards it, gun raised.

When I got to it I stopped again and then repeated the quick scan, but again, no one shot so I bolted around the corner, through the doorway gun in hand into another room adjacent to the brick wall of the room I'd been fighting in. This one had the pipe in the previous room, running through it to

and another wall right behind the pipe.

Now I had problems.

This room was similar to the other one in use and design but shorter in depth. It also had no windows in the brick walls that bordered the left and right side and was dimly lit only by the light that filtered through the broken, skylight windows. Glass and miscellaneous tools, boxes, hardware, tires and other items littering this room making clear passage difficult but not impossible.

Compounding that though, there were 4 doors here. Two on the far wall and one on the right wall beyond the pipe and the last on the left wall leading back into the room I'd left a couple minutes ago, and none of them were open.

I was beginning to start self-doubting my path when I noticed something on the floor and turned my attention to it.

There on the floor not a meter from where I stood, was a small patch of what looked like blood and as I moved closer I noticed additional smeared dirt and blood signs as though the floor had been mopped and immediately guessed Alina had broken free if only for a moment, and a scuffle had ensued till she was again subdued.

Looking further into the room I could see the trail of dripping blood leading to the footbridge that straddled the pipe so I quickly moved along it, crossed the bridging and found the trail again on the other side, turning to the right for the door on the right wall.

Moving quickly to the door I leaned against it and put my ear to it, listening for noises on the other side.

I could faintly hear the scuffling and angry voice of a male and the equally angry and frightened voice of a woman who I assumed to be Alina but I couldn't hear any other voices and I knew there were at least two more bad guys someplace.

While standing off to the right side of the door jamb I put my hand on the lever that opened the door and slowly pushed it down unlatching it then pulling it open just a little I looked through the gap into the room.

The first thing I noticed as I gazed quickly into the new room was the guy in the overcoat to my left, dragging Alina through the room as she kicked and struggled, toward a doorway at the far end of the room. Then I took a quick look at the room itself hoping to find the other two guys.

The devil you know is always better than the devil you don't.

This room was similar to the first room in dimension, maybe 10 meters wide, 30 meters deep and ten meters high. It too had a window wall but on the right side, over a short, 2-meter-high wall with the brick wall on the left that I was now looking through the doorway. This room however had no overhead steel railway or desks. There were two double metal doors on the far wall to my left, and it was empty of any furniture, only littered papers, cans and collapsed and rotting cardboard boxes, small scraps of metal literally covering the floor and some long-forgotten doors stacked neatly in a row off one wall and a small stack of boxes along the window wall ahead and to my right.

The good news... I thought. The odds are in my favor now. His full attention seems to be on her and no wonder with the fight she's putting up. Plus, I don't see the other guys.

The bad news on the other hand... I continued to roll around in my head, is that I don't see the other two bad guys. Bitch!

By now, despite Alina putting up a good struggle, Overcoat had made it halfway down the remaining distance to the two doors on the end of the room and I knew I didn't have much time left if I was gonna stage a rescue here.

Jerking the door open, I stepped quickly into the room and dropped to one knee, raised the .45 aiming for Overcoat's form just 12 meters away.

I probably should have gone ahead and shot him right there, and on afterthought, it would have made the next three days a lot easier but that's not my nature so I shouted out.

"Stand tight, Gomer or I'll put a bullet through your head!"

The shout had the effect I wanted, stopping him in mid-drag, Alina still

thrashing, causing him to turn to face me. As I figured he would, he immediately spun Alina between him and me and while obviously reaching for a weapon beneath his overcoat, pulled a large, ugly knife and put it to her throat, then called back.

“You shoot and you’ll hit the bitch!”

At that point, I dropped the pistol to the floor and quickly rolled the AC off, shouldered it and aimed with both eyes open, through the scope at his head behind hers, only inches of it showing.

“Maybe!” I replied. “But maybe not and I hit you instead? Seems to me the odds are more in my favor than yours!”

“This bitch belongs to me. Go find your own!” He called back, not moving but still standing behind her as she stood stock still, eyes wide with fear.

“Don’t work that way, Gomer. “The girl came with me. The girl leaves with me. The only question here is, do you leave alive or stay here as rat shit!”

“I got 6 more guys comin, fartbreath. The way I see it, you’ll be the rat shit!” He countered.

“Oooh, that hurt.” I replied sarcastically. Then.

“No.” I said casually. “I don’t think so.”

“I think you have two more guys and I’m willing to bet they’re waiting on you behind those doors, not sure what to do at the moment.”

And having said that I slid the AC to the left some and tapped the trigger sending two rounds through the center of the doorway where the two doors joined and was rewarded by the scream of pain that echoed briefly and then died.

“Ok. I’m wrong.” I said.

“You got one more dude back there.”

“You Mother!” He started but I cut him off.

“Look, Gomer!” I shouted over his wail. “I have a scope on you, you have a friggin knife on her and you have one buddy left who, if I don’t miss my guess, is now high tailing it for the exit, and I’m getting impatient.”

“You have two choices here.

A, let the girl loose and I’ll let you live to lie about the outcome or B, I’m gonna put two rounds through your right eye.”

“You got exactly ten seconds to think about it.”

Overcoat stood there for nearly the full ten seconds and as I was just getting ready to pull the trigger, said.

“Ok. I’ll take A. How do we do this?”

“Simple. You drop the knife, turn and walk through the doors.”

“What? And you shoot me in the back as I walk away?”

“Look, Gomer. While I know that’s exactly what you’d do if the roles were reversed, that’s not my style. For what it’s worth, you have my word you’ll walk outta this room alive and unhurt if you do it.”

“Besides. You’re back to the original two choices if you don’t and the clock starts ticking at 2 seconds shortly.”

Again, he stood there, not moving, considering the options then.

“Ok, asshole. I’m cutting out on your word.” he called, lowering the knife. “But mark my words. We’ll meet again and when we do, you’ll be looking up at me as the lights go out on your life, prick face.”

“Strong threat for a guy who’s sure to die. I’ll look forward to seeing you again.” I replied.

I watched him through the scope as he sheathed the knife then turned his back to me and walked to the door.

At the door, he pushed the handle down and then pushed the door to open it but couldn’t move it. Then, as it apparently hit him that there was a body on the other side barring its operation, he turned briefly to look over his shoulder at me still aimed at him, and leaned heavily into the door, forcing it

open enough that he could get through, disappearing from my sights.

Odd that a Bandit would be that interested in a girl, especially a wounded one, I thought as I rolled the AC back behind my shoulder and picked up the .45 next to me.

Rising stiffly to my feet I hobbled to Alina who till now had stood stock still and when I got to her, she threw her arms around me, hugging me and then fainted.

I lowered her to the floor gently then limped to the door, pushed it open a bit and looked out into a large, open, expansive room maybe 50 meters deep, and appeared to span the entire 30 meter width of the three previous rooms, that was also empty of anything more than litter that had blown in through the oversized, double doors at the end of it, and watched a minute as Gomer ran toward them, screaming furiously at another figure running the same direction ahead of him.

I turned my attention back to Alina and let the doors close behind me as I made my way back to her, knelt and after shrugging off the backpack, pulled the med kit out and set about changing her bandages, shooting her up with another 10cc's of Vinka and breaking another inhalant under her nose to bring her around.

"Come on babe. We're almost there."

She was awake and although her eyes didn't look too clear, she replied.

"Right." And offered me a weak smile. Then she rose a little unsteadily to her feet and while leaning on me for balance, walked with me to the door.

"I'm exhausted." She said as we passed through the door.

"I know." I replied. "Doc's just 15 minutes east of us now." I lied to her.

"That is good." She replied. "Because I don't think I can get much further than that."

“No worries.

“A couple days of rest in the infirm and you’ll be on your way to Chinatown.” I replied again.

“Singapore City.” She corrected me.

“What?” I said.

“Singapore City. That is where I travel to.” She offered.

“Right.” I said as I chuckled. “Singapore City.”

We both hobbled our way to the oversized doors standing open before us where I briefly stopped our progress to look out over the area.

Outside the main building we were about to exit lay a drive that ran left and right between our building and another building maybe 30 feet across from us. The window glass long ago broken, paint fading or falling off the frames and walls hanging on the last vestiges of rusting metal. The drive itself was slowly returning to nature and several small trees had taken root here and there with shrubs and grass scattered about on the concrete pavement that covered the span between the buildings. Several abandoned vehicles ranging from small transport cars to busses along with a lot of junk from the inside of the buildings had been pushed off to the side of the drive, up against the walls and left to rot and fall apart themselves, rust and failing paint prevalent on all of them.

As I looked first left and then right I knew from old memories that we were in the rear of the plant, not far from the southeast corner and when I looked right, I saw Gomer, running west about a 100 yards up the drive, screaming furiously at his buddy who had just disappeared around the southwest corner of the plant building, headed toward the front. As I stood there I pulled my binoculars out and focused on Gomer, making his way along and watched as he also disappeared around the corner, never once looking back, then waited three more minutes to verify his disinterest in us, packed the binoculars and turned back to Alia.

“This way Babe”. I said as I helped her to her feet and started out the door, Alia leaning heavily on my left shoulder for support, already

exhausted.

Passing through the door I turned us left, the opposite direction of Gomer and his buddy, and we made our way east through the littered drive to the southeast corner of the plant.

Ahead of me through the trees and shrubs I could see two more buildings slightly right of our path, the rusting AC cooling towers just to the left and the perimeter wall system that enclosed the plant, stretching left and right slightly beyond them with a rusting gate in it maybe 75 yards from where we currently stood.

As I continued to direct us up the drive toward the entrance gate, I heard the unmistakable report of an automatic AK in the distance behind us and I figured it was either Gomer dolling out punishment for his cohort abandoning him or someone on defense. It didn't matter much to me either way at the moment.

It took us nearly 10 minutes to cover the 225 feet to the gate and when we got close enough to see the gate unobstructed, I noted to my concern, that it was closed and probably locked making exit through it, impossible.

It was then that I started looking at the 25' wide by 8' deep gate house built into the wall next to it and noted that although the door was also closed, it looked like it was pried open at least once before and I figured I might be able to pry it open again and get us out through it.

When we finally got to it I set Alina down in the shade of a tree limped over to the door for a closer look, picking up a 6' long steel rod to use as a pry bar but when I actually got to the door I discovered the hasp and latch mechanism was already bent and broken beyond any use, the door merely sitting in the closed position so I dropped the bar and pushed the door inward.

Looking inside I found the room was dark and smelled of mold and rot and as I flipped on the PDA light and stepped through the door, it swung shut softly behind me sealing out the small amount of daylight I'd allowed in only seconds ago. Leaving me with only the light from the PDA.

Scanning the room I quickly I discovered it cluttered with rotting paper and cardboard boxes, forest detritus a rusting and broken set of file cabinets, several broken roll about chairs, and a beat up, rusting, metal desk.

The original 8' by 4', glass observation window set in the front wall to overlook the entrance, had long ago been removed and blocked in with concrete forever more sealing the room in darkness.

The door located next to it and to the left however, appeared to still be usable and after stepping over the junk on the floor, gripping the broken handle and pulling on it, to my delight it swung inward with only a small amount of effort flooding the room again with light from outside.

Now that I knew how to get out it was time to again gather Alina and get moving so after jamming the door open with a loose brick I found on the floor, I turned and retraced my steps back to the 1st door, jammed it open as well and then collected Alina and as she hung on my left shoulder, made our way into the gate house.

As I helped her to her feet I noted the small pool of blood on the ground beside her and decided to take a minute and change her bandages so after helping her into the gate house I guided her over to the metal desk and using a short board I found on the floor, swept all the crap off the desk and onto the floor then helped her to sit on it and finally lay down across it so I could tend to her wounds.

Shrugging off the backpack I pulled out another pack of bandages and the med kit and as she lay on the desk I gently pulled her trousers down about midway to her thigh on the injured side leaving the other side at her hip affording her some dignity but because of the height of the upper area wound I had her unbutton her shirt all the way up, thereby exposing her one breast.

"Wow" I said quietly and she chuckled modestly despite her exhaustion.

I was moving as quickly as I could but even still the cleaning, redressing and vinca took about 10 minutes to complete and when I was done I helped her to again sit up on the desk then looked at her and said.

Much as I hate to put you through this, I gotta have you take the shirt off. I need to wrap your chest or these bandages will just come off again.

She was looking into my eyes as I said this and I guess a little of my embarrassment showed and she smiled wickedly and said.

“Sure you do.”

I was about to start into a defensive argument when I realized she was laughing at me so I helped her to shrug off the shirt leaving her naked from the waist up now.

I’d like to say I was unaffected by the event but despite her unattractive odor, her figure was stunning and I was suddenly caught up in staring at her for a moment as she raised her arm to cover her breasts. Realizing I was staring I quickly looked away and started unwrapping the gauze.

“Raise your arms please.” I said in the best command voice I could muster without choking and she complied, raising her elbows out level with her chest, hands crossed forward at her throat and after a brief hesitation, I reached around her and started to wrap her chest with the gauze.

The procedure took only a few moments and left both of us breathless, me I’m sure more than her.

“Ok. You can put your shirt back on now.” I told her.

She was smiling at me again and said.

“You enjoyed again, no?”

“Knock it off Alina. It’s not funny.” I retorted indignantly as I turned away to repack the medical supplies and put the backpack on again, but she merely chuckled.

“I think so.”

I helped her again to her feet, then turned and kicked the brick from the inner door allowing it to swing shut once again, then I helped her through the cluttered room to the outer door and through it to the outside

roadway where I again, kicked the brick away from the door and watched as it swung shut, banged open and then shut again.

As I was watching the door go through its motions of settling closed, the thought of followers, humane or otherwise crossed my mind.

“Hang tight a minute. I don’t like this and I want to work on it a minute.” I said as I slipped back through the door into the room.

Moving through the room I exited inside the plant complex again and picked up the bar I’d abandoned earlier then returned to the gate house and after allowing the inner door to swing shut again, I wedged one end of the rod firmly into the door jamb about three quarters of the way away from the hinge side then as I moved to the outer door holding the other end high, I opened it and while holding the bar high up the door, stepped through it and pulled it slowly closed still holding the bar up inside the room till the door was open only 6” wide, my arm still holding the rod up inside. I then set the top of the rod against the top of the door and let go of it there where it stayed and after extracting my arm from the jamb, gently allowed the door to close completely pulling it snugly.

Testing the door by pushing on it and found it jammed tight.

As I had hoped, the rod had slid down the door and stopped at an angle jamming the inner door at the bottom and the outer door at the top.

Anyone or anything following us would find the doors almost impassable and would then have to either go over the wall or use another gate somewhere else. Either way, that gave us time.

All I had to do now was finish the trek to the Yaniv, rail station and assuming all was as it was when I was last here, there I’d find a Duty and Freedom post in the depot, food and water, the trader Hawaiian and most importantly, Bonesetter, the doc I needed to help Alina.

What I didn’t know, was what lay between us and it right now, or for that matter, if it was just as abandoned as the Laundromat had been on the other end of the tunnels.

What I did know and what concerned me the most right now was that it took the better part of 10 minutes to get us from the plant to the gate

house, 225 feet away and figuring the Yaniv station at just over a mile away, it would take about 3 hours to walk there with good terrain and 4 to 5 hours through wooded terrain and judging from the shape she was now in, Alina wasn't gonna make it.

"WTF." I mumbled, as I started across the clear, 50' wide concrete drive in front of the gate house toward the woods supporting her as best I could on my own injured ankle.

"What?" She lazily asked from my shoulder.

"Nothin, Babe. Nothin to worry about."

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Another thing that I didn't know was that within minutes of having started across the concrete drive, three blind dogs loped out of the plant door, followed by three more, stopped briefly, sniffing the air and the ground, then the second three shot off up the roadway that Gomer had taken and the other three, toward the gate house.

Upon finding the trail ended at the door, one put its front paws up on the door for a moment then down on the ground, circled a couple times then lit off howling at a full run, up the east side of the plant toward the open, front gate, the other two howling along in hot pursuit.



Chapter 23

Hot Pursuit

After we'd left the gate house I pulled out the binoculars and turned right, looking south and west down a rough, rutted roadway some 200' long where I could see another roadway that intersected it running north and west to the right and south and east to the left. Judging that to be the easiest route against venturing straight south and east into the woods, I started us out down the road way.

We'd traveled 200' and were at the T of the roadway when I just registered the first barks of the dogs behind us and hoping they were far away and uninterested in us, picked up our pace just a little anyway after turning left on the new rutted roadway that now ran south and east in the direction of Yaniv.

We were another 360 feet down this new road when I heard the dogs again, closer behind us this time than last, still barking occasionally but hopefully not on our trail. We had come upon a clearing in the roadway that was packed with abandoned vehicles on both sides apparently driven off the roadway and parked at an angle, nearly door to door, hoods into the wooded area that bordered the roadway.

I was getting clicks on my PDA Geiger indicating radiation but nothing lethal yet so I continued on down the roadway and we were half way

through this vehicle graveyard when I heard the dogs behind us begin baying and howling having caught on to our scent.

“Shit!” I spat out looking left and right for a defensive place from which to fight this new upcoming battle.

Alina, who had been plowing along hanging even more heavily on me snapped out of her stupor and groggily asked.

“What? What is the matter?”

“We gotta find a defensive point and fast Alina. There’s dogs coming up behind us and from the sound of it we don’t have much time.” I replied as calmly as I could under the circumstances.

“Where!” She asked, now fully alert and looking back over her shoulder.

“Don’t know yet Babe. Behind us and coming fast.”

“What do we do?” Now she was scared, her eyes huge and her scans darting left, right and behind us.

“This way.” I said as I headed toward a large bus I’d noticed, rusting just ahead of us.

We cut off the roadway down a 24” wide gap between the bus and a large panel truck and when I reached the rear bus doors I yanked on them discovering them solidly and frustratingly locked so we headed fast further up the gap till we got to the front door which I discovered still open.

I was helping Alina into the bus when I heard the baying and barking somewhere near the head of the vehicle graveyard, just seconds from being on us and after apologizing out loud, grabbed her back end and shoved her hard into the driver’s side seat where she lost her balance and toppled onto the seat askew as I jumped into the bus myself and began yanking at the reticulating, door arm to close the door, finding it horrifyingly jammed open.

“WHUTHEFUCK!” I exclaimed as I leaned and slammed on the handle trying fruitlessly to get it to close as the dogs rounded the rear corner of the

bus and started heading toward the door, now standing open, snarling and growling in anticipation of the attack.

“COME... ON... YOU... MUTHER...” I’d been leaning on the arm when it suddenly broke loose and the doors slammed shut just as the first dog reached it and stopped up short, standing just outside the door scratching, barking and snarling to get in.

“BITCH!” I screamed at it as I unsnapped my holster and drew the .45 out in one quick motion, holding off pulling the trigger as I realized it wasn’t getting in and started to calm down.

With the door safely shut, the dogs climbing over each other in the narrow space outside, barking and snarling I began to collect my head and turned around to check on Alina where I found her scrunched up on the torn up, driver’s seat, knees below her chin, arms folded around them, eyes tightly closed and shaking so hard I was sure the seat was going to break through.

“Relax Babe!” I shouted over the din of the ruckus outside. “They can’t get in. We’re safe in here for the moment.”

After a couple minutes she opened her eyes and seeing the dogs at the door across from her and behind me pawing savagely at the glass door, closed them again just as quickly.

I could now see she had a nasty gash on her forehead where she had apparently hit something when I shoved her inside. I could also see a large torn section of her pants still attached to one of the lower springs of the seat she was sitting on that exposed her naked right hip from the just below the belt line to half way down her thigh.

Well so much for guessing she has no underwear. I thought as I shifted my attention back to the dogs.

They were moving pretty quick out there but every now and then would stop to untangle themselves and seeing this, a plan began to form in my head.

Looking down the clear aisle of the buss I untangled myself from the

arm assembly and started down the aisle about half way where I stopped and climbed into the seat, rolled the shotgun around from my back and into my hands and after reversing the direction, raised the gun, butt forward and smacked it several times on the bus window till it broke completely out dropping glass fragments over the ground behind the dogs who now, hearing the commotion, had realigned their attention to jumping at the window.

Then I leaned back against the rear of the seat in front of the one I was kneeling on, aimed the shotgun out the window and down on the dogs backs and after a brief moment, pulled the trigger, jacked a new round and pulled the trigger again, jacking another round and pausing.

One of the three went down out of sight and another went yelping up the narrow pass toward the front of the bus and the woods beyond. The third, followed it unharmed and out of my range unless I turned completely around and broke out another window, where it stayed snarling and growling as if taunting me.

Fighting the overwhelming urge to change direction of aim, I kept my position and waited. After another 4 minutes the third dog moved down the aisle under my sights and I pulled the trigger again, jacked another round and pulled it one more time, quickly jacking another round under the hammer and pausing.

My ears were ringing from the close range, closed area shots and Alina was screaming in horror from the front of the bus but there was no more barking or snarling that I could discern and after Alina finished her scream, there was silence.

"The dogs are gone Babe."

"Where?" She asked.

"Dead".

"Will they come back?" She asked, eyes wide with fright again.

"That's always a possibility." I replied. "But doubtful. I got two and wounded the third bad enough that it limped out of her probably to die

someplace close by.”

“You got all of them.” She asked, hope filling her voice.

“I got two. The third will die someplace close by.”

“How can you be sure?” She begged again.

“I know what I shot and I know how well the hit was. It’ll die sooner than later and not far from here. It’s probably bleeding out right now.”

“We will wait then? Maybe an hour to be sure?”

Her adrenalin had kicked in and she was pinging now like an over tightened guitar string. Fully aware and sharp. If we were gonna make any time at all, now was the time to move while she had the energy.

“No Babe. We gotta go, now. We can’t stay here, Gomer might come along and that would be bad.”

I felt a little bad about lying about the Gomer but I needed her moving willingly as quickly as I could get her going to take advantage of the adrenalin rush and I was moving up the aisle for the front door as she pleaded one more time to wait.

At the front I jerked the reticulating arm in the opposite direction and the door opened but not without a great deal of resistance.

With the shot gun raised I stuck my head out and scanned both directions but saw nothing other than the dead dogs lying between the two vehicles and a heavy trail of blood leading toward the front of the bus and into the woods beyond.

“Come on.” I said and stepped out of the bus, turned toward the rear and the roadway beyond and took one step when I heard her say.

“No. Please! We wait some more!”

I didn’t figure I had a lot of time here so I kept walking and simply said.

“You wait then. I’m gone.”

And was rewarded less than 5 seconds later by the sound of scrambling feet exiting the bus behind me, then the gasp of “Oh my God!” as she found the two dead dogs and finally her body slamming into my back as I neared the end of the bus and slowed to look out.

“You would leave me?” She accused, quietly but with great emphasis.

“No.” I replied as I scanned right then left and seeing nothing, moved swiftly out of the passage and turned left to regain the south and east trek as before.

“But you did.” She insisted.

“You’re here right?”

“That is not the point.” She followed up, warming to the fight.

I was about to shut her down again when I thought it might be more efficient to keep her wound up than to let her wind down.

“What point?” I started. “You are here. Not there. You came on your own.

Then as an afterthought I added what I knew, always sparked a woman up. “You are wrong about that.”

Sure enough, it fired her up and she started on a low level tirade that lasted another 500’ of un assisted walking and fuming till we came upon a new, asphalt cross road that went north, northeast to the left and south, southwest to the right.

Turning right I could see a small building about 200’ down the roadway at another T- intersection with some type of bridgework piping system crossing our roadway near it.

I started down the road while she stormed along behind me but I could already hear her losing steam and after we’d gone 100’ she was silent again, plodding along half aware of what was going on around her and I’d slowed up again to wrap my left arm around her waist as she wrapped her right over my shoulder.

The woods still bordered the roadway and as we neared the piping I'd seen earlier I could clearly see two, 10" dia. Pipes with some type of insulation wrapped around them and falling off in places, that exited the woods, turned 90 degrees up a rusting, steel bridgework structure, turned again level about 8' high and traveled over the road then returned again to the ground and continued it's path back into the woods disappearing after 8 or 10 feet, just beyond that lay the small building I'd seen earlier. We needed someplace to rest and that shack that might just do it.

By the time we were passing under the pipes, about 25' from the shack I was seriously considering the need to carry Alina the remaining distance but she made it on her own and after opening the door, .45 raised and ready and finding absolutely nothing in the room, I held it open for her and she plodded into the cool, dark interior, slid down to her knees and then her bottom exhausted.



The shack was a single room quarters about 8' wide by 12' long with a single door on one end and a small window on the other. There was nothing at all inside, the floors actually swept clear and that bothered me for some reason that I couldn't put my finger on.

Probably used for storage at one time. I thought as I noted the still intact if dirty window in the opposite wall.

"Rest here a minute Alina. I'll be right back."

Upon approaching I'd noticed some type of antenna just 50 feet away from the building with a platform maybe 60' up for observation or electronic

work and I wanted to see if I could get up there to get bearings.

As I crossed the road I could now make out three, shipping containers at the base of it and slowed to approach a little more cautiously.

The tree line itself had grown around, up to and between the three cons and that suggested that no one was using them as a consistent habitat and as such, they were probably empty but that didn't guaranty it and as I got within 30' of them I heard the snorting and rutting noises of a group of wild boar and froze up in my tracks.

Boars were bad news. Definitely an animal to be reckoned with carefully. Like the unaffected version of boar before the Zone, these animals hunted in packs of 3 or more, typically rutting for roots and vegetation but with a newly developed, cannibalistic meat is also on the dietary menu as well.

They increased in size and weight substantially reaching 48" at the shoulder and weighing in at nearly 500lbs. More the size of small buffalos they became highly aggressive by nature, known to charge a target 100' away and chase it till either they caught up and mauled it or lost sight of it, lost a great deal of their body fur and with a newly developed a carnivorous appetite combined with a physical shape change in the hoofs, resulting in a resemblance to claws. They have also grown an extra pair of tusks which are easily recognized and used effectively for mauling.

Zone boars resist radiation well, which allows them to spend long periods in heavily contaminated areas with little immediate effects and being territorial in nature, small groups have been known to defend their territory to the death. They normally attack by charging, ripping the victim to shreds with their claws and tusks and are especially dangerous when they attack as a group, surrounding their victim then using tactics similar to wolves.

While I had a pretty good view of the back of the three cons I had no view of any of the boars that I could now, clearly hear as my view of the area was still blocked here and there by the cons themselves and several small trees.

What bothered me most about this was that if one of the boars charged, I'd have a difficult time seeing it in this foliage until it was within 12 feet of me, vastly reducing my reaction time and effectiveness so I stood there quietly watching for what I could see, trying desperately to make out the boar.

After three minutes of waiting I was too impatient to go on. I wanted to get up in that tower for the view and I wasn't gonna let some pigs stop me regardless of how dangerous they might be so I carefully made my way through the thicket to the edge of the first con and started down it.

I was about half way when I got my first glimpse of the boar. Just the back end when it swung its rear end around, and exposed itself in the front of the cons but it stopped me short and scared the hell out of me.

It was big. Maybe 250 lbs and from the looks of the beast, exposed hind quarters it had been its share of fights.

I had the shot gun up as I started creeping again and when I reached the front corner of the con, I could see a clearing area where a fire pit had been laid out with brick and a spit built into it. There were also several pots and pans, cans and other the remnants of cloth, maybe clothing scattered about the clearing too and as I got closer to the corner I was able to finally see nearly all of the one I was looking at before plus two more smaller ones, busy tearing apart what appeared to be the carcass of another boar in the clearing in front of the cons.

None of them had seen me yet as I stood there trying to decide how to handle the shooting part, and then the big one suddenly stopped chewing, raised its head up sniffing the air and then to my horror, turned its satanic gaze right at me and for a moment I thought it was smiling at me.

I was still sighting down the barrel of the shotgun into its face and when it looked like it had made up its mind to charge, I pulled the trigger, jacked another shell into the breach, re-aligned and pulled the trigger again jacking yet another round in as quickly as I could.

Neither of the two rounds had done much damage to the thick boned cranium of the boar but the two shots throwing 60, BB pellets at near the

speed of sound had destroyed both its eyes sending it blindly and furiously raging off to the left, between the second and first con for whatever reason, leaving me to contend with the other two who were now both in the process of charging me from only 30' away.

I knowing I couldn't run, I was committed to engaging the minute the big one had seen me since they would chase me till I either found a tree I could limp to and climb fast enough to escape the charge or I got mauled to death so standing at the corner of the con I steadied the shotgun and calmed myself as much as I could, aimed at the face of the next biggest one and pulled the trigger again jacking a new round right behind it and scored a direct forehead hit, taking out both its eyes as well, sending it veering off to find the first maybe and leaving the third on its own.

I was realigning the third when it must have sensed the danger to itself and suddenly veered to its left, skidding in the dirt as it changed course and loped off some 40' across the clearing before stopping and turning around to face me again.

At 40 feet I was still tempted to shoot but I knew It would have little effect at this range and unless I managed to get its eyes too, I be down to one or two shells left in the shotgun and forced to draw the .45 and that didn't excite me at all so I stood there sighting it from across the clearing, listening to the other two howling in pain somewhere in the distance behind me and waited for it to decide what to do.

After what seemed like an eternity, it snorted a couple times at me, rutted the dirt in front of it then casually turned and lumbered off into the woods paying me or its companions no more attention.

Again, I was in no hurry to move, leery of some unexpected tactic so I stood there tensely, watching for anything it might try but after 4 or 5 minutes of nothing, I lowered the shotgun a bit and limped my way slowly into the clearing.

As I approached the fire pit I suddenly realized that what I had taken for the carcass of another boar was in fact the carcass of a man, the arms and legs savagely torn apart, mostly eaten leaving behind several bone

fragments and clothing.

As I looked over the camp site I noted to my right, the remnants of a uniform shoulder patch and from the insignia determined it to have once belonged to a member of the wolf clan bandits. The scumbag had apparently been alone being as no other sign of anyone else was present and gotten ambushed by the three boars.

Forcing my attention away from the corpse, further examination of the camp site produced a prize I was surly not expecting. There, leaning against the wall of the first con I'd rounded, next to the doorway was an unfired, nearly pristine, American Remington VM tactical shotgun!

If anything could make my day, this find had done it.

I moved quickly around the corner and after leaning my Remington against the wall, scooped up the VM auto and after a brief inspection determined it to be in excellent condition and fully loaded.

The Remington VM is considered to be one of the most reliable, autoloader, 12 gauge assault shotguns available. This particular one was apparently customized with a pica tinny rail, forward barrel-clamp side rails on it 22" long barrel with an extended magazine allowing 8 rounds in the mag and 1 more in the breach. This shot gun is great for self defense for any number of reasons not the least being that its recoil is like that of a 20ga gun and the ability to fire 9 rounds without pumping the mag.

Setting it down again I picked up my pump action, cycled the remaining three rounds out of the breach and magazine and after collecting them from the ground, put them into my vest pocket. Then I removed the sling from it and set the gun back down empty.

After picking up the VM, attaching the sling and slipping it over my shoulder, I stepped to the side of the closed door, covered it and turned the lever, pushing it open, ready for anyone who might be inside but when nothing happened outside of the door swinging shut again, I opened it again a little less cautiously and peered into the gloomy interior.

At first inspection two things registered clearly. One, it was obvious that there was no one inside since there was nothing in it larger than a chair that could be used as a hiding place so I stepped quickly into the con and

allowed the door to swing shut and latch behind me protecting my flank from a sneak attack and two, that this can had until recently, been used as a living quarters for someone, probably the unlucky bastard outside from the bedding, nearly spent candles, small boxes of provisions and books neatly laid out.

It took me about 10 minutes to go over the entire stash but after I had finished I'd added another box of 12 gauge shells, 2 clips of 9-19 pistol ammo that Alia was carrying and several personal affects including a wad of money in both US and Russian currency, a sleeping bag, a bed roll and a half roll of toilet paper. Alia would appreciate that.

Retracing my footsteps back to the door I cracked it open and peered outside but seeing nothing threatening, I opened it fully and stepped outside with my new shotgun and quickly surveyed the clearing for anything new.

Finding nothing had changed I scanned the clearing again and looking up, found the tower I was heading for within the trees maybe 60 feet away from me and started to make my way toward it, stepping around the carnage, the fire pit and across the clearing to the woods on the opposite side.

I couldn't hear the boars anymore so I assumed they were gone away and started threading my way through the wooded area in the direction of the tower.

I'd gone only a short distance when I walked out into another clearing, free of all but several young saplings with the antenna assembly sprouting from the center and a 6' tall chain link fence around it.

Ahead of me I could see that the fence gate had been cut open and the bars that would normally prevent anyone from using the tower ladder had also been removed so I altered my course slightly and entered the fenced area.

As I passed through the opening I had a thought and stopping there, I pulled the gate shot then threaded a piece of chain through the gate and fence to secure the gate shut and moved on to the antenna.

The antenna itself consisted of a 20" diameter, steel mast about 50' tall with a metal ladder and circular climber cage welded to it that ascended to a steel platform mounted to the top of the mast. Mounted to the platform and braced by the hand rails were two, 40' tall antennas with several 30" diameter dish antennas mounted below the platform as well.

As I approached the base it was apparent that I would need to abandon the backpack to fit within the climb cage so I shrugged it off and set it on the ground to the side of the mast and mounted the ladder to start my climb.

The climb itself was difficult with the brace. It had a tendency to slide on the rung if I didn't pay attention to the placement of my boot but I made it to the top without mishap and after getting myself situated, I pulled out the binoculars again and started a slow pan of the area.

From this height I could clearly see the top of the Yaniv train station, east, south east of me and the reticule markings estimated the distance to be about a thousand yards away and that was too far for the electronics in the binocular to pick up any heat readings that would affirm people there. I also noted that the terrain directly between the station and where we were now was heavily forested and that meant hard and long travel.

There were however, alternative routes I noted as I was scanning.

Heading directly south of us was a 30' wide clearing cut into the woods that ran south, all the way to the tracks. The clearing had been maintained at one time for the now abandoned power transmission lines that ran south into Yaniv and north into Pripyat and although that regular maintenance had ceased many years ago, the clearing had only high grass and a few small trees in it. The walking would be difficult but doable.

There was also the roadway we were currently on that ran paved although broken, parallel with the tracks, due west into Chernobyl and although there was a separation distance of what looked like 400 yards of woods between this roadway and the station, it appeared that there was also some type of perpendicular road that ran due south through the woods to the north side of the tracks across from the station making it conceivable

that we could use the roads then cross the tracks and be at the station far faster than trudging through the tall grass or the dense woods.

Either way posed threats and dangers but the roadway made swifter travel and for Alina, that was what mattered most.

With the route now determined I took a couple extra minutes to scan the rest of the area around us and although I found a couple signs of encampments trailing camp fire smoke, I saw no Stalkers in the open.

I also saw a group of flesh and dogs far east of us on the same roadway we were about to travel on but I put the distance at over 700 yards and I figured we'd be turning south before they got to the tower here and as such, didn't matter much so I put the binoculars back into the case and turned to descend back down the ladder.

On the ground again I grabbed up the backpack and made my way back out of the enclosure taking care to reset the latch on the gate as I closed it, then through the short wooded area and back into the camp clearing.

When I got back to the small shed where I'd left Alina I started to turn the handle of the door and three shots from inside the shed tore ragged holes in the door, narrowly missing my BPV.

"Alina!" I called out as I jerked back and off to the side to avoid being shot.

It's me! Bridger! Don't shoot again!

"Oh my God." She whimpered back.
"I'm sorry! I thought it was someone bad!"

"I've been called worse." I said as I turned the handle again and standing again away from the center of the door just in case, pushed it open.

As I stepped into the shack and my eyes acclimated to the darkness I found her in the far corner getting up shakily and as I walked in she literally ran into me, embracing me and sobbing again.

"I woke up when I heard the shots and I, I thought you might be dead and I was too frightened to even look out the window." She sobbed as I held her tightly.

"Then to make things even more bad I nearly killed you now." And she sobbed even harder.

"Alina. Relax Babe. It's ok." I cooed as I stroked her hair and waited as she calmed back down. "I figured out where we are and how to get to where we need to be so we're good now but we need to get going. Are you ok?"

"I am fine."

"We need to head down the road here a ways, then turn right and about half again as far and we will be at Yaniv station."

"That is good news. Why did you shoot?"

"Pest control Babe. Don't worry about it."

"Right." She said and smiled her mocking smile at me.

I chuckled and as I pulled the canteen out again, said. "We're almost there Babe. First you drink some, then let's get goin again."

"I want to be there before dark."

And I handed her the canteen which she gratefully accepted and drank long on, finally handing it back to me when she was through.

"Ready?" I asked and when she smiled at me I turned to head back out the door with her following closely behind.

THE END



The White Witch is MC SPANGLER'S first published novel. Having worked nearly all his life as a carpenter and residential rehabbing expert and occasional acting in Little Theater, writing this book is was a bit different for him.

Look for upcoming additional novels about the adventures and misadventures of Bridger.

www.MCSpangler.com

Excerpt from book II
Coming Soon

The White Witch Whispers in the Night

Book II



Chapter 1 The Long Haul

The road was in fairly good condition, only a small amount of weeds growing in the cracks and broken crevices so we were making good time when we got to the midway point a little over a half hour later. The piping that I had seen crossing the road earlier, ran alongside it now, two 6" diameter pipes coated in black creosote and occasionally showing the original insulation about 4 feet off to the side of the road, elevated about a foot off the ground on concrete blocks and we'd just passed the entrance to one of the numerous, off-shoot, railway loading docks, about 600 yards from

our turn off that I had briefly considered using then abandoned after I realized it doubled back and I was beginning to think we were going to get to the turn with no problems when Alina fell.

I hadn't been paying attention to her so much as I was paying attention to the woods that ran alongside of our roadway watching for predators so when I heard the sound of her hitting the pavement and exhaling suddenly I snapped my head around and saw her lying there, 15' behind me on the roadway and my heart skipped a beat.

When I got to her I checked her pulse and found it weak but still beating but her pupils were dilated and she was totally unresponsive as I gently slapped her cheeks trying to revive her.

Looking up the road I saw nothing in the direction we were headed and looking back I saw the same nothing so I reached below her neck and raised her up adjusting my right arm under her shoulders and then my left under her knees and slowly picked her up her head, arms and legs hanging limply over my arms and I groaned vocally at the monstrous pain that shot through my ankle and after I caught my breath and the pain died down a little, I began limping on down the road thankful that she weighed only 115 or there about.

"We really need to get you a bath sweetheart." I said knowing she didn't hear a word of it in reference to the stench she was emitting.

The day was getting longer an hour later when I reached a pile of debris on the south side of the road that caught my attention pulling me up and out of my exhausted reverie. I knew the road I was looking for went off my right, south toward the station but couldn't remember what the roadway was called or for that matter, what it even looked like that led back to the station and as I stood there holding Alina I wasn't sure if I was at the right turn.

I looked into the woods and could see a rutted roadway leading back alongside a smaller power line strung up on concrete power poles and after I'd tossed it around dumbly in my head a couple times I decided to go for it anyway and started back, southbound along it.

The way was a little rough with grass and some small saplings but not

that bad and as I trudged along, nearly exhausted I began to recite rimes and limericks to take my mind off my burden.

Four hundred yards. I thought as I turned the corner, stumbling slightly and snapping awake. Then I started to sing softly...

Four hundred yards of roadway to go.

Four hundred yards to go.

Knock one down, turn it around.

Three ninety nine yards of roadway to go.

I had no clue how I managed to make it to the tracks and I really didn't remember much about the actual 400 yards since most of it I trudged exhaustedly looking at my feet as I went through the woods but when I looked up I noticed that the light had faded to heavy dusk and the we were 20' out of the woods, west of the roadway I had originally planned to use and as such I was west of the station, looking at a long line of abandoned railcars, pushed to topple haphazardly off the track onto the grade beside it, rotting away and stripped of just about everything of conceivable value alongside the northern most rail.

The thought briefly occurred to me that I was extremely fortunate that we weren't jumped along the way since I wouldn't have known it till they or it was latched onto me.

Spying a break between the mammoth, rusting passenger cars I navigated my way clumsily between two of them and as I cleared them, saw the first of two abandoned trains sitting quietly in front of me, long forgotten, side by side on the next two series of tracks blocking my way. Knowing I couldn't get over the couplings or under the cars holding Alia, I altered my path right to take me 50 feet further west to the front of the train engines.

As I cleared the front of the first engine altering my course again to the east to get to the station I saw the first sign of people on the station platform roughly 30 yards away from me and I stopped dead in my tracks. There were four men were standing outside the station doors, only one facing my direction and the other three with their backs to me, discussing

something animatedly.

Alia wasn't all that heavy but with the backpack, the vest and the weapons the weight added up fast and I wasn't sure how fast I could spin and make the train cover if things heated up and as I was now in the open, six feet from cover holding her in front of me with no idea whether they were friend or foe I was considering backing up and rethinking my approach when the guy facing me, actually noticed me and raised his rifle to look at me through the scope.

Right after that, the heavier one, with a full black beard and both the other guys, turned and looked in my direction having been alerted by the rifle guy standing next to them, then split off from rifle guy and started trotting in my direction.

The mood of the group appeared helpful so I figured I couldn't get in much more trouble cooperating than I could by trying to bolt so I started walking again, watching the guys trotting toward me and thinking about nothing else except putting one foot in front of the other, in the direction of the station and the medical facility.

I had walked and stumbled with her in my arms another 10 yards and the guys were getting closer when my endurance finally gave out and I dropped unceremoniously to one knee, still holding Alina propped up in my arms on the other knee, exhausted as the group arrived.

There were 5 of them in the party, the fifth having come out of the station late, passing the sharp shooter who was still on the station patio, watching me with what looked like a Dragunov sniper rifle, as the other 4 moved toward me across the lot.

All appeared to be middle aged and battle hardened, two of the three headed for me armed with Colt AR15's, the one catching up, with a Winchester shotgun and the fifth, a big dude with a neatly trimmed, thick black beard appeared to be unarmed save the automatic pistol that I noted strapped to his leg still holstered apparently unconcerned about my starting a fight.

Why would he be? I thought. With four other armed guys and a sniper on lookout.

As I watched, too exhausted to care much about who they were, if they were friend or foe, or for that matter, if we'd survive another 5 minutes, I slowly shifted my position to put my left side toward them and the sniper on the patio, while simultaneously shifting Alina's weight to my right, raised leg and with my now free, right hand, pulled the .45 from my holster holding it tight to my leg.

They approached me warily and stopped 18' out from me, all but Black Beard had their weapons raised and aimed at me.

"Greetings Stalker." Black beard called.
"What brings you here?"

"I would think it would be somewhat obvious?" I replied with a little sarcasm.

"Yes." Black beard answered as he stood there a minute debating this in his own mind.

Then, having made his decision, he started forward again, followed closely by his companions still a little edgy and as he advanced said.

"We don't know you Stalker but I can see you're exhausted."
"Your friend Alive?" He asked tentatively.

""Far as I can tell from here." I replied carefully. "But she needs medical attention soon or she won't be."

"No worries, Stalker. We have a medic in the town down there. Best in the area." He said with a smile on his face.

"Bruiser. Relieve our guest of his burden."
"Ace. You and Beamer help yon Stalker to his feet and take both of them down to the town medic."

The one called Bruiser, then walked up to me to take Alina but when he started to bend over I raised the .45 and stuck the end of the barrel in the

underside of his chin.

Look for Book II
The White Witch

Whispers
Coming August 2018