

FROSTARC

SECLUSION BOOK ONE

by ARTHUR McMAHON



CHAPTER ONE

Fear

The snow had ceased, and his truck was warming up. Inside his tattered cabin, Kozz prepared to leave on his monthly supply run. Staring into the bathroom mirror his fingertips brushed through a buzz cut of salt and pepper hair, then across the sandpaper stubble of his cheeks. Silver eyes and a strong jaw line gave youth to an otherwise aged face, and his block of a head balanced atop a spud-like body. Pale skin stretched tight around a growing waist where it once was pulled neat and fit around a warrior's physique.

“This mug ain't what it used to be, but I'll make it presentable enough to head into town.”

After shaving Kozz walked into the main room and grabbed his belongings off the round table next to the small gas-fire stove. A change of clothes, a few meal bars, and his knife. He tripped over a stack of tabloid magazines, the same stack he told himself years ago he would find a better place for.

Kozz gave a last look around his home and felt for the

familiar cold metal surface at his side as he walked out the door. Sometimes Kozz could be forgetful, but he never forgot her.

The crisp sting of the air awakened his senses unlike any cup of coffee could, making the hairs on his body stand erect at its command. The air was calm, but its stagnant chill was ever present. Kozz reached inside his coat pocket and pulled out a fat stogie, then he lit it up. *The heat from the first puff warms my bones like drinking a cup of hot cocoa.* The smoke danced in circles and waves as Kozz exhaled.

The solitary man examined the clear view of white that stretched all around the horizon, meeting the blue sky with a clarity that only such a still day could bring. Most days were too dangerous to travel through the stark wilderness with the constant drapes of snow burying anything that stood still for too long. Only the warmers placed within and around his home kept Kozz from such a fate. The weathered chrome towers passed to each other a current of warmth which formed a bubble around the cabin, turning ice and snow into puddles.

The drive to town would take thirty hours on a good day and stopping for a rest was not an option. Kozz's rig would be engulfed by powder in minutes if a storm flared up while he was taking a nap. Checking on the integrity of his 200-ton H₂O delivery truck one last time before leaving did not sound like such a bad idea. Kozz pulled in one final puff before

tossing his cigar out into a drift of snow where it melted its way towards the soil. He walked down the steps that led away from his house and put his boot down onto the wooden tread where his foot broke through a rotten board that he had been meaning to replace. “Goddamn piece of shit,” he cried as he tumbled to the ground.

Being taller than most and as broad as an oil drum, Kozz found that many conventional constructions were not built to accommodate his size. He sat there for a moment looking at the damage, more worried about the busted stairs than his sprained and scratched ankle. *This damn house needs some work, but it'll have to wait until I get back.* Kozz lifted himself up on his left foot, testing weight on his damaged right ankle. Pain shot up through his leg. Walking was not going to be easy. Kozz hobbled over to his large, ash-colored truck and grabbed a rag from under the passenger seat. He sat down and wrapped the rag around his ankle, filling it with snow to reduce the swelling. *Moe and the guys are gonna riot when they see me like this.* He stood up and limped his way around the side of the rig to check the energy cells. Large red lettering and symbols were faded along the behemoth's side, relics of a previous owner. Kozz reached the energy cell compartment and could hear their quiet buzz, then he opened the hatch and saw that the deep-blue electric glow of the two cells was healthy, the whirring buzz was another good sign. A slow walk-

around showed the tires and treads to all be in good shape. The life-water canisters were full and secure. Kozz was satisfied.

He pulled his heavy body up and into the driver's cab. Two large seats rested behind the controls, and behind them was a small room filled edge-to-edge with a bed and a small shelf that contained a variety of editorial magazines alongside a slim selection of romance novels. Kozz threw his duffel bag on the passenger seat and felt for her at his side one more time before shutting the door and pulling back the gear lever.

Dials adjusted along the dashboard as the gears changed at Kozz's command. Digital displays danced along the windshield, several with faulty readings and one that flickered frustratingly at the crest of his vision despite his many failed attempts to disconnect the broken display. Numbers climbed as the speed increased, soaring upwards as the truck powered its way up the first few large snowbanks before it gained momentum.

The ashen truck was hauling over 150 tons of liquid water that Kozz had collected from the ice around his home, and the cargo was being delivered to a warehouse near Edgetown where it would then be sent abroad across the planet and to other worlds. Hydrogen had become a major source of energy, and water was needed on other planets. Erde was overpopulated, and Torris was dry. Frostarc served as

humanity's fountain of life.

Water had been scarce in centuries past. Colonization of Frostarc was humankind's first attempt at spreading to another world, and the dire need of a dehydrated Erde outweighed the risks involved. The first colonists were memorialized as heroes.

The thirty hour drive was not necessary. Kozz could have chosen to live closer to the distribution warehouse and turn in more life-water at a faster pace, but he had chosen solitude over convenience. Most other harvesters had personal cargo-grade airships to transfer their loads more frequently and with greater speed, but Kozz did not want the money. He only needed something to occupy his time and enough cash to get by. The excuse to fire up his rig and tear through the snow drifts was enough reason to make the trip. The power was exhilarating, something he always thought a person could not feel properly without being connected to the ground.

The sun had only just risen as Kozz set off. The truck had taken time to power up to full throttle, plowing through the snow drifts and skidding across the glaciers. A retractable pilot mounted at the front of the vehicle wedged through the ice and pushed everything else out of its way. The self-righting propulsion system on the truck's underside allowed Kozz to turn in any direction at full speed without worry of capsizing. Cruising at a comfortable 287 mph, he grabbed a meal bar

from his bag. *They'll never make this processed shit taste as good as the real stuff, but Lord knows it's what keeps me going out here.* Kozz flipped the cruise control switch, kicked his feet up on the dashboard, and flipped open a magazine entitled *The Letterhead*, continuing an article he had started earlier.

The attacks on the Insurrectionist Moon have accomplished nothing. Presider Conway and the Cooperation need to wipe out the entire world of rebel hooligans so that we, the people, can make proper use of one of the only known habitable locations in the galaxy. We must move forward on this issue.

Sure, twenty years ago the Presider's Enforcers were able to eliminate many of the highest crime lords that rule the planet, but what have they done lately? Our efforts have become ineffective and meaningless. The major threats we were able to rid ourselves of have been replaced and are now stronger than ever.

We cannot expect to live in a peaceful, unified society with a world of outlaws and dissenters living at our front door. It is time to end the petty attacks and negotiations. I call upon you Presider Conway, I call upon you the people of the Cooperation, because it is time for war! Let us use our might to end the threat of the Insurrectionist Moon before it grows any stronger. Let us end this now!

“Let's take over that godforsaken hellhole.” Kozz growled as he flipped through the pages. *Every last one of those fuckers should be murdered, thought Kozz, every hovel they hide in destroyed. The organized crime and society built upon deception and greed that they have thrived on needs to crumble. The Presider has taken the issue seriously in the*

past, but his recent lack of effort has allowed their economy and crime lord hierarchy to rebound. We aren't doing enough. Painful memories enraged Kozz's emotions, but before the thoughts consumed him he popped a couple of prescribed pills and they calmed him. He put the magazine down and shuffled about for something else to read, choosing a novel with a woman in tears on the cover as a man above soars away in an airship, titled *My Passion, My Love, My War*.

The further south he traveled, the more signs of life there were. The truck rolled through numerous paths in the deep snow left behind by animals and brown patches of shrubs became more common. At one point Kozz saw smoke on the horizon that he attributed to another harvester's fire-warmed home. The sun had set midway through the journey, but it would rise again before Kozz arrived at his destination. The short days of this small planet were something Kozz had never grown used to.

Small cabins appeared in the distance leading to a view of Edgetown along the horizon with reds and oranges coloring the sky as the sun began to rise over the sleepy tourist village. Few lights could be seen amongst the buildings, and the streets looked awfully quiet. *Must be due to the early morning hours.* Kozz's truck kept barreling along right past the town and towards Moe's Warehouse which resided another hour south.

Kozz arrived at the front gate to the complex and let

himself through, as usual. The building was a massive square of blue and gray corrugated metal which was topped with a high-peaked roof to keep off the weight of the snow. He drove over to the pumps near the front entrance.

Kozz stepped out of the truck and tentatively put his feet on the ground, feeling that the injured ankle had become stiff. The pain had subsided a bit, but he packed up another rag with snow and tied it around the swollen injury, then he pulled out a stogie from his jacket pocket and lit it up. The wind had increased and he needed the smokey heat to keep away the chill.

As expected, no one came out to greet him. Kozz limped around to the rear of his truck and hooked up his cargo to the warehouse pumps. As he neared the building Kozz felt a sound emanating through the wall like the muddled voices of a telepod left on in another room. The unintelligible sound echoed in his ear, its waves vibrating in his chest. *Either Moe's ripping into somebody or there's a party going on that I wasn't told about.*

Sounds of flowing pipe-water and the purr of the pumps faded as Kozz made his way over to the front door, his attention focused on the words coming from within the building. Ice had cracked the frame in several places and pushed the door away from its flush build. Kozz pressed the door latch, not aware that his other hand was feeling for her

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smooth surface at his side. The door slid open, and out blared a cascade of noise. Befuddled by the river of sound that crashed upon him, Kozz backed away from the door, clapping hands over both ears. Words blasted tremors through his body, some catching his attention: disease, dangerous, quarantine.

“...pending the status of your infection...”

“What the fuck? The hell is it talking about?”

Far enough away to shake off his daze, Kozz listened more carefully to the message. A female's voice read off a script, monotone and sterile.

Warning to all who receive this message. Warning. A fatal disease is spreading. This is a worldwide pandemic. The disease is extremely dangerous and highly contagious in numerous regards. It is recommended that all who receive this message avoid all others who exhibit strange behavior and move to one of the two quarantine zones. Quarantine zone locations: GRID ID 1128-34 located within Port Town, GRID ID 1189-09 located within the city of Quartz. You will be treated and released pending the status of your infection.

“Fatal disease...a pandemic.” This is insane. *Moe and the others laugh their asses off and hop around like little bunnies*

in heat when they get me with one of their pranks, but this is too much, even for them.

Kozz tore off a couple of strips of wet cloth from the rag around his ankle and stuffed his ears as best he could, dampening the sound a bit. He approached the entrance once more and the noise again pierced into his mind and the waves of vibrations shook his bones. Kozz walked in and saw no lights on within the entire warehouse. The doorway at his back allowed in as much daylight as it could, casting Kozz's shadow across the cement floor as his broad silhouette stood over the threshold. The place smelled of cold metal as it always had.

The minuscule amount of light was absorbed by the blackness of the building's interior, but with what little light there was Kozz could see stacks of fallen boxes that had strewn their metal bits, machine parts, and packing materials all about the floor. A second look made it seem as if they had not only fallen, but had been pushed over. It almost appeared as if someone had been rifling through the boxes, searching recklessly for what was within them.

Kozz tried to shout out the names of the people he knew at the warehouse, but even to himself his words were inaudible, engulfed and defeated by the roaring monotone voice.

“Warning. A fatal disease is spreading...”

I've got to shut this shit off. Kozz had been to the warehouse many times before and knew the layout well. His eyes could not see far in the darkness, so his memory placed the floor design at the front of his thoughts. Up above on the grated walkway sat some sort of control panel, probably what he could use to shut off the message and hopefully turn on the lights. He started walking forward to where he knew the stairway should be, but after taking a few steps something caught his eye.

In the corner of his vision, around the other side of some of the fallen boxes, was a horrid sight. A man, a corpse, lay eviscerated and disemboweled on the hard floor.

Images from Kozz's past overloaded his mind and made him vomit, the memories causing his heart to ache as if there were a hole in it. He ignored the pain, burying it deep within himself alongside all the thoughts of his past. Ten years of confined hatred and sorrow pushed on the walls of his mind, threatening to break loose and consume Kozz. The weight on his heart had grown heavier with each passing day, and the doctor was his only help. *Thank the Lord for those pills.*

Kozz shook his head, gathering himself. He recognized the dead man's face, but had never known his name. The murder weapon, a jagged piece of scrap sheet metal, was tossed away from the body. Kozz was familiar with death and murder, and he knew that this man had died recently, very recently. *Poor*

guy probably got axed not more than a day ago.

He reached for her grip at his side and pulled her from the holster at his hip. Red. A scarlet six-shooter that Kozz had called his for most of his life. In a world where lasers had long ago replaced bullets, she was considered an antique, a collectable by most, but Kozz had kept her in working condition, as had his father before him. Her sunset shine coruscated in the darkness with the little bit of light that reached her from the outside.

He walked forward, keeping his senses alert while trying to defeat the blackness and deafening noise that surrounded him. He approached the lift assuming it would not work with the lights shut off like they were, and he was right. Kozz felt his way along the side of the elevator and across some metal beams until he felt the upward angle of the staircase railing. He climbed the steel-grated staircase, pain shooting up from his swollen ankle, until he reached the upper landing.

Kozz had never been on the grated walkway, but his memory from below guided him to take a right at the staircase and then an immediate left at the first intersection. He prowled his way along the path, trying to sense for anything out of the ordinary, holding the cold railing in his hand as he walked. The railing veered to the right, and that was where Kozz knew he should turn left. Just as he started down the next pathway he felt something move.

He did not quite see it, but he had sensed it nonetheless. Red was up somewhere in the darkness, pointing in the direction of the culprit. "Show yourself," Kozz bellowed, his voice again swallowed by the noise around him, but as if answering his roar two faint white lights lit up not too far down the path and they leaped towards him. Kozz fired, but the lights disappeared and he was not sure if his shot had hit. Then the thing jumped on Kozz. It was small and scrawny, but it felt like a man. The thing crawled over the top of Kozz and firmly clutched his neck with its boney hands. Kozz tore at the arms, but they would not budge. The pain in his left ankle increased with the extra weight on his shoulders. Still holding Red in his hand, Kozz grabbed behind his shoulders and gripped the thin man's under arms, then bent forward and flipped the man over and onto a solid object that he did not know was there.

A few reserve lights turned on within the building, sufficient to see with but not enough to blind Kozz after being in total darkness. The solid object was the control panel Kozz had been looking for, much closer than he expected. On top of the controls was Moe writhing in pain with old blood dried around his mouth and streaked across his arms, but he quickly gathered himself and launched again at Kozz. Now able to see, Kozz landed a blow across Moe's face and watched the man fall to the ground.

Kozz jumped on top of his friend and held him down. He could only see the whites of Moe's eyes with red capillaries along their undersides, and the surreal glow was still present. Moe strained and squirmed as he tried to free himself from Kozz's grasp, but the little man did not have enough strength. *This must be the disease.* Kozz leaned back as Moe growled and bit at his face. *No, this isn't a disease, this is a demon. Something evil has taken over. It can't be him any longer. This isn't Moe, this is some murderous beast. If I let him it go, it's just going to continue trying to kill me like it did that other fellow.*

Kozz let go of the creature with one hand and crashed the butt of Red across its face. "Wake up Moe!" He slapped again. "Get that thing out of you and come back!" The creature used its free hand to scrape and claw at Kozz's side. "Last chance, buddy." He delivered one more devastating blow across its face, knocking several teeth out of its mouth. The demon that was Moe started to laugh, gurgling blood as it did. *Wake up dammit! Come on Moe, snap out of it!* Moe's free arm grabbed the knife that was attached to Kozz's belt, but Kozz gripped the arm and snapped it at the elbow like a twig. The creature screamed out in pain as it dropped the knife, but the crying wails morphed into a wicked laugh and the creature swung its broken arm at Kozz's face.

That's it then. Goodbye Moe. Kozz planted his hands on the

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creature's throat and squeezed, the laughter becoming a squeak. Kozz pressed harder until no more sound could escape the creature's throat, but its face carried on as if it were still laughing. *Laugh all you want you damn demon, it's over for you.* Kozz put his weight into the force of his grip. The soft light disappeared from the creature's stare and the clawing hands stopped. Looking into the eyes as they rolled back into place, Kozz saw Moe. A look of fear and confusion glazed across his friend's face and Kozz released his hold, but it was too late. The demon had left and Moe's body went limp. Kozz had killed his friend. His heart lurched and the pain of it knocked him to the ground.

CHAPTER TWO

Ghost Town

Puffs of smoke billowed from the tops of chimneys, floating northward with the mild wind. The sun descended behind the valley plains to the west, fading the blue sky into carnations of pink and purple. Night approached and on flickered the warm and inviting lights of the tiny cabins and cottages that lined the main streets of Edgetown. Couples strolled the cobblestone paths as children chased each other around the ornate streetlights and under tiled benches. Aromas of ginger, cinnamon, and fresh baked bread wafted about, enticing the chilled to enter any one of the colorful shops for a hot meal and a cup of spiced tea. Candles glinted in the frosted windows, unshaded so that any passerby could see the little trinkets and wide smiles that waited inside.

Kozz parked his large vehicle on the outskirts of town and walked past the cute tourist villa that supplied Edgetown with most of its wealth. Several blocks behind the shops were the homes and byways of the local residents where the streets

were either dirt or hard-packed ice. Most of the ramshackle homes were only slightly larger and better kept than Kozz's own shack out on the ice fields. Snow slid off the high-peaked roofs, creating large piles between the houses. Treading feet flattened the pathways, the roads by tires and plows, but everywhere else was claimed by the ever falling snow as it was considered too much hassle to maintain. Few homes had the money for outdoor warmers, and those that did only used them for gatherings and special occasions.

Across from the local mechanic's shop was Kozz's destination, McMick's Tavern. When Kozz walked in he was greeted by familiar faces, those that always knew when he would be coming in for his occasional visit. He took a seat at the bar. "Hey doll," he yelled to the bartender, "would ya mind fixin' me up a cup of hot cocoa?" Kozz lit up a cigar and yammered with his friends, trading stories and politics.

Linda, the bartender, filled Kozz's ears with the terrible tales of her tragic love life which she had experienced since his last stroll into town. Kozz could be patient when he chose to be, and women frequently told him that he was a good listener. He was her big teddy bear with a shoulder to cry on for the evening.

He stayed the night in town and stopped by the local drug store early the next morning. The young girls behind the counter always greeted him with a smile and had his

prescriptions ready to go. The elderly pharmacist Todd was one to ask his regular customers for favors, and so Kozz, in no rush this way or that, was willing to shovel snow or lift some boxes for the ornery fart. He appreciated how silly it was for a business man to ask so much of his customers, but being the only pharmacy in town meant he could handle business however he wanted.

After lending a hand, Kozz walked over to the grocery store and grabbed as many goods as he could carry. The cashiers had stopped asking if he wanted help carrying his groceries to his vehicle once they learned he had to park on the outskirts. Bags upon bags hung from both of his arms as he trudged his way back to his rig. Kozz hefted the groceries up into his truck's cabin and placed them on top of his mattress.

This was how Kozz had spent his last trip into town and many of those before.

Hours were spent grieving his fallen friend and searching the warehouse for any clues as to what was going on. Kozz had fiddled with the computer systems as best he could and saw that all communication devices were inoperable. All he found were some power cables that had been slashed and ripped from their holdings. Unable to contact outside assistance, Kozz

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could not even offer Moe and the other deceased man the respectable closure they deserved. He could call for no one to take the bodies away, and the frozen dirt was impossible to dig through. Left unsatisfied and confused, he wasted the day away without anything to show for it. *I don't know if that demon that was inside you died, but at least you passed on without it in you, Moe. At least I had done that much for you.*

As Kozz approached Edgetown with the weight of his murdered friend on his conscience, he sensed an unusual stillness. Night was falling again and only a few faint lights could be seen amongst the assemblage of buildings. The houses looked cold without the smokey chimneys and soft candlelight that were the staple of the tourism-inspired main streets. *The city-folk nearly faint when they see this gingerbread village of a town with all the brown buildings and white trim.* Kozz drove into town, seeing that there was no one around the streets who would be bothered by his huge rig. *Looks like Edgetown closed down early tonight. Word must have spread about this disease, this damn evilness, and kept all the travelers home.* Kozz had seen Edgetown close down early before because of severe drops in tourism during the colder months of the year. *But this is different. This town looks dead, feels dead. Shit is going down. Maybe there is someone here to find, someone to tell me what is going on. Besides, I gotta get my meds.*

Kozz parked his truck and shoved open the driver door. The rig quieted as he stepped down into a knee-deep drift of white fluff. The town looked unkempt, taken over by the never ending snowfall. Streets were buried and snow drifts settled between the buildings, reaching as high as the lower edges of some roofs, the waves of white left untouched by man or machine. The warm and inviting shops and homes Kozz had known were now cold and lifeless, placid frost having crystallized across the windows that were once occupied by dancing candlelight. Not a single streetlight was lit and every one was wrapped in a sheet of white.

Kozz inhaled the cold air into his lungs and tasted stale bread. The crunching under his boots echoed and was the only audible distraction from his own breathing. Silence and solitude were his home, but feeling such seclusion in this part of town gave Kozz the chills. He walked down the road and found that plowing through the snow with a busted ankle was proving to be a pain. *But my truck's got too wide a load to fit through those skinny alleys the locals around here call streets.* He turned down a pathway and trekked through the drifts, dragging his sore foot through the snow.

The rustic and weathered houses hidden a few blocks back were no livelier than their main street counterparts and appeared to be abandoned like the rest of the town. Everything was succumbing to the snow. Without the stubborn

persistence of people to fight for and protect their land, the town was quickly losing its battle with the forces of nature. Kozz could find no tracks in the snow, no movement in the windows or vehicles on the road to indicate the existence of life.

Kozz approached a house he was familiar with, Linda's place. Broken glass hung askew from the window nearest to the front door, most of it scattered on the sill and within the snow on the wooden deck. The door was propped open. *That broad is always in some kind of trouble or another. No vehicle in the driveway. Might be some guy roughed her up, or maybe she fled with the rest of them and someone robbed her while she was gone.* Linda was the usual bartender at McMick's. She was always getting herself involved with the wrong guys and Kozz had saved her neck more than once. She often repaid him with a free place to stay and drinks on the house.

Kozz stepped up onto the deck and opened the front door with one hand while the other gripped Red. Snow had blown into the living room, creating white trails that faded from the door and busted window into the shaggy brown of the carpet. A tall lamp which had stood near the window was now knocked over, but everything else seemed to be in place and it did not look like anything of value had been taken. The kitchen was a mess, but only in a way that reflected Linda's level of

cleanliness. The bedroom held an unmade bed, an armoire with drawers all opened at various lengths, and a closet with a missing door. *Everything's still here. Clothes, jewelry— that girl must've been in a hurry to leave everything behind.* Kozz used her restroom and noticed that all of her toiletries were still there. He exited her home with more questions to answer.

The sky above was a deep orange with spotted gray clouds that faded to a dark blue in the east, and a soft snowfall drifted sideways in the light wind. Kozz continued down the road, but he stopped in front of Linda's neighbor's house where a large snow-covered lump sat in the driveway. Kozz walked over to it and brushed away the snow, revealing a red taillight. *Goddamn, first vehicle I've seen since coming here.* He pushed more powder away and found that the hood was open and bent back. *What the hell?* He dug out the snow that covered the energy cells and found them smashed. More digging exposed slashed hoses and torn belts. *What is this shit?* Someone had ripped the working parts of the vehicle to shreds and the rest of the vehicle was left undamaged. *Those power cables back at the warehouse, was that Moe? I don't know. Did another one of those demons do this?* More puzzle pieces filled Kozz's mind and he struggled to fit them together.

He turned to the house and saw more shattered windows. Red came out of her holster as Kozz began to fear the possibility that the town was not only empty, but dangerous.

He walked to the front door to see if anybody was inside and found that the door frame had been splintered by forced entry. He pushed the door open slowly, finding a room full of overturned furniture. His eyes fell on a cracked indent in a wall that was spotlighted by the sunlight which came through the doorway. In front of the wall was a tipped sofa with tan fabric that was streaked with dried blood. Kozz steadied himself and made his way to the other end of the room, eyes and ears open. He peeked around the edge of the sofa and found a bloodied man's body, frozen on the floor at the base of the wall. *Damn, it is them. It's here too. I've gotta get my meds and get the hell outta this place.*

Kozz left, not wanting to search the rest of the home. His years of bloodshed and death should have been behind him. He did not want the memories to surface, and he struggled to keep the thoughts of his son concealed from himself. He lit up a stogie and used it to calm himself. It was against doctor's orders, but a good cigar helped Kozz control his thoughts and settle his aching heart. Escaping the past was a daily battle for Kozz, one that he thought he would never win.

He picked himself up and blazed a trail down the road. The chill of the snow had worn through the thick layers of Kozz's boots and his feet began to go numb, the pain in his ankle subsiding with the loss of feeling.

Kozz turned a corner and saw a light on ahead a few streets

near McMick's tavern. *Maybe there is a soul left around here after all.* As he approached his destination Kozz realized that the source of the light was the drug store across the street from McMick's. With any luck he could get his medication and find someone to talk with.

Not a block away from the drug store Kozz passed by The Dawson Inn. Other than a couple of evenings spent at Linda's, The Dawson Inn was Kozz's usual stop for the night in Edgetown. The Dawsons never had a child, and so they treated Kozz like a son who visited home every so often from college. Mrs. Dawson always made sure Kozz had a good home cooked meal in him before he went to bed, no matter how much he may have eaten at the tavern earlier in the day. Mr. Dawson was full of extended tales that were adorned with life lessons and morals for Kozz to learn. Their inn looked like all of the other homely buildings off of the main streets, but inside it was quaint and full of smells that made Kozz feel like he was child again, back home with his parents in the good days. He adored the couple and was saddened to see that their home looked as empty and cold as the rest. The Dawsons, too, had fled town.

Kozz's hope to find life at McMick's was erased before he was even able to look inside. The sunken doorway had been completely entombed in snowfall. Trying to enter the tavern would require a lot of digging, and it was not worth the effort.

Light from the drug store escaped onto the snow-covered road and highlighted something Kozz thought was peculiar. The light created a shadow that ran down the center of the road where a dip had been created. *A path.* Kozz looked back at his own trail, a rough trench in the deep snow. *The recent powder may have softened it up a bit, but that's a person's path. That's for damn sure. Someone's been through here.*

Red in his hand, Kozz sneaked close to the window of the drug store and dropped down into a squat. He turned his head and looked back over his shoulder with Red gripped in both hands and hanging between his legs. Inside he could see that the light was coming from behind the pharmacy counter and that the aisles of assorted goods inside the store had been ransacked. Most of the shelves were completely empty and what was left had been scattered across the floor. *People must've bought up all the supplies they needed before making the trip east towards the city.* Another dim source of light appeared. Two small lights bobbed up and down in one of the aisles. Kozz almost jumped at the realization. They were eyes. *Lord! It's one of them. Another one of those damn demons.*

Kozz could have blasted it right then and there, but he did not know if they were all murderous. And then there was Moe. It seemed that Moe had returned to his normal self the moment before Kozz had ended his life. The man inside the pharmacy was hefty and balding, perhaps someone's father.

Kozz might be able to save him. Maybe there was a chance.

Kozz got on his knees and crawled under the window towards the front entrance. He then slid open the front door without making a sound and turned himself sideways, slipping through the entrance and stepping into the store. The floor was littered with odds and ends that were left behind in the evacuation.

Kozz stepped towards the man and put Red away to appear less intimidating. “Hey buddy, let’s talk.” The man’s head popped up over the aisle’s shelving, white eyes glowing. Kozz put his hands up palms-open towards the man. “No harm, no trouble.” The man’s head dropped and Kozz heard the fast thunking of the heavy body sprinting down the aisle. “I don’t want to hurt you, friend.” The body rounded the corner and charged, but Kozz held his ground. The demon-eyed beast hissed a throaty growl and leaped at its prey. The man was much larger than Moe and could do some serious damage, so to avoid taking the blow Kozz hunkered down low and used the man’s forward momentum to lift the chubby body and hurl it over and behind himself. The man tried to latch onto Kozz and gashed three long fingernails across his cheek as it flew into the air. It crashed through several rows of shelves and was buried under the rubble, gurgling wet noises as it attempted to uncover itself.

“What’s your name?” shouted Kozz. “Come on now. Fight

off that damn demon and give me your name!” Objects flew through the air as the demon-eyed man hurled the store’s scattered goods at Kozz. He dodged a pair of pliers and blocked a couple pieces of broken shelf with his forearm, but a can of chili hit him square in his sprained ankle and Kozz yelled out with a cry of agony as he fell to the ground. The creature launched more objects at him and Kozz blocked what he could. “Fight that damn thing inside of you. Wake up and give me your name!” Kozz lifted himself into a sitting position with his arms and Red left her holster. A ceramic serving plate flew past his head like a frisbee and smashed into a wall. “Tell me now if there is a sane person in there or—” the body stood from the rubble, brandishing a long kitchen knife. The creature staggered over the mess and slashed the blade in Kozz’s direction. Red found her aim. The demon found its footing and rushed forward.

KABLAM!

A hole the size of a fist exploded open in the possessed man’s chest. The demon inside screamed at a glass-shattering pitch and its eyes beamed as if the light was steam released under high pressure, its face stretching out like a ghoul’s to vent the explosions of light and noise. Kozz closed his eyes and plugged his ears. *Like a goddamn banshee!* He tried to protect his senses, but could not block its intensity, and he hollered back an unintelligible garble at the creature, doing all he could

to escape the unearthly shriek. The body fell forward and landed at Kozz's feet. The howling light ended just as quickly as it had begun. The knife stuck into the floorboards with the dead man's grip still firm, but Kozz kicked the blade away and took in a deep breath.

When that thing died it didn't laugh like the one before. The glow in its eyes didn't escape, it was extinguished. That fucker didn't get away this time, I killed it. Kozz felt like he was going to pass out from the experience. His heart was pumping again and pain was starting to settle in. He tried to calm himself while marveling at what had just gone down. This is wrong. They must know this isn't a disease by now. These people are possessed by something evil. Kozz noticed Red in his hand, still smoking from the kill. She's happy. She hasn't seen any real action in years, since before I ran away to this ice world. She's a canon, a magnum, a gun deserved to be called so. Pops taught me to take care of her and use her properly, told me to take my time and not waste my bullet. She's heavy. I can hold her true with one arm, most men would need two. She's pining for more.

Kozz stood up to get away from the dead body. The can that had smacked his ankle caused more pain than damage, and other than a throbbing ache Kozz felt no extra grief from the impact. He walked over to the pharmacy counter to find his medication. The lone light was bright enough to see well

behind the counter, but it would still be a chore to riffle through the shelves of medication to find his prescription. He remembered how the young pharmacists never went back to look for his pills, instead they always bent below the counter and grabbed a bag marked with his name. He checked under the counter and found a small brown bag, then turned it around and on it written in black marker was “Kozz”. He opened the bag and inside the two small bottles rattled. One was for his depression, or so the doctor had called it, but he knew that it was more of a pill to control his anger outbursts. The other was for his chest pains, ischemia of the heart.

Kozz walked over to the restroom and washed the blood and sweat off his face, cleaning the three gashes that were cut across his left cheek. His eyes were cold steel. “You’re one ugly dog,” Kozz said to his reflection, “but you’ve got class.” A small smile cracked the corner of his lips and he saluted himself. It was refreshing to see a somewhat normal face, one that was not stretched out of proportion or holding a murderous snarl.

He sat on the toilet to rest and he let out a slow sigh. Thinking of the faces of the two men he had killed over the past few hours soured his thoughts. *I’m sorry for what I’ve done, but I think I might’ve helped Moe and that other man escape their evil captors. Torn power cables and smashed cars, scuffled homes and an empty town. No way to get a hold of anyone. This is something serious. All I know is that*

whatever is happening is some freaky shit, and I'm sure I'll see a lot more of it if I keep going on. I could go home and ride this thing out on my little ranch. I can find enough food in this town to last me a while if I have to. I might be lonely, but I'm sure I would be safe from whatever the hell is going on, the disease or whatever it is couldn't survive the miles upon miles of frozen wasteland.

And what about Priscilla? My darling Priscilla. That message said that this was a worldwide pandemic, but what if it has escaped to the other planets? What if it made it to Erde? I have to make sure she's safe from it. Ten years since I've seen her, ten years since those bastards stole my son away from me, ten years since I abandoned my beautiful wife, but I had to. There was no other choice, no other way for her to be safe, but now she could be in danger again and I have to find her. "I sought solitude for good reason, but now I've got to get out." I'm going to die cold and alone on these frozen plains if I stay much longer. At one time that seemed like it was worth it, it was what I was looking for. I wanted to die alone. I wanted to never be seen again. "Hell, it's been long enough."

So that's it then, I'm not going home. I might return one day, but that won't be for a good long time. Kozz fired up a stogie. Sometimes a hard think is enough to send my ticker racing. The pain it brings is like a swift kick in the nuts. It'll

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make me drop to my knees and beg for mercy, something no person has ever been able to do, but I've been good lately. Between my medicine, the cigars, and some smarts I've had good control over it, though that might change soon. It may not be too good for my heart to get all charged up, but it feels damn good. I shouldn't enjoy this, but I am.

CHAPTER THREE

The Boy

Kozz rummaged through the remaining goods on the drug store floor. He found a leather bag and loaded it with his prescriptions, several packages of dehydrated food, a few meal bars, bandage wraps, and some other odds and ends, then he strapped it onto his shoulder and went out the door. Kozz welcomed the outside chill and set out for his truck, taking a new path back and cutting through the dip in the middle of the street. The direct route to the main streets took him through a thin alley, bordered on one side by a wire fence and the other by the back ends of homes.

Along the path Kozz spotted another light shining in the night. A back porch light hung from its holding by a solitary wire, still emanating a faint, frost-covered glow. The geothermal generator in the yard was still running and had kept itself warm and free of snow. White powder around the home sparkled as Kozz walked, reflecting the bulb's light like a shimmering sea on a moonlit night. He approached the back

windows and looked inside, seeing that nothing was left but a hefty-looking table in the center of the house. Kozz moved on, the homes growing in size and decoration as he neared the main streets.

Thud.

A hollow sound in the distance. *It could be anything*, thought Kozz, *maybe a garbage can falling over or a door swinging in the breeze.*

Bam!

A small explosion out there somewhere, like a large firecracker. Kozz was not sure what was going on, but Red had found her way into his hand. The noise was far away and he did not feel an immediate threat, but the sounds changed and amplified as he approached the main streets. An extended scraping sound, like a rusty knife on sheet metal, made Kozz cringe.

He reached the street, exited the alleyway, and down the road he saw a sight that made his heart drop. *Shit.* Two bodies were tearing at his truck. He saw that many of the tires had been popped and the energy cell compartment was opened and bent back. “Get your asses off her you dirty freaks!” Kozz’s shout caught their attention. A tall, thin man bounded through the snow towards Kozz, and not far behind was a child struggling to move through the deep snow.

“Tell me someone’s in there you dirty bastard!” Kozz held

Red with one arm, straight like an arrow towards his assailant. The tall man ran through the drifts with ease and was soon close enough for Kozz to see the glow in his eyes. “Hey day-glo, is there anyone in there who can hear me?” The creature was unmoved by Kozz's words. It stomped forward and raised its hands like a carnivorous beast ready to pounce on its prey. The creature was close. “Last chance, buddy.” It ducked its head forward and charged like a bull. Red shivered with excitement. Closer it came, the demon almost leaped from the man’s eyes. Closer. Red braced herself. Close enough.

KABLAM!

Half of the man’s face was gone, its remaining eye beamed like a flashlight in the night and it gurgled its scream through the blood that poured down its throat. The man’s body fell forward and the demon’s deathly howls were muffled by the snow. The boy followed the trench-like path the man had made and ran at Kozz. He was small with thin, shoulder-length black hair that reminded Kozz of a fistful of string. The boy crawled over the hills of snow as he approached Kozz, white eyes gleaming like the moon.

Shit. There’s no fucking way I can kill a kid. The boy found a solid piece of ground and jumped into a sprint. Kozz noticed the screwdriver the kid held in his hand and Red dropped to his side, sliding back into her holster. *I’ve gotta do something. Doesn’t matter if he might try to kill me, he looks too much*

like— The boy lunged forward, hacking with the screwdriver. Kozz brushed him to the side, but the kid swung back and grazed Kozz’s thigh with the tip, cutting through his jeans and a few layers of skin. Kozz bent down to grip the boy’s arm and ripped the tool out of his hand, tossing it into the distance where it disappeared into the deep snow.

The boy thrashed about. Kozz pulled him in and wrapped him up in a tight bear hug, holding his arms so that only the boy’s feet were free as they kicked in the air. Kozz squeezed, and the boy squirmed. The child grunted like an angry ape and whipped his head around, gaining enough stretch to bite down on Kozz’s arm and rip off a piece of flesh. *Shit, what if it is an infection? This little bastard might have given it to me.* Kozz compacted his arms, his bulging muscles crushing the boy, suffocating him. Something popped, likely one of the boy’s ribs. Kozz held for a moment longer and then threw the kid to the ground.

The fire-eyed boy arched in pain when he hit the hard street. He tried to recover, but Kozz dropped a knee on his chest, putting his weight into the knee and twisting it. The boy, the demon, writhed in pain. “Say goodbye, kid.” Kozz grabbed Red and slowly motioned her towards the boy’s head. “Your time is up.” Kozz set Red between the child’s eyes and a smirk appeared on the boy’s face, widening into a devilish smile as Kozz’s face went grim. “Burn in hell.” Kozz’s right forearm

flexed as he tightened his grip, placing a finger on the trigger. The boy chuckled with the demonic double voice like Moe had, one soft like a child's voice and the other heavy like a diesel engine. Kozz put pressure on the trigger and started to pull it back.

The glow in the boy's eyes vanished, and Kozz saw a familiar fear and confusion in the child's brown eyes. Sweat and melted snow soaked the boy's forehead, causing his hair to stick to his head like a mop. His eyes darted all around, examining the setting. He focused on the gun that poked his forehead and the grisly glare of the old man that held it, then he became aware of the prominent pain in his chest. His lips quivered.

The shock of seeing the boy's transformation held Kozz in his position for a moment before he lifted himself off of the child and backed away, trying to show as best he could that he meant no harm. The boy scuttled backwards until he settled in a deep drift of snow. He panted and heaved, wincing at the pain he felt with every inward breath. The boy's world had abruptly morphed into a blackened twister of fear, confusion, and pain. Kozz was the first to speak.

"I'm not gonna hurt you anymore, kid. It was the demon that held you that I was after, and it's gone now. You're safe."

The boy's defensive posture did not change. He could not remember what had happened to him, but what Kozz was

saying sounded right, even if it did not make any sense.

“As far as I can tell,” said Kozz, “you and me are the only sensible people left in this town now. It was only me until I tricked that demon out of you.” The boy held his chest with one hand and touched the center of his forehead with the other. “I held Red to your head, but she didn’t thirst for your blood. One of your ribs is fractured. Maybe broken, but I doubt it. I’m sorry about that.” He stepped towards the boy, but stopped short as the kid looked like he was about to bolt. “My name is Kozz. I once had a son about your age, his name is Jake. What’s your name, kid?”

The boy tried to speak. “C-ca...” He coughed and cringed at the pain before working his way around it. “Caleb. I’m Caleb.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Caleb.” Kozz grabbed his leather bag and showed it to the boy. “I’ve got some bandages I just picked up from the store. Let’s wrap you up and then head over to my truck. They’ll help you heal better and I’ve got some aspirin for the pain.”

Caleb examined the area, noticing the lack of lights and people. He saw the dead man down the street and then looked away. Something had happened that he could not remember. The town was different. He knew that Kozz had killed the man only minutes earlier, he felt like he should have a memory of it, but he had no other choice than to trust him at the moment. He nodded towards Kozz and tried to stand on his own.

Kozz took two of the rolls of medical wrap out of his bag and walked over to Caleb. The boy's muscles went stiff when Kozz neared. "This is gonna hurt, but it's gonna help. You'll pull through. Caleb's a strong name." Kozz wrapped the bandage around the boy's thin torso and over his bony shoulder. The child backed away as he was being wrapped, considering escape, but Kozz pulled Caleb close so that he could properly tend to the boy's injury. Kozz offered Caleb four aspirins and some water, but the boy only accepted the drink. Kozz put the pills away, impressed by the boy's toughness. He wrapped his bite wound and hoped that he was not going to turn into one of those demons.

Kozz helped Caleb stand up. Walking was excruciating for Caleb at first, but he quickly learned how to breathe and lean properly to avoid the sharpest pains. Kozz offered to carry Caleb, but the boy had none of it. "Grandma," said Caleb. "I want to see my grandma."

"Sure kid. We'll go find your grandma after stopping by my rig."

Kozz was dismayed as they approached his truck. Seeing the damage up close broke his heart. "My girl," he said. "What did you do to my girl?" Kozz walked over to the front of his truck and put a hand on her grill like he was feeling for a pulse. Several of the tires had been slashed, more than he had spares for. Everywhere the truck had dents and screwdriver-sized

puncture wounds. The energy cell compartment was opened and bent back like the other vehicle he had seen, and inside the energy cells were shattered and many of the other parts had been ripped and torn. Kozz knew how to repair most of the damage, but his experience was limited and even if he had all the necessary parts it would take him days to get her back in operating condition.

Caleb did not know much about vehicles, but he knew that the truck was enormous and looked to be in bad shape. “Who did this?”

Kozz was flabbergasted. “You mean you don’t remember doing it?”

Caleb stood wide-eyed, afraid of evoking Kozz’s anger. He shook his head.

“Caleb, the demon that was inside you did it. That demon and the one inside that dead man back there.” Caleb’s first instinct was to deny such an accusation. “I only killed the man because his demon was going to kill me. That’s why I had to hurt you, Caleb. Your demon tried to kill me too. I wasn’t able to save that poor guy, but I saved you from the evil that held you.”

Caleb’s mind was racing, trying to recall the truth that Kozz spoke. It was there, but he could not access it. He felt like imploding from the disarray of his memories, the frustration of the emptiness in his mind. “I c-can’t remember. I think it’s

true, but I can't remember. Kozz, I can't remember." The boy wept. Kozz balanced himself in the quake of the boy's sorrow, trying not to crack himself. He moved forward to hold Caleb, but the boy backed away. He may have felt the truth of the situation, but he still did not trust the man that had held a gun to his head. Kozz let the boy cry out his worries, his concerns, and tried to figure out what they were going to do now without a vehicle.

CHAPTER FOUR

Confusion

Caleb pointed in the direction of his grandma's house, noting that it was not a far walk. Kozz thought she may have left town like everyone else, but it was possible that she had stayed behind, wondering where her grandson was. His hopes were not high.

Only a couple of blocks away, the home was small and subdued, perched further back from the street than the other buildings. Soft light seeped from a side window. Caleb moved forward towards the door, but Kozz held him back.

"I'll make sure it's safe first."

"But Kozz, she's in there."

"Wait outside until I come get you." Kozz pulled out his knife and handed it to Caleb. "Use it if you need to."

Caleb did not have the breath to argue. Kozz opened the unlocked door and walked inside with Red ready to draw. The air was musty and cold. The furniture was neatly in place and untouched trinkets decorated every inch of shelf space, none

having been packed and taken away. Thick carpet brushed ice and snow off of Kozz's boots as he crept about the house. He made his way to the hallway at the other end of the living room and saw the same soft, stagnant light under a doorway at the far end. He heard a low, unintelligible murmur coming from the room.

The hallway was thin enough that Kozz had to squeeze his way through. The noise became louder as he approached the door and he recognized the sound.

“Warning. A fatal disease is spreading...”

His body shivered at the remembrance of the deafening message. Kozz pushed the door open with his free hand, the other held his protector. The hinges squeaked like scurrying mice as they slid on their pivots. A small telepod displayed a gray screen with the warning message playing on a quiet loop. The muted light dispersed throughout the room and led Kozz's eyes to a horrifying mess on the master bed where a figure almost not recognizable enough to call an old woman laid battered and eviscerated on top of the mattress.

The mess was a dark red stain in an otherwise colorless room. Kozz would have considered himself faded to such a sight after living a life such as his, but a decade of gore sobriety had weakened his gag reflex. He backed out of the room and

down the hall, half falling and half leaping onto the living room couch.

Kozz sat up and buried his face into the cushions, trying to erase the image and settle his stomach.

“Grandma!” Caleb called as he entered her home. “It’s me grandma!” He ran to the telepod-lit hallway as Kozz sat up, shouting “Caleb, no!”

A short, high-pitched scream pierced Kozz’s heart. The boy let out a few wails, then he stumbled back down the hallway and landed himself on Kozz’s lap.

“I remember!” Caleb shouted, tears dripping and snot oozing. “I did it. I remember. I did it. I did...” He repeated the phrases until they turned into drooling sobs.

“You didn’t do anything, Caleb.”

“No!” the boy cried. “I did it. I killed grandma! I killed her I killed her. I remember! The thing inside me, it made me do it. I fought it, but it was too strong. I watched it make me kill her. It killed my grandma!”

The boy’s confessions hit Kozz like a smack in the face. That was proof enough to him that this was no disease. A monster had taken over the little boy, the weak child that cried in his lap, and had made him murder his own flesh and blood.

“It wasn’t you, it was that evil demon that was inside you. Caleb, you have to understand that this isn’t your fault.”

“But I did it—“

“No! The demons controlled you. They committed the crime. You fought them, you were brave, and your grandma would be proud of you for trying to protect her. You can't blame yourself.” KoZZ held the child and rubbed a warm hand on his back. “Caleb is a brave name. You were very brave to try and fight them off. There was nothing more you could've done.”

The boy convulsed in his sobs, the pain in his ribs making it difficult to breathe between the wails, and KoZZ just held him, giving Caleb something solid to hold on to in the chaos of everything around him until the boy cried himself dry. KoZZ waded in the sadness of the moment and processed his thoughts. They had to move forward.

An hour passed before Caleb was steady enough to go on. Sad thoughts consumed the boy, but his uncontrollable cries had quieted. He mentioned his parents' home and told KoZZ that it resided miles east of the town.

“How far of a walk would it be?” KoZZ asked.

“I've only walked it once with my dad when we went on a hunting trip.” Caleb mumbled. His energy had faded. He stared at the ground as he spoke. “Took us like five days but we camped a lot and moved slow when we were hunting the whitecats. Probably be shorter if we went straight there.”

“With the two of us beaten up like the pair of eggs we are it'll take a week, I bet.” Caleb huffed at the remark, letting KoZZ

know that he would have smiled if the situation were different. They limped their way back to Kozz's destroyed truck. A few days walk out in the frozen wilderness would kill them if they were not fully prepared, but as luck would have it Kozz had stowed emergency supplies in his truck cabin in case the behemoth broke down on the frozen plains. He grabbed a pair of rolled up sleeping bags, a few everlights, and the remaining food storage. Kozz held an assortment of bags on his shoulders, but Caleb insisted that he could carry something and so Kozz strapped the smaller of the sleeping bags and a small bundle of food to the boy's back. They walked eastward, leaving the rig behind them as Kozz pondered the likelihood that Caleb's parents were still around. The couple lived out in the country and may have missed the initial catastrophe that struck the town, much like Kozz had.

Caleb looked pitiful. Kozz had never seen a child so sad. "Hang in there, kid. She loved you, you know that. It wasn't your fault." Kozz felt a memory stab him in the chest. "It wasn't your fault. It never was."

"Yeah," muttered Caleb. The word oozed out of him like it was sludge. He wanted to believe it, but he did not.

The duo headed towards the end of town and Kozz scoured the landscape in front of them for any signs of danger, his instincts telling him to search every hole and shadow an enemy could hide in. He now knew that there was not a soul

left in the town other than the demon-eyed zombies, and so he kept his senses open to anything that would catch his attention.

A face with glowing eyes flashed in a second story window. Kozz had seen it. “Run, Caleb.” His voice was firm, but not harsh. “Run to the tree and hide behind it.” Caleb looked ahead and saw the tree Kozz was pointing towards. A large pine stood at the end of the street, guiding tourists to their destination like a welcoming beacon of vacation and relaxation. The tree was the only one in the entire town. Planted long ago, it had been well tended by the townspeople. The pine had become the image of Edgetown, a monument that could be seen from miles away on the flat ice fields.

Caleb hesitated at the sudden command, but he saw Kozz’s silver eyes staring at him through the darkness and understood the sternness in his voice. Caleb started to run, but a woman burst through the front door of one of the houses and sprinted straight towards the boy and Caleb froze in place. He pulled out the knife Kozz had given him and held it out, fully extended in the direction of the blood-covered woman. She clawed at the air as she ran towards him. Caleb heard Kozz’s voice in his head, telling him again to run, but his muscles had seized up and he could not make them move. The woman’s voice mixed with something deeper and grittier and together they screamed as she launched herself at the child.

KABLAM!

The woman's shoulder exploded in a flurry of flesh. She fell to the ground and grabbed Caleb's leg, her blood staining the white snow she sank into. The boy stood still with his knife extended and the woman pulled his leg out from under him.

KABLAM!

The woman howled into the snow as light spilled out of her body. Kozz walked over and pried Caleb's leg free from her dying grip, only then seeing the face of his victim. "Oh God," sighed Kozz, "Linda." The number of friends he had killed was increasing. *I had no other choice. She was going to kill the boy.*

"Kozz, behind you!" Caleb pulled on Kozz's coat and pointed down the street back towards the truck. Three more demons were bounding through the snow.

"Run Caleb! To the tree!" Caleb did not stall this time. He went straight for the tree as Kozz turned around and found Red in the air, eyeing her targets. *Aim true, Kozz. Take your time.* His eyes followed the barrel, landing square on the foremost threat. He saw the straight line that had forged between Red and the young man who charged down the street. If Kozz waited a second more, that line would be gone.

KABLAM!

All that was left of the young man's throat were a few slivers of clinging flesh. He did not scream, but his wounds

poured blood and light like a waterfall. Next up was an older man with frostbitten fingertips. *Is Caleb alright? Did he make it to the tree?*

KABLAM!

The man fell. His knee had been shot through, the bone blasted to splinters. Kozz went to fire once more.

Click.

“Damn!” Kozz had not reloaded. “It’s been too long. I must be way out of practice to forget this kind of shit.” The third charging demon was a bulbous woman who was now upon Kozz. She tackled him and landed a solid head butt on his forehead that put him in a momentary daze. The glow in her eyes brightened with ferocity as she pummeled him with her fists, drool dripping and slinging all over Kozz as she gnashed her teeth and bit at him. He held her back with his forearm and landed a blow to her jaw. Blood mixed with drool as he hit her again and then a stinging pain shot up Kozz’s leg.

The frostbitten man had crawled his way to Kozz, leaving a bloody path in the snow. The demon sank his teeth into Kozz’s calf. He kicked at the glowing eyes with his other leg and landed a solid strike on the man’s balding head, knocking him back and sending a swell of pain through Kozz’s sprained ankle. Another direct hit with his good foot cracked the man’s neck and Kozz heard him scream his death to the world.

The woman’s weight crushed Kozz and made it difficult for

him to breathe. She attacked with her fists, landing blow after blow on Kozz's hardened face. He caught one of her punches with his right hand and bent her arm back further than it was meant to go, dislocating it with a pop. The woman shrieked in pain and bent forward to bite at his throat. Kozz tried to buck her off, but her weight was too much. As she went in for the kill, he grabbed her other arm and snapped it over her back, then he pulled at it hard and she rolled off of him with the flow of pain.

Kozz stood up and kicked her onto her stomach. He jumped on her back with both knees landing firm on her backbone, then he grabbed her head and twisted it.

The woman's body flopped around like a blubber-filled fish. She bellowed into the night, eyes and mouth shooting shafts of light into the darkness. When she died all was silent again.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Ranch

Heart pounding and aching, Kozz struggled to stay conscious. He numbed his bloody face with wet snow and wiped it clean, then heaved his mass from the ground and gathered the bags of supplies that had fallen from his body. *Madness. I've got enough of their blood and saliva on me to pass on any disease. I've got no chance if that's how it spreads.* Kozz walked down the street and checked behind the tree, finding Caleb crouched in hiding.

"I'm sorry I didn't help you." Caleb was carving a stick figure into the tree.

"You listened well. Best you hide and be safe from the danger."

"But you almost died! I saw. I could have got them with the knife." He pulled the knife away from the tree and looked at the blade. "I'm a hunter. I know how to use it, my mom and dad taught me. I was just surprised by that first lady. I could have helped you."

“Caleb is a brave name,” said Kozz, “but I wouldn’t have let you help. You need to be safe. You need to be away from the danger. I can’t risk you getting hurt.”

“But Kozz.”

“No Caleb!” Kozz noticed that his voice was getting loud and he turned away from Caleb. “I’ll do the fighting. You hide. If I lose you like I lost Jake.... You just listen to me and run when I say to. I’ll protect you until we find your parents.” He turned back and punched the tree, and then he punched it again. Caleb was scared. Kozz saw the boy’s brown eyes well up and so he put his anger aside and tried to warm his frigid presence.

The lone eastward road continued across the flat ice of the high plains until it led down into a valley that separated two stretches of rolling hills. Kozz thought it might be best to stay off the main road, avoiding any houses that might contain more trouble. They trekked through the snow to the hills on the southern side of the road. Daylight had breached the horizon and from the tops of the highest hills Kozz could see the green forests to the south. The approaching day weighed heavy on the shoulders of the two exhausted and injured wanderers.

They never ventured too far from the road, always keeping it in their sights. Along the roadway there were many abandoned vehicles covered in snowfall. Some were buried

deep under days or weeks of powder, but several seemed as if they had been abandoned recently. Kozz did not think it was worth the risk to try to find an operable vehicle amongst the junk. It was too dangerous.

Before they rested Kozz wanted to be as far from Edgetown as possible. He did not know how bad the trouble was everywhere else, but he knew that town was a hell hole. The sun began to set and the air became colder at about the time when Caleb was no longer able to hold himself up. Kozz decided to find a spot to rest for the night and they stumbled upon a small shack that looked as if it had been abandoned for years. It stood beside a large rock formation. The roof was missing many of its wooden shingles, and the siding was cracking in several places. Ice had crusted the door shut and Kozz slammed his body into it several times before it opened.

Inside was a single room with some dilapidated furniture and a haphazard stone fireplace that was pieced together by unprofessional hands. Outside Caleb slowly gathered fallen shingles, pieces of siding, and wooden molding, but a of couple armfuls was all his aching chest would allow him to carry. Kozz broke down the worn furniture and then started a fire, rehydrating a package of powdered beans to go with their meal bars. The shack did not hold the heat well and the breeze blew through the old walls with ease. As long as they stayed close to the fire they could keep away the stinging chill of the frosty

night air.

“Kozz,” said Caleb with his legs wrapped in his sleeping bag and his hands holding a can of warm beans, “where did you get your gun?”

“My pops gave her to me before he died.”

“How did he die?”

“Him and my mother were in an accident when I was only a little older than you. I don’t know exactly what happened, no one ever told me. Red, she’s all I have left to remember them by. She’s an antique though, you don’t see many like her around these days with all those laser shooters that look like kid toys.”

“My dad has old guns like that one too, but he never uses most of them. They just hang on the wall above our fireplace. He likes them a lot.”

“Well when we get to your house your dad and I might just have something in common to talk about.”

“Yeah. Maybe you guys will be friends.”

“Yeah. Maybe.”

It was difficult for both of them to sleep that night. Kozz had nightmares full of twisted faces screaming in the night. He kept seeing his wife and son walking like zombies with that demonic white glow in their eyes and woke up many times sweaty and angry. Every time he woke he heard Caleb’s whimpers as the boy suffered through his own terrors. Kozz

thought of waking Caleb to shake him out of the bad dreams, but decided to let him rest knowing that falling asleep with a cracked rib was difficult enough to do once a night.

The morning brought soreness and strain, but the morning was warmer than the last, making the trek ahead seem less daunting in their minds. The valley made a slow curve to the south where the wanderers soon found themselves facing a horizon of trees.

"That's where my house is," said Caleb, "right before you get to the woods."

As the hours passed Kozz learned that Caleb was staying in Edgetown with his grandma while he was going to school, seeing his parents several times a week and living with them during the off times of the year. The child cried as he spoke about his grandma, whom he loved and looked up to.

"How are you holding up, kid?"

"Fine, I guess."

"Don't say that. You can't be fine. She was someone you loved very much."

"What in the world happened anyway? What happened to me and all the others? What's going on? I wish I could just go back in time when it was all normal!" Caleb's face scrunched as he gritted his teeth and kicked at the snow as hard as he could. He winced at the pain in his chest. "Why did I do what I did to grandma!"

"I wish I could answer those questions for you, kid." Kozz put a hand on the back of Caleb's head. "Don't blame yourself, and calm down before you go and make that snapped twig of yours worse."

They later sat down for a midday break and built a small fire out of some brush that survived despite the snow. They settled in a small depression within one of the hills that was almost like a cave, resting on a patch of bare dirt and rock that had been left alone by the snow.

"So, um, you had a son?" Caleb remembered that the last time Kozz had mentioned his son he had become angry. He was afraid to ask, but he wanted to know.

"Yes." Kozz had been poking at the fire and stopped when he heard the question.

"What was he like?"

Kozz stared into the small, dancing flames for a long time before speaking. "Jake was smart, funny, full of love. He was sad when he had to stay home from school. He always helped his mother make dinner and loved to eat everything he made. He wanted to be an airship captain when he grew up, just like he thought daddy was. He loved airships, built models of them that hung from his bedroom ceiling. There was this one time that he...." Kozz choked on his words and put his head down, hiding his watering eyes from Caleb. "He was a good kid."

"What happened to him?"

“Those are some difficult memories for me, Caleb. They hurt too much. Maybe another time.”

Kozz stomped out the fire and he took his medication with the last of the melted snow water, then he put the pill bottle back into his bag and pulled out a cigar. *Not many left.* He lit it up and breathed in its heat, burning the sorrow out of his body and staying down wind of Caleb as they walked up the next hill.

Kozz spotted a person walking along the road, but the body staggered in an abnormal way, limping as if it were injured. The person looked into each abandoned vehicle it passed. Kozz and Caleb were too far away to see its eyes, but it was obvious that the person was not moving the right way, as if it did not know how to operate its body. Together they decided it would be best to not approach the person. They left the body to wander the valley road as they continued along their hill-strewn path.

“Kozz, I sometimes think I remember things,” said Caleb as they walked.

“You don’t have to think about what that demon made you do.”

“No, like...like I remember when it first happened. Something was talking to me in my head, but I couldn’t understand it. I think I remember it pushing me, bullying me. I told it to go away and tried to push back, but it was stronger.

And sometimes I see flashes, like memories of being able to see through my eyes when I wasn't in control. It's really weird."

"What did the voice sound like?"

"I don't know. It just made no sense." Caleb pondered his thoughts. "The last things I really remember is that the telepod was telling everybody to stay inside because there was a bad infection going around. School was closed for a few days and the police had caught a couple of people that had the sickness and they locked them up. I was with my grandma and then my head started to feel funny and then I woke up with you pointing your gun in my face."

"Do you remember what the date was when you were inside your grandma's house?"

"Like, the eighth or ninth."

"That's not even two weeks ago. It really hasn't been that long at all."

That night they risked entering a home that was more cozy than the rickety shack they had slept in the night before. Kozz scouted it out and found no one in the residence. The home was a large cabin, well maintained but completely abandoned and there were several soft beds for them to choose from. Night terrors still haunted them both. Sleep was more comfortable, but they had little of it.

The following morning Kozz had to rewrap Caleb. The boy

had squirmed around so much in the night that he had undone the bandaging. Kozz's ankle was stiff, but the pain was dull. He checked his own bite wounds and scrapes, all scabbing and healing just fine. He had no symptoms of the "infection" but decided to keep check on it in case he had to run himself away from Caleb. *Run away to protect him, thought Kozz, would it be right of me to run away again?*

The undulating hills decreased in size as they approached the forest's edge. They descended to a lower elevation, making their way down the glacier. The deep snow they had been traveling through gained a thin layer of crunchy ice spread across its surface. Caleb's light body stayed on top of the snow and he giggled as he watched Kozz's heavy bulk sink with every step. It was frustrating for the big man.

Blue skies were gradually covered by swirls of gray. Darkness loomed over the lands behind them to the northwest. Given the time of year, Kozz thought Mother Nature had one last ice storm to throw their way before she gave way to the relief of the warmer months. They were going to have to get to Caleb's house in a hurry.

"It's not that far," said Caleb as he and Kozz walked the descending hills at a brisk pace, "I think I can see it sometimes if I look hard enough."

They directed their path towards the road in order to make finding the home a bit easier. The blackened sky had gained on

them throughout the day. Its low rumble reverberated through the hills, allowing Kozz and Caleb to feel it in their feet. The icy teeth of the dragon that consumed the sky would chomp down and swallow them if they were not able to find shelter by nightfall.

Caleb noticed a few land marks in the area and gathered a stronger sense of direction. A large pile of boulders meant they had to go one way, a meadow of turquoise tundra poking through the frost said they had to turn around a hill over there. The snow at their feet was now a dense layer of white ice, broken here and there by hardy, ground-hugging plants. Kozz followed Caleb's orders, but urged the boy to move faster.

The sun was engulfed by the darkness that hid the western horizon and rumbling clouds filled the sky sooner than Kozz had expected. Sprinkles of hail and wet sleet pelted their backs, the wind growing in strength with every step they took. The low rumble grew into a roar that sounded like the very earth behind them was being torn from its surface.

"There!" Caleb pointed towards a distant light in the field ahead. "That's my ranch. We made it!"

The patches of dirt and tundra beneath them would soon be blanketed in yet another layer of white. They hurried down the field along a wood and wire fence which outlined the property and arrived at a gateway with a sign that read "Northwood Ranch". The home was within plain view. Lights

were on in all the windows and two people were seen running out the front door, perhaps to greet their son.

“Momma! Dad!”

Caleb hustled forward, but Kozz stood and watched for another moment. The parents did not run towards their son, they ran around the building, both holding objects. Then he heard the screams. They came from the woman, shrill and full of distress. She was being chased. The screams continued, her voice fading as she rounded the building and the cacophony of the approaching storm ascended. Kozz bolted forward, passing Caleb within a few strides. She was in danger and he had to help before it was too late.

A loud crash stopped both Kozz and Caleb in their tracks, and then another one followed. It sounded like thunder, but it came from the wrong direction. It came from behind the house. Caleb went to run forward again. Kozz grabbed the boy by the collar of his jacket and told him to stay put. Red appeared, fully loaded. Caleb shook his head at Kozz. He understood that Kozz thought there was trouble, but he could not let the man go at his parents with a gun. Kozz took a step towards the house and Caleb was ready to fight the gun from his hands. The woman walked around the corner of the home looking worn, disheveled, empty, and with a shotgun in her hands. Red rose up into the air. The woman hollered a sorrowful cry and dropped to the ground. Kozz and Caleb both

ran to her.

“Momma!” Caleb yelled over the bustle of the storm.
“Momma, what’s wrong?”

“Caleb?” The woman raised her face from the cradle of her hands. “Caleb. Oh my—my Caleb!” She opened her arms and started to rise, but Caleb dove into her as she knelt on one knee. Kozz stopped at a distance and waited for the woman to make the first move. She eyed him in her wariness, holding her child like she had nothing else in the world. Mother and son embraced each other as if they thought they would never see each other again.

“Mom,” said Caleb as he looked back over his shoulder, “this is Kozz. He’s my friend. He saved me.”

“Saved you?”

“Yeah, from the demons.”

Caleb’s mother’s concern wrinkled her ageless face. She stood up, her short hair fluttering in the wind. She wore a long, brown dress that held steady in the turbulence with its thickness and weight. “Who are you?” she asked.

“A friend of Caleb’s,” replied Kozz.

She held her son at her side, considering the rock of a man that stood against the backdrop of an approaching storm. His face was stoic and scarred, but she felt a warm energy that emanated from him. “Come inside before we have to pry you off the ice.”

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She walked to the front door with Caleb held close. Kozz followed them inside. They had only just entered through the door when Caleb asked “Where’s dad?” and his mother dropped again, succumbing to her emotions.

She tried to speak, but only one word escaped her sorrow.

“Dead,” was all she said.

CHAPTER SIX

Moving Onward

Mother spent the night in her bedroom with her son. She told Caleb that she had shot his father, Harold, just before he and Kozz had arrived, and she said that his father had become sick from the disease that was afflicting the entire world, that he went mad and tried to kill her. She tried to talk to her husband. She tried to hold him back, but he was too strong. She tried to run, but had nowhere to go and there was no one to help her. She did everything she could, but in the end she had to protect herself.

Caleb confessed what became of his grandmother. Talk of murder and betrayal spat from the child's mouth. His mother's eyes widened. What was she hearing? She held her son tight, hushing his cries. "You would never do anything like that," she kissed his cheek, and then his forehead. "It wasn't your fault."

"That's what Kozz kept saying," admitted her son.

She squeezed her child. She felt nauseous. *Harold's mother is gone too? Caleb? This can't be happening.*

Their wails mixed with the howls of the wind. The storm unleashed its power throughout the night, shaking the home with its relentless force and pelting it with clumps of ice and snow. The noise drowned out the cries of of the broken family, allowing Kozz to gain some peace despite being surrounded by sorrow and thunder. He rested in a bed too small in a room too similar to one he remembered from his past. Inside Caleb's bedroom hung a dozen airships from the ceiling. The walls were stripes of bright blues, and the child-sized furniture sat neatly in place where his mother had put it as she had tidied up his room in his absence. The smell of the room was enough to bring Kozz to tears, its sweet clean scent masking the layers of dirt and adventure Caleb had brought into his home over the years. The weight of his memories caused Kozz's mental barrier to crack, and he let them pour through that night. As the wind cried and his neighbors cried, so too did he. The recollections of his past life hurt Kozz, but they did so in a gentle way, soothing his heart as much as they made it ache, massaging his muscles as they tensed, catching his tears as they fell. The storm carried on and the residents of the house shed all the tears they could. They all fell asleep to the swaying motions of the home and the bombarding sounds of the sky's icy tears.

The next morning Kozz woke to sunlight beaming in his eye and the aromas of a morning kitchen. Looking out the lone window in Caleb's room, Kozz saw that the blizzard had dumped a good foot or so of snow in its wake. There was a slight chill in the room, but when he opened the door he was greeted with the heat from the stove and fireplace.

Mother and son were quietly eating their breakfasts. Kozz saw the eggs and ham on the kitchen counter and he looked back over to the others. Luciele formally introduced herself and then motioned towards the food, signaling for Kozz to go and grab some while it was warm. He scraped a hearty amount onto a plate and joined the others at the dining table. He participated in the silence, but was drawn out of it when Luciele asked, "Is what my son says true? Was he one of the infected? You saved him?"

"All true," replied Kozz. Caleb looked up from his plate, telling his mom 'I told you so' with his eyes.

"Thank you. I owe you more than I could ever repay. The food and bed are the least I could do."

"I appreciate it all, but you owe me nothing. I saved Caleb because I wanted to, because I needed to. He's safe now and I'll be on my way soon."

"No. From the way you devour your food between your words I can tell you don't get many home-cooked meals.

You're going to stay and rest."

"Thank you," said Kozz with a piece of ham falling from his mouth, "but I need to be on my way."

"What you need is a bath and a change of clothes. Your face is a mess of wounds and your shirt is made of more blood than cotton. Caleb told me what you two have been through and there's no need for you to run away and see more of it all broken and exhausted like you are." Luciele stood up and walked to her bedroom. "Come. I'll grab you something to wear while I clean your stuff. You're a big guy, but I think some of Harold's baggy pajamas will fit."

"Mom only acts bossy like this when dad is in trouble," said Caleb. He looked at Kozz, then back down to his half-empty plate. "He's gone now, Kozz."

"I know. He'll be looking over you from above now, helping you when you're in trouble."

"Yeah. That's kinda what mom said."

Luciele emerged with a handful of garments and handed them to Kozz. He excused himself to the restroom to change. The pajamas were not a perfect fit, but Kozz was not uncomfortable. For an average sized man, Harold wore large and baggy night clothes. Kozz handed Luciele his stained shirt and pants, but said he would scrub his jacket himself.

Kozz sat himself next to the fire and admired the wall above where a dozen different guns perched, all from the

gunpowder and metal era. Caleb brought Kozz a cup of hot tea. Kozz held the cup in one hand and Red in the other. Caleb sat in the chair across from him, wrapped in fresh bandages. He had finally taken some aspirin after his mother told him it was alright. Kozz spouted information about each of the different types of guns above the fireplace and Caleb listened, sharing the knowledge he held that was given to him by his father. The conversation led to the hunting trips Caleb had taken with his parents, a boy reminiscing about a man he loved, admired, and could not yet accept was truly gone from the world.

Kozz stayed for several days. His clothes were cleaned, but they still held their red stains and there was no other clothing in the house that would fit him. He helped Luciele dig through the cold ground behind the house and bury her husband. She planted a wooden tombstone at his grave and a funeral was held outside, wife and son grieving their loss while Kozz waited inside.

Luciele sat down and talked with Kozz the next day as the sun rose over the horizon. She asked him about who he was, about his past, about where he was going to go and what he was going to do. Kozz had little in the way of answers to give her. He held on tight to his secrets and only told her that he was heading to the quarantine zone inside Port Town where he planned on finding a ship to Erde. He told her about his life on Frostarc the last ten years, but she found that about as

interesting as a bent nail. She explained how her family had moved to Frostarc from Erde when she was a child. She had met Harold in their younger days on a camping trip with mutual friends back when he was a big game hunter, and years later they decided to get married and settle on their ranch. She shared her story openly, hoping it would encourage Kozz to do the same.

"My past is full of pain," said Kozz. "I'd rather forget about it. Excuse me, doll." He left the room. Luciele sat where she was and stared at the armchair Kozz had vacated. Harold loved to sit in that chair and watch the flickering fire with a cold beer in his hand. His favorite dirty ball cap was still perched on top of the chair. She buried her face in her hands and let another wave of sorrow crash through her. Alone, she wept.

The day came when Kozz could wait no longer. Luciele and Caleb's tears only reminded him of his wife and his need to find her. He had to leave, but Luciele and Caleb did not meet him at the door to say their goodbyes. The morning when he was to head on his way, Kozz was met at the door by the mother and son garbed in their outdoor hunting gear and backpacks.

"What is this?" asked Kozz.

"We want to go with you," said Luciele, "to Port Town."

Kozz shook his head. "If out there is anything like Edgetown was, it's gonna be too dangerous. You're better off

staying here until this mess is taken care of.”

“We have no reason to stay.” Luciele dropped her bags to the ground with conviction and used her arm motions for emphasis as she spoke. “Harold is gone from our lives. There is too much work on the ranch for Caleb and I to do alone. With Edgetown empty like you say it is, we have nowhere to go for supplies. We may be safe from the disease if we stay but we will still be in danger of starvation and loneliness. I have to do what’s best for my son. We will be going to Port Town, to the quarantine zone. If you do not want us to travel with you then so be it, but it will be better for us all if we go together.”

“Why don’t you want us to go with you, Kozz?” Caleb spoke from behind his mother. She moved out of his way. “Is it because you’re scared that I’m gonna turn into one of those bad guys again? I’m sorry. I’ll fight it harder next time.”

“No, Caleb. God no. I just want you guys to be safe, away from the danger. I thought that when I brought you home you would be safe here with your family.” Kozz looked over the woman and child. They were so much like his family. He just wanted them to be protected, safe from harm. His past was evidence that he could not be the protection they needed, but the idea of them traveling alone in such dangerous circumstances, he could not even entertain the idea of leaving them to that. He had to protect them. He had to do better than he had done with his own family. “Let’s get going then,” he

submitted. "I only hope my best is good enough this time."

The others did not know the meaning in those last words, but they were glad to be traveling together. Outside, Kozz was surprised to find two large pack mules fully loaded with supplies. Luciele tied on the last few bags which her and Caleb were holding. "My boy is hurt and you're not in great shape either, bucko. We'll need these beasts to carry our load. Gram had our truck." In truth, Kozz felt fine. His ankle was healed and his wounds were just itchy scabs at this point, but he did not argue since they had a long way to travel on foot if they could not find a working vehicle. Luciele lifted her son onto one of the mules and Caleb grabbed the reins, commanding the creature with ease like he had ridden it many times before.

They set off due south, downhill towards the forest. The consensus was that there was a greater chance of running into people, and the infected, along the warm belt of the equator, but it would also make surviving the forces of nature a much easier task. Luciele and Caleb stopped by Harold's grave one last time to say goodbye before they were off, then together they crossed to the other end of the ranch before reaching the forest, passing the herd of wooly cattle the family had raised along their way. "The herd will survive without us to care for them," Luciele explained to her son, "especially with the last of the winter storms behind us and the warmer months on their way."

Living far away from town, it was rare for Caleb to have a friend to play with, and so his comic books became his companions. He hung out with heroes and adventurers. They shared stories with him, taught him life lessons, and encouraged him when he was feeling down. The heartbreak of losing his father and grandmother was tragic, but all of the grand adventures in his comic books held some sort of tragedy. Caleb cried when he thought of their deaths, he was afraid that he would become infected again, but he knew that he was now on his own adventure. Already he had seen battles and death, escaped the evil that had captured him, made a new friend, and now he was traveling on the back of a mule to a far away city.

Caleb decided that if he was going on an adventure, he would have to be brave. He opened up one of his books and sought out his favorite speech at the end of one of the tales. He had always dreamed of having an adventure like the heroes in his father's bedtime stories or in his comics. Now he was seeing how difficult a real adventure could be.

Go then young one, live life! Quit reading your books and watching your movies, instead go find your own adventure to tell. Do not focus on adding days to your life, focus on adding

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life to your days! Before you reach the clearing at the end of the path, go and blaze your own trails through the muck and grime of life. Do not be afraid to get a little dirt on your boots.

Gather your bearings and head out into the unknown. If you have no goal in life, make one. If you do not have a destination, find one, and when you get there find another. There may be some scary things out in the world, but what is the use of feeling safe inside your own home if you do not know what it is like to feel true fear? Now I am not saying to go out and seek danger, but you need to not worry about running into difficulties on the road of life.

I say unto you dear reader, unto you traveler of words, journeyer of prose, adventurer of the pages of another's life, break away from your linear stretch of paved comfort and step into the squishy mud that few others dare enter. Play in it, stomp through it, pick it up and squeeze it and feel it ooze through your fingers and smell it and taste it. Use every sense you have on that mud and do with it what you cannot to the paved path. Create your own story for others to read.

Caleb put down his comic book. It was only the first night out and he had already gone through one of the few he had packed in his bag.

A full day's travel brought the group to the edge of the woods at the end of the ranch. They chose an area for camp that was sheltered by a few small trees which stood outside the wall of old growth. The twigs and branches Kozz had gathered

held frost on the outside, but were dry inside. Luciele started a fire without any trouble.

“I don’t know where we are going to go,” said Luciele. “Caleb and I, we’re like two pickles without a jar. Do you think the quarantine zone will be safe?”

“Depends,” said Kozz, “on just how wide spread this outbreak is. Could be that they have a way to control it, could be that they don’t.”

“If only we had another choice. Harold and his mother were the only family I had left, and with them gone—” Luciele trailed off when she saw Caleb become upset at the mention of the departed. It was difficult for her to grasp that her son had become infected and in his state of delirium had committed such acts as attacking Kozz and murdering his own grandma. She still did not fully believe it, hoping that Caleb’s sickness had created the thoughts in his mind. Kozz had not protested anything Caleb had said, but she did not want to believe it. *How could such a thing happen?*

Their first night out in the open together was uncomfortable. The lone tent they had was barely large enough to fit the three of them, especially with Kozz being as large as he was, and the ground beneath them was frozen and hard. In such tight and awkward quarters Kozz knew they would be forced to get to know each other well during their journey. The night was quiet and still, other than the sporadic ‘haw’ made

by one of the mules.

The morning brought aching muscles, but everyone worked together to disassemble their campsite and made their way into the forest. The coniferous trees on the forest's perimeter had full branches all the way down to their trunks, but after breaching the first few rows the woods opened with only the roof of the forest harboring foliage. The edge of the forest was dotted here and there with stumps, trees that Luciele, Caleb, and Harold had previously cut down for firewood. There was no underbrush, only a thin layer of frozen ice that had entered the forest as light snow flurries landing on the undisturbed ground, succumbing to the winter chill and sinking down into a slab of ice. The air was quiet with not a single bird nor rodent to disturb the stillness.

Luciele took the lead, having spent a great deal of time in these woods with her husband and son. A good bit of the early travel was done on the trails the family had carved throughout the years. The barren forest was easy for the large mules to walk through, but it could be disorienting to a person who did not know the area well. Kozz was grateful to have Luciele as a guide.

The deeper they delved into the thickening spires of wood, the more the sunlight and ice dwindled. Generations of pine needles covered the forest floor. When Caleb was not on his mule he scuffed his feet along the ground, kicking away the

layers of frozen needles and uncovering the cracked earth below. “The roots under these old trees run deep,” said Luciele, “and you won't find much else sprouting from the ground in this neck of the woods. With nothing but acidic needles to eat it's near impossible for any little critters to survive. Whenever we hunted in these woods we had to reach the southern or eastern ends before we could find anything worth tracking. A few wandering predators will pass through from time to time, but only to get to somewhere else.”

The forest thickened like a soup that was set aside to cool. Their pace slowed as they worked to get the mules through the tightening packs of trees. “Get a move on you old heifer,” Kozz pushed one of the mules from the rear, wedging it between two large evergreens. Caleb turned around and giggled at the sight. His mother sighed.

“First off that isn't a she, it's a he,” said Luciele. “Secondly, he is not bovine. And thirdly I'm surprised he hasn't kicked you square in the jaw by now, get your hands off his behind already!” She hurried over to the front end of the mule and rubbed its head. “I'm sorry, baby. He doesn't know any better. I ain't sure what was going through that thick head of his.” Luciele grabbed its reins and backed the mule out, guiding it around the trees with ease. “Follow my lead and you won't be getting him stuck again, Kozz.”

“I was!” he huffed. “We were following your steps but then

that damn horse went off on its own way and got itself stuck.”

“Isn't a horse, and it won't go off thataways unless you make it go thataways. He knows how to follow quite well. You ever even worked with a mule before?”

“Animals never been quite my thing, darlin'.” Kozz took the reins from Luciele's hand. “Go on, we'll follow.”

She gave Kozz a fierce glare, but smiled when she turned away. Caleb buried his giggles into his shoulder.

They walked downhill into a large crater where small underbrush and saplings barely clung to life. A mostly frozen pond filled the bottom of the natural well, seeping between the trees like a marsh. They climbed to the other side of the dip and spent the night in a small clearing where one tree had fallen and taken a couple of others with it. A small patch of night sky poked through the pine-strewn roof above.

Caleb made the fire and Luciele warmed up some of her home-cooked leftovers before they spoiled. She set her packs aside as she cooked, and Kozz finally got a good look at the shotgun she was carrying. He asked if he could hold it.

“Mmhmm,” replied Luciele. She handed him the weapon.

The double-barrel felt cold and dirty in his hands. *The way it probably made Luciele's heart feel when she used it last*, thought Kozz. He looked it over, ran his hands along its surface, dismantled it, and then inspected the insides. “How did you land your hands on this beauty?”

“Harold is the collector,” she replied, “and he paid a good bit for this one. He had a bunch of firearms, what he calls his old guns. You saw some of 'em above our fireplace. I decided to leave the rest behind with him, except for this one.” She grabbed the gun from Kozz and put it back together. “I didn’t want to leave this one near him, the one that took his life away. It may have saved mine, but it killed my better half. My Harold.”

Luciele excused herself to the tent. Caleb drew in the pine needles on the ground with a stick and Kozz asked what he was drawing. Caleb told him that it was his father sitting in an airship, he was flying his dad away into the air to protect him from the infection. “My mom says he’s up in the sky somewhere right now, watching over us and protecting us as best he can. Maybe I’ll be able to fly up there sometime and I’ll get to see him again.”

“It takes strength to believe.” Kozz looked over the fire to the small boy on the other side. He could only marvel at how well Caleb was handling such tragic circumstances. “I’m sure he would like that, Caleb.”

Luciele called her son to bed. Caleb kicked away his drawing and said goodnight before entering the tent.

Kozz sat with the fire by himself for a time and thought about his family. He had grieved for his son for so long, suffering through every element of sadness and anger a human

mind could go through. He tortured himself with guilt and held the blame against himself for all of the years since his son had died. He had let his fear and self-hatred take over. He had abandoned his wife and tried to forget the entirety of his past life. He wept at the thoughts.

Caleb is so strong, he thought, and I am so weak. The boy and his mother were bringing up all of the memories KoZZ had fought back and locked away over the past decade. Their questions, their stories, their familiarities were all keys that were unlocking the rusted seals in his mind. He cared for his new friends, but they swelled an anger inside of him. They brought up all of the flames of pain that he thought he had extinguished. He knew he was blessed to have their companionship, and he knew he had to deal with the pain. He could not fight it any longer. He needed to find his wife, he needed to see her again, he needed to be sure that she was alright after all of these years. A tsunami of memories flooded his thoughts, consuming him, drowning him. His mind was racing from one thought to the next, he felt like he was going insane, like he was going to die, like his brain was going to crack.

KoZZ stood up and ran away from the campsite, his thick boots thudded on the ground and his breaths came out in grunts like a bear. His large body bounced between the trees and his jacket snagged on twigs and ripped them from their

branches. Snot dripped from his nose, and he spat out the mucus pooling in his throat. Kozz tripped on something and fell forward, rolling down a hill. He came to a stop at the icy edge of the pond where its waters had frozen around the bases of several dead trees. There he cried in a way that only a man who had held in a lifetime of horrors could cry. Caleb and Luciele heard him in their half-sleep, the sound of such a strong man in such a state of despair was both heart-breaking and frightening. They felt sorry for him in the same way that they were sorry for themselves. This night was Kozz's window to forgiveness. The pines heard his wretched unraveling, they witnessed his convulsing sobs, and they gave to him the serenity and spiritual surrounding he needed to unleash his own personal demons. Kozz let it all out. He suffered, he apologized to his wife and son, he begged for forgiveness, he prayed, and he screamed out all of his anger, beating his self-loathing into the crispy pine needles with his fists. Kozz fought with himself through the night, eventually succumbing to mental and physical exhaustion.

He crawled his way back to the campsite and rested next to the fire where he fell fast into sleep. Luciele quietly exited the tent to put a thick blanket over Kozz and a pillow under his head. She stoked the fire and made sure he was safe from it. They all slept well past dawn the next morning.

Kozz awoke in a daze, his mind fogged over from the forces

exerted on it the night before. His face felt heavy and his entire body was sore. Luciele exited the tent and her son came back from somewhere beyond the camp, zipping up his trousers. Caleb was about to say something to Kozz, but his mother hushed him before he could speak. Kozz ignored it, knowing it was going to be about his episode last night.

That morning they crossed through the dense section of woods and entered a much more open forest. Thin shrubs scattered across the forest floor, dotted with small patches of broad-leaved ferns. A subtle din of birdsongs littered the distance, occasionally broken by the squall of a raptor on the hunt. Sprinkles of blue and thin rays of light broke through the green top of the forest.

After hearing his sadness the night before, both Caleb and Luciele were surprised to see that Kozz looked even stronger today than he had been in the past. His shoulders were no longer slumped forward, but held back with pride. His chin was raised just a bit higher than usual, and each step forward he took was planted with firm determination. *Something happened last night*, thought Luciele, *something has changed in him*. Though it was apparent from the moment they met Kozz that he was a substantial man with great power and skill, his presence seemed to have multiplied by the way he was now carrying himself.

“Kozz,” began Luciele, “why are you—“

“I’ve been forgiven,” said Kozz before she could ask her question. “Priscilla and Jake, they told me they had forgiven me a long time ago. They spoke to me last night and we all told each other how much we love one another. They told me I had to forgive myself. I told them I couldn’t do it, not alone. They said they would help me, and they did. They shared their love with me, and I forgave myself for what happened. I forgave myself for what I’ve done and what I didn’t do. I forgave myself for it all.

“Everything I’ve kept away, all the weight that was on my shoulders has been lifted. I can actually feel it. I’m lighter, less sluggish, and even my heart feels less restricted. I can feel it pumping harder than it has in years. I feel young again. I feel happy.

“Now we’re on our way to Port Town. You, Caleb, and me, and we’ll be there for each other the entire way. Then I’m off to find my wife, my lovely Priscilla. Nothing will stop me from reaching her.”

Luciele walked over to Kozz and put her arms around him. “I’m glad you found what you needed,” she said to him. “You’re a good man, Kozz.” She reminded him that he had saved her son, that he had gone out of his way to help her bury her husband, and that he had allowed them to accompany him on his journey.

“No,” said Kozz, “you welcomed me into your journey. I

don't know if I would have survived this trip on my own. You and your boy have done more for me than you could imagine. I haven't felt this good in a long time, and it's all thanks to you two. All I needed were a couple of friends to give me a guiding hand. I still have a long way to feeling more like the man I used to be, but something snapped in me last night. I forgave myself, and that was the first step."

As the day passed they traveled into thicker underbrush and warmer air. The trees were still mostly pine, but a few deciduous oaks broke the monotony. Kozz was never one for remembering names of creatures and trees, but Caleb and his mother were wizards at it, naming every type of living thing they spotted along the way. It was a game for them, something to pass the time.

They camped that night and shared stories from their pasts. Kozz left out tales of his wife and son, opting to tell more about his childhood. He told them about life on Erde with his parents, about his mother's delicious double-baked pies, about the pool hall and shooting range he went to with his father, and about the family trips he took to the few nature reserves on the planet which were not overrun by tarred streets, concrete, and skyscrapers. Kozz explained how his mother was a schoolteacher and his father was a military man, how they lived a good life until his parents died in a vehicle accident. He spent some time in foster homes until he escaped them and

decided to live life on the streets.

Caleb had fun talking about school and playing card games with his grandma and her friends. Luciele shared a few laughs about her high school days and some of the pranks she and her sisters liked to pull on boys.

"Sisters?" asked Kozz. "You have family out there?"

"Well...somewhere," admitted Luciele. "We had a falling out after mom and pop passed away. My sisters didn't like Harold. I haven't talked to either of them in years."

"That's too bad," said Kozz. "Do you know where they are?"

"Not a clue. They both moved back to Erde after mom passed. I haven't heard from them since, and that was before Caleb was born. They could be anywhere, and I don't really care where."

"Must have been a rough falling out."

"I'd rather not talk about it. In fact, I have this one story you have got to hear. Caleb, remember that time you were out at night chasing blinker bugs and ran back in the house all excited to tell dad and me about the warm pile of mud you found behind the barn?"

"Mom!"

A week had passed since Harold's death and this was the first leisurely night they had together as a group, putting aside their troubles for a few hours to laugh with each other and play games.

By noon the next day the air was mild and they all had to shed their winter coats to keep from sweating. The forest was cut off by a rock-faced bank with a steep slope. Small trickles of water dripped from the forest to the gray, slate surface and part way down the trickles merged to form a thin, clear stream. The few plants which lived on the smooth stone held onto cracks and small trenches scattered across the surface. The stream grew deeper farther down the slope as it weaved through its carved path between the boulders, and in the deeper sections of the stream was a species of enormous salamander, some as long as six feet and looked to weigh at least a hundred pounds. The harmless creatures took little notice of the group's presence.

The water made for a slippery descent down the hillside, but the many large rocks and fallen trees gave everyone solid holdings to grab on to. The mules had the most difficult time making the descent. Luciele grabbed the reins from Kozz's hand, intending to guide the animals herself. Kozz held the reins tight for a moment, but then let go with a huff. "I'm not used to being second in command, doll."

"Second?" Luciele cocked her head to the side. "Who said second? My son could handle all of this better than you if he weren't hurt. Heck, he probably can anyways, and stop calling me doll!" Kozz did not look pleased. Luciele smirked. It was almost too easy to get Kozz all riled up. "My woods, my mules,

my rules.”

“Hey momma,” said Caleb, “why don't we get Kozz to carry some of our bags. The mules are looking awfully tired.”

Kozz turned his attention from Luciele to Caleb. He stared at the boy, no emotion showing on his scabbed face. He would have looked menacing if he were not the butt of their joking.

“Great idea,” said Luciele. “Kozz, why don't you?”

“Bah!” Kozz adjusted the sack on his shoulder and marched forward. He hustled down the hill and nearly slipped on the wet rocks.

“Like a grumpy old toad,” said Luciele. “Isn't he?”

“Like a wart on the butt of a grumpy old toad.”

At the base of the cliff the stream merged with several others and formed a small river. The forest floor was now dense with underbrush, mostly young trees and bushy ferns that were easy to push out of the way, and it was teeming with songbirds.

Descending the slope brought aching backs and sore legs. They made camp early that night and Kozz set out to teach Caleb how to use the knife he had given him, just in case, but Caleb argued that he had experience skinning and gutting game with a knife and did not need any lessons. "Attacking and defending with a blade is a completely different ball game," said Kozz. He placed Caleb's hands on the grip and lifted the boy's arms. “First thing you gotta know is how to

hold it. You've gotta be threatening. It's your first line of defense. If you're scary-lookin' enough you might frighten them off, if you're lucky.”

“Okay,” said Caleb.

Kozz held the knife in his hand with a firm grip and slashed at a tree with clean swipes, then he stabbed it with determination and left the blade stuck point-first into the tree. “You see how that bark sliced off?” asked Kozz. “It was like butter. Go on, grab the knife and give it a go.”

“Alright,” said Caleb. He yanked the blade free from the tree and gripped the handle just as Kozz had shown him. Caleb had a hard time putting force into his swipes and could not get the blade to slice away sections of bark like Kozz had.

“Gotta get a tighter grip.” Kozz grabbed Caleb's hand and squeezed it.

“Ow! That hurts!”

“That's how strong your grip has to be when you need to use that knife. You can't just hold it, it's gotta be a solid part of your arm. If you're not digging your fingers into that thing like your life depends on it you're not gonna have any force behind your attacks and the knife will just get knocked away from your hand.”

“My arm's getting all tired already.”

“Well you'll be needing bigger muscles then.” Kozz punched at his biceps. “We're talking about fighting for your

life, here. You'll be using all the energy you got.”

“Guess I'll be needing to do some push-ups then.” Caleb punched his own arms. He rubbed the pain out of them after Kozz turned to look at the campfire.

They ate a hearty dinner of beans and some forest critters Luciele had snagged along the way. Kozz wanted to start shooting practice with the boy and was surprised to find that Caleb had brought along his own small laser pistol. It was a thin metal device with a digital screen and a handle. They set up a range with a fallen log and a few empty food cans. Kozz cracked open an everlight and tossed it near the targets.

Caleb went first and took his time with each shot, knocking down all three cans without a miss. Kozz laughed at the sound it made when it fired.

“That thing sounds like my electric razor when it hits a rough patch of stubble!”

Caleb frowned. “Well it might not sound like an airship engine backfiring like yours, but at least I don't have to worry about forgetting to reload it.” Kozz's deep laughter was cut short and he looked to Caleb's eyes. Luciele stood up with a sudden bout of worry, but then both Kozz and Caleb broke their stern faces and let their laughter escape simultaneously.

They walked through the forest for several more days until they came to an expanse of green grass being cropped by grazing cattle. The wind blew waves across the across the

plains, causing them to shimmer in the sunlight. In the distance was a small, white house in the shade of a large red barn.

Caleb darted out of the forest's edge and down into the field where he jumped into the grass and rolled around, feeling the warm prickles on his skin. Though not fully healed, his rib did not appear to be causing him much grief. Kozz and Luciele walked down to where Caleb laid in the grass and looked across the fields to the house that waited in their path.

"I think we should go see if someone is in there," said Luciele.

"I agree," said Kozz. "If there's any trouble we should be able to handle it."

"There's a good chance that someone is still home and doing alright," said Luciele. "Everything looks so nice and tended to, not like a place that's been neglected."

They walked through the field, the herd of cattle shying away from them, and Kozz spotted a dead cow in the field near the barn. It looked to have been attacked by something only days ago. "That poor thing has been baking in the sun like a tomato," said Luciele, grabbing her nose. "Smells worse than walking behind these mules after they've eaten a belly full of skunkweed."

The barn had been painted recently and was in solid shape. Inside, hay littered the floor and Kozz found another dead cow

in one of the stalls. It did not smell as bad as the other that had been baking in the warm sun and it looked like it had been alive not long ago. Luciele walked over to inspect the damage to see what could have killed the animal, but outside Caleb screamed and the both of them ran out the door before they could search for anything.

Red was in Kozz's hand as he rounded the corner of the barn and he found Caleb on the ground covering his eyes from the horrid sight in front of him. A woman stood in the shade between the barn and the house with a wood-chopping ax driven through her forehead, the ax pinning her dead body up against the barn wall. Streams of dried blood ran down both sides of her face and soaked into her white blouse. She was an older woman with gray hair, but not much more could be deciphered from the mess. Luciele picked up her son and moved him away from the scene. Kozz followed them to the front of the house. *That image will haunt the boy for the rest of his life*, thought Kozz.

"That woman looks like she's been there no longer than a day or so," said Luciele.

"She looks like grandma," cried Caleb.

Luciele held her son and tried her best to comfort him. "Do you think she was killed because she was one of the infected, Kozz? Or do you think one of the infected got her?"

"That's a brutal way for someone to kill another person,"

said Kozz, “but they could have done anything in self-defense. I think it was probably one of the demons that did it to her, though.” Kozz lit up a stogie, his lighter held by the same hand as was Red. His heart condition had not gone away just because he had forgiven himself, but it had not been flaring up as bad as it once was. The smoke caressed his insides and made him feel better. “God help us all.”

Kozz crept up to one of the house windows and looked inside. The house was cluttered, its drawers and cabinets were emptied all over the floor, but it looked empty of life and so Kozz had the others follow him as he went inside. Luciele and Caleb waited in the parlor while Kozz checked the other rooms. He told the others that all was clear. They all took a few moments to rest on the soft sofa before Kozz went into the restroom to shave his rough beard and Luciele tested the kitchen sink for running water. Clear, cold liquid poured out. She grabbed a few glasses from one of the cabinets and filled drinks for everyone from the faucet. Kozz started shaving while she and Caleb rummaged through the kitchen pantry for food.

Clink.

Luciele and Caleb both heard a noise from somewhere in the kitchen.

Clink.

Luciele moved towards the window. It sounded like

something small had hit the glass.

Clink.

“A pebble,” said Luciele. She looked down to her son who looked back at her with a curious face. Then, at the same time, their eyes widened in sudden realization. Luciele leaned over the sink to look out the window when the front door ruptured inward and an old man burst across the threshold, his eyes glowing as white as his receding hair line. Plaid suspenders held up his tan pants, his shirt was half-tucked and all but one button was unclasped. He turned towards the kitchen and ran at the mother and son with a pitchfork held over his head in both hands.

Luciele had left her shotgun in the living room. She screamed for Kozz. The old man charged forward and threw his pitchfork at them like a harpoon. Luciele jumped aside to dodge the attack as Caleb ran low and behind the white-eyed man. The boy looked back to see that the man had stepped forward and grabbed his mother’s wrist before she could escape. The man went to pick up his pitchfork with his other hand and Luciele kicked him in the face as he bent down. She ran past him to get her gun. The man ran after her.

KABLAM!

The sound of the blast shook the house as the man collapsed to the floor and screamed like a sewer rat that had been set aflame. His eyes beamed like spotlights and a

moment later it was all over. Kozz stood in the restroom doorway with a half-shaved face, frothy razor in one hand and Red in the other, her barrel smoking. Caleb stood frozen with his hand on his laser pistol, and Luciele fell forward onto the sofa, heaving a sigh of relief.

“That is no fucking infection,” she said matter-of-factly. Caleb transitioned from one state of shock to another after hearing his mother swear, surprised by her sudden choice of words. “You’re right Kozz. This is something else. I can’t believe my baby was like that.” Kozz went to the bedroom where he grabbed a thick blanket to cover the body with.

“Why couldn't we save the man?” Caleb asked his mother. “Like Kozz saved me.”

“We didn't have the chance, sweetie,” she replied. “It was too dangerous. Now come here. I need your hug.”

The group decided that they would not sleep in the house. The comfort of the beds and blankets was welcoming, but there were too many disturbing images around the home and they agreed that not one of them would have caught a wink of sleep that night with so much death surrounding them.

Kozz finished his shave and they all took baths to clean the woodland camping off their bodies. They washed their clothes and gathered extra food for the journey. In the barn they collected more feed for the mules and set out before dusk hit, hoping to get far enough away from the home to rid it from

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their sight.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Secrets

Warmer days welcomed laughter and shared kindness, and the colder nights brought the group closer together as they huddled in their tent for warmth. They had grown close over their short time together, but the mystery of Kozz's past was like thick metal bars separating the mutual freedom of Luciele and Caleb from the imprisoned convict locked away in his lonely cell.

A cup of cocoa slid down Kozz's throat like warm silk as he watched the sun settle beyond the horizon, giving his sight the comfort of shade and letting the cool evening air place its first chilled grip on his exposed skin. Everyone shifted just a little closer to the fire as a chill set in, the three travelers were highlighted by the firelight against the darkening sky.

Since the run in at the farm it had been smooth traveling and high spirits for the tired trio. Their path took them away from homes and villages, avoiding any and all contact with lurking dangers. They slowed their pace to rest their aching

feet and sore thighs, making the last few days feel more like a vacation than an arduous trek for survival. Luciele poked at a rehydrating can of mixed vegetables she was heating for her son as he sat with his elbows on his knees and his chin in his hands. Kozz put down his warm drink and stared into the flames as Luciele pulled out her son's food. Caleb sat next to his mother and ate his meal, falling asleep with his head on her lap before the stars replaced the sunset.

"Kozz, I've seen the way you look at Caleb," said Luciele as she ran her fingers through her son's unwashed hair.

"What do you mean, doll?"

"You have only known him for a few weeks now, but with every new day I can feel the warmth and love growing in your eyes. You care for him, don't you?"

"I wouldn't go saying all of that, but I care for the kid, sure. What are you getting at, Luce?"

"Don't call me 'Loose', and you are not being honest with yourself, or me for that matter."

"Sorry doll," he paused for a minute and ran over in his head what Luciele had just said, "about the name and the truth. The truth is I can't tell you the truth. There's things about me you can't know, no one can know. It's a complicated matter, Luciele."

"I know you've been hiding behind your secrets, but I have decided to trust you nevertheless. You have a past that you

don't want to share, that's fine. You are here, now, helping us and leading us to wherever it is we are going, and since you are here with me and my boy I want to know why it is you find him so special. I want to know why you care for him so. What is it Kozz? Your care for my son does not go unappreciated, but I want to know why you are doing it Kozz, why you have such love for my son. I've heard only small mentions from you of your own son, and most of it was from that night you broke down and cried out to the world. Does Caleb remind you of Jake? Have you been using my boy as a stand in for your own son?"

Her words dug deep into Kozz's heart. She helped him understand that even though there were things he could not tell her or anyone else, there were parts of his life that he could share and had only chosen not to. His heart ached, but not in the same way as when it was over exerted. It ached in a way that it had been aching for years, dull and tucked away. He had chosen to keep all of his secrets to himself for years. It was time to let some go.

"Luciele, darling, I have something to share with you, something I've been keeping to myself for a long time."

"Go ahead, please." She put a pillow under Caleb's head and walked around the fire to sit next to Kozz. She placed one hand on his shoulder and the other on top of his hand. Her skin was cold, yet caring.

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“If I look at Caleb the way you say I do, it's because he reminds me of my son.” Tears filled Kozz's eyes. For ten years his emotions had hidden in his darkness, but Luciele and Caleb had unlocked the flood gates. Luciele rubbed a hand across his back. She made no move to speak and patiently waited for Kozz to continue. “His name was Jake. My beautiful wife Priscilla and I had a son twenty-three years ago, he died twelve years after that. He was our only child, and we loved him very much. There was somebody that was mad at me, somebody that wanted revenge. That somebody entered my home while I was away and killed Jake, murdered my son. Jake wasn't given the life he dreamed of, the life he was going to live. He wanted to be a pilot and a scientist for the Cooperation. He was smart and loving like his mother. He was strong and brave.

“Jake was also a quiet boy, like Caleb. He was a boy of few words, but the words he did speak were strong and important and interesting. Caleb reminds me of Jake in some ways, not all, but some. Caleb's interests and words and inner strength, his love reminds me of Jake. Caleb may not be as aggressive and physically strong as my son, but his courage, his heart is powerful and so was Jake's.

“Caleb is a great boy, and that's why I care for him. My eyes are warm for him because he makes my heart warm. He, no, both of you have given me something I have been without for

more than ten years, love and personal strength. You have given me love. Caleb has given me love. A man cannot live without love and I felt close to dying not too long ago, not more than a month ago when I lived in my icy hell hole alone, staying away from love and warmth so that I could protect it and protect myself from losing it again.”

There were a few seconds of silence as both of them wiped away their tears. “What are you trying to protect, Kozz? Who? Is it your wife, Priscilla? What happened to her? Does she need protection from the person who killed your son?” Kozz turned towards Luciele. She leaned back and her lips twitched, embarrassed about how forward she was with her questions. “I’m sorry Kozz, I—”

“I abandoned her.” Kozz admitted as if pleading guilty to a jury. “I ran away to protect her, but now I have to find her and make sure she is safe from all this madness. It’s still difficult to speak of it all. I don’t wanna say anymore.” Kozz returned his gaze to the flames.

“I’m so sorry about what happened to your son. He sounds like a wonderful boy.” Luciele looked over to her sleeping child. “Caleb likes you, he told me so. I know you will keep him safe.”

“Thanks. I’ve kept this all inside for too long.”

“Thank you for telling me your story, and for putting your trust in me. I am sorry for trying to delve any further than you

were willing to go.”

“Think nothing of it, doll.”

Caleb stirred awake from his sleep. Luciele stood up and walked over to her son and led him into the tent. Kozz stared into the flames until they dwindled into non-existence. When only the glowing coals remained Kozz followed the others into the tent to sleep.

In the morning they all awoke to a distant buzzing sound, one they were all familiar with. Caleb sat up, immediately followed by his mother and Kozz. “Do you hear that?” Caleb shouted in excitement. “It’s an airship!” They emerged from the tent to see a small airship flying above, popping in and out of sight as the thin foliage of the treetops swayed in the dawn wind. The airship was a one-man personal carrier and flew past them without pause. Their fire had long been out and their campsite was well-hidden under a clump of young trees, but even if the person flying the ship had seen them, chances were they would not have stopped. Caleb chased after the ship for a bit, but he soon gave up and sulked back to the campsite.

Luciele assured her son that it was good to at least see someone flying a ship, that it meant there were others alive and unaffected by the disease, others who were doing what they could to survive, others who were on their way to Port Town, to the quarantine zone. “Unless those glow-in-the-dark freaks can fly our machines,” said Kozz, “I’d say this is a good

sign.”

“They can't do that,” said Caleb. “Can they, Kozz?”

“There's no reason to scare my child,” said Luciele.

“I'm not scared, mom. Not really.” Caleb was indeed scared, but he would never admit it in front of Kozz. “But do you think they can fly an airship?”

“Probably not,” said Kozz. “I was just sayin' what popped off the top of my head. Those demons can be tricky, but there's no way they can be that smart.”

The small ship flew eastward, towards the city. They followed the path of the now out of sight airship, hopes lifted slightly by the first sign of normal life they had seen in weeks. *Someone is up there, they all thought in one fashion or another, someone's survived outside of the quarantine zones just as long as we have. We aren't the last ones.*

By the end of the day they reached the top of a hill that served as the end to the forest. Ahead were open plains, farmland that was dotted with small towns, and not much in the way of cover from wandering eyes. They were going to have to brave the open.

The wind from the east was crisp and refreshing, laced with salt from blowing across the mass of water that stretched along the horizon. The Great River was not really a river at all, but a sea that spanned from one pole to the other on one side of the planet. The land ahead was separated by its miles-wide girth.

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The ice was thick enough in the north and south where it was possible to walk across the sea, but nowhere in between was there a natural crossing. Only one bridge spanned the expanse at its thinnest section, and Kozz intended to use it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Fray

Gunfire sounded the morning alarm. Distant snaps and crackles littered the east for several minutes until all was quiet again. The three travelers were going to run into others whether they wanted to or not. Kozz was first to gather his belongings and move onward. "It's a dangerous path we're about to take, but we need to get to that bridge. We're gonna have to go through that small town at the water's edge to get across the sea." He tightened the straps on the mules and led the animals downhill. Caleb and Luciele picked up their gear and followed after him.

"That town is Siletz," said Luciele. "It's where my parents used to live. Good place for seafood. Harold and I used to spend entire summers out on the sea before Caleb was born, back when we were young and cared diddly about any responsibilities."

"I never liked boats," said Kozz.

"Me neither," said Caleb.

"Well then," said Luciele, her voice as flat as an iron, "good thing there's a bridge."

They dropped into the middle of the valley and followed a road towards Siletz. More gunfire crackled in spurts throughout the day and Kozz chuckled every time he heard it.

"What's so funny?" asked Caleb.

"Laser guns, like the one you have," replied Kozz. "They sound like bug zappers."

Luciele chuckled despite her worry. "That's something my Harold would have said!" She found herself in a small fit of laughter and the next several times they heard gunfire she laughed along with Kozz. Caleb did not think it was funny, his laser pistol was not a joke. Kozz teased the boy, trying to get him to join in on the fun. Caleb forced a frown for as long as he could, but it cracked into a grin when Kozz imitated the laser blasts by buzzing his lips. "Bzzrrrrrpp...bzzrrrrrpp." Gunfire meant people were nearby, regular people, and the laughter helped relieve some of their stress.

The group stayed clear of the outlying homes that led the way to Siletz, but as they closed in on their destination the clustering streets became unavoidable and the gunfire grew louder. They were all well aware of their weapons and kept them ready to draw at a moment's notice.

Siletz was the most populated port on this side of The Great River, but it still was not large enough to be called a true city.

The buildings were taller than those in Edgetown and the streets were wider, but the town was empty and broken. They stepped around the shattered glass and forgotten belongings that lay scattered in the streets and kept their eyes on the silent buildings, afraid of what may be hiding inside. A salty wind funneled through the streets, howling through open windows and carrying a charred smell of burnt wood. They walked by a section of homes which were burned to the ground, coals still smoldering. The streets near the area were coated in black ash that swirled in the wind.

“Looks like a battle was fought here,” said Luciele. She grabbed her son’s hand and noticed that it was blackened from drawing figures in the ash. Gunfire clapped through the buildings and she squeezed Caleb’s hand tight, pulling him to the side of a building to take cover.

tew-tew-tew ticka-ticka-ticka tew-tew-tew

“I don’t think it’s over yet, doll,” said Kozz as he ducked low, pulling Luciele and Caleb down with him. The gunfire was close and echoed between the buildings. Shouts of men followed the blasts.

ticka-ticka-ticka tew-tew-tew

“Get ‘em!”

“Ah!”

“We need to find whoever that is without surprising them,” said Kozz. He crept alongside the building towards the

direction of the gunfire and motioned for the others to stay where they were. He approached the corner of the block and peered down the street. Two men stood over the bodies of several others not more than a hundred yards down the road. One man had a black mustache large enough to be seen a mile away, the other had a wide-brimmed cowboy hat. It was almost like watching a cartoon. One of the men yelled something and Kozz saw a body dart towards them. Both men fired and the body fell.

tew-tew-tew

The men stood where they were and laughed with each other.

Kozz turned back to Luciele and Caleb. “Two men with guns. I think they were fighting off some demons. I’m gonna call out to them. Have your weapons ready just in case.” Kozz turned back towards the street, seeing that the two men started walking in his direction. Kozz stood up, body mostly hidden behind the building. “Don’t shoot!” he yelled from around the corner, “I’m not infected!”

“Who’s that?” demanded one of the men. They ceased their jokes and both pointed their guns towards the voice. “Who’n the hell is that?”

“Name’s Kozz,” he shouted back. “I’m coming out.” He moved halfway out from the building so that the men could see him.

“Show ya hands,” commanded the one in the wide-brim hat. “You alone?” asked the one with the dark mustache, it was waxed and curled at the tips.

“I have a weapon for my protection,” said Kozz as he showed both his hands, Red held upside down by the barrel in one. “There is a woman and a boy with me.”

“You keep that antique where it is so we know ya won’t be causin’ us trouble,” said the hat-wearing man. “Family man, eh?”

“Not my family,” said Kozz. “Just friends.”

“Tell them to come out,” said the hat man.

“Not until you put down your weapons, hoss,” said Kozz. The two men looked at each other and lowered their guns. Kozz lowered his hands and motioned for Caleb and Luciele to come out with him. They stood next to him with their guns holstered, but ready to draw.

“Looks like we’ve got some more survivors to join our crew,” said the mustached man. “My name is Freddy, this other guy is Tim.”

“Alright then,” said Tim, “come with us and y’all have somewhere safe to sleep tonight. This town is overrun with those freaks.”

“We haven’t seen anything but you guys since we got to this town,” said Luciele.

“Well miss, you were lucky,” responded Freddy. “Our camp

has been attacked several times in the last few days. But we've got lots of guns. It's pretty safe."

"We're just looking to cross the bridge over The Great River," said Kozz.

"You ain't gettin' over that bridge," said Tim.

"Why not?" asked Caleb.

"Cause kid, they destroyed it." Tim spat on the ground. He looked pissed.

"Who destroyed it?" asked Luciele.

"Damn infected people blew it right up," said Freddy. "Crashed an airship into it. Can't cross it now. We tried."

"There's no way one of the infected could have done that." Luciele rolled her eyes. How dumb did these guys think she was? "Someone must have just crashed into it. Ran out of energy or something."

"Could be," said Freddy, "but I don't know. They're smart and they like to destroy."

"Evil sumbitches," said Tim.

"It can't be," said Luciele.

"I believe it," said Kozz. "I've fought enough of them already to know how evil and destructive they are, and how crafty they can be. They use tools and traps, and I've seen them destroy vehicles to prevent us from using them. I wouldn't put it past them to destroy important devices and infrastructure."

"I believe it too," said Caleb. "I think they did it. They know

what they're doing.”

Concern furrowed Luciele's brow. She bent down and hugged her son. He grabbed her tight as his face filled with worry and understanding. He shared a look with Kozz over his mother's shoulder, both knowing that something big was happening.

“Ok, enough chit chat,” said Tim. “Let's get back to camp. We're near the base of the bridge. Y'all be able to see the damage for yaselves.

Kozz, Luciele, and Caleb followed Tim and Freddy through the streets. They walked downhill towards the water's edge where the breeze became brisk and the bridge came into view. The colossal structure had been built a decade ago and still displayed its pristine white color. Tall arches held suspension cables that seemed to stretch for miles and the midway support column rose into a peak high in the sky. Just beyond the midway support was a collapsed arch that floated in the air on suspension cables, and the bridge below it was missing in the depths of the sea. The remaining bridge structure was warped and twisted by the tense cables. From the shore the gap seemed small, but those who understood the bridge's immense size knew that the breach could have been a hundred feet across. Its length made it impossible to see the other end.

Dozens of ships and small boats along the shoreline had been burned to cinders or sunk, only the ropes that tied them

to the docks had kept them from fully submerging or floating away with the current.

“No vessels left to carry us across the sea?” asked Kozz.

“Not a one,” replied Tim.

There were more dead bodies along the docks than there were in town, and the number increased as they approached the camp. Corrugated metal was used to line the perimeter of the settlement, blocking off the areas between the buildings and the sea. Men with guns stood along the haphazard wall of debris and two of them greeted Tim and Freddy as they entered the camp. Other than the few men on guard, the camp was a ragtag bunch of beaten and desperate people. Cold. Starving. Sick. Weak. Kozz estimated about fifty people in all, maybe more, and most were scared out of their wits.

ticka-ticka-ticka

Shots rang out nearby. Kozz, Luciele, and Caleb ducked for cover, but got back up as burly laughter followed the shots, leading the way to hoots and hollers.

“Ha! Well howdy strangers,” said a large-bellied man with a pair of dark sunglasses. He wore a bright red shirt that was tucked into black denim pants, separated by a belt with a large buckle on it that read “GAUCHO” in gold lettering. The whole outfit was bottomed off with a pair of black, sparkly boots. *What an asshole*, thought Kozz. “Sorry if I gave you beautiful people a little scare, I was just blasting away another one of

those diseased freaks. Well, I thought I saw something anyway. The name's Daryll. The wonderful people here seem to have put me in charge of this place."

"Gettin' your jollies off, slick?" Kozz did not like the man. He learned way back in his childhood to be tough from the get-go with pricks and egomaniacs. "Or are you just firing that thing off like a lunatic? There are people here, learn some restraint." Luciele tensed up at Kozz's sudden remarks. She spat his name under her breath just loud enough for him to hear. Tim walked over next to Daryll.

"Hey champ," said Tim, "we ain't need the attitude ya bringin' to our little group here."

"Sorry," said Luciele, "we've just had a rough couple of weeks. My husband was killed and we have traveled all the way from Edgetown without any transportation other than our feet and these two mules. We're all just a little on edge. This big lug is Kozz, I'm Luciele, and this is my son Caleb."

"That's more like it, pretty." Luciele frowned at Daryll's comment. "We lucky survivors here would be glad to welcome the three of you into our little guild, if you can keep a cover on top of the big boy's steaming temper."

"The more you talk," said Kozz, "the more my blood boils."

"Hold on champ," said Tim, "now we're gonna be goin' out to the quarantine zone out in Port Town if ya want to be joinin' in with us. The mules and the guns y'all are carrying can be

useful to us, and I'm sure the larger numbers we got can help ya get there if that's where y'all are headin'. But if ya have a problem with us, just put it away and keep it to yaself or go and head out on your own way."

"What he says is true my friend," said slick Daryll. "You may be large and want to be in charge, but Tim and I here have saved these folks from the horrors in the nearby towns and have made a plan to move out tomorrow morning. We welcome you into our survivors club, but it comes with peace agreements that must be made."

"We're going to Port Town as well." Luciele spoke before Kozz had the chance. "He will calm down, and I will make sure of it. Thank you for welcoming us, I'm sure we will prove to be helpful in this journey." Caleb hid behind his mother when she spoke, peeking around her to look at all the people.

"Very well my dear," said slick Daryll, "we are honored to have you aboard. Perhaps your friend will lighten up after a good night's rest. I hope to meet your handsome son tomorrow as well as the shy bug seems to have bitten him this evening."

Daryll and Tim wandered over to the perimeter and talked quietly to one another. Freddy guided Kozz and the others to an empty corner of the camp. "Well here you are miss, sir, Caleb. Don't worry about making yourselves too comfortable. We'll be moving on soon enough, I'm sure."

"We appreciate your hospitality, Freddy," said Luciele.

"Nothin' to it miss. My wife, she would give me quite the scolding if I wasn't to treat new guests proper and all."

"Oh, well I'd love to meet her."

"Well, um...sure, maybe. She's not well at the moment." Freddy looked down and kicked at the dirt. "Anywho, if you'll excuse me. I need to get some food cookin' for my son."

Luciele gave Kozz a stern talking to once Freddy walked away, saying how he was rude and gave off a bad first impression and now all three of them were going to have trouble fitting in with the group of survivors. She admitted that she did not care much for Daryll or Tim, but that it did not warrant the discourtesy Kozz had shown them.

Caleb lost focus on the grownup's bickering as he caught the glares of a few of the people in the camp. *Their faces are so sad, he thought, so pale and droopy and sad. Whenever I look at them they turn away like they're scared of us or something. I don't want them to be scared of me.* He followed his mother and Kozz over to where they were going to pitch their tent.

"Perhaps we should put our stuff to the side for the moment," said Luciele. "Let's go and introduce ourselves around the camp."

"Don't feel quite in the mood for a meet and greet," said Kozz. "You go ahead and take Caleb with you. I'll stay here and set us up for the night." Caleb did not want to go either, but his mother made him. Kozz lit up his last stogie and surveyed the

camp from his perch, keeping an eye on Luciele and Caleb as they wandered off.

They first approached an elderly woman who sat all alone in a dark section of the camp near the water's edge. Behind her tent the small waves splashed on weathered rocks. Luciele introduced herself and her son, but could not make out a word the woman had said. She surely said her name, but her whispered mumbles were incomprehensible. Luciele tried to get the woman to speak more clearly, she wanted to make sure that the woman had been fed and well-cared for, but it was a struggle. Caleb slipped away from his mother's grip and went down to a small beach at the water's edge where he saw that some of the younger people had gathered on the sand and pebbles.

The dull roar of The Great River filled Caleb's ears. The bridge that crossed the sea was usually adorned with lights in the evening, but its broken form was nothing more than an eerie silhouette against the twilight backdrop. As he approached the beach, Caleb saw that the younger kids near the water were not so young after all. It seemed that other than a couple of babes in arms he was the youngest person in the camp. Most of the beach kids were older teenagers, but one was a little younger than the rest. Caleb walked over to a boy who was maybe fifteen with mopy red hair and a lime green shirt.

“Hi, my name is Caleb.”

“Hi,” said the kid. He looked at Caleb when he spoke but turned right back to a drawing he was making in the sand.

“What’s your name?” asked Caleb.

“Samuel.”

“What’cha doin’ Samuel?”

“Nuttin. Just drawing.”

“What’s that?” asked Caleb as he sat down next to Samuel.
“Is that a monster or an alien or something?”

“Suttin like that. I had a dream where my mom’s brain was switched with this thing’s brain and that’s why she got infected and started acting all weird and scary.”

“Oh,” said Caleb with a long pause. “Did your mom get turned into one of the infected?”

“Yeah. My pop and I had to run away from her cus’ she was trying to hurt us. She’s still out there somewhere. Pop says maybe she’ll get fixed soon and we can all be together again.”

“You can get her back Samuel, I know you can. I...” Caleb considered his thoughts for a second before continuing. “I was infected for a little while and I was made normal again. My friend Kozz saved me. I was trying to hurt him and I didn’t know what I was doing, and then I saw Kozz and I thought he was going to kill me but I came back to normal and have been fine ever since.”

“Really?” said Samuel, finally breaking away from his

drawing. “You were really one of the infected people? And your friend saved you? Are you fibbing?”

“It’s all true.”

“Pinky swear?”

“Pinky swear.” They locked their little fingers together and Samuel sprang up to his feet.

“I have to go tell my dad that we can save her!”

“But Samuel, wait!” Samuel ran off to find his father and Caleb’s shouts went unheard, squelched by Samuel’s excitement and the noise of the sea, or simply ignored. Caleb worried that what he had told Samuel might spread around, and he was afraid of what others might think of him after hearing it.

With Samuel out of the way, Caleb could fully see the drawing left in the sand. The creature looked powerful and as if it could come alive at any moment. The memory of his mind being pushed, bullied by some phantom force, caused Caleb’s eyes to well up. His grandma, his dad, his friends— they were all gone. There had to be some way to stop it from causing more pain, whatever it was. Caleb kicked sand over the creature’s face and ran back to find his mother.

Luciele was right where he had left her. When he returned she sighed in relief and used him as an excuse to get away from the old woman. “I couldn’t hear a thing she was saying, but every time I tried to excuse myself away she grabbed my arm

and reeled me back in like a big ol' fish she was trying to tire out. And I'll tell you what, I almost tuckered out and gave up. I was ready to plop down right next to her and listen to her little jibberings blabber on." They walked on to meet someone else, but Caleb looked back and saw that the elderly woman's mouth kept on muttering even after they had left.

They were met with sullen faces as they meandered through the camp and were ignored by those Luciele tried to start a conversation with. A young couple left the group at the shore and approached Luciele and Caleb.

"Hi there," said the petite girl with auburn hair, "my name is Kelly and this is my boyfriend, Richard. You both looked kinda lost and lonely so we thought we'd come on over and give ya a smile. There ain't too many happy faces around here."

"Not many talkers either," said Richard, a young man with blonde hair and a thin frame. "Welcome to the survivor's camp, full of the dreary and self-absorbed, the battered and broken, the pricks and—" He stopped and smiled at Kelly, seeing that she was giving him a level stare. "Anyway, nice to meet you both."

"Yes, well I'm Luciele and this is my son, Caleb. Say 'hi' Caleb."

"Hi."

"It's a pleasure to meet you two," said Luciele. "I'm glad there's someone around here who's willing to talk and isn't

crazy. Poor old woman back there has a few too many badgers in her coop.”

“We've been here a couple days and still haven't been able to get most people to open up,” said Kelly, “that's why we've been hanging out with the teens and such. Even in the midst of all this chaos they still want to have fun.”

“All the other folks are too sad or whacked out or mad,” said Richard, “speaking of mad....” Richard nodded in the direction behind the group and everyone turned to see three men marching intently towards them. It was Freddy, Tim, and Daryll, all with their weapons drawn. Freddy held his weapon low and slowed as the men approached the group, but Daryll and Tim walked right up to Luciele with their eyes fixed on Caleb as he hid behind his mother.

“Show yourself, boy,” said Daryll, “I've got a few questions to ask you.”

“Hold on there slick,” said Kozz as he pushed his way between Luciele and the men. “Why don't you take a couple steps back.”

“Didn't know you were harboring an infected with yeh,” said Daryll as he was forced to take a step back from Kozz's intimidating size.

“No one is infected, slick.”

“We know about the boy,” said Tim. “His own words. He tol' Freddy's kid that he was infected.”

Caleb gripped his mother's dress tight and shrunk as small as he could behind her. She stood strong in front of her son and had Kozz move to her side.

“My son is a healthy young boy you nitwits. You leave him alone or I'll be jumping on you like a whitecat on a fluff rabbit.”

“Your son is a threat to our community if he's carrying the disease,” said Daryll. “Now, if he is indeed healthy and is just going around telling falsities then we don't have much of a problem. However, if he is sick, we will have to deal with him in a manner that will ensure the safety of our people. Freddy here told us what he said to little Sammy. I want to have a look at the boy and have him tell me the truth.”

“I'm sorry ma'am,” said Freddy, “I didn't mean for this.”

“Shut up Freddy,” said Tim as he whacked Freddy in the arm with the butt of his rifle. Freddy rubbed his bruised flesh and walked back to his designated section of the camp where his son, Samuel, waited for him.

“The boy isn't infected,” said Kozz.

“Well what he told Freddy's kid,” said Daryll, “was that he was and you...”

“He never was infected.”

“I want to hear it from the kid.”

“You've got my word, slick.”

“I want the boy's word!”

Arthur McMahon

“You leave the child alone or I'm gonna have to get nasty.”

“I'd like to see you try.”

“You're gonna regret those words.”

“Enough!” shouted Luciele. Caleb moved away from his mother's guard and stepped forward. The point of Tim's gun lifted a nudge when the boy appeared, and Daryll's had taken a noticeable turn in Kozz's direction.

Richard and Kelly both moved to Caleb's side. Luciele put her hand on her son's shoulder, as did Kelly, but Caleb took another step forward and let their hands fall behind him. He thought about the heroes in his comics.

“Before you reach the clearing at the end of the path, go and blaze your own trails through the muck and grime of life.”

“I was infected,” muttered Caleb.

“What was that, boy?” asked Daryll. “I didn't hear yeh.”

“Hush Caleb,” warned Luciele.

“Caleb, don't!” Kozz huffed. The world turned into a blur. His chest ached and his mind raced through a thousand outcomes, all ending with Kozz unable to prevent Caleb's death. Past nightmares haunted him. He could not think. He could not move. He was going to fail again.

“Let the boy speak!” shouted Daryll. “Say what you need to say, boy. Tell us the truth.”

“Do not be afraid to get a little dirt on your boots.”

“I was infected!” Caleb's strong voice shocked his friends. It was the loudest Kozz had ever heard the boy speak, and it was a side of Caleb that even Luciele had never seen.

Tim raised his weapon and Kozz lurched forward to barricade Caleb with his own body. Daryll and Tim were stirred by the sudden movement and swung their weapons around in the excitement as everyone hollered at one another. Kozz's face was red hot. The commotion was a whirlwind in his head. From somewhere he heard Luciele comment that she could burn them a path through the sea with his forehead. He had to stay between Caleb and the men that were...between the boy and the...between Jake and.... All went to blackness.