

Shamans of Time

By

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Prologue – The Great Fall

Mirthful laughter catches in Janav's throat and his genial smile wavers and dies as a thrumming vibration emanates from the floor of the vast library. He thrusts out his palms, quieting his giggling pupils. The rhythmic pulsation intensifies and books rattle off the shelves all throughout the athenaeum. Tears trickle down his cheeks, and he whispers, "I'm sorry, children, but our time together has come to an end. Please do not fear what comes next."

With an act of volition, Janav sheds his physical vessel and severs his etheric umbilical cord. While his young students huddle together as shelves topple over all around them, he ascends through the crystal ceiling and into the night sky.

Drifting high above the city, Janav watches as light as bright as the sun explodes at the heart of the metropolis. A concussion wave ripples outward, devastating everything in its wake, and evoking all of the elements in their greatest sums. Furious fires, quaking earth, thundering lightning, raging waters, and torrent winds ravage and consume until there is nothing left.

Janav radiates with deep sorrow as another Grand Cycle ends. Not with an ascension from the alien created soul matrix, but with the near extinction of humankind. Yet as he observes Omega becoming Alpha in the Ouroboros loop, his grief becomes hope. He notices an anomaly, which he missed during the four previous total cataclysms of human civilization. A brief temporal breach that he will exploit if humanity is to fall again in twenty-five-thousand years.

Chapter 1 – Cataclysmic Origins

1 – Hollow Observer

Arlington, Virginia
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Sirens wail in the distance like the cries of an abandoned child. Raucous shrieks and feral howls are met by panicked screams and piercing gunshots on the street three stories below. The reek of a burning car wreck filters through the floor-to-ceiling bedroom windows. It fuses with the stench of Sarafina's corpse lying twisted in the heavy quilt on their bed. Barking grunts and ceaseless pounding comes from the front door of Zane Hazen's condo.

He lies spread-eagle on the floor in the dark. He envisions a jagged piece of glass crawling up his arm. Just deep enough to open the arteries. Blood runs free over his palms and between his fingers, hot and thick and bright. He re-envisions the act using a large mirror shard instead. This time, he stares himself in the eye as he carves into his wrist, his gaze grotesque with judgment. He imagines what it feels like to bleed out. The beat of his heart grows farther and farther apart. His lungs breathe in less and less air until they quit with a gasp. His vision goes foggy as he watches his life drain onto the azure carpet and become an ugly stain. A blemish that can never be cleansed. A reflection of his soul.

Sarafina, Zane's loving wife of five years, was one of the thirty-five percent of the population afflicted with the horrible illness. 'Separating the wicked from the righteous' were the words of the Pope. Total bullshit.

A fellow photojournalist forwarded Zane pictures from inside one of the quarantine camps. The conditions were inhumane. There were simply too many ill to care for them properly. Zane decided not to report Sarafina's infirmity. Instead, he gave her Roxicodone he bought off the street for the pain and diarrhea. Marijuana to settle her heaving stomach. And ice packs on her forehead for the torrid fever. He fed her soup through a straw and kept her in bed. And that's where she died. In her sleep. It's also where he murdered her. And his daughter.

Although logically he knows murder is an inapt term for his actions, the anguish tearing at the inside of his heart screeches with terrible guilt. It's digging a chasm into the center of his chest. Boring out an emotional abyss.

Zane had been lying in a daze beside the body of his wife when a warm liquid dampened the sheets below him. Absentmindedly he touched it with his fingers and brought them up to sniff. It smelled of urine, but he hadn't pissed himself. He sat up and pulled the quilt off his wife. Her body twitched. He touched her cheek. Her skin was cool, but not as cold as he imagined a

six-hour-old cadaver should be. She spasmed violently. Then her once beautiful harlequin-green eyes shot open, bloodshot and vicious. She roared a banshee's horrid scream and attacked him in a savage fit of rage. She clawed and chomped at him, breaking her fingernails off in his chest, and nearly bit off the tip of his nose. In a primal state of survival, he clutched a lamp from his nightstand and smashed her skull in with its metal base.

Hours beforehand he had been forced to restrain her. He tied her wrists and ankles to the bed frame with random articles of clothing and stuffed a rolled pair of his socks in her mouth. She wouldn't stop screaming about a demon laughing at her and jabbing her with his taloned fingers. He untied her after she died. He was sure she was dead. But she couldn't have been. If only he hadn't untied her. He wouldn't have had to kill her. And his daughter.

Sarafina's warm blood splashed his face and into his mouth when he struck her repeatedly with the lamp. He vomited onto the bed and collapsed to the floor. He didn't bother to get up and wash. That was more than fifteen hours ago. If he has been infected he should feel the symptoms by now. If he isn't punished by the disease, he will have to punish himself. He can do it honorably like the samurai. Fall on the sharpened katana that decorates their coffee table in the living room.

Zane tells his stiff body to move, but some part of his mind countermands his order. His subconscious must have paralyzed him to sabotage his suicide. I *will* end this! He focuses hard and wills himself to rise. Up now!

And just then the first rays of dawn beam through the windows, banishing his dour thoughts like so many creatures of the night. The shackles of self-destructive compulsion that enslave his emotions shatter. The crushing weight of darkness that entomb his fractured heart sear away.

He becomes entranced by floating dust motes in the sunlight that swirl and flow, dancing curiously until they take a hazy form. My God! Sarafina! It is as if the aurora carried her soul to him from beyond the veil of death. She holds out her arms and falls upon him in an embrace that fills him with an invigorating warmth as her loving spirit envelops him. An understanding surfaces from the dredges of his consciousness: Death will not cleanse my soul. Only in life can my spirit be healed.

The perpetual beating on his front door ceases, and Zane leaps to his feet. He doesn't know why or where, but he has to move. Something is calling to him. He can feel it in the marrow of his bones.

He stares for a moment at Sarafina's body all twisted and decides he can't leave her that way. Rigor mortis has set in, but he does his best to lay her on her back and wrap her with their quilt.

Next, he hits the bathroom. The power is out, but the water is still flowing. That won't last much longer. He washes up in the sink, scrubbing the dried blood from his face, neck, chest, and hands. Brushes his teeth. Applies Old Spice deodorant to his under arms and fixes his messy blond hair using his fingers. His bright blue eyes look tired but determined.

Zane is thirty-two-years-old, six-foot-tall, and a hundred-and-seventy-five pounds of lean muscle. He has a mix of German, Irish, and Cherokee genes to thank for his 'handsome mug,' as Sarafina always put it. And a second-degree black belt in Shidōkan, supplemented by moderate weight lifting, to thank for his excellent physique.

Shidōkan translates as the group that lives and trains in the way of the samurai warrior. It is an eclectic combination of bare-knuckle knockdown karate, jujitsu grappling, and Muay Thai.

He is also skilled in the martial art of Kenjutsu, which translates as the technique of the sword.

Zane goes back into the bedroom, puts on a clean pair of bluejeans, socks, and a blue polo. Grabs his hiking boots, which he wears when shooting outdoor photography, and goes into the living room to lace them up. He doesn't want to sit on the bed where he left his wife's body to rest.

Sarafina is, or *was*, a journalist for The Washington Post. A strong-willed libertarian in converse to the Post's otherwise neoconservative slant. She was young to have obtained such a prestigious position, but she was an excellent journalist. And of course, it didn't hurt that her father was the executive editor. Zane and Sarafina shared a dream that once their daughter had grown, they would travel the world, Zane photographing all the exotic sites and Sarafina writing about them. They didn't know if their joint project would be a book, an e-zine, or just a blog, but none of that matters now. Sarafina is dead. Their daughter is dead. And with them all of his dreams.

After putting on his boots, Zane clips his smartphone to his belt and runs his earbuds under his shirt and plugs his ears. He throws on his black leather jacket, a gift from his wife. Grabs his Leica S2, a digital SLR 37.5 megapixel camera, his most prized possession, and hangs it from his neck. He snatches a key from a drawer and sticks it in his pocket. It belongs to his younger brother Jared's '99 Honda Nighthawk motorcycle. Jared left his bike without notice when he jetted to Tokyo three months ago. Finally, Zane straps his katana to his back using his black belt as a makeshift strap. He bought the katana in Japan while doing a photo assignment.

Zane's stomach roars at him and he realizes he hasn't eaten anything in the last twenty-four hours. So he goes to the kitchen, rips open a can of Campbell's Chunky Chili and devours it cold. He washes it down with a Starbucks Bottled Vanilla Frappuccino.

He spent all of last night on the bedroom floor, drifting in and out of consciousness, back and forth between strange dreams and haunting nightmares. One of the dreams, a dream that has reoccurred throughout his life, was of an alien city sinking into the ocean after a massive explosion. It always bothers him when he has the dream, but he has no idea why. It leaves him with a lingering heavy feeling of sorrow that is difficult to shake.

Which reminds him there's one more thing he must do before heading out into the dreadful madness. He doesn't want to do it. But he knows he will regret it for the remainder of his life, however short that may be, if he doesn't do it now. I've got to.

He clenches his jaw in resolve and heads for the second bedroom. With each step, a heavier weight bears down on him, as if he is fighting a repulsive magnetic force. As he approaches the open doorway his pace slows to that of a forming mountain. When he finally reaches the threshold he halts altogether.

The room had been his and Sarafina's shared office. Now it is empty but for some painting supplies they had recently bought. Sarafina fussed over the color choices as if they were a matter of life and death. She researched the psychological effects of not only every major color but also the effects of every color combination. Ultimately after much deliberation, she chose a garden theme of pale green paired with decorative accents of rose for the walls and a deep blue for the ceiling.

Sarafina was four months pregnant. She had an ultrasound a week before everything went crazy. They were going to name her Eden. Eden Olivia Hazen.

Zane can't enter the barren nursery. An invisible barrier of loss secures the room. He can't cry even though he knows he should. No tears will form. His eyes are sunbaked desert stones miles from an oasis. He can't feel anything. Misery or rage or pain. His guilt has consumed his heart. The center of his chest has become a cold void, black and empty.

He whispers softly as spring rain on a koi pond. "Goodbye, my sweet little princess."

Then turns away and marches to the front door. He unclips his smartphone to select random play on all music before clipping it again. The non-lyrical post-rock song, *Greet Death* by *Explosions in the Sky*, begins to play at a low volume as he draws his katana. He inhales a long, steadying breath, flips the deadbolt, twists the door knob slow, and then pulls the door wide, ready to strike.

He is met by nothing more than an empty hallway. Whoever or whatever had been so driven to get at him must have lost interest. Why he has no idea.

Zane steps out and closes the door behind him. The only trace of the wannabe intruder slash killer is blood smeared across his door. He doesn't bother to lock it. He'll never return. This will never be his home again.

Creeping down the hall, Zane holds his katana tight with both hands as he heads for the stairs. If all of the infected have become like his wife, death can be hiding behind any door, around any corner, and humanity has certainly reached its end.

He passes by the open door of a Middle Eastern couple's condo. Dried blood stains the door. Expensive furniture is overturned. Shattered glass litters the plush carpet, reflecting sunlight that spills in through windows with their drapes torn down. Multiple holes puncture the wallpapered walls.

Zane continues on to the stairwell door, where he finds more smeared blood. He kicks the door open, daring anything lurking on the stairs to come for him. He would rather face any opponents in the hall than the stairwell.

No ravenous roars or rushing footsteps echo from the stairs. So he makes his way down to the parking garage, quick but quiet. The garage is dimly lit by sunlight pouring in from the exit.

He dashes to Jared's motorcycle. It is clean, all black and chrome, and well kept. It was the only possession Jared had ever taken good care of. As a kid, most of Jared's Christmas gifts were broken before New Years, and he had usually broken a few of Zane's toys too. When Jared lied to him about financial issues a year ago, when his real problem was a drug addiction, and yet he never hocked his bike for pill money, it expressed his true degree of love for his motorcycle.

Zane chooses his brother's Honda Nighthawk over his wife's Toyota Prius and his VW Jetta because the roads will probably be jammed with car crashes. He has never driven a motorcycle, but he had gone dirt biking a few times in high school with his brother, and the old VW Golf he owned while in college was a stick shift, so he should manage fine.

After sheathing his katana, Zane climbs on the bike and kicks the side stand up. He notices a woman at the other end of the garage, shambling toward the exit.

Turning on his Leica, he looks through the viewfinder and zooms in on her. She moves in a spasmodic fashion, her limbs twitching as if tugged by puppet strings. He snaps a shot and the flash lights up the dim garage. Damn! I forgot to turn off the auto flash.

The woman turns around at once. Her cloudy eyes do not focus on him, but she shuffles in his direction, twice as fast as she had been working toward the exit. It is his Middle Eastern neighbor. Blood stains her blouse and her throat is torn ragged. She can't be alive with a wound like that. It's just not possible.

A gurgling groan draws Zane's attention to the right. A middle-aged man is dragging himself toward Zane, two car lengths away, his jeans bunched around his ankles. His legs are dead weight, his pelvis clearly shattered, mostly likely by a speeding vehicle that had been racing to exit the garage.

Zane fishes the key from his pocket with a shaking hand, fumbles as he attempts to jam it into the ignition switch, finally slipping it in and turns it to the on position. Sets the kill switch to run. Squeezes the clutch lever with his left hand, and with his right, he thumbs the start button. And nothing happens. Shit!

The shambling dead woman is only three car lengths away. The dragger is only one.

What am I doing wrong? What did I forget? Maybe it won't start in first gear. He toes the gear shift lever up a half click to neutral and tries again. *Still*, nothing happens. Shit!

His moaning neighbor, jaw slack, drool dribbling down one side of her chin, arms stretched forward and grasping, is only two car lengths away. The paraplegic only a few feet.

Maybe the battery is dead. Or the gas...

Zane reaches down and turns the fuel shutoff valve he had forgotten. He attempts again and it purrs to life. He revs it a few times to warm the engine so it doesn't stall, kicks the hand gripping at his ankle, shifts into first and rips passed the undead woman.

The instrumental song, *Death is the Road to Awe* by Clint Mansell from *The Fountain OST*, begins to play as he exits the parking garage.

Just before rolling out onto the street, Zane stomps on the rear brake and squeezes the front brake and clutch lever, squealing to a halt.

A dump truck with a plow attached roars passed him and smashes two intermingled burning cars out of the center of the road, before coming to a stop. Two Mack trucks pulling trailers stop behind him and blow their horns. 'RIDE TO SAFETY' is spray painted across the trailers. A Hummer H20 and a few SUVs round out the caravan.

Civilians with hunting rifles and handguns jump out of the back of the trailers. A man with a megaphone announces, "Anyone who has *not* be bitten by one of the infected can come with us to safety. You've got two minutes to get down here."

The Middle Eastern man from Zane's condo, charges from down the street toward the caravan, growling like a crazed hungry animal. An old man with a rifle fires once. A plume of blood and brains erupt from the back of his neighbor's skull and he falls in a rag-doll sprawl.

Zane turns off the auto flash on his Leica and begins snapping photos as a dozen survivors rush out of the main entrance of the condos and toward the trailers.

A large shadow passes over Zane and a little white dog in the cab of the first truck begins yapping out the cracked window. Zane looks up with his camera and snaps a shot of an angel just before it disappears behind the building across the street. The mere glimpse of the white winged creature should send dread coursing through him, but he feels only a mild pulse of unease.

Zane jolts and almost falls over with the bike. The undead Middle Eastern woman shambles by him, an arm's length away, as if he weren't there. Her torn open throat exposes writhing black tendrils like rotten roots under her skin. A bullet to the head drops her to the

street. Why didn't she attack me? She could have taken a bite out of me before I knew what was happening.

The number of infected racing, shambling, and crawling after the survivors quickly becomes overwhelming. The caravan rolls out, firing shots at the runners as they go, and they take a left onto 10th Street North.

Zane considers momentarily if he should attempt to ride up to Jersey and Pennsy where his family lives. Where he grew up. His father may have taken his fishing boat out to sea. But he'll only last as long as his fresh water does. His Christian fanatic mother is probably held up in a Kingdom Hall, waiting for Jesus to float down on a cloud riding a white horse. His rowdy cousins are most likely having a drunken end of the world blowout. His grandparents live in a densely populated area and have neither the materials or the strength to adequately barricade their home. Even if he survived the three and half hour trip, which will be much longer due to the traffic conditions, the chance of finding his family dead or undead is vastly greater than finding any of them alive. He doesn't want to smash in the skull of someone he loves. Again.

So instead Zane follows the small ragtag caravan, a few car lengths behind, unsure if he should join them for the length of their journey.

Five blocks later, at the intersection of North Barton Street, two angels swoop down and attack the Mack trucks. Zane can't see what's happening. But both of the trucks jackknife, flip their trailers and spill tumbling people onto the street.

Zane swerves around the SUVs and Hummer, then turns sharp and puts on the brakes hard, skidding to a halt. A horde of the infected surge into the intersection, swarming the overturned trailers. They had been hidden by a patch of pine trees and a house on the corner. The angels must have herded them together, before setting the trap.

Help I'm Alive by *Metric* plays from Zane's smartphone as a few dozen gunshots ring out and the agonizing screams of men, women, and children coalesce with the constant savage cries of the raging infected.

♪ I tremble ♪

♪ They're gonna eat me alive ♪

♪ If I stumble ♪

♪ They're gonna eat me alive ♪

♪ Can you hear my heart beating like a hammer ♪

Zane lifts his Leica and snaps shots of the massacre. There is nothing else he can do. Photography is the only thing he has left.

He loved reading Spider-Man as a kid and wanted to be like Peter Parker and become a New York photographer. For Zane's twelfth birthday, his grandfather gave him his first camera, a 35mm Nikon, and taught him all the basics of photography; focusing and setting the exposure, proper shutter speed and aperture, and how to developed the negatives. Later Zane borrowed books from the library to learn when and how to use different lenses and filters, and all about lighting. After graduating from Neshaminy High School, Zane attended the Art Institute of Philadelphia, where he received a Bachelor's Degree in Photography. He spent many weekends during his college years, wandering the streets of Philly, camera in hand, searching both the gorgeous and the grimy, to create himself a grand portfolio.

He secretly wanted to emulate Henri Cartier-Bresson, the Godfather of photojournalism. From the early 1930's Bresson prowled the streets snapping moments, fleeting action that found

its perfect expression and true meaning through the content and composition of the picture. Bresson's pictures were about being in the right place at the right time. He could step into a space and realize the theatrical possibilities. He knew that if he waited, a moment of life would enter that space, and then he would pounce upon that fraction of a second, that decisive moment, by shooting a photograph. A decisive moment is seemingly casual but charged with significance.

In Zane's sophomore year, he won the Young Photographer Infinity Award for a shot he caught in Kensington of a homeless junky. It appeared as if the bedraggled man had passed only moments before Zane stumbled upon him. The man was dead on the street, a syringe in his arm, laid between the crumbling curb and a junked pickup. The lighting was absolutely perfect; the sun was just rising over a church behind the deceased. The photo's viewpoint portrayed both the tragedy of our society's most graphic deficiency and the beauty of the tattered man's liberation from a harsh life.

Transfixed by the atrocious scene, Zane kicks the bike's side stand down and gets off the bike to get some better angles. Without thinking, he moves in closer and closer, taking shot after shot, until he is so close blood splashes the lens of his camera. He stops and realizes he is surrounded. But not one of them touches him or even looks at him.

A strange understanding strikes him: Somehow Sarafina's spirit is acting as a protective shroud, rendering me invisible to all evil.

Or maybe you're infected and they can sense their own kind, whispers a voice in his mind that he refuses to give heed. The dark voice of death and despair.

Pulling the end of his polo shirt up from under his jacket, he uses it to wipe the blood from his lens, before moving further into the carnage for some more graphic photos of human teeth tearing ferociously into jugular veins. The terror-stricken faces of the victims are as intense as the rage engraved upon the faces of the infected. Neither the grisly fury of the diseased murders or the helpless cries of the slaughtered innocent touch the cold void that had been his heart.

Maybe the human race deserves eradication. For all the children we let starve due to greed and disinterest. For all the wars over oil and poppy and minerals. For the plundering and polluting of the earth. For the genetic engineering of viruses. For the creation and detonation of nuclear weapons.

Death And All His Friends by Coldplay plays as Zane rides around the trucks and continues on down the road.

♪ No I don't wanna battle from beginning to end ♪

♪ I don't wanna cycle or recycle revenge ♪

♪ I don't wanna follow death and all his friends ♪

Zane veers left onto Arlington Boulevard. Due to an abundance of abandoned cars, he is forced to drive on the grassy median that divides the road. Wandering infected, cloudy-eyed and twitching in spasmodic puppet-like movements, obviously hear the rumbling sound of the motorcycle engine as he passes. They spin around unable to tell where it is coming from, and others trapped inside vehicles smash their faces against the windows, moaning in either agitation or bewilderment

He takes the on-ramp onto Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Bridge but has to stop half way across. A large segment of all seven lanes is completely gone. Charred rebar juts from crumbling

concrete over blackened steel plate girders. The National Guard must have blown the bridge to stop an influx of the infected from entering DC.

The Arlington Memorial Bridge off to the right looks intact. So after taking a few photos, he turns the bike around and drives the wrong way all the way back down the on-ramp. Then takes the George Washington Memorial Parkway to the Arlington Memorial Bridge.

The entry to the bridge looks like the aftermath of a war zone. Blood stained concertina wire, spent shell casings by the thousands, discarded rifles and helmets, mutilated human remains, an overturned light armored vehicle, and a Humvee with one door ajar and all its shatterproof windows painted scarlet from the inside, imply it had been protected by a National Guard barricade that was overrun.

Apocalypse Please by *Muse* plays as Zane traverses the blockade wreckage and onto the bridge.

♪ Declare this an emergency ♪
♪ Come on and spread a sense of urgency ♪
♪ And pull us through ♪
♪ And pull us through ♪
♪ And this is the end ♪
♪ This is the end of the world ♪

He veers right after the bridge and then straight over the little median onto Lincoln Memorial Circle, driving the wrong way. When the circle ends he drives onto the sidewalk and then zips through the poles meant to stop vehicles from driving onto the walkway.

He stops between the Lincoln Memorial and the recently reconstructed Reflecting Pool, turns off the bike and gets off to take some more horrific photos.

Cold Desert by *Kings of Leon* begins to play as Zane climbs the stairs up to the massive monument and passes through the fluted white marble columns into the temple. A group of people is huddled atop the statue of Lincoln, crying and clutching each other tight, as a mass of the undead claw up at them and moan hungrily.

As Zane circles the statue snapping photos, a father holds his young son's waist as he stands on Lincoln's arm and pisses onto the twitchers below. A foul muck of urine and feces cakes the pink marble floor under the feet of the undead. The people atop the statue must have been there all night.

Zane zooms in on a middle-aged Afro-American woman resting on Lincoln's shoulder. She holds a silver cross between thumb and forefinger, both hands pressed firm to her heart, eyes closed, lips murmuring in fervent prayer.

♪ Jesus don't love me ♪
♪ No one ever carried my load ♪
♪ I'm too young to feel this old ♪

He leaves the doomed survivors crammed atop the Lincoln statue behind, and strides down the stairs and passed the Nighthawk.

Goodnight, Travel Well by *The Killers* plays as Zane gazes absentmindedly into the Reflecting Pool.

♪ The unknown distance to the great beyond ♪
♪ Stares back at my grieving frame ♪
♪ To cast my shadow by the holy sun ♪

♪ My spirit moans with a sacred pain ♪

Proudly reflected in the still water, the stone obelisk of the Washington Monument stands tall. It probably will continue to do so long after mankind has vanished from the planet.

A mid-size twin-engine bizjet enters the reflection and Zane looks up at the morning sky. It must have come from Reagan National Airport. It's only a few miles south of here. But where the hell do they think they'll go? Canada? The North Pole? Even Santa isn't safe from this horror. There's probably a half dozen rabid elves chewing on his fat ass right now.

Something much smaller is trailing the jet. Zane zooms in with his Leica to reveal an angel hurling a spear. One of the engines lights up bright and spews black smoke. The jet wavers, losing altitude, then arches through the sky, and soars over the Washington Monument, the jet's belly only feet above the pointed tip. It is flying in Zane's direction. The pilot's going to try and bring the bird down in the pool.

Zane has photographed the aftermath of many major disasters during his career, and he'll never forget any of those images.

Bloated bodies half buried in mud and debris, after the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004.

Children's mangled limbs and crushed skulls in the ruins of collapsed school buildings, after the devastating Kashmir earthquake of 2005.

Blood stained tattered clothes hanging from the twisted metal of bombed commuter trains in Mumbai India in 2006.

A father wading through chest-high waters while his wife and children cling to the boat he pulls, in India after the monsoon flooding of 2007.

Entire villages in Burma reduced to wastelands of wet rubble, after Cyclone Nargis in 2008.

Essential roads demolished by massive mudslides and bridges washed away by raging rivers, after Typhoon Morakot in Taiwan in 2009.

Tens of thousands of battered and broken bodies thrown into mass graves, after the catastrophic earthquake in Haiti in 2010.

Large ships at port capsized, trains derailed, and nuclear meltdowns, after the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011.

Until today, Zane had never photographed a disaster in progress.

The second engine bursts into flame and smoke. The jet descends rapidly, bucking wild and swaying chaotic, fighting a nosedive.

The voice of reason echoes from somewhere deep in the recess of his mind: Get on the bike and flee!

Of course, Zane ignores reason and continues snapping photos of the calamity unfolding before him.

The nose of the jet smashes through the nine-foot-tall granite Freedom Wall of the World War II Memorial with an explosion of stone and dust, before its belly smacks the Reflecting Pool, shooting water in a huge arch and creating a wave that travels the length of the pool, about two-thousand-feet, which splashes Zane, soaking him up to his chest and misting the lens of his camera. Upon impact with the pool the jet slides into a roll, tearing both wings off and igniting the fuel tanks with a roaring blast of heat and fire, and continues tumbling violently, losing its tail and flinging flaming bodies from its crumpled burning frame, until the mangled wreckage

finally comes to rest at the edge of the pool, only a few feet from where Zane stands taking photos.

A good photograph encapsulates a moment of time, framing it in a way that emphasizes the splendor or calamity of that instant, revealing the truth of an inaccessible occurrence to anyone who gazes upon the photo, allowing them to experience that moment as though it were their own memory. But as I stare through the viewfinder, recording flashes of history, the end of humanity, I couldn't be any more distant from my captured images. As though my camera has isolated me from the apocalypse transpiring all around me. As though I am a mere observer. A specter of Gehenna's uprising.

To capture such fiercely dynamic imagery with the static medium of photography has been a lifelong aspiration. These shots would grant him membership to Magnum Photos, the holy grail of photo agencies. He would then be regarded no longer as a photojournalist but as a visual philosopher. One of these would surely win him a Pulitzer Prize. Robert Capa, the world's greatest war photographer, would be envious of these shots.

Smoking chunks of debris rain here and there. Puddles of jet fuel burn on the surface of the water. A few trees have caught aflame. Charred bodies litter the grass. And still, Zane feels absolutely nothing. His chest is a barren tomb. An empty casket.

Hollow by *Submersed* plays as Zane mounts the bike, starts it up, and follows the walkway around and zips through another set of poles meant to block vehicles from entering.

♪ You take the breath you didn't make ♪

♪ What's left you did forsake ♪

♪ Lift me up my soul's so hollow ♪

♪ You can make me scream internally ♪

♪ You can make me breathe eternally ♪

He drives down the tree-lined shady street of Henry Bacon Drive and makes a right onto Constitution Avenue. All eight lanes of the road are crammed with abandoned automobiles, so he rides the sidewalk until he reaches the Ellipse of President's Park. The semicircular colonnaded balcony of the South Portico of the White House is visible in the distance, peeking arrogantly through the tall trees.

In the wake of World War III, the war of all nations versus the armies of God, the President issued a military draft, before he and his cabinet fled to an undisclosed underground military installation, leaving the American people despondent and the Executive Mansion deserted.

The thought of the President's Palace being unoccupied compels the curious explorer within him. So Zane drives between two dead fountains and on into the park, as *Monsters* by *Band of Horses* begins to play.

The tires of the bike crush the dead brown grass, frozen with morning dew, as he cruises through the center of the Ellipse, towards the National Christmas Tree at the other end of the park, off to the right. It is all lit up even with the power grid down since it utilizes solar energy.

A man in his mid-to-late-twenties darts into the park from the left, clutching a wooden baseball bat in one hand and the wrist of a woman with the other, who is having trouble keeping pace with him. A little girl, three or four-years-old, clings to the woman, face buried in the crook of her neck.

The photographer in him taking control, Zane stops, turns off the bike, and gets off.

Two bellowing bloody men enter the park a few yards behind the family of three. At the same moment, four more of the crazed infected rush into the park from the opposite side, spread out and close in on them.

The man halts at the center of the Ellipse, ten feet from Zane, his wife ready to collapse with exhaustion. The husband yells at her to get down and stay there, and she obeys immediately, falling to her knees and hugging her daughter with her entire body to protect her.

The six infected holler and bark like rabid dogs as they circle the man, waving his bat at them wildly.

♪ When awful people they surround you ♪
♪ Well hey, they just like monsters ♪
♪ They come to feed on us ♪
♪ Giant little animals for us ♪
♪ Though to say we got much hope ♪
♪ If I am lost it's only for a little while ♪

Zane walks a tight orbit around the phalanx of snarling infected, crouching here and there, trying to get the best angles so that their vicious attack is framed just right.

His mind refuses to observe the horror taking place in real time. He sees each image he catches in a freeze frame. And a flash of pleasant memory between each shot acts as a counterbalance.

Snap! The end of the father's bat connecting with a lunging woman's growling mouth, her neck twisted, jaw unhinged, blood and teeth suspended in midair.

Flash! Green mint ice cream smeared across Sarafina's smiling lips, after a game of miniature golf on their first date.

Snap! The father's bat rebounding off a frenzied attacker's crushed nose, with a mist of blood, and a crack through the center of the bat.

Flash! Sarafina in his arms, looking up at him and whispering, 'I love you,' for the first time.

Snap! With an explosion of splinters, the end of the bat ricocheting off an attacker's forehead, while the jagged end of the handle scrapes across the side of his scalp.

Flash! Eyes shut tight, mouth wide, Sarafina shudders in ecstasy as she climaxes below him.

Snap! The father jabbing the broken bat end into the throat of a leaping man with a gush of blood.

Flash! Sarafina doing the Egyptian dance in their bathroom doorway, wearing nothing but a hat of soap bubbles.

Snap! The father's arms are thrown wide, his mouth agape with a roar of pain, his body seemingly levitating as he is frozen in mid-fall, an infected man atop him, ripping into his jugular mid-tackle.

Flash! Sarafina jumping on their bed and daring him to use his 'fancy-pants karate' to take her down.

Snap! The mother yanked backward by her long hair, her daughter torn from her arms by her small neck, both crying out with horror as they reach for each other.

Flash! Wetsuit around her knees, Sarafina laughing loud after falling on her ass, on a boat trip returning from scuba diving during their Caribbean honeymoon.

Snap! The mother's arms and legs are pointed in different directions in a thrashing of helpless struggle, as her throat is shredded by grinding teeth.

Flash! Sarafina holding the downward dog Yoga pose while swearing jokingly to withhold sex if he gives her another wedgie.

Snap! The crying girl's little body is contorted in a flail of resistance as an enraged man palms the back of her skull with one hand and grips a leg with his other, and plunges his broken teeth into the soft skin of her neck.

Flash! Sarafina's harlequin-green eyes sparkling with tears of joy while viewing their daughter's thumping heartbeat with an ultrasound.

Until The End by Breaking Benjamin begins to play as Zane starts the bike and rides a wide arc around the family of three laying dead on the cold ground.

♪ I'm done with these endeavors ♪
♪ Alone I walk the winding way ♪
♪ It's over ♪

He exits the park onto East Street NW and rides pass the derelict guard post onto Executive Avenue. Follows it up to the White House south lawn, speeds around the large circle to the Rose Garden, and kills the engine.

The *Black Eyed Peas* cover of *Power To The People* by *John Lennon* plays as he walks through the garden, up the stairs to the West Colonnade, through the unlocked doors of the office of the president's secretaries, where papers are scattered everywhere, and finally into the luxurious Oval Office.

♪ Power to the people ♪
♪ Power to the people, right on ♪
♪ Say you want a revolution ♪
♪ We better get on right away ♪
♪ Well you get on your feet ♪
♪ And out on the street ♪

Zane walks across the taupe rug bearing the presidential seal, passed two couches with a coffee table placed between them, around the ornately carved large Resolute Desk, and takes a seat in the president's comfortable leather chair. He gazes at the portrait of George Washington, hung over the marble fireplace across the office, as *The Ghost Of You by My Chemical Romance* begins to play.

The emo-punk song, like all the other music he has listened to this morning, carries the potent emotions Zane can no longer feel for himself.

♪ I never said I'd lie and wait forever ♪
♪ If I died, we'd be together ♪

And then with the force of a jolt of lightning, his ruptured heart pounds with torturous guilt. The cold black hole that fills his chest explodes into a fiery sun of pain and anger. Sarafina's protective spirit has forsaken me!

A torrent of vehement rage bellows up from deep within him, from the very core of his being, and erupts from him as a turbulent roar that causes his body to tremble. His lungs feel as if they are being torn apart by the fierce exertion of his furious thunder.

Zane pulls in a deep breath as he tears his Leica from around his neck. He lifts his most prized possession above his head, containing his life's greatest work as a photojournalist, and lets

out another thunderous roar as he slams the camera down on the wooden desk, shattering the lens. He brings it down, again and again, hollering ferociously as he does so, smashing the camera to bits, and then flings the remains across the room into the fireplace.

He shoots to his feet and jerks his katana from its sheath on his back. With one palm smacked on the desktop, he launches himself over the desk, bounces up and slashes his blade down on the wooden coffee table between the couches. He kicks it with a boot while yanking the sword back, then brings it down again, chopping the table in two. Twisting with a violent swipe, he slashes the cushions of the couch to his right, and white feathers burst from within. With a fierce howl and brutal kick he flips the couch over on its back. Then turns to the other couch and slashes back and forth in a screaming rage, mincing the cushions to ragged shreds and sending feathers flying all about the Oval Office.

♪ At the end of the world ♪
♪ Or the last thing I see ♪
♪ You are never coming home ♪
♪ And all the things that you never ever told me ♪
♪ And all the smiles that are ever gonna haunt me ♪
♪ Never coming home ♪
♪ Never coming home ♪
♪ Could I? Should I? ♪
♪ And all the wounds that are ever gonna scar me ♪
♪ For all the ghosts that are never gonna... ♪

Zane yanks his earbuds out and hurls his smartphone against the wall. He grips his katana firm with both hands, blade pointed down, and lifts it over his head. His arms shake and he hyperventilates as he gathers the courage to plunge the steel deep into his belly. With one last furious cry of wrath, he thrusts the blade down hard, stabbing it into the center of the president's desk.

He turns and melts to the floor, his back against the desk. Resting his elbows on his raised knees, he cups his eyes with his palms. A sob retches up from the bowels of his guts. And at last, his eyes fill with tears. I'm sorry, Sarafina. I'm too weak to take my own life!

He cries and cries, tears running from his palms down his arms. He cries and cries, begging his dead wife and unborn daughter for forgiveness. He cries and cries until he can conjure no more tears. And then he continues to sob without the tears.

When he feels too emotionally drained to cry anymore, a male voice, deep and melodic, sounds clearly in his mind. *"It is time to give up being only a spectator and become a true participant."*

Zane's eyes shoot open. A ghostly man stands before him. Etheric blue and ageless, seven-foot-tall with white hair and gold eyes. He wears white robes with gold edging, the material as non-physical as the man. A white misty energy swirls about him and flows out from him like dry ice. He has no wings or halo, but he is far more angelic than any of those creatures soaring the skies.

2 – Quarantine Break

Author's Note: The dialog in this scene has been translated from Japanese.

Kyoto, Japan
Thursday, December 27, 2012
5:55 AM JST

Nurse Himura Kaida shakes her head to keep from falling asleep on her feet. Her cute bob-cut black hair is a mess. Her almond-shaped jade eyes are red with exhaustion. She has only slept four hours in the last two days. And those few hours were short naps taken unintentionally while sitting on the toilet.

Although Kaida was solicited for modeling, she refused the opportunity and attended the Kyoto Prefectural University of Medicine for four years directly out of high school. She's now twenty-eight-years-old, which means she's been working full time as a nurse for six years. Nothing during those years of school or work prepared her for this insanity.

The classroom is overcrowded with unconscious patients. All the desks were piled hastily against the rear wall. Kyoto University of Art and Design is designated as a quarantine camp, same as every other school, public and private, in the country.

Her father, a CEO of Medicon, Inc., which markets state-of-the-art medical equipment, is in another understaffed overcrowded camp, same as her mother. They're both infected.

They were always strict, but they were also supportive and loving. It was a struggle not to ignore this assignment and go to them. However, her sense of responsibility won out over her personal desire. Now she appreciates her assignment to this camp. To see her parents like these patients, in this condition, would be unbearable. She is also thankful that her husband, Dai, worked so hard last year to convince her that the time just wasn't right for them to have a child. To witness her own son or daughter go through so much pain would crush her heart.

Kaida tears off the thick plastic packaging from a 1000 mL IV bag of saline solution, pulls the protective tab from the administration port and discards both in the trash bin on her makeshift medical cart. She slides the roller clamp closed on the IV tubing plugged into the old bag, pulls the spike out and plugs it into the new bag with a twisting push. After tossing the old bag into the trash, she hangs the new bag on the IV pole hook and slides open the roller clamp before moving on to the next cot to do the same. After changing all the IV bags she will switch carts and change all their catheter bags. Then restock her carts and start working the next overcrowded classroom, ad infinitum.

The disease is not communicable. There has not been a single confirmed case of infection outside the original thirty-five percent of the infected populace. Therefore Kaida is wearing her usual white scrubs and face mask, rather than an orange pressurized space suit, as shown in the CNN videos from the first day of the outbreak.

Her husband is a doctor but was assigned to a different quarantine camp. Dai informed Kaida that although the American media has proclaimed the disease a virus, in actuality, no pathogen has been discovered. Neither the United States' CDC, Japan's NIID, or the United Nations' WHO have yet to learn anything of value about the disease. The cause, be it a bacterium, virus, fungi, or parasite, remains unknown. The initial method of infection transmission, airborne, common vehicle, direct contact, or vector-borne, is also still unknown. And stranger yet, the pandemic had no epicenter. It seemed to manifest from nowhere and strike everywhere all at once.

The initial symptoms were a simple headache that grew into a fever and heavy sweating within an hour, then vomiting, all of which is typical of a stomach virus, though the onset was more rapid. Two and a half hours later severe abdominal pain, accompanied by profuse diarrhea and more vomiting, assaulted the infected. Abnormally large doses of morphine were required to dull their pain. Forty-eight hours later they began suffering intense omni-sense hallucinations. All of them screamed about demons and devils. They had to be heavily sedated. Twelve hours later all the infected appeared to have gone into cardiac arrest. Kaida's first thought was that the portable cardiac monitor defibrillators the military had brought in had not been properly charged. Her second thought was that the sedatives had caused a latent adverse reaction with the disease. In fact, the patients' had gone into a coma so deep it's considered a hibernative state. Only a trained physician would distinguish them as alive. The monitors have been adjusted to compensate. That was about six hours ago.

As Kaida changes another IV bag, the fingers of the man laying before her twitch. Out of the corner of her eye, she notices the next patient's toes fidget under their bed sheet. She freezes. The man's eyes shudder under his eyelids. It sends an icy shiver up her spine. The hairs on her arms stand up. Her heart starts to pound. She glances around the classroom. All the patients are having muscle spasms and rapid eye movement. She has an incredible urge to flee. To drop the IV bag and run. To race with all her strength to reach the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force light armored vehicle posted at the entrance of the school.

Kaida hangs the IV bag and slowly walks backward down the isle of twitching patients, her agitation growing with each of their spasms. I've got to go find the doctor.

She leaps in surprise as the cardiac monitor behind her beeps. Before she can react, another monitor across the room begins to scream. Then another and another until all the monitors are shouting that their patients have flat lined. Standing at the center of the classroom, Kaida is surrounded by death. And then, she isn't.

The monitors quiet. The patients are alive, heart rhythms normal.

And then the muscle spasms and rapid eye movements return. Worse than before. Their bodies convulse. Bed sheets are thrown off. IV poles are knocked to the floor. Cots are overturned. They spit, growl, clench their fists and gnash their teeth. Their heart rates speed until all the monitors begin to scream at her again.

Honoring her intuition, Kaida dismisses her duty to her patients, spins around and rushes for the door. The monitor screams are joined by furious howls and shrieks of rage. She glances over her shoulder as she dashes through the doorway. All the infected are tearing out their IVs and catheters. Their facial expressions are demonic.

Kaida doesn't have time to contemplate what has happened to her patients or why. She thinks only of escape. She is on the second floor and will have to pass six other classrooms in this hallway, each harboring twenty-five infected, before she reaches the stairs.

Hoarse snarls and screeching wails reverberate from every direction in a cacophony of fury. The high-pitched squeal of a woman pierces the horrid din for just a moment. It has to be the other nurse assigned to this floor. Murdered.

As Kaida races past the first set of classrooms, raging infected are already spilling out of the two classrooms closest to the stairs. Her adrenalin spikes at their sight and she runs faster, her leg muscles working harder than she ever thought they were capable.

Upon her father's insistence that she learn discipline, Kaida practiced Kung Fu as a child for seven years. She chose the Chinese martial art rather than a Japanese discipline as an act of defiance against her father. She was forced to quit upon entering high school to make time in her schedule for cram school and has never been required to recall her training. Fortunately, she has practiced Yoga for the last six years so she's still limber. Because at five-foot-five and a hundred-and-fifteen pounds, remembering her Kung Fu skills may be the deciding factor that determines if she escapes this hallway alive or not.

Infected charge out of the second set of classrooms just as she reaches them. She sideswipes away from a grasping man, ducks under a clawing woman, and darts toward the final two classrooms from which a hysteric crowd has massed, with still more trying to push through the crammed doorways. They take note of her at once, bellow furiously and rush forward to meet her.

With twenty already ahead, and at least that many chasing from behind, she will not be given a moment of pause. To hesitate for even a single second will mean her end. If just one of the infected manage to grab a hold of her, she will be torn apart before she can break free.

Her body seems to move without her mind's direction. As she reaches the crowd she swings her arms up like the wings of a crane and leaps into a front kick that strikes the first frenzied attacker in the chest, throwing the woman to the floor and forcing others backward. Kaida jumps over the fallen woman, flashing through the small opening as clutching fists snatch at her from all around.

A rabid man directly ahead reaches for her throat. Like a snake coiling a branch, Kaida's palm wraps around his forearm and grips a hold with the speed of fangs injecting venom. She redirects his momentum to spin him around twice, knocking other infected to the ground, and flings the man in the direction of the stairs. He hits the floor, giving her another opening. She leaps onto his chest with one foot and over his head with the other before he can grab her.

A roaring man swings at her. Kaida ducks and lunges up with a half-fist leopard paw, driving the second row of her knuckles into his throat, crushing his trachea and causing him to stumble backward. She throws her arms around him, her fingers clenching hold like tiger claws, then pushes hard, using him as a battering ram to break through the last of the crowd.

Kaida whirls toward the stairs and releases the suffocating man, letting him fall at the entry to the stairwell, creating an obstacle for her pursuers. She plunges over him like a sprinter jumping a hurdle, her arms windmilling as she flies over the first flight of stairs. She hits the landing hard, almost falls, twists and sails down the remainder of the stairs, taking three and four at a time.

The stairwell exits to the front lobby on the first floor. A mob of roaring infected is already charging for the school's main entrance. She only has a three-second lead.

Kaida darts to the double doors and slams through them into the brisk winter night. Dawn is yet an hour away. Approximately fifteen centimeters of snow blanket everything in sight.

The large school is built atop a hill. Fifty brick stairs, which stretch half the length of the building, descend to the dark street below, where the snow has been plowed up to the sidewalk.

She rushes down the shoved and salted path at the center of the stairs, waving her arms and shouting. The frenzied horde is only a few steps behind her now.

The gunner in the machine-gun turret mounted atop the JGSDF light armored vehicle swivels away from the street.

Kaida's intuition shouts for her to drop. As she throws herself to the cold stairs, bullets whiz overhead.

The booming large caliber ammunition chews through the infected like Bruce Lee's fists through rice paper. Skulls explode. Limbs fly. Bodies are torn apart. Bone fragments and bloody pulp splatters everywhere. The tattered cadavers fall atop Kaida, burying her alive, the weight of their bodies crushing her, squeezing the oxygen from her lungs, suffocating her.

Hyperventilating in a claustrophobic state of hysteria, Kaida struggles desperately to pull, push, and wiggle forward through the gory mess, collecting abrasions and lacerations from jagged bones, as bullets continue to pierce the night and feral shrieks and raucous howls persist to ravage her soul.

She finally breaks through the pile of death with a great gasp as the turret's last bullet fires. The horde still pours out of the building and flows down the stairs, climbing over the shredded corpses that bathe their path.

As the gunner works to reload the machine-gun with a new ammunition belt, two soldiers jolt from the vehicle with automatic rifles. They drop to one knee and fire in short bursts, dropping the raging infected one after the next.

The soldiers begin to scream obscenities as they continue firing, realizing there are far too many. They don't turn and run or try hiding inside the vehicle. They hold their positions. And they are slaughtered.

When the machine-gun is reloaded, the frenzied horde is already mounting the vehicle. As the gunner begins firing he is yanked from the turret, and his jugular is ripped out as he shouts in horror.

Kaida remains where she lies among the bodies as the last of the infected exit the school and the horde disperses, spreading in all directions. When she is sure she is alone, she climbs out from her hiding spot under the mutilated corpses. She is shivering from the cold and from shock. With a trembling and bloody hand, she pulls her smartphone from her pocket. I've got to call Dai.

She smudges the cracked touchscreen with blood as she pulls up his contact and hits call mobile. It rings until his voice mail answers. She cries into the phone. "Dai, please call me! You've got to be okay! Please, Dai!"

"Your husband, all of your family with the exception of Sakura, and every friend you have ever had is either dead or soon will be."

She drops her smartphone in a jolt of fright and falls backward onto the cadavers. What can only be described as a spirit, floats a foot above the bodies underfoot.

“Follow me and we may be able to change this.”

3 – Favela Run

Author’s Note: The dialog in this scene has been translated from Portuguese.

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
Wednesday, December 26, 2012
7:22 PM BRT

Tierra Lima roars with radiant fury, her gravelly voice a bellow. “You’ve used me since I was *fucking* twelve-years-old! I trained and fought seven years to escape your heartless imprisonment!”

Victor chews savagely on his gag, a dirty pair of his own underwear. He squirms on the cement floor of the bedroom and pulls at his bounds. His bleeding wrists are tied behind his back with twine and his ankles are tied with an extension cord. His enraged eyes are bloodshot and his pupils dilated.

Carlos, Victor’s number one lieutenant, is propped in the far corner of the bedroom, his throat a bloody and ragged mess of torn flesh. The only lamp with a good bulb is laying on the floor, spotlighting his vacant face.

Tierra points to the large CV tattooed on her neck, partially obscured by her long ruby-red braids, beaded at the ends. CV is the abbreviate for Comando Vermelho, which is Portuguese for Red Command, a major cocaine trafficking mafia. “I haven’t been able to leave this *fucking* favela since you tagged me! I haven’t seen my family in five years!”

Shotgun blasts and submachine-gun fire echo from outside the shanty. Victor’s soldiers shout frightened obscenities between the gunshots.

Tierra traces a finger across an ugly scar over her right eye. “You cut me! You beat me! You rape me! You let your *fucking* friends rape me! I’m going to tear you open, rip out your *fucking* black heart, and stomp it into jelly!”

A roll of thunder accentuates her threat. A few drops of rain spatter on the tin roof, a short lead into a torrential downpour that nearly drowns out the gunfire.

Tierra clutches at two daggers, one sheathed on each thigh, below her russet short-shorts. She took the daggers from Victor after he turned on them. Her milky chocolate eyes well with hot tears of rage and retribution. Her usual caramel complexion is flush. Her taut breasts, over-proportioned to her lithe body, heave under her tan belly-shirt. Her ripped abs swell and her firm bubble-butt clenches with each furious breath. Like a colossal volcano on the verge of eruption, Tierra feels her hatred rising to a climactic explosion of horrific violence. She is five-foot-six and a hundred-and-twenty-five pounds of pure vengeance.

A crack of lightning booms and the lamp on the floor dies. The windows are boarded up tight to keep out drug fiends and so the room is now pitch-black.

A shuffling on the floor. A roar of bestial wrath. Tierra's legs are pulled out from under her. Crushing pain shoots from the back of her head to burn behind her eyes. White sparks swirl around in the darkness. The pulsating pain threatens to consume her consciousness. An abyss is tugging her down. Rough hands are pulling at her legs, her waist, her arms, her shoulders. The heavy weight of Victor's body is climbing over her. His hot stinking breath hits her in the face.

This man who promised her love and luxury for her virginity and dedication to the Red Command, this animal that ravaged her body and ordered her around like a dog in an attempt to break her spirit, this monster has shed his handsome boyish grin and revealed his true self. And I will not let him bind me any longer.

Tierra grabs at Victor's head, plunging a thumb deep into one eye, warm goop oozing out. With her other hand, she pulls a dagger and jabs it into Victor's temple.

She pushes his corpse aside, rolls over, and vomits. I'm free. I'm free! "I'm free!"

And then Tierra realizes the gunfire has stopped. The pounding of the rain and the feral shouts of the infected is all she hears. Either all Victor's soldiers are dead or they've abandoned their posts. I've got to get the fuck out of here now!

Tierra spits, climbs to her feet, feels for the bed and grabs the sheet. She wipes the sour vomit from her mouth and Victor's eyeball goo from her thumb. Then feels for Victor with a foot, finds his head, grips her dagger, steps on his throat and jerks the blade from his skull. She sweeps it across his T-shirt to remove any gray matter and sheathes it on her thigh.

She pulls open the bedroom door and steps out into the living room slash dining room slash cutting shop. The windows aren't boarded as tight in here, so slivers of light filter in. Amongst a few digital scales, heaps of pure cocaine are piled on a large wooden table against the wall to the left.

The unlocked front door, the only exit, tears open. Two infected men rush in howling in a frenzy, drenched in rain and blood and madness.

Tierra immediately and automatically crouches, feet shoulder-width apart, and rocks back and forth in the triangular step of the ginga. The fundamental movement in the martial art of Capoeira. She swings in a constant motion, ready to defend or attack.

As the first charging man reaches her, Tierra feints left and then swings into a sweeping kick, sending the man soaring into the darkened bedroom. She cartwheels into a twisting handstand kick, the heel of her foot slamming into the second man's chin. He flies backward and smashes his spine over the wooden table edge, sending an immense cloud of cocaine into the air, and falls to the floor. He claws toward her, his back obviously broken, as she coughs and chokes on the potent stimulant stinging her eyes and burning her sinuses and lungs.

The first man bursts from the bedroom, his nose busted and gushing. With one fluid spin, Tierra pulls a dagger and slashes his throat wide. Still reaching for her, his eyes roll back and he collapses with a gurgling moan.

Tierra sheathes her dagger and darts out the front door into the pouring rain. The sun has already vanished behind the hill, leaving the favela in twilight. Bolts of lightning streak through the clouded sky. Tin roofed brick shanties cascade down the massive hillside to the ocean and as far as the eye can see around. The rain is salty and the evening breeze is warm. Raucous shrieks and cries of horror coalesce with the downpour. An angel soars overhead but offers no heavenly

aid. People are running like mad in all directions. There's no telling who's infected and who's not in all the chaos.

Tierra's heart is pounding. Her pits are sweating profusely. Her adrenaline is surging. The shrieks of the infected distort until they're all roaring her name. Their savage expressions twist and morph into Victor's vicious appearance. I've got to get the *holy* fuck out of here!

Tierra screams as she charges forward and takes a sprinting leap over a twenty foot drop and lands with a shoulder roll onto a rooftop, rolls up into a dash over the roof and takes another leap, her feet landing squarely on the next roof, but the rusted tin roof collapses under her and she slides down the wet tin into the shanty, where a Victor is waiting for her, drooling blood and venomous rage.

As the Victor bolts for her, Tierra dives out a window onto a slanted tin roof, slides down the soaking roof head first, her hands out before her, slips off the edge and falls ten feet to the ground, where she rolls into a somersault and onto her feet again.

Shrieking her name, the Victor crashes down behind her and hustles to his feet to chase after her as she runs through the open back door of another shanty, darts through a trashed living room, bounds up a flight of rickety stairs, then another, and another, jumps out a window onto a flat roof and darts to the edge where she takes another insane leap.

The distance between roofs is too great, and so Tierra's feet hit the side of the shanty and she grabs at the wet roof as the Victor bounces off the wall beside her and falls thirty feet to the ground, as she kicks and claws and manages to climb onto the rooftop where she lays on her back and stares up at the assaulting rainclouds as she catches her breath.

Lightning flashes with a boom of thunder and a distant memory reigns through her mind.

Nadalia, Tierra's older sister, led her into a crowd at an outdoor baile funk dance. At twelve-years-old she felt uncharacteristically timid. It was her first baile funk. Nadalia flirted with a hot guy in his early twenties, who gave Tierra a boyish grin with only a hint of the predator within as he pretended to listen to Nadalia. He danced with Nadalia, but soon pulled Tierra into their erotic dance. He gestured to his friend, who handed Victor a bottle of white cachaça and induced himself to Nadalia as Carlos. Carlos danced with Nadalia and slowly Carlos and Nadalia disappeared. Victor gave Tierra her first taste of liquor, and her second, and third, until she was too drunk to care that Victor was pulling down her panties. He whispered promises and compliments as he lifted the back of her skirt. He covered her mouth tight to keep her from screaming with pain as he forged into her. Tierra desperately searched the crowd for Nadalia as Victor repeatedly thrust into her without mercy, but she could not find her sister. Victor came inside her with a laughing grunt and told her it meant he loves her.

Lightning cracks overhead with deafening force and casts forth another awful memory.

Victor was about to move up in the Red Command but told her she would have to make a sacrifice for their love. With Carlos' help, Victor tied Tierra to their bed, face down and nude. An older plump man soon came in, disrobed and mounted her with feverish glee. He jabbed his thick prick between her clenching ass cheeks as she wailed painfully for Victor's aid, but Victor never answered her cries for help.

A bolt of lightning crashes so near it rattles the tin roof under her and another memory surfaces.

Victor's crew had expanded his territory and he wished to reward his three top lieutenants. He attached a dog leash to Tierra's leather choker and jerked her to her knees. He

commanded her to suck off each of them. She refused and threatened to chew them off instead. Carlos grabbed her from behind and held her as Victor slapped her. She spit in Victor's face and Victor punched her in the jaw and then the head, his ring cutting open her forehead. Dazed with blood running into her eye, Victor stood over her laughing and taunting as her mouth was used as a sex toy.

Lightning ripples through the dark clouds, and a terrifying scene seizes hold of her mindscape.

Tierra is encircled by a pack of snarling Victors. Their teeth are broken, jagged, and dripping blood. They all pounce at once, knocking her to the ground. She punches and kicks wildly, but there are too many. They pull and tear off her clothing. Their sharp teeth rip into the meat of her arms, thighs, and calves. Chew and chomp at her fingers and toes. Rive through her abdominal muscles to wrench out her intestines. Snap down on her nipples and tear them from her breasts. Bite and shred her earlobes, lips, cheeks, and eyelids.

Tierra gasps and leaps to her feet. Run! Run! Run! I gotta get to the beach! Find a boat! Get the fuck out of here!

She rushes forward and hurls herself off the rooftop onto the next roof one story down, the rain pelting so hard now that she slips on landing and slides feet first across the roof and over the edge, falls ten feet to another tin roof, tumbles into a roll and off the roof to drop another ten and land ass down in an immense puddle.

A screech of her name propels her to her feet again and she runs into the first doorway in sight, the rear entrance of a bar, with a Victor in close pursuit. The door has been smashed inward. Splinters of green painted wood litter the hallway floor. That and the smell of gun smoke tell her she chose the wrong door. But the Victor is right behind her, so she continues onward past the bathroom and into the small bar.

The dim light of candles reveal bullet casings, shattered glass, overturned tables, broken stools, glinting mirror shards, spilled liquor, and bloodied bodies, *everywhere*. And each of them wears Tierra's face.

Three Victor's, spread across the bar, all turn toward her and howl her name. The Victor rushing into the bar behind her replies with another howl, signaling to the others that they've got her surrounded.

Tierra jumps over a corpse wearing her face onto a pool table, dashes along the edge rather than duck under the hanging lights, and leaps onto another pool table as a snarling Victor scrambles over the bar to her right, knocking over a candle and setting the alcohol doused bar aflame. Simultaneously a Victor to her left clambers over busted stools and dying patrons who have stolen her face, and a Victor directly ahead kicks an upturned table out of the way and holds his ground before the front exit.

Tierra pulls a dagger from her thigh, swipes a cachaça bottle off the pool table, bounds off the table while hurling the bottle forward, and as her feet hit the floor the bottle shatters across the Victor's forehead, sending him bouncing off the door frame and onto the floor. The Victor with the flames behind him lunges from her right and Tierra sweeps her blade across his eyes, swings out of his way letting him hurtle blindly into the Victor charging from her left, and they both go down in a furious wrestle as Tierra bolts out the front exit with a Victor still chasing.

Blinding surges of lightning cast ghostly flashes of growling Victors scurrying through the rain like malicious creatures of the underworld, as Tierra flees through a marketplace of produce and meats drenched with mottled purple mold.

Tierra's heart pounds with the intensity of an automatic rifle and her every muscle screams with searing pain as she charges forward with the maximum exertion her body will suffer as four Victors close in.

A handful of beads is torn from the ends of Tierra's long ruby-red braids as she reaches a tall chain-link fence and slips through a small hole at the bottom feet first. She drops six feet to the broken blacktop of a park with bare soccer goals and glances back over her shoulder as she continues running, to see one Victor jammed tight head first in the hole and three Victors frantically scaling the fence.

Tierra darts out the park exit to see a Victor to the right grappling with two Tierra's, and so she hurries to the left with the howl of the three Victor's drawing near. Tierra rushes down a long and narrow stairwell of crumbling cement as two Victors sprint up the stairs toward her, one on the heels of the other, and there is no turning back because the other three Victors are only a few steps behind her, so Tierra pulls a dagger and hurls it into the throat of the first Victor below her and he stumbles forward. The Victor behind him trips over him and falls, and Tierra stomps over his back before he can rise and she runs down the remainder of the stairs with four Victors tumbling down behind her in a snarling heap of rage.

A Kawasaki dirt bike zooms by as Tierra exits the stairs onto a tight street, and she rushes off in the same direction, knowing the road zigzags through the remainder of the favela all the way down to the beach.

A Victor charges out of a doorway into the path of the dirt bike and the rider slams into the Victor and is thrown off the bike and smashes through the window of a shanty.

Tierra sprints forward, picks up the bike, kicks it into gear and rips back on the throttle as the four Victors catch up to her, and she shoots down the street and their howls are lost in the engine roar.

Tierra weaves around abandoned cars and swerves around screaming Tierras and dodges grasping Victors and skids and fishtails around ever tight turn until she reaches a fiery wreck of twisted cars blocking the final straightaway.

The fire must be incredibly hot to burn despite the bombarding rain, and yet Tierra cannot turn back because a mass of Victors is stampeding down the street behind her. So Tierra shoots forward and jerks the front tire up onto the trunk of the rear car, and she stands up to keep as much of her body as possible away from the searing flames, holding her breath as she rides through the smoke over the burning ruins of metal and plastic with the heat cooking her legs, and she pants for air as she reaches the other end of the wreckage and races out of the favela and onto the wet sand of the beach and down to the water where Victor's ghost is waiting amongst the crashing waves.

Tierra leaps off the bike, letting it fall to the sand, and she scoops up a handful of wet sand and throws it at Victor's ghost. "I'm free! You can't have me anymore! I'm free!"

"You are free from Victor Ferreira. You are free from the Red Command. You are free of the favela. But you are not yet free from the responsibility to fight."

"Fuck you, Victor!"

“Calm yourself. You are suffering hallucinations due to psychological trauma and cocaine overdose. I am not your enemy.”

4 – Gunshots and Teardrops

Author’s Note: The dialog in this scene has been translated from Afrikaans.

Johannesburg, South Africa
Thursday, December 27, 2012
12:11 AM SAST

Siren screaming, lights spinning, one of Lieutenant Mandla Jabulani’s gargantuan hands work the steering wheel while the other works the shifter of the Audi S3 Sportback, as he swerves around a burning auto collision in the center of an intersection. The suburbs are in pandemonium. Structure fires and power outages and crazed citizens are everywhere.

His partner, Kevin, in the passenger seat to his left, clutches his Musler 12-gauge pump-action tactical shotgun to his chest like he’s afraid it’ll pull a *Shawshank Redemption*. Kevin’s blue eyes dart back and forth at the civil insurrection. His bushel of blond hair is matted with blood and torn out on one side of his scalp. The constant chatter of adrenaline pumped voices hissing from the two-way radio commingle with his repeated muttering of, “This is the fucking end.”

Kevin is young, thin, and white. Physically Mandla’s polar opposite.

Mandla is thirty-five-years-old, six-foot-six, and three-hundred pounds of solid muscle. The dark-brown skin of his head is clean-shaven and his fierce eyes are soft brown.

Mandla and Kevin are elite crime fighters of the South African Police Service’s Flying Squad rapid response unit. Partners for five years. Close friends for just as long. When you come under fire as often as they do, you have to have complete trust in one another. But tonight Mandla’s trust in his partner is strained. Kevin looks like he could snap at any moment.

About an hour ago calls started pouring in, all of them domestic violence. Reports of family members and neighbors that had become criminally insane. Emergency calls usually come in waves, but this was a tsunami tidal wave. Within a few minutes, the overwhelming number of calls crashed the phone system.

When they made it to their first call of a maniacal family member, they found everyone in the house murdered. A man with flesh in his teeth and a kitchen knife buried in his neck lay atop his deceased wife. Apparently, the man had torn out the throats of his two children before attacking his wife. The wife had managed to stab her husband as he tore into her jugular.

At their second insanity call, they found a raving woman, wearing nothing besides soiled underwear, pounding and kicking at her bedroom door. Her husband had barricaded her inside. She put up one hell of a fight. Even broke the skin of Mandla’s forearm with her teeth. Pepper

spray didn't faze her. Might as well have been Visine. Rubber slugs from the 12-gauge fired at point-blank range didn't bother her either. Finally, Mandla pinned her to the floor with his baton between her teeth, while Kevin cuffed her feet. Then Mandla flipped her over, squeezing her head between his knees as Kevin cuffed her hands behind her back. She's now on the floor of the back seat, struggling incessantly, with a rolled up pair of socks in her mouth and a belt wrapped around her head to hold it in place. If she weren't gagged, she'd chew through her own arm.

Their next call is in the opposite direction they're traveling. Kevin's too shaken to have noticed yet. During their brawl with the woman in the back seat, Mandla realized the severity of the situation, and that his family's in danger.

A bloody man bolts into the street and Mandla veers to the right in an effort to dodge him, but clips him with the corner of the bumper, smashing the left headlight and tossing the man like a rag doll.

Kevin's voice shudders as it rises from a mumble to a shout. "*Tank*, I'm telling you this is the *fucking* end! *Fucking* Armageddon! Angels in the skies and demons in the people! They're *fucking* possessed!"

Mandla's voice is a hearty boom. "Kevin, calm the fuck down. If you start quoting Revelations I'm going to backhand you, I swear. These people could have a new disease. A mutated form of rabies."

The bite on Mandla's forearm burns. Must not have cleaned it well enough before putting on the bandage.

"Rabies? *Tank*, are you *fucking* kidding? This is not no *fucking* rabies! This is some *fucking* end of days shit!"

A teenage girl, being chased by a blood-drenched woman, runs across the street and is struck by a speeding pickup truck. She is flung into the air and slams onto the roof of the cruiser and rolls down the rear windshield into the street in a mangled heap of gore.

A long beep comes over the two-way radio to signal a priority call. The tac channel operator commands, "All units, immediate withdraw to Central. All units, immediate withdraw to Central."

Mandla grabs the radio mic and squeezes the talk button. "3B11, dispatch."

"3B11, go ahead."

"Why are we being withdrawn? Under who's orders?"

"The—" No static, garbled words, or distorted voices. It just goes dead.

"Dispatch. Repeat."

Silence, nothing but dead silence.

Mandla switches to the alpha dispatch channel and tries again. No response. He attempts the other tac channels, but there's no radio traffic on any channel. He smacks the mic back into its cradle with frustration. "Kevin, check the antenna."

Kevin lowers his window and cool night air rushes into the car.

When the air hits him, Mandla realizes his whole body is sweating profusely. A fever?

Kevin unbuckles his seatbelt and pops his head and shoulders out the window for a moment, then slides back into his seat, closes the window and refastens his seatbelt. "Looks fine. Girl didn't hit it."

Mandla groans, "Then the closest repeater station must be down."

"They have *backup* power. Solar powered."

“So then something must have taken it out.”

“Tank, we’re talking high fences and brick buildings. The only something that could do it has *wings*. They’re dismantling the system. They’re going to kill every last one of us!”

“*Kevin*, calm down.” Mandla makes a sharp left, the wheels screeching louder than the siren as he speeds through the turn. “We’ll be in range of another repeater soon enough.”

Kevin looks to Mandla with furrowed brows. “Tank, Central is north. Where the *fuck* are we going?”

“I’ve got to get my family.” The muscle of Mandla’s right forearm, the bitten arm, spasms. “They’re not safe alone. We’ll take them with us.”

“Where are you going to seat them?” Kevin jerks his thumb toward the back seat. “Next to the carnivorous lunatic?”

“We’ll put the perp in the trunk. She won’t mind.”

Kevin rakes a hand through his hair with realization. “Kelly! We’ve got to get Kelly!”

“I’m sorry, Kevin. But your wife.” He shakes his head with remorse. “Kelly will be the same as our perp.”

“What? NO!” Kevin pounds a fist on the dash. “Why would you—”

“She was *sick*.” Mandla speeds through two cars, one traveling the opposite direction, and both the side mirrors of the cruiser are torn off with a tearing crack. “Everyone that was sick is now...mentally sick.”

“No!” Kevin slams the dash a second time. “You can’t fucking know that for sure!”

“We’ve worked together for five years. When has my intuition been wrong?”

“*Fuck* your intuition! She’s my wife! My *fucking* wife! We’ve got to go get her!”

“Kelly is sick. My family is not. I’ve got to get my family to safety. The roads are getting worse by the minute. We might not make it to Central as it is. If we have to go all the way to your house and wrestle your sick wife into the trunk, my family, none of us will make it.”

Kevin breathes hard through flaring nostrils and cocks his shotgun, a deliberate and severe threat. It’s no longer loaded with rubber slugs. “Tank, you raised me up from a pup. Covered for me when I fucked up. Saved my life more than once. But Kelly’s my *fucking* wife. Sick or not, I’m going to her.”

“Fine. You want to throw away your life, then you can take my SUV. But only after my family is safe in the back seat.” Mandla gestures behind them with a nod, where the crazed woman is struggling against her cuffs and twisting her head back and forth, fighting to cast off the makeshift gag.

“Why don’t *you* take your SUV and *I’ll* keep the squad car.”

“Without the siren and lights, I might get jammed up.”

“But I’ve got *twice* the distance to travel.”

Mandla barks, “And my family’s more important than your...” He pauses a beat, calming himself. “She’s *sick* with a disease that may have no cure.”

Kevin turns toward Mandla and brings the barrel of his shotgun off his shoulder, pointing it directly at Mandla’s head. “Or maybe I’ll just *take* the car from you, Tank.”

“You better take a deep breath and think real *fucking* hard about what you’re doing.”

“I don’t want to fucking do this Tank, but I fucking will.”

Mandla's booming voice rises to an angry roar. "If you don't take your *fucking* shotgun off me right this *fucking* minute, Kevin, I'm going to take it from you and smash in your *fucking* skull!"

Kevin's arms tremble. Tears spill over his cheeks. He turns away from Mandla and brings the shotgun barrel back to his shoulder without another word.

An obese man engulfed in flames darts in front of the squad car and Mandla slams on the brake and clutch while jerking the wheel hard, causing the cruiser to slide sideways and smack the burning man with the side of the car. The man hits the pavement, rolls over several times, and then climbs to his feet, still all aflame, and runs off after whoever he had been chasing.

Rather than reverse with vehicles speeding toward him from both directions, Mandla shoots forward down a side street and turns at the next major road. Then races the remainder of the way to his home without speaking, his thoughts focused on his helpless wheelchair-bound mother and his eight-year-old nephew, Dingane.

Three years ago Mandla's younger brother, Thandiwe, took a stray bullet to the face, thanks to two rival gangs shooting it out on a Sunday afternoon. Dingane's mother had already abandoned him years before, so Mandla took him in and treated him as his own son. Dingane's a good boy. Never given Mandla any trouble. Even takes care of Mandla's mother while he's working nights.

They're my responsibility. And the only family I've got. I must get them to safety.

Mandla kills the siren as he turns onto his street and drives up onto the curb outside his home, a small two-story house with a six-foot-tall stone wall around the entire property. It's the only home he has ever known.

He shuts off the engine but leaves the lights spinning, and pops the trunk. "Put the perp in the trunk while I get my family."

Kevin unbuckles his seatbelt and opens his door without comment.

The entire neighborhood is dark but for the light of the full moon, so Mandla grabs a flashlight from under his seat before climbing out. He switches on his hand-held radio, attached to his utility belt, out of habit as he swings the door closed.

He unlocks the front gate and closes and relocks it behind him. As he rushes across the front lawn there comes a loud thump from the side of the house.

Mandla deviates from the stone path onto the grass and scans his flashlight across the side yard. His fifty-year-old neighbor, Kopano, rises to his feet beside the stone perimeter wall. He must have climbed over. He's only wearing a robe, and it's open, exposing his genitals. Maybe he's being chased.

"Kopano, are you okay?"

Kopano replies with a feral howl and dashes toward Mandla.

"Oh shit!" Mandla pulls his Vektor Z88 9mm pistol from his duty holster, thumbs off the safety, aims for the center of mass and fires.

Kopano takes the bullet to his lung. As if Mandla was using a pellet gun, it doesn't even slow him.

Mandla fires again, striking Kopano just left of the sternum, and he drops to the lawn twitching. "Fuck!"

Kevin's voice comes from his hand-held radio. "Tank, you okay?"

He holsters his pistol and uses the mic clipped to his uniform shoulder-loop as he hastens onto the front porch. "Fine. Be out in five."

After fumbling with his keys for a moment, he unlocks the knob and the deadbolt, enters quickly, slams the door and relocks the deadbolt. Mandla calls out, "Dingane? Mother?" as he rushes through the living room and up the stairs.

The small bedroom he shares with Dingane is empty. To be sure, Mandla shines the flashlight under Dingane's bed, the same bed Mandla's brother had slept in throughout his childhood.

A string of shotgun blasts come from outside.

Mandla squeezes the mic on his shoulder. "Kevin? You alright?"

No response. No more gunshots.

Mandla doesn't bother to check the bathroom and goes to his mother's room. The door is locked. It's never locked. He knocks hard. "Open up."

The small voice of Dingane asks, "Is it you, Manny?"

"It's me. Open the door."

The lock clicks and Mandla pushes the door open. "Dingane, get your sneakers on now. We're leaving."

Dingane protests, "But it's dark."

"Here." He hands Dingane his flashlight. "I want you downstairs in *one* minute, *one*. Wait by the front door. Go!"

Dingane scurries out, the flashlight beam waving back and forth.

As Mandla pulls open the shades to let in the moonlight, his mother asks, "Manny, what's going on? Where are we going? It's after midnight."

Mandla scoops her frail body into his arms. "I've got to get you to safety."

"Is it the food riots?"

He ignores her wheelchair and rushes from the bedroom. "Everyone that was sick, mom, they're running around killing people. They've all gone insane. I'm taking you where you'll be safe."

"Manny, salvation is only found in the Lord."

Mandla charges down the stairs. "Then consider me doing the Lord's work."

He rushes through the living room to the front door and Dingane's not there. Mandla shouts toward the ceiling, "Dingane!"

No response.

Mandla shouts again, louder. "Dingane, where are you?!"

The back door swings open and Cindy, Dingane's Golden Retriever, runs into the living room barking, with Dingane behind her, flashlight beam swirling all about.

A window shatters in the dining room behind Mandla. He turns to see a moonlit-silhouetted figure climbing through the window.

Cindy growls and barks frantically.

A stomping of feet comes from the back door. Mandla turns toward the living room to see a crazed woman clutch Dingane by his shoulders. Dingane drops the flashlight and it rolls under the couch.

Mandla plops his mother into her old recliner and a terrible pain shoots up his bitten arm through his shoulder, neck, and into his skull, piercing like a hot blade.

He ignores the pain and charges across the living room as Cindy leaps at the woman, snapping in her face, keeping her from biting Dingane.

Mandla pulls his pistol, grips the woman by her throat, shoves it into her mouth and fires, brains exploding out the back of her skull.

His mother screeches.

Mandla spins around as a naked man buries his face between her head and shoulder. Mandla charges across the living room, grabs the man's bicep and rips him off his mother, jabs his pistol into his eye and fires. As the body falls to the floor, Mandla drops to one knee and slaps his left hand over his mother's gushing jugular to halt the bleeding.

Dingane screams and Mandla turns as a bloody man lunges atop Dingane. He aims his pistol, but he can't risk a shot in the low light. He could hit Dingane.

Mandla jumps up as Cindy chomps down on the man's forearm and shakes her head violently. The man lets go of Dingane, grips Cindy tight by her back leg, pulls her onto her belly, and tears into Cindy's throat, and she yelps in pain. Mandla grabs Dingane by the arm, smearing his mother's blood on him, and yanks him up from under the man, then puts a bullet into the top of the man's skull.

Cindy cries and kicks her paws as blood courses from her neck. Dingane cries and throws his arms around Cindy.

Mandla turns and runs back to his mother. His pounding heart ceases beating for a count of three. His mother lies slack in her recliner, the whites of her eyes showing behind half-closed lids. "No!"

Another dining room window shatters. Stomping of two pairs of feet comes from the back door. Mandla's arm spasms with pain and his fingers twitch.

Pistol held out with two hands, Mandla marches across the living room until Dingane's beside him, out of his line of fire. Mandla fires twice. Two head shots. Two bodies smack the floor. He spins around and fires again. Another head shot. Another body falls.

Mandla holsters his pistol, grips Dingane by the waist, pries him off Cindy and puts him down on his feet pointed toward the front door. "Cover your eyes and walk to the door now, hurry."

As they walk passed Mandla's mother, he does not look at her. He doesn't want to remember her this way.

Mandla breathes, "Okay, you can uncover your eyes."

He unlocks the deadbolt, opens the door and hurries Dingane out of the house and across the front lawn. He unlocks the front gate and opens it to see two infected men on the other side of the squad car.

He pulls his pistol as an infected snarls and clambers onto the hood. Mandla fires, taking off his ear, fires again, hitting him in the forehead, and the body collapses across the hood. The other infected man is coming around the front of the car when Mandla fires, hitting him center of the throat, severing his spinal cord, and the body collapses onto the street.

Mandla opens the passenger door for Dingane and races around the car to find Kevin lying on the street with his throat torn apart and several bodies lying around him, each of them with massive head wounds. Mandla bends down, pulls three magazines from Kevin's utility belt, and whispers, "Sorry, Kevin. Thanks for the ammo."

He shoves the magazines into his pocket and climbs into the driver's seat. The back seat's empty. The infected woman must be in the trunk.

Dingane screams, "Manny, there's more!"

Mandla hits the door lock button, pulls the keys from his pocket, jams them into the ignition, and starts the engine as a man and woman pound on the windows. He puts it into reverse and zooms backward onto the street beyond all the bodies, before putting it into first and zipping passed the two infected chasing after the car.

Dingane cries, "Where is Nanna?"

"Buckle your seatbelt." Mandla buckles his seatbelt as Dingane does the same.

Dingane repeats, "Where is Nanna?"

Mandla works through the gears at breakneck speed. "She's..." I can't. But he needs to know. "Nanna is..." Fuck! I can't. I just can't. To say it aloud is to admit it's true. Admit I failed her. I let her... "Die." It comes out as a low whisper. He swallows hard. "She's...she's dead. I'm sorry."

Dingane sobs hard, choking on his words. "We need...to pray...so Nanna and Cindy... can find their way...up to heaven."

Mandla didn't have much use for prayer after his brother was killed. Left the leading of prayer up to his mother. But if it will help Dingane, I'll pray. "Okay."

Dingane's sobs soften into a stuttering weep. "Manny, you start."

Shit. I can do this. It's just a little prayer. "Dear Lord, please forgive Nanna and Cindy for their sins, and welcome them into heaven.

"Dingane, you take over. I've got to focus on driving."

Dingane folds his hands together and closes his eyes. "Lord, please send an angel, a good one, not one of the bad ones, to help Nanna find heaven. She can't see so well without her glasses. And Cindy doesn't know what heaven smells like, so she won't know the way."

Mandla takes a sharp turn and the corpse on the hood slides off, leaving a bloody streak behind. It's my fucking fault. I should have come home earlier. I should have realized the danger sooner.

"Please send an angel to find my daddy and tell him that Nanna and Cindy are coming up to heaven, so he can meet them at the gates and show them where his house is, so they can live together."

The car bounces up and down as Mandla veers off the road into a park to bypass a traffic jam. I should have gone home the minute dispatch reported the fucking phone system had crashed.

"And please tell my daddy to take Cindy to the dog park so she can play with other dogs because without me there to play catch see might get sad."

Mandla careens between trees and around fleeing citizens, the tires kicking up dirt and grass into the air. I should have fucked the job and never left them home alone with everything that's been happening. I should have known better.

"And please tell Nanna and Cindy not to worry about me, because I'm big enough to stay home alone while Manny is working, and I can help take care of all the house chores too."

The car bounces up and down again as Mandla steers out of the park back onto the road. It's my fucking fault. My mother's blood is on my hands. Mine!

“And please tell my daddy and Nanna and Cindy I love them, even though they went to heaven without me.”

Mandla turns onto Heidelberg Road, a six-lane highway divided by a small median. Most of the traffic is headed the opposite direction, out of the city rather than into it. I should be driving the other direction. Taking Dingane as far away from the city as possible. But something, maybe my intuition, maybe not, but something is telling me I have to get to Central.

“And please tell them I miss them really bad, and I wish they didn’t go without me, and I hope I get to come up to heaven soon, so we can all be together again.”

“Amen.” Mandla flips on the siren, shifts into sixth gear, and puts the pedal to the floor, the engine roaring as it climbs to its top speed of 250 km/h.

Dingane hugs his knees up to his chest and hides his face as he weeps.

Mandla’s right arm, shoulder, and side of his neck throbs with increasing pain as he speeds down the highway. He turns on the internal light and peels up the bandage on his forearm to take a peek. Something black is squiggling in the wound. He quickly covers it back up and turns off the light. I’m infected. Maybe that’s why I feel the need to get to Central. Maybe I need to get Dingane into safe hands, away from me. Or maybe the infection is manipulating my thoughts, leading me to a rallying point for the infected to hunt together.

Mandla downshifts and brakes before zooming down the off-ramp onto Anderson Street, so fast the right side of the car scrapes along the guard rail most of the way down.

The city is worse than the suburbs. More people in tighter spaces. The power is out everywhere. The chaos is of apocalyptic proportions. Citizens scurry in every direction, some firing guns, others clinging to dead children. Groups of the infected shriek and howl as they kill anyone they can catch.

Dingane lets out a shuddering whisper. “What’s wrong with all of them?”

“They’re sick. They’re *very* sick.”

Mandla speeds down Anderson Street, hopping on and off the sidewalk here and there to bypass auto collisions and packs of infected tearing people apart.

When he reaches the intersection of Ntemi Piliso Street, he’s forced to turn right due to a huge fiery pileup blocking the road. He races up to Commissioner Street and slams on the brakes, tires screaming, just before reaching it.

An angel flies low over the intersection, his white wings shimmering in the ghostly moonlight. Mandla kills the siren, spinning lights, and the one remaining headlight. A mob, no, a *horde* of the infected enter the intersection, following the angel. They’re being led toward Central.

Mandla smacks the shifter into reverse, twists around to look out the rear windshield, and slams on the gas. The car whizzes a block down the road to Fox Street. A colossal bang triggers the airbags and spins the car.

His vision blurs, his head spins, and he coughs and chokes on airbag dust as he realizes he’s been in a collision. “Dingane, you okay?”

Dingane coughs. “I think so.”

Mandla traces his thumb and forefinger down the back of Dingane’s neck, checking for deformities of his spine, and thankfully finds none. Of course they probably both have whiplash, but he can deal with that later. “You sure you’re okay?”

Dingane nods his head. “Yeah.”

“Wait here. I’ll see how bad the damage is.” Mandla hits the door unlock button and climbs out, wobbling on his feet for a moment, before walking around the car.

The rear passenger side tire and axle are torn off, and the trunk compartment is crushed. The infected woman in the trunk must be dead.

An old Toyota Camry is on the other side of the intersection, its engine compartment crumpled and spewing steam. They must have been driving the wrong way down Fox Street.

Central is only five blocks away. We have to get there before the horde does.

Mandla opens the passenger door. “I’m going to have to run with you over my shoulder. It’s your job to watch our backs for any surprises and let me know.”

Dingane climbs out, eyes red with tears, and sniffles. “Okay.”

Mandla tosses him over his left shoulder and breaks into a sprint down Fox Street. He runs down the center of the one-lane road rather than the wide sidewalk, so he has more time to react to any infected that may come out of one of the buildings. Unfortunately, the heavy soles of his boots beating the pavement echo down the street, announcing his presence.

One block down as Mandla passes Gerard Sekoto Street, Dingane shouts. “Two sick behind us!”

Mandla spins around as he pulls his pistol to see two infected coming from the dilapidated building on the corner. He fires once at the closest, misses, then fires again and hits the woman below the eye, killing her. The second infected is two arm’s length away when Mandla puts a bullet between his eyes.

Dingane shouts. “Manny, two more!”

Mandla whirls around, two infected are coming from half a block up. He takes steady aim, needing every bullet to count, and as he squeezes the trigger his arm spasms, causing him to shoot wide.

“Another one behind us!”

He twists, aims, and fires a head shot. As the corpse smacks the street he twists back around and fires another head shot, and the pistol slide locks back. Shit!

The last infected is almost on top of him. Mandla ejects the empty magazine, letting it fall to the street, and jogs backward to give himself a few extra seconds as he pulls a new magazine from his pocket and slaps it into the pistol.

Sweat drips into his eyes, blurring his vision.

The last infected lunges at Mandla with a feral howl. His pistol barks a round. The bullet shatters the front teeth as it plunges into its open mouth and rips through its brains, sending a pulpy explosion from the back of its skull. The body hits the blacktop with its face smacked between Mandla’s boots.

Mandla wipes the sweat from his eyes with the short sleeve of his uniform, sidesteps the corpse, and then darts off down the street again.

Sweat pours off him in sheets. The fever must be getting worse.

He puts down another four infected as he runs three blocks to Alexander Street, where the blue and white buildings of Central are visible one block north on the left.

Johannesburg Central Police Station, known as John Vorster Square during the apartheid-era, is a thirteen-story international style high-rise building, secured by a twelve-foot-tall perimeter fence.

Mandla sprints up the block. Two fire engines are parked steel bumper to steel bumper, closing off Commissioner Street. Several police officers are posted atop. Corpses with bloody head wounds lay scattered all about. A spotlight hits him and one of the officers shouts, "Freeze!"

A familiar voice asks, "Tank, is that you?"

"Yes, and I've got bad news." He walks along the steel bumpers to pass beyond the makeshift barricade.

Twenty squad cars, lights spinning and headlights shining, are parked in a staggered pattern that will bottleneck a mob of attackers into narrow zigzagging paths. Two to three officers stand ready around each squad car.

Travis hurries down off the fire engine. "Tank, it's bad man. This is everybody. You make fifty."

Johannesburg Central *alone* fields over three-hundred uniformed officers.

"The military's taking control of the situation. Ordered us to hold Central until they arrive. All communications are down. So no ETA. VIPs inside and anyone who can use a weapon outside. STF's in command."

Special Task Force is a counter-terrorism unit trained to conduct military operations.

Mandla pants, "There's a few hundred infected approaching, led by one of the *godforsaken* angels. We've got only a few minutes at max. I've got to get my nephew inside."

Travis nods. "I'll relay the intel. You get him inside."

Mandla races through the zigzagging path down the street to the main entrance, noting along the way, four STF officers perching atop squad cars with sniper rifles. Another pair of fire engines is parked at this end of the street, completely closing off the block.

Mandla bangs on the glass doors, and hollers, "Hurry! Hurry!"

A middle-aged woman carrying a flashlight, dressed in civilian attire, unlocks and opens the doors.

Mandla takes Dingane from his shoulder and plops him on his feet. "Dingane, go with this woman. I've got to help out here. I'll come find you as soon as I can. I love you."

Dingane hugs him tight. "I love you, Manny."

The woman takes Dingane by the hand. "I'll put him in the holding cells with the other civilians. We've got other children. He'll be safe."

Staccato gunfire echoes from the other end of the street.

Mandla whirls around and runs into the center of the road. The gunfire is coming from the officers atop the fire engines, shouting in dismay.

A vibration flows over the street, rattling the windows of the buildings and shaking the squad cars. It's immediately followed by a high-pitched shrill that rapidly grows into the horrific roar of an angel's cry.

The officers atop the fire engines are pitched backward into the air. The fire engines roll over and slide apart. An angel soars into view.

Four sniper rifles discharge at once and the angel's head disappears in an explosion of gore. The decapitated body plummets from the sky and crashes onto the hood of a squad car, demolishing the engine compartment and bathing the windshield with a viscous black blood.

Officers from the front line of squad cars dart forward, grip the fallen men who've been dazed and drag them back behind the front line.

The infected flood in like a wave of vicious hunger, ravenous and insatiable. They continue to pour in even as a hailstorm of bullets eat away at the forerunners, laying a path of mutilated corpses at their feet. They do not waiver. They show no fear. They scurry over the rising heaps of dead all the more gluttonous and enraged.

The cacophony of blaring gunshots and bright muzzle flashes cannot rival the terrible dissonance of their screeching wails and tortured expressions of demonic hatred. Nor can the combined firepower of fifty officers firing assault rifles, 9mm pistols, 12-gauge shotguns, and sniper rifles challenge the relentless onslaught of the savage horde.

As the infected reach the squad cars, the front line of police retreat backward to join the second line, firing as they go. The plan to bottleneck the infected is easily overcome as they climb up and over the cars.

The second line is pushed back to the third, and then the fourth, as the horde continues to gain ground. Officers shout they are out of ammo and others toss them magazines. The fourth line is pushed back to the fifth, and then the sixth, the final line. The horde is finally thinning, but there is no more ammunition to share. One after the next, each officer fires his last round, until every weapon is tossed to the ground, red hot and empty. For every officer, there remains two infected.

With two fire engines to their backs, there's nowhere for them to retreat. The officers pull their batons from their utility belts, raise them above their heads, and as the raging infected charge forward, they shout a unified war cry.

The officers bludgeon the infected, batons smashing skulls, blood and brains spilling to the blacktop. Nearly as many officers are overcome by the infected, their throats torn out as they are tackled to the ground.

The grisly carnage carries on until Mandla finds himself the last man standing, all his fellow officers bleeding out onto the street. He's surrounded by the last ten snarling infected.

Throughout his childhood, Mandla practiced Zulu Stick Fighting with his brother. Their father taught them when Mandla was seven-years-old. As an adult, he has practiced Obnu Bilate for fourteen years. During Apartheid Obnu Bilate was outlawed because of its use by Black South Africans fighting against the Afrikaner National Party of South Africa. However the art is still practiced in secret, and now he may be the last practitioner alive.

Mandla scoops up one of his fallen comrade's batons and moves into a defensive stance as the encircling infected bark and grunt and sniff. Why aren't they attacking? Can they smell the infection on me?

He stares into their bloodshot eyes, into their fully dilated pupils, into the dark void of their sickness, and shouts, "I've been stabbed, shot, smashed in the head with a club, even bitten, but I've never been taken down! And neither this infection nor any of you sick motherfuckers are going to bring me down!"

All ten of the infected let out bestial howls and charge in on him. Mandla twists and spins, flailing his batons, throwing kicks to the head, sweeping others off their feet and stomping their faces into the blacktop. One leaps onto his back and Mandla dives backward onto the trunk of a squad car, crushing the man's spine. Bouncing back to his feet, Mandla delivers a windmill fury of skull splitting punches with the batons.

His rage grows stronger with each infected he slays, as if absorbing their ferocity. It feeds his frenzy, empowering him.

When only one infected remains, he clutches her by the crotch of her pants and her long hair, thrusts her above his head, bellowing in madness, and slams her down over his knee, shattering her spine, folding her in half.

Mandla roars and beats his chest in triumph. Kicks and spits on his fallen enemies. And then his right arm spasms, flinging his baton. His head spins and his stomach lurches. Vomit erupts from him like a geyser. He stumbles backward, tripping over a corpse, and falls on his ass.

The swirling flares in his peripheral vision coalesce with the stars in the night sky. He breathes hard through gritted teeth, his head pounding so hard his eyes may burst.

After a long moment, the pain subsides, and Mandla climbs to his feet. Perhaps the infection has lost, or more likely it has retreated momentarily to return with greater force. The war is not won.

Mandla weaves through the corpses up to the front entrance. As he raises his fist to bang on the glass doors, they open to reveal the middle-aged woman in tears. She must have been watching.

With shaking hands, she hands over the cell keys and her flashlight. She doesn't say a word. Neither does he.

Mandla lumbers through the dark halls of the building, his infected arm throbbing, his aching head a slide show of the recent horrors. His mother dead. Cindy dead. Kevin dead. The entire police force dead. The world has become death.

As he approaches the jail area, his macabre thoughts are cleared away by a chorus of screams. He explodes into a charging run down the hall and into the jail.

Emergency lighting reveals a horrific scene. Infected are inside the holding cells with the civilians. Women and children, screaming in terror, are killed before his eyes. Half of them are already gory messes of torn flesh, dead on the floor.

These infected are different. They're not agile and animalistic. Their limbs move in spasmodic twitches. And they don't bark, roar, or wail, instead they moan.

Dingane reaches his arms through the bars of one of the cells, and cries, "Manny!"

An elderly man and a teenage girl are fending off two infected in the same cell as Dingane. Bodies are strewn all about the cell.

"Hold on!" Mandla rushes over to the control room, then fumbles with the keys, attempting one after the next, trying to find the right key, as people scream for help, and finally, the door unlocks.

He pushes through into the small room. He slaps his hand down on the first unlock button and slides his hand over all of them. Nothing happens. No power, stupid!

Mandla darts out of the control room and frantically shines the flashlight around as he runs along the cells, looking for an emergency release. He discovers a locked steel box at the end of the cell block. Again he fumbles with the keys, as innocent people are murdered only feet away, and finally, the box unlocks. He slams the manual unlock lever down and all the cell locks clank open.

He sprints down the cell block as cell doors are thrown open and people rush out with infected shambling after them. The teenage girl from Dingane's cell passes him, and as she does, their eyes lock for a fraction of a second, the look of shame on her face slows time, and Mandla knows from the core of his being that he cannot save Dingane.

The elderly man is on the floor at the front of the cell when Mandla reaches it. Both his withered hands are claspng his throat, blood gurgling from his mouth. Dingane is in the rear corner of the cell with two infected hunched over him.

Every muscle in Mandla's body becomes solid steel as rage boils from his every molecule. His gargantuan hands clamp around each infected's neck. He yanks them off of Dingane's corpse and slams their heads against the rear wall. Blood spurts from their mangled faces. With all of his strength, he slams them again, and then again, and again, until his hands are so soaked with blood and gray matter that he cannot hold onto them and they slip from his vise grip to the floor.

Mandla scoops Dingane up and squeezes his little body to his massive chest. His swelling rage mutates into a deep sorrow. Hot tears brim up and break forth for the first time since his brother's funeral. He ignores the screams for help, people wrestling with the infected, and carries Dingane out of the jail area, through the dark halls, and out of the police station.

In a daze, he sits down on the curb, his broad shoulders slack, his head hanging, Dingane's limp body in his lap. There is no justice. There is no hope. There is no God. Only pain and despair and death.

One of the dead officers' legs kick. Another officer's hand opens and closes. Another officer turns his head.

Mandla stands, clutching Dingane's lifeless body, and gazes at all the twitching bodies. They begin to moan and try to pick themselves up, learning to balance, like infants attempting to crawl for the first time.

And then he sees him. The Grim Reaper, dressed in white robes and bathed in a white mist, hovering on the other side of the street. He's come to collect the souls of the dead. He's come for Dingane's soul!

"I am not death. I am the possibility of life. And the vessel you are carrying is empty."

5 – Acrylic Dream

Author's Note: The dialog in this scene has been translated from Spanish.

Barcelona, Spain
Thursday, December 27, 2012
8:44 AM CET

Cascada Pataki carefully dips a detailer brush into one of the ten wells of her oval palette, containing acrylic paints of various colors, before stroking the pointed tip on her living room wall, which she has been painting all night to a malign chorus of pounding fists and feral howls.

The sun rose a half hour ago. She can feel the warmth of the rays coming through the eastern windows. Therefore the malevolent creatures beating at her door aren't vampires.

Cascada's painting on her living room wall because it's the largest in her condo. She pulled all the pictures down and pushed the furniture against the front door. No canvas felt large enough to capture the entire scene, which is so vivid in her mind.

She's wearing a special artist's apron with many tiny pockets, to keep each of the brushes she is using where she won't lose track of them. The only thing she's wearing under it is a frilly bra and boy-shorts panties.

Cascada has long wavy brunet hair, tied back into a ponytail to keep it out of the paints, sea-green eyes, and a medium-olive complexion. She's five-foot-eight and a hundred-and-thirty pounds, with heavy buoyant breasts and a heart-shaped ass. Her ethnicity is a gorgeous mix of Hungarian and Spanish. Despite her physical beauty, at twenty-seven-years-old, she's still single and living alone, but for her Labrador Retriever.

The briefest thought of her dog, Guia, fills her with sorrow. Cascada had already fed Guia before she heard the news report about the poisonous mold. Guia vomited and defecated uncontrollably, whining and crying incessantly for hours, before she finally died in the tub. Cascada wrapped Guia in her living room rug and put her out on the balcony. That was Monday, Christmas Eve. Cascada hasn't left her condo since.

Her mother, Rozalia, and her older brother, Domokos, were stricken with the disease. Her father, Krisztian, was too busy caring for them to help Cascada with Guia, or even to pick her up from her condo to join her family.

When Cascade had woken in the night to screams and bestial roars, she attempted to call her father several times. But every time she asked her cell to dial a contact, it replied 'No Signal.' And the power was out, so she has no idea what has happened to them.

She won't allow herself to think of her family now, or Guia, or of the horrors trying to break through her door. She keeps her mind absorbed in her painting. She is normally very emotional. She should be weeping in bed. But she's transferring all that emotion into her art.

Cascade slides the detailer brush into a pocket of her apron and pulls a sash brush from another. She is almost done. Just a few more finishing touches. It will surely be the greatest painting of her career. It certainly is the largest. Of course not a single pair of eyes will ever gaze upon her masterpiece. She will win no awards. But that isn't important to her anyhow. She is compelled to paint this image, not to share it with the world, but only to answer the image's pleading to be brought to life.

Cascade grew up in Barcelona and moved to New York City straight after high school to attend Pratt Institute, on a full scholarship. After receiving a Master of Fine Arts in Fine Arts, she moved back home to Barcelona, where she has steadily worked as an artistic painter. She doesn't earn a lot of money, but enough to support herself.

She has a strong affinity for the sea, but cannot afford a seafront condo as she has always desired. The crashing waves bestow her a serenity that she longs for, now more than ever. She often takes the metro to Barceloneta beach to paint. She finds the scent and sound of the Mediterranean Sea inspiring.

Cascade slips her brush into her apron and puts her palette down on the floor next to her meticulous organized pochade box, containing all her paints and brushes. It's complete.

The vast city she painted is made up of large pyramids with quartz capstones, tall circular towers with translucent crystal windows, and geodesic crystal domes.

It feels as familiar as the house she grew up in. Not simply a picture she saw as a child and forgot. Familiar like she's seen it with her own eyes. But how? That's completely impossible. What city is this? And why does it fill me with so much terrible...guilt?

Cascada senses the presence of someone entering the room. But she hears no sound of footsteps or breathing. Feels no vibration of footfalls. Smells no scent of cologne, deodorant or soap. The person does not enter through a door or a window. It seems as if he, yes, definitely a *he*, has manifested from the fresh painting on the wall.

A soft but potent male voice touches not her eardrums, but the inner ear of her mind.
"The great city you have painted is Atlantis."

She has always had a strong instinct for reading people. She can sense malice or innocence from a person even before they speak a word. The male presence in her living room feels like a caring and wise old man. Like a gentle loving grandfather. She trusts him at once.

"If you come with me you can help change all this devastation and death transpiring outside your home."

"What could I possibly do to help?" She gestures to her eyes. "I'm totally blind."

Cascada lost her vision when she was thirteen. The doctors told her it was a rare mutation of her retinas. Desiring to give to the world, and inspired by Eşref Armağan, the renowned Turkish blind painter, she decided that her blindness would not stop her from becoming a great painter.

"Already you see more than most of the sighted. And I will help you to see vastly more."

6 – Computing Death

Mountain View, California
Thursday, December 27, 2012
4:33 AM PST

Delaire Flynn and four of her coworkers stare with bloodshot eyes as they type and click in a mad haste. They're all wired on caffeine and sugar. Been drinking warm energy drinks continuously for hours.

They sit around a plastic foldable table crammed in the farthest corner from the single exit of a data center. It encompasses the entire top floor of the building. The thirteenth floor. Besides the blinking blue and green LED's of thousands of racked servers working at full capacity, the only source of light is the neon glow of their Alienware laptops. The building is running on backup generators accompanied with a solar panel array atop the roof, which powers the servers, air cooling system for the center, and building security only. The five of them are employed by Metacortex as part of an IT Security Solutions Team, which is a fancy euphemism for corporate hackers.

“George Romero is a *hack*,” huffs Spock, without looking away from his screen. “Social commentary and a low production budget do not excuse the horrendous travesties that are his Dead films. Max Brooks’ *World War Z* is overripe with social commentary, yet it *adds* to the greatness of the novel. *Land of the Dead*, with the highest budget of any Romero flick, is utter garbage and arguably the worst of Romero’s Dead films. Intelligent zombies are beyond ridiculous. And he is most certainly *not* the Godfather of zombie films, as is inaccurately stated habitually. *White Zombie*, released in 1932, was the first feature length zombie film. Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* wasn’t released until 1968, thirty-six years later. *Godfather*? More like the bastard grandson.”

Spock is a half Native Indian, half space invader, die-hard Trekkie. His blue T-shirt has a picture of Bill Gates’ head augmented as a Borg.

“Okay, Romero is a hack,” agrees Sulu, “but if he hadn’t made *Dawn of the Dead*, Zack Snyder never could have done the remake, which contains some of the most intense zombie action ever filmed, outside Danny Boyle’s 28 films.”

Sulu is Korean-American, was Spock’s roommate and sidekick at Caltech, and is a total *Battlestar Galactica* fanatic. His yellow T-shirt reads, ‘WTF - What the Frak?!’.

Mace adds, “And Tom Savini’s remake of *Night of the Living Dead* isn’t a half bad movie either.”

Mace is Afro-American and has sincerely declared, many times, that he is a Jedi Knight on a covert mission. He’s wearing a purple T-shirt with a picture of Boba Fett and bold black text that reads, ‘My Backpack’s Got Jets’.

“Wow, dude,” Raj exclaims with his thick Hindian accent. “The 28 films contain *zero* zombies.”

Raj seems to be a clone of a television sitcom character of the same name. His red T-shirt says, ‘Expendable’.

Sulu replies, “Yeah, *technically* a zombie is a reanimated corpse that feeds on living human flesh. But the infected of the 28 films are zombie-like minded, mentally blinded by their murderous rage, using only their bare hands and teeth to kill everyone and anyone uninfected.”

Spock adds, “28 Days Later raised the zombie genre to a new level while keeping the violence only begets more violence message that is so common to the zombie genre.”

“*Dudes*,” exclaims Raj, “if you include the 28 films in a zombie film debate, then you also have to include *The Crazies* and *The Signal*.”

“Do you have the crazy?” Mace shouts, with angry eyes, pointing to his shaved black head. “I love that line.”

Her mental pressure gauge reaching for the red, Delaire rakes her small fingers through her vibrant-indigo spunky pixie-cut hairdo. It’s a dye job. On top of everything else, she’s going to die with *Smurf* hair. She’s actually a ginger, though she’s often been told she has a strong resemblance to Ellen Page. She has a similar petite build at five-foot-two and a hundred-and-five pounds. And is originally from Canada, same as the boyish Hollywood star.

Delaire speaks with a childlike voice. “Guys! This is *not* a zombie film debate. We need to focus on our survival.” She huffs a frustrated sigh of desperation. “And *dammit*, we’re losing proxies faster than I can setup new ones. Power grids are blinking out everywhere. Time is running out.”

Her orange T-shirt states 'Free Tibet' in green lettering across her small but perky chest. Her college sweetheart, Boston born and raised, always said what she lacked in tits she made up for with a wicked sweet ass. Where's Riley now? Zombie or zombie meal?

"Beta," groans Spock, "we're working through the problem, examining all the appropriate information that we have at our disposal, which of course includes zombie cinema."

Beta is a nickname Delaire picked up while earning her Bachelor's Degree in Computer Science and Engineering from M.I.T. One of her professors jokingly called her Betamax in her freshmen year. It stuck with her, although eventually shortened to Beta.

"I agree with Beta," Sulu consents, "zombie cinema is full of erroneous intel. We should discuss zombie literature."

Mace argues, "But we haven't even discussed the goretastic Lucio Fulci yet."

"Yeah, *dude*," Raj blurts excitedly. "Like the scene in *Zombi 2*, when the woman's eye is slowly pierced by that large shard of wood. Or in *City of the Living Dead*, when the girl vomits up all her internal organs. And in *The Beyond*, the woman's face is melted off by demonic acid, and the man's face and tongue are eaten by tarantulas. Epic gore!"

Delaire shoves a stick of Clove Chewing Gum into her mouth to keep from grinding her teeth to the roots.

Spock comments, "Speaking of foreign directors, Jaume Balagueró and Paco Plaza's *Rec* films put Romero's spookumentary hand-held cam filmed *Diary of the Dead* to shame."

Mace replies, "If we mention the Italian and the Spanish, we've got to give the French their due. David Morlet's *Mutants* is both an intense psychological thriller and a vicious bloody horror. Yannick Dahan and Benjamin Rocher's *The Horde* is a brutally violent over-the-top action film, and a definite must-see for fans of the genre."

"And let us not forget *Zombieland*," adds Spock. "It may be a comedy, but Columbus' survival rules are quite significant."

Mace comments, "And it has the most brilliant cameo ever."

Sulu informs, "Ninja Strike Force finally breached the Pentagon's firewall array. I'm reallocating Cortana's primary resources to DoD database scan."

Raj questions, "Does *Marvel Zombies* count as literature? Because *Marvel Zombies vs. Army of Darkness* was *totally* hilarious. I couldn't believe Ash got his head eaten by Howard the Duck!"

"It was quite humorous indeed," agrees Spock. "I most enjoyed issue four of *Marvel Zombies* five, *Bad Torrent*, which took place in a dystopia cyberpunk Alterniverse, where the zombie virus—"

Delaire interrupts. "Comic books are not literature and zombie superheroes have no fucking relevance, *whatsoever!*"

"Again, I have to agree with Beta," Sulu concurs. "The Eisner Award-winning comic book series, *The Walking Dead*, is much more relevant to our situation."

Mace counters, "The storyline of *The Walking Dead* doesn't begin until Rick Grimes wakes from his gunshot-induced coma, a few months *after* the zombie uprising. We need stratagem on dealing with the initial outbreak stage."

Sulu informs, "We lost Chaos. All of Germany just went dark. We can forget about penetrating the JIC."

Spock rants, “In *Patient Zero* by Jonathan Maberry, a grand novel by the way if you ignore the Big Government propaganda, terrorists alter a rare disease called fatal familial insomnia to create a prion-driven parasite zombie-like disease, in which the infected are not actually undead, they’re unliving. Outside of being an excellent read, I don’t think there’s any outbreak stage stratagem to learn from it.”

Delaire’s toes curl within her tangerine Van sneakers.

Spock continues ranting to her dismay. “J.L. Bourne’s *Day by Day Armageddon* saga, written in a journal format, is also a great read. But none of us has military training or any flight experience, and stumbling upon a secret nuclear bunker is about as likely as being saved by Romulans. So I don’t think it is of much strategic value.”

I’d do just about anything to use the Jedi mind trick just once. Delaire imagines slowly waving her palm at Spock. You will shut up.

“Eden by Tony Monchinski is an above-average read, though it would easily be considered mediocre if not for the nonlinear structure of the narrative keeping the story interesting. As for lessons taught, be sure your companions are true friends and not unintelligent vengeful drug abusers.”

Delaire ceases typing momentarily and actually waves her hand at Spock. “These aren’t the sources of knowledge you’re looking for.”

“Rhiannon Frater’s self-published zombie trilogy, *As The World Dies*, is a totally unrealistic gothic chic’s daydream romance fantasy.”

Delaire succumbs to threatening bodily harm. “You better pray on bended knees to Leonard Nimoy *and* Zachary Quinto that your Vulcan death grip is faster than my wicked tornado kick.”

“*Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* by Jane Austen and Seth Grahame-Smith is completely boring for anyone other than fans of *both* Jane Austen and zombies. As it takes place in the nineteenth century, no application.”

Through gritted teeth, Delaire grumbles, “I swear to fraking Yoda I’m setting phasers to vaporize.”

“*Dying To Live* by Kim Paffenroth is absolute and utter trash. Zombie bunnies, oh *please*.”

Between all the low-frequency electromagnetic energy from the servers, the lack of sleep dueling with caffeine overload, and her coworkers’ inability to realize the reality of their dire situation, Delaire is going to spontaneously combust.

Before flames can burst from her every orifice, Sulu breaks Spock’s perpetual rant. “The guys over at the Googleplex just emailed me a copy of Max Brooks’ *Zombie Survival Guide*, courtesy of the Google Books database. I’m forwarding a copy to each of you now.”

Her entire body quivering, Delaire closes her sapphire eyes and begins to inhale and exhale. Deep. Slow. Breaths. I release all my stress. All my tension. I’m cool. I’m calm.

“According to Mr. Brooks,” Spock advises, “we’re dealing with a Class 4 pandemic, a doomsday outbreak, a total zombie apocalypse.”

“And his shrewd survival strategy in this worst-case scenario,” adds Sulu, “is to escape all civilization, find a remote, uninhabited corner of the planet, and rebuild our lives from scratch.”

Raj laughs. "Beta, looks like you'll have to mate with each of us to repopulate the Earth. We've got to keep the gene pool diverse."

Delaire opens her eyes with a sigh. "Sorry Raj, end of the human race or not, I don't do techno-geeks." And they still have yet to comprehend my sexual orientation.

Sulu informs, "Anonymous is inside the CDC. I'm dividing Cortana's primary resources."

"Okay," Delaire huffs, "let's take this one step at a time. First thing I think we should figure out is where to get some weapons."

Mace replies, "All of us have played the Dead Rising games. *Everything* is a weapon."

"Mace," exclaims Delaire, "using a purple dildo to kill zombies, not realistic. And if any of you bring up Left 4 Dead or Resident Evil, I'm going to smack you."

"And Dead Space?" Raj asks.

Delaire retorts, "We are *not* on a spaceship and we are *not* dealing with Necromorphs."

"Actually, Beta," counters Spock, "an alien virus is the most logical conclusion at this point. Unless of course, you believe the angels are truly divine."

On the verge of losing her cool again, Delaire spits her gum over Spock's head, and growls, "Forget about the goddamn angels. Forget about the cause of the plague. I don't care if it's an al-Qaeda virus, or an alien parasite, or a supernatural possession. I don't care if we're all suffering from amnesia and are trapped in a holodeck simulation. I don't care if we're all in the basement of a university medical school tripping out on LSD in sensory deprivation tanks. I don't care if we're in the distant future all plugged into a simulated reality created by sentient machines. I don't care if we've all fallen into the subconscious unconstructed dream space of limbo. What are *we* going to do to *survive*?"

"Don't be ridiculous now, Beta," jeers Spock. "Everyone knows al-Qaeda is fictitious."

Delaire rubs her thumb and forefinger across her closed eyes until she reaches the bridge of her nose and pinches hard. "Wow. *Really*? There's no reasoning with you, at all."

Sulu informs, "Cortana has completed computations of all of our collected data. I'm forwarding her detailed report now."

Cortana is their private designation for Metacortex's Simulated Intelligence. It was created using a Darwinian algorithm to slowly evolve. It's the closest thing to an AI possible as of yet.

It was Delaire's idea to utilize Cortana to examine all the information they could gather to approximate humanity's chance to persevere. At first, they compiled free info. The major media outlets were all unresponsive. Either they abandoned their posts or they were overrun by the infected. Alternative news sources, Alternet.org and BlackListedNews.com, were up and running but with little actionable intel. All mainstream video-sharing websites had disabled uploading functions due to excessive uploads crashing servers. LiveLeak.com was still operating but was extremely bogged down by heavy traffic. Cryptome.org was, however, accepting uploads. Thank you, John Young. There are thousands of amateur photos and videos from around the globe. Most of the world looks like the aftermath of a Michael Bay film, only a lot bloodier. It was Sulu's idea to coordinate with every major hacker collective, white hat and black, to acquire more crucial info.

Now the calculated fate of humankind is only three little mouse clicks away. With the first click, Delaire switches her current workspace to where her Evolution Inbox is open. With

another click, she hits the Send/Receive button to download new mail. With the final click, she selects the email containing the report and it appears in the message preview window.

Delaire swallows hard and scrolls down to the end. Her stomach churns as she reads the final line: Estimated human survival rate = 0.00342

The blood drains from her skull and she chokes out her words in a whimper. “The human race...is doomed...to extinction.”

Raj smiles as if she just offered him a blowjob with anal play. “Who wants to put this server farm to good use and host a massive PvP combat tournament?”

Mace cheers, “Nova! Let’s get our game on!”

Sulu replies, “I’ll send out invites to Anonymous and Ninja Strike Force.”

Spock threatens, “I hope you are all prepared to meet thy doom.”

The thousands of blinking blue and green LED’s blur and smear, as Delaire’s consciousness recedes, leaving her in a stupefied daze. Staring at the light show, she closes her laptop, grabs her knapsack from under her chair, and fishes out her keys. She will need the small key-chain flashlight attached. She stands up on weak legs, knees shaking, and mutters. “I’m going to the washroom.”

Raj demands, “Bring up some more energy drinks on your way back.”

“Beta,” adds Spock, “you should take your backpack so you can carry more.”

Delaire hears words spoken but is unable to process their meaning. They drift away before she can grasp a hold of them. And then her feet are carrying her forward through the flaring blue and green stars that threaten to consume her mind entirely. She is drawn through the starfield as though caught in a gravity well. She is pulled faster and faster until she is falling through a cyan spiral nebula, like the galaxy giving birth to a Deva. Like a lone astronaut journeying through a psychedelic stargate beyond the infinite. Like an immortal cosmic entity, the nexus of all psionic energy, the prime universal force of creation, has bonded with her soul. She reaches the end of the universe and slams through it into the hallway outside the data center. Her consciousness is propelled back to the forefront of her mind at once.

She collapses to her hands and knees as her stomach wrenches and she spews Citrus Blast and Chef Boyardee Beefaroni across the gray carpet. She falls onto her side and rolls onto her back. She begins to hyperventilate as tears well up. Images of her family flash before her and warm tears pour down over her temples. Fuck! My parents. My little brother. My grandparents. She squeezes her fists and slams herself across the chest. She cries out in a whine, “No. No. No.”

Delaire’s parents had both been paramedics. They met on the job. Eventually, they became professors at McMaster University’s Faculty of Health Sciences. But they volunteered their skills to a quarantine camp when the plague hit. She knew since yesterday they had to have been dead, but it hadn’t actually been real to her until now. And her little brother was one of the infected. She had told herself they would find a cure, and then put him out of her mind. She kept all of her family out of her thoughts. Hid their existence from herself. Focused on the hack and devising a survival plan.

She shivers with the intensity of her sobbing. Bites her bottom lip and rocks herself as she holds her white knuckled fists to her chest. Why? Why? Why? *Fuck*, why?

The horrible pain tearing through her heart with the brutal force of a speeding freight train suddenly twists off the tracks and explodes into fiery rabid rage. Delaire stomps her feet and

fists to the carpet, and howls, “Fuck *you!*” She isn’t even sure if she believes in God. She doesn’t know who she is cursing. “Fuuuuuuck you! Fuck you! Fuck you! Fuck! Fuck! *Fuck!*”

Delaire rolls over and jumps up. Clenches her jaw and breathes hard through her nose. Her body trembles with anger.

She closes her eyes and tries to settle herself. Calm down. You’re not a quitter. Cortana could be wrong. Even if she’s right, you can’t just sit in this damn building and die of starvation or thirst. You’re smart. Think up a plan and put it into action. With or without the help of your coworkers. Have faith in yourself.

Delaire unclenches her jaw, focuses on breathing normally, and opens her eyes. “Right, I can do this. I can do this. I can.” She grabs her crotch with both hands while twisting her legs together. But first I’ve got to take a *wicked* piss and wash the vomit taste from my mouth. She spits and sticks out her tongue. “*Yuck.*” She grabs the hem of her T-shirt and pulls it up to wipe the snot and vomit from her face.

The exit sign over the door to the stairs bathes the hallway with a red glow, providing sufficient light to scoop up her keys without stepping in her puke, from where she dropped them upon reentry. Emergency lights in the stairwell give ample illumination to find her way down to the twelfth floor. But when she turns the first corner away from the glow of another exit sign, she steps into a black hole. She holds down the button to her key-chain flashlight with her thumb and it emits just enough light not to trip over her own feet in the great abyss of darkness. If she hadn’t taken the walk in the past when the building had power, she never would have been able to find the washroom now.

Delaire was in the Sport Taekwondo Club for four years at M.I.T., but that doesn’t make her feel any better about the encumbering darkness. She can’t help from imagining one of the cleaning women having been infected and coming to work anyway, only to collapse in a closet where no one would find her. Now this imaginary toilet scrubber with outstanding work ethic is hungrily stalking Delaire from the darkness with her zombie intensified senses.

Reaching the ladies room, Delaire pushes the door open slow in case something terrible is lurking or brooding inside. Twenty-five-years-old and she is scared to go to the washroom alone. Holding her breath, she creeps from stall to stall shining the flashlight at each toilet, until she reaches the last one and resumes breathing again.

The seat is cold against her ass, but that doesn’t stop her from letting out a sigh of relief that echoes through the dark restroom.

A slight vibration causes the stalls to shudder. What the fuck? An explosion outside maybe?

She wipes, flushes, pulls up her Zelda Triforce boy briefs, then her bluejeans, and zippers and buttons as she exits the stall. She sets her keys on the countertop beside a sink to wash up.

Thankfully cold water is still flowing. That won’t last much longer for sure. She rinses the bad taste from her mouth and splashes her face.

And then she freezes, water dripping from her chin and running down her neck to absorb into her T-shirt. She isn’t alone. She hadn’t heard the door open, but she feels a presence. There is definitely someone else in the restroom with her. *Shit*, this is the scene in the slasher movies where the defenseless woman is slaughtered! And *I’m* that woman! It’s *my* red blood that’s going to be splashed all over the mirror!

With a trembling hand, her heart pounding, Delaire reaches for her keys with the pace of a glacier melting. As quiet as possible, by squeezing them into her palm so the keys can't jangle together, she picks them off the countertop. Ever so gently she slides the flashlight forward, pointing it at the mirrors. She swallows and presses the button.

The dim light reveals nothing but her own flushed face and wide eyes looking back at her. She lets her shoulders drop and breathes easy. She shakes her head. I must be losing my brain.

"I can assure you your brain stills resides safely within your cranium."

Delaire spins around and screams as she jumps back landing her ass in the sink. She mutters at the ghost. "You're a stressed induced hallucination!"

"I am not a hallucination."

Shit. My hallucination thinks he's real. And he can speak inside my head. One too many energy drinks for sure.

"My name is Janav. I am an etheric being, the last of an elder race that ascended from this dimensional plane thousands of years ago."

Delaire shakes her head and rubs her eyes, but the ghost remains. "Okay, just for the moment I'll pretend you're not a hallucination, and that you're speaking the truth about being an ancient alien. What do you want with me?"

"Before incarnating in this lifetime, you formed an etheric contract, which stated I may act as a guide to you at a set point in linear time, which is now."

"And where did this contract state you'd be guiding me?"

"Anywhere or time required to stop the total cataclysm of human civilization."

"So you're going to help me fight the zombie hordes?"

"You have no hope of defeating them, nor any need to fight them. We are going to work to stop the outbreak from ever occurring."

"Even if that's possible, and I'm not having a total mental meltdown, I have to know. Are they really zombies?"

"The primary infected are not the zombies of your world's fiction. They are not undead. The alien quanta pathogen prepares the body to become an organic portal for a negative polarity transdimensional being. What your religions would call a demon."

"The secondary infected are reanimated by an alien parasite, given birth by the alien pathogen, transmitted through saliva and blood."

"Alien quanta pathogen. Can you be more specific?"

"The pathogen functions on the quantum level and is of an extraterrestrial source. There is no human language more detailed to describe the disease as it is beyond human science."

Delaire has a dozen more questions, but before she can open her mouth, Janav speaks within her mind.

"Please, no more questions. A dying woman drove her vehicle through the front entrance of this building. Infected have entered."

"My friends upstairs, we've got to get them."

"No, they cannot come with us. If you wish to save them, your family, and all of humanity, you will come with me now, alone."

She leaps out of the sink. "I can't leave them!"

“There is nothing you can do for them here. You would not even survive the trip upstairs. Come with me.”

“If I want to live.” Delaire bites her bottom lip with indecision.

A grunting bark and a loud crash sound from outside the washroom.

“Okay, *fuck* it. As long as you don’t expect me to walk the streets unarmed, I’m down. How we going to get out of here? You got a spaceship somewhere?”

Janav turns and holds his etheric blue palm out toward the stalls. A pinprick of bright white light appears and spirals counterclockwise as it grows steadily into a blue-white circular vortex, eight feet in diameter.

Delaire’s jaw drops open in amazement. “Is that an actual fucking wormhole?”

“It is a spatiotemporal rift. Please enter quickly. It costs a substantial amount of extra-dimensional energy to sustain.”

Delaire pulls in a deep breath as if about to dive into the ocean and walks forward. A warm tingling sensation flows over her as she passes into the rift. No swirling colors envelop her and no smeared stars zoom by her. It’s instantaneous. Like stepping through an ordinary doorway.

What she sees on the other side of the threshold is a shock. Five other people step out of a rift at the exact same moment as she, with Janav behind each of them. The rifts close and all but the Janav beside her vanishes. They’re in a large bank vault lit by emergency lighting.

There is a handsome blond in a leather jacket who looks physically and emotionally exhausted but unscathed. He has a strong silent vibe about him. An Asian woman who could be a J-pop idol except she’s dressed in scrubs and covered head to toe in blood. Definitely the caring nurturer type. A dripping wet caramel colored girl with ruby-red braids, her legs blistered with burns, wobbling like she’s ready to collapse. She looks like a real tough bitch. A colossal sweat soaked African cop with blood on his hands and tears in his eyes. I’d wager a gentle-hearted giant. And an absolutely *gorgeous* woman wearing little more than an artist’s apron, who appears to be blind. Also shy and demure.

Janav opens another rift and waves them through. And they enter a sterile white room with no doors and one large window. The attention of all of them but the blind beauty is drawn immediately to the window. An alien city stretches as far as the eye can see, unlike any Delaire has seen in life or fiction. Which makes it all the more strange that it feels so familiar.

Even as the thought to question *where* arises in her mind, Janav’s telepathic voice answers.

“Welcome to Mars.”

This is the end of the free preview.

The full novel is available for purchase at most major eBook retailers.

Please browse my website JamesLucien.Wordpress.com for more of my works.