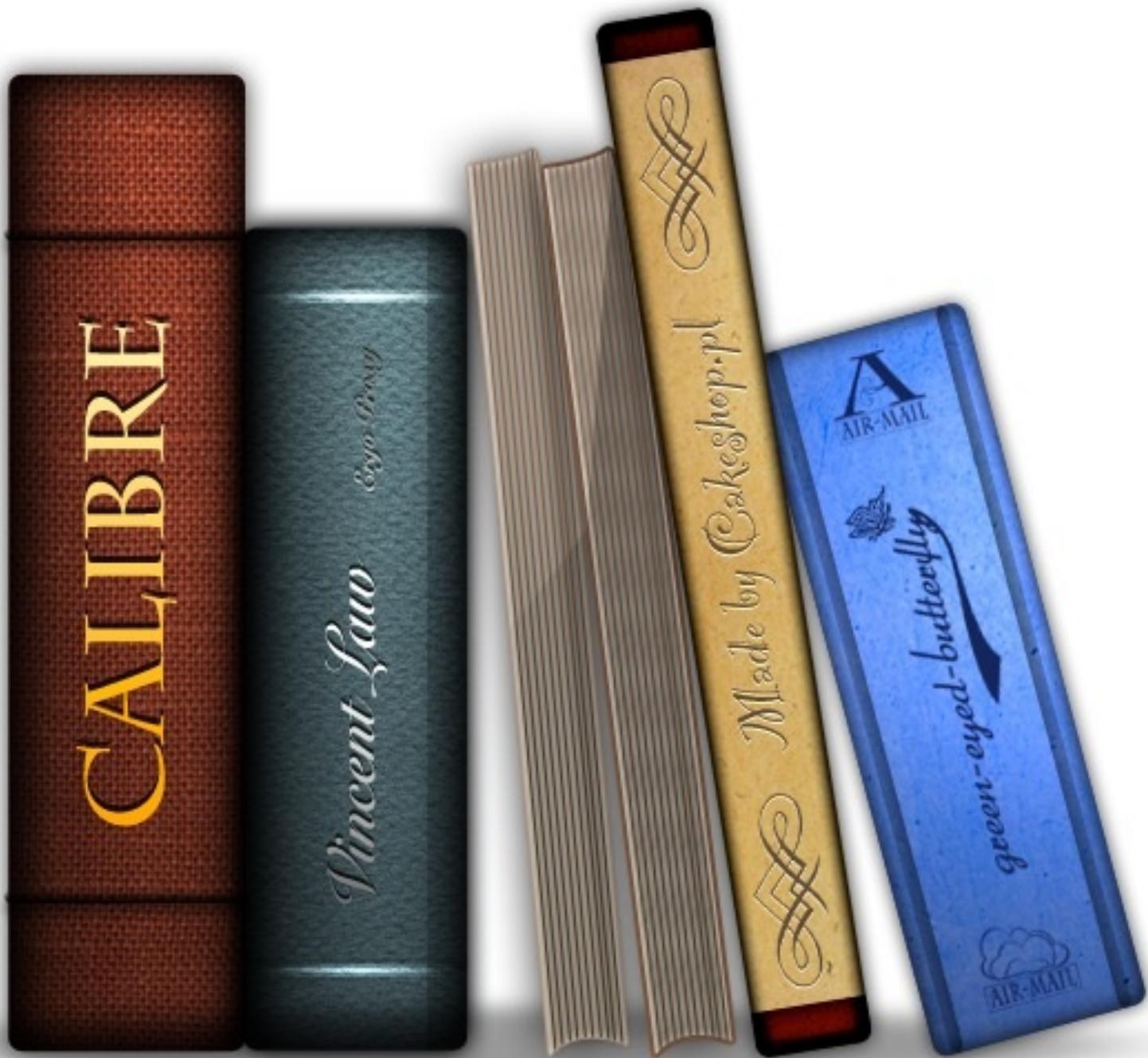


After the End

Dee, Bonnie



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AFTER THE END

by
Bonnie Dee

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After the End
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After the End

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Chapter One

Through the binoculars, a zombie was even uglier than when seen up close and personal. Of course, when they were near, you didn't generally have time to study them too carefully. There were other things to do—like screaming and running. From a distance it was safe for Ari to let his gaze wander over the creature's rotting skin, its flat, vacant eyes and slack-jawed yokel mouth. Blood stained the lower half of its face, coating cheeks and chin and nearly obliterating the Alpha Kappa Beta logo on the upper half of the thing's sweatshirt.

An "after" then. He could usually tell by the clothes a "before" corpse from one that had been turned after the first wave. Who would bury their beloved Brenda or Beth in a sorority sweatshirt? Most of the first generation zombies wore suits or dresses since they'd come to the banquet from mortuary viewings or funeral services. Or they were naked cadavers straight from the slab at the hospital or city morgue.

The people they'd infected rather than completely devoured tended to wear more casual clothes

and generally had a bite or two taken out of them. And wasn't it an amusing sight to see a little girl in shorts and shirt and daisy-decorated sandals munching on an arm held in one hand like a turkey drumstick.

Ari adjusted the binocs, bringing the zombie sorority sister into sharper focus. He immediately wished he hadn't. Her hair remained in patchy, random clumps on her half-scalped head. Bright pink streaks and little sparkling clips decorated some of the long blonde strands. Adorable. She tossed her hair back from her face with a girlish flip and reached for another length of intestine from the book she was eating. Lucky dead guy wouldn't be staggering to his feet and perpetuating the cycle any time soon.

The zombie's milky gray eyes suddenly turned toward Ari and for a second it was as if she was looking directly at him. His heart stuttered and he nearly dropped the glasses.

"Fuck!" He jerked the binoculars away from his eyes as if not seeing her would hide him, and then he snorted at his stupidity. Of course, she couldn't see him from blocks away. He was well hidden in his perch on the fifth floor of an office building. Even if the thing had glimpsed a flash of light off the glasses, she wouldn't be able to interpret it as a pair of binocs. The creatures weren't that smart.

"Hey, Captain!" The voice coming from behind made him jump and the binoculars slipped from his fingers to clatter on the floor.

"Jesus, don't do that!" He turned to face Derrick. The kid was as jittery as a meth junky without a fix in sight.

"What is it?" Ari dreaded the answer.

"It's Mrs. Scheider. We think it's almost time. Can you come?"

Ari picked up the glasses and took a last glance at the zombie girl and her victim. She was on her hands and knees, head down, burrowing into the man's abdominal cavity like a dog with a particularly good treat. He pulled the binocs from his eyes and packed them into their carrying case before rising. "All right, let's go. And Derrick..."

"Yeah?"

"Quit calling me 'captain'."

"Right."

As Ari followed the younger teenager from the office, a big, drooping, half-dead plant in the corner caught his attention. "Someone's not keeping up on their watering." He tried to put the kid at ease with a little joke—very little—but Derrick didn't crack a smile.

"Dr. Joe doesn't know what to do. Some of the others are saying we should...you know, take care of her right now. But we have to wait and see first, don't we? I mean we can't just kill her, can we?"

If Joe doesn't know, what makes you think I do? It was beyond him how the rest of them kept turning to him for answers and trusting him to make decisions for the group. He still believed it had all started because he was wearing his army uniform and he wished he'd never worn it that day he'd gone to meet Billy, C.C. and the other guys. The goddamn camouflage had somehow convinced everyone he was a man who could take charge and they listened to him as if he had some authority. Stranded souls, they'd been desperate for anyone to tell them what to do and suddenly that had been Ari. But he was only nineteen. The army hadn't said jack shit during basic training about what to do in the case of a hostile zombie takeover.

His pulse pounded as he followed Derrick down five flights of stairs to the ground floor where the group was camped. In the conference room, they sat around a big table eating Hostess cakes, chips, and slices of an apple they'd foraged from vending machines and desks. The office personnel had squirreled away little nutritious food in their drawers, which was too bad, because a diet of candy bars and soda wasn't helping jittery Derrick any.

Joe crouched beside Mrs. Scheider. The sick woman lay on a pile of folded coats and jackets.

someone had put together.

~~"What's up, doc?" Ari stopped himself from mimicking Bugs Bunny. Joking over a dying woman's body was harsh, but when he was keyed up he always made smart ass remarks. "How is she doing?"~~

Dr. Joseph Morgenstern, who wasn't really an M.D. but a dermatologist, shrugged and scratched at the stubble on his chin. "She regained consciousness for a little bit, but now she's out of it again. From her breathing, I don't think she's got much more time." He lowered his voice. "I'm so out of my element here. I have no idea what else to do for her. If we were in a hospital, I'd give her oxygen, but here..."

Ari nodded. Even if they'd administered oxygen a while ago or had an entire medical team working on Mrs. Scheider, he doubted it would have helped. But they couldn't have gone searching for a tank. It was too dangerous. There was no hospital or medical clinic nearby and even if there were they'd be hopping with revenants.

"Hey, you're back." Lila's touch on his shoulder brought his head up fast. He looked into her unusual indigo eyes and his stomach gave a little flip. Because she'd taken him by surprise, he took himself, but he knew better. It was the way his body always reacted to seeing Lila, a stomach flutter usually followed by a low burn in his groin.

"I see you found brunch for everybody," he said.

She tucked strands of her shoulder length, brown hair behind her ear. "Wasn't much to find. The ground floor had already been picked over. We gathered this stuff from the second floor. We'll have to have to raid a grocery store soon. We can't live on junk food."

He nodded and gazed down at the sick woman's face. She looked old, much older than she seemed at the beginning of all this. When was it? Only four days ago? Five? He'd nearly lost track. It seemed this had been their life forever, trekking through a dying city on their way to an uncertain future.

When he'd first seen Mrs. Scheider, she'd been one of those brisk, styled and pressed, white-haired women who could be any age from sixty to eighty. He'd looked right past her on the subway, his attention caught by a sexy, dark-haired chick and her friend sitting farther up the aisle. They were the kind of girls who talked and laughed too loud, enjoying drawing everyone's attention. He'd been happy to oblige because both girls were worth looking at.

The truth was, that day on the subway he'd noticed very few of the people he was traveling with now. He sure as hell wouldn't have struck up a friendship with any of them under normal circumstances. But that day on the subway things had veered far from normal.

Now, Mrs. Scheider looked about a hundred years old, or as if she was already halfway dead. Her skin was paper white, her cheeks sunken and her mouth seemed toothless. The once fluffy white hair was flat and dirty, the designer clothes torn and bloodied. Her chest hitched up and down and her breath rasped between parted lips.

"Too late for oxygen anyway," Dr. Joe said quietly. "We're going to have to be ready."

Meaning Ari was going to have to be ready. No one else would want to do what had to be done here—if it had to be done. Ari wasn't the only one who'd made a kill since this began. Deb, Derrick, even Sondra had taken out some revenants. But killing one of their own was a different matter. Ari was a soldier so everyone assumed he was equipped to handle anything. He'd have to suck it up and do the job.

"Why don't you clear the room," Ari said.

"I'll do it." Lila squeezed his shoulder lightly and when she took her hand away, he still felt the warmth and pressure of it.

Behind him, he was vaguely aware of Lila talking to the others, chairs moving away from the

conference tables, footsteps and voices receding from the room. But most of his attention was focused on the wheezing woman in front of him. He'd admired Mrs. Scheider's sharp tongue and dry humor and he'd miss it.

They'd had been scavenging in a diner, when the zombies came. The ax he'd taken from a store had come in useful in slashing a path through them. The blade cut cleanly through gristle and bone, severing heads like a weed-whacker churning through dandelions. He'd managed to escape along with the people in the front of the diner, while the rest of the crew, who'd been in the kitchen, ran out the back. Only when they came together several blocks away did they realize Mrs. Scheider wasn't with them.

Ari had gone back for her, running harder than he ever had on the obstacle course at Fort Benning. He'd found the woman hiding in a storage room and carried her back to where the others waited. Julia had cleaned the blood from her trembling body. Joe had stitched and bandaged her wound. And Ari had mentally kicked himself for allowing this to happen. He should've kept better watch. He should've kept them all safe. They were his responsibility now whether he liked it or not.

Lila was back now, joining in the vigil over Mrs. Scheider. She crouched beside Ari, her shoulder bumping his. "Do you need me to help?"

Ari looked into her exotic eyes focused on his like searchlights probing his secret thoughts. He shook his head. "No. I'll handle it. Please, just make sure everyone's staying calm and that Deb has set up perimeters. Don't want to get slack with security."

"All right." She rose and walked from the room. His gaze lingered on her backside before the door closed behind her. What kind of a sick perv checked out a girl's ass when a person was dying right in front of him? Especially when it was very likely he'd have to behead the poor old lady soon after she died.

Mrs. Scheider drew in another rattling breath and paused. Ari held his own breath, waiting for her to exhale. His hand tightened on the ax, and then air whistled out between her slack lips. He glanced at Joe. The other man was pale and looked like he'd rather be anywhere but here.

"Isn't there anything else you can do for her?" Ari asked. "I know we don't have morphine or anything, but..."

The dermatologist shook his head, locks of his gray-shot hair tumbling onto his forehead. His beard was growing in and his hair was shaggy. "There's nothing we can do but wait."

Ari sat back on his heels, the ax lying across his legs, and waited.

* * * * *

Chapter Two

Ten days earlier...

Lila had her textbook, *World Religions in Practice: a Comparative Introduction*, propped open on her lap, but hadn't turned a page for the past ten minutes. Alternate scenarios for how last night could have gone kept playing out in her mind. She could've kept her temper. She could've not yelled stupid things she didn't really mean. She could've refrained from crying. She could've been cool and made the breakup as painless for them both as possible.

It wasn't like she hated Doyle or wished him pain. He'd been a good boyfriend, a good friend for two years. But their time was over. Both of them knew it, had known it for months now, but someone had needed to say the words. Since Doyle avoided confrontation of any kind, Lila had finally done it. Badly.

She stared out the window at the lights of the subway station flashing by, the advertisements on the wall and the people waiting on the platform. The train braked and the lights flickered. When the

train stopped, the doors slid open and newcomers shuffled into the half-filled compartment. Lila hadn't needed to make room for anyone beside her yet, but probably would before she reached her stop.

She looked at the photograph of a gold-gilded Buddha on the page of her textbook then glanced at the soldier sitting across the aisle from her. He was looking at the two noisy girls a few seats ahead of them. Barbie and Babs, Lila had christened the duo, who talked high, fast and breathlessly. Maybe she was completely stereotyping and the girls were having a profound conversation about art, politics or the meaning of life, but from the snatches she'd overheard, she doubted it.

At any rate, the fembots seemed to have GI Joe captivated. He was a young guy with a compact build beneath his olive green T. His hair was close-shaven brown stubble. She wondered what he looked like before Uncle Sam got hold of him. Maybe he'd been the kind who always went for the close-shaven look. He had a good skull shape for it. Some guys didn't. And why was she staring at him and thinking about his hair, or lack of it?

Before she looked away, she noted the rest of his attire, camouflage pants and shirt with the sleeves rolled up, heavy lace-up boots, dog tags hanging against his chest. Was he expecting a battle right here in the city, or did the army make these guys wear the uniform even when they were on duty? He was probably young and foolish enough to be proud of the fascist military look.

Her gaze slid back to the serene-faced Buddha on the page of her book and she wished she remembered her Zen beliefs last night. She'd gone to meet Doyle at his place fully expecting to present the situation calmly and receive an equally peaceful agreement from her boyfriend. *Ex non* she reminded herself. The man rarely got upset even when he was under a lot of pressure at the hospital where he worked, which from all accounts had been a madhouse recently due to the A7 virus. He was always reasonable. They rarely argued and when they did, their disagreements weren't heated. In fact, even as she'd told Doyle she thought they should break up, for a moment Lila couldn't remember why she was doing it. He really was so easy to get along with.

Then things had taken a strange turn. Even-tempered Doyle had lost it. He'd yelled and cursed and insulted her. Her adrenaline rising, Lila had yelled back. Things she hadn't known bothered him came spewing out. Before it was over, they were both displaying a passion their relationship had been sorely lacking for most of the time they were together.

Now that it was over, she felt a vague anxiety and melancholy and definitely regret for losing her temper, but nothing more powerful than that. She would miss having someone to do things with, a day she could count on, but beyond that she felt fairly confident Doyle would slide quickly and easily into the role of "a guy I used to date back in college." The thought made her sadder than the actual loss of him.

The train pulled out of the station, lights flickering again, and gathered steam as it clattered along the tracks. Lila brought her attention back to the text, which she really needed to read before class that afternoon. She concentrated for the length of a paragraph before looking up again.

A teenage boy and little girl who'd just boarded the train took the last empty seat in the back end of the compartment, the one in front of the soldier. The girl was asking the boy something and he was telling her to shut up. *Brother and sister*, Lila guessed.

Sitting directly in front of her, a fashionable, white-haired lady was focused on her magazine. A young African American woman perhaps in her late twenties sat beside her. Lila tried to decide if the woman was wearing extensions in her abundant mass of braids.

She took a sip of her nearly empty coffee and stole another glance at GI Joe. He'd stopped watching the chatty Barbies and was staring out his window, legs sprawled in front of him, a backpack on the seat beside him. Lila smiled at the backpack, nothing military issue about it. The thing must be a leftover from his high school days. The blue bag was decorated with signatures scrawled in black

marker and a peeling bumper sticker of some local band.

~~Lila gave up trying to read and closed her book. She shoved it in her backpack, a neutral, unmarred navy, on the floor by her feet. As she leaned over to zip the bag closed, a shudder shook the car. She was thrown forward into the back of the seat in front of her then tossed back into her seat. Her neck snapped at the impact as the train came to an immediate, jolting stop. The lights went out, plunging the compartment into semi-darkness. Emergency light strips down the center of each aisle cast an eerie glow over the chaotic scene.~~

Cries and shouts resounded through the car. Piercing shrieks and "oh my Gods" came from the Barbie twins. Lila stood and craned her neck trying to see what was going on in the front of the compartment, but everyone else was rising too so she couldn't see anything except other people's backs and bobbing heads. She pressed her cheek close to the window, trying to look down the track, but the subway tunnel was too dark. Was this a collision or a derailment? Lila's heart pounded. She tried to calm down and reminded herself it could be worse. At least no one appeared to be hurt. The train couldn't have crashed into anything too hard. Maybe there'd simply been some massive power outage and they'd be stuck here for a while. She bent to pick up her backpack so she'd be ready if the conductor came to evacuate them.

Just then several loud screams cut across the babble of worried, excited voices. These weren't like the initial yells of surprise, but horrified screams of pain and fear.

"What the hell?" A low voice came from right beside her.

Lila turned to find GI Joe standing in the aisle beside her seat, staring toward the front of the car.

"What is it? What do you see?" she asked, climbing onto her seat to try to get a better view.

"I don't know, but I think we'd better—"

A woman's howling shriek was cut off, ending in a loud gurgle.

"We've gotta go, now!" The soldier grabbed Lila's arm and jerked her into the aisle with him. He shoved her behind him toward the door between compartments. It was closed. Lila's fingers scrabbled against glass and metal as she struggled to open it. As the screaming at the front of the car increased, she jerked the door open. Hands pushed against her back, propelling her into the space between cars. She tripped on the uneven metal floor, stumbled down the steps to the track, banging her knee against the edge of the car before her foot hit pavement. She was spun aside and slammed against the subway car as people shoved her out of the way..

In the dark, a hand grabbed her wrist and pulled. "This way."

"What is it? What's happening?" She didn't know if she'd said it or thought it. Questions repeated in a continuous loop in her head while the horrifying screaming inside the compartment went on and on. It wasn't just one or two voices now, but many as if a massacre were taking place.

"Over here." The soldier sounded confident and his hand was strong. Lila ran with him and so did some others. She could hardly see the other people in the dark, only feel their bodies pressing around her. They were running like a herd of gazelles racing before cheetahs. Jesus, what was happening back there? What was coming after them?

The man running beside her stopped so abruptly he nearly jerked her arm from its socket. He crouched and did something on the ground. Lila stared blindly at his dark shape and realized he was prying open a manhole grate. The crowd divided like water, flowing around them this way and that, but some people became aware of what he was doing and huddled around, waiting.

There was a clang of metal. The soldier rose and spoke quickly. "Whatever's on that train, I don't want to try to run from it straight down a tunnel. If we go into the storm sewer, maybe we'll have a better chance to escape."

The idea of descending into a pitch black abyss didn't seem like much of an alternative to running for the nearest station, but Lila could see his logic. If they couldn't outrun whatever was coming, the

should hide. One man was already climbing into the hole. Lila's eyes had adjusted to the very dim light and she could make out the shapes of her fellow travelers enough to see that the next person clambering into the pit was the African American woman with the braids. Following her was her seatmate, the white-haired lady.

Lila turned to the teenage boy and his little sister standing beside her. "You going with them?"

"I guess." He stooped to talk to the girl, who was crying. She shook her head. Her brother grabbed her arms and his cajoling voice grew angry.

Lila looked back at the train, its huge silver body like the carcass of some great beast lying in the tunnel. Adrenaline, sharp as knives, lanced through her veins. Her heart pounded so hard her chest was tight and she could scarcely breathe. More people were spilling out of the subway cars both nearby and farther down the track. More yells and screams, muffled by the closed windows came from inside the compartments. As Lila watched, the silhouette of a person stumbled off the train and dropped onto the pavement. The woman crawled across the ground, crying.

Lila took a step toward her to offer help then stopped. Another person was lurching down the steps right behind the woman. There was something wrong with the dark figure and the way it moved with a jerky gait like a marionette. Lila didn't know how she knew the person wasn't a victim. She just felt it.

The hair on Lila's nape lifted and she backed away. Turning, she grabbed the little girl by one hand and the older boy by the arm. "Move! Now!" She pushed them toward the open manhole, where another man was just disappearing from sight.

"I'll pass your sister down to you," she promised the boy, and he began to climb the ladder. Before he'd gotten very far, Lila lifted the crying girl beneath the armpits and slung her into the pit. She glanced back at the lurching figure—several of them now moving alongside the train. One grabbed a running woman and pulled her close as if in a lover's embrace. Lila didn't see what happened next but screams rang in her ears.

The top of the ladder was clear so she began her own descent, her sandals slipping on the metal rungs. From below came the echoing sound of voices, hands reaching for her and helping her off the ladder.

"Something's coming," she gasped breathlessly. "Something—"

"Is that everyone?" The soldier was beside her. She caught a glimpse of his profile in the darkness as he looked up to the gray circle above.

"Close it! You'd better close it. Hurry!" The whole point of hiding down here would be lost if that—whatever those people were—spotted the open manhole cover.

GI Joe climbed back up the ladder, his body blocking the light overhead. He reached out and pulled the metal cover back into place. The black circle moved across the opening like an eclipse plunging them into total darkness.

"What now? We can't even see," someone spoke above the little girl's sobbing.

"Anyone have a lighter or matches?" Lila knew the soldier's voice already. How could he sound so calm in the middle of this disaster?

"I do," came a young female voice, followed by the sound of someone scrabbling through a purse. Lila thought of her abandoned backpack, the comparative religions textbook which she knew she would never see again. She stood in the darkness, listening to the muffled sounds of trauma and running footsteps overhead and felt the warmth of bodies all around her, heard the other people murmuring and moving.

The storm sewer smelled like a monkey house at the zoo, a potent, urine-soaked stench that stung her nostrils. Her body tensed and she fought against the urge to scream. A primitive fear of things that lurked in the dark twisted her gut, but surely nothing down here could be any worse than

whatever horrible thing was happening up above.

~~Several people were whispering about terrorists and the possibility of some kind of mass strike on the city. One man suggested a fast acting, flesh eating virus and someone else told him to shut the hell up. Several people tried to make calls on their cell phones but of course there was no signal down here.~~

The girl with the lighter located it and struck a flame. In the tiny flickering light, Lila could see a little beyond the brown face of the lighter's owner—the woman with the braids. She held the lighter out from her body to try to shed its glow on the space around them. It was less garbage-strewn and rat-infested than Lila had expected, which made sense. This was a storm drain, a run-off for rainwater, not an open sewer despite the smell of piss. Luckily there hadn't been rain in weeks and the concrete floor was pretty dry. The tunnel stretched in both directions like the subway above, disappearing quickly into blackness.

Lila counted ten in their group. In addition to the soldier, the brother and sister, and the two women from the seat in front of her, there was a tall, middle-aged man in a suit and an older Hispanic man wearing a Mets baseball cap. A pretty woman in a tailored blouse and slacks, whose hair had straggled from its stylish twist stood with her arms folded protectively over her chest. Beside her was a man with crew cut white hair. The name tag on his gray industrial uniform proclaimed him "Omni Everett."

GI Joe scanned the tunnel in both directions and pointed to the right. "The nearest station would be that way. All we have to do is keep walking straight and we should get there in about ten minutes. We'll conserve the lighter. Only turn it on when necessary."

"No way," Everett said. "I'm not walking blind. We don't know when the next exit will be. We should wait here until whatever's happening quiets down, then go up and check things out."

"He's right," the woman with her pale blond hair in a bun agreed. "We have no idea what we'd be heading into in the dark. Besides, someone in authority will come soon to help. We should be nearby."

"I don't think anyone's coming," Lila said carefully. "At least not for a long time. We're probably on our own. Getting to the next station and then the street is our best bet."

"Look. We can stand here and argue or get moving, but either way, the lighter's going off. We need it later." GI Joe managed to sound absolutely confident without coming across as arrogant. The woman with the lighter doused it immediately.

"Maybe we should introduce ourselves." The blonde woman's voice sounded louder when they were all shrouded in darkness. "I'm Ann Hanson."

"I don't think it matters, lady. We can talk later. Right now we should just get the hell out of here!" The latino accent gave away the speaker as the man in the Mets cap.

"I agree. We should go before someone finds us here," came the voice of the lighter owner.

Or some thing. Lila couldn't shake the image of that lurching shadow grabbing a woman and pulling her close. The shape had been human, but there'd been something very strange about the way it moved.

"Yeah, something seriously messed up is going on up there. No way should we stick around," the teenage boy mumbled.

"I don't want anyone crapping out halfway there. We can take turns carrying the kid. What about the lady with the white hair. Can you make it even if it's a few miles?" The soldier's voice sounded impatient now. Lila could tell he was frustrated and anxious to get moving.

"I'm perfectly capable of walking for ten minutes or ten hours if need be, young man, and you may refer to me as Mrs. Scheider rather than 'the lady with the white hair'." The woman's dry voice made Lila smile.

"All right. Let's move out. Hold hands with the person in front of and behind you." Once more C

Joe grabbed Lila's hand, scaring the crap out of her. Why did she always seem to be standing right next to him?

But Omar Everett wasn't done speaking his piece. "You all do whatever you want, but I'm staying here."

"Your choice," the soldier said, shortly. "Just don't go up until we're long gone. I don't want you giving away our location. Girl with the lighter, want to hand it over?"

"Deb," she said, and moved past Lila to surrender her lighter to the leader before linking hands with Lila. Her fingers were strong and warm. The soldier's hand was even stronger. It tugged insistently on Lila's, pulling her forward.

"Everyone holding onto someone else?"

A ragged chorus of affirmatives came from the group. Even the little girl had stopped sobbing, only an occasional hiccup coming from her.

Lila felt bad leaving Mr. Everett behind, alone in the dark. It didn't seem right. But no one else, including Ann Hanson, seemed inclined to leave the group to stay with him.

Walking forward, Lila instinctively kept her head ducked low. This was like one of those trust games intended to teach you to put your faith in other people, but which usually backfired when you stubbed a toe or barked your shin. She held tight to the soldier's hand and kept herself close behind his broad back. If anyone ran into something it would be him, not her—and wasn't that a selfish thought for someone who considered herself a kind, even spiritual person? When it came down to it, survivalist nature beat out pacifist ideals.

Deb's hand grew sweaty in hers as the group shuffled along holding hands like a chain of elementary schoolchildren on a field trip. Or a barrel of monkeys. Lila smiled at the silly image of red plastic monkeys linked together, and the smile nearly burst into uncontrollable giggles. She was on the edge of losing control and getting hysterical.

"What's your name anyway?" she asked the soldier in an attempt to distract herself from the surrealistic circumstances.

"Ari Brenner."

"What do you think happened? A terrorist attack?" She already knew it was more than an accident. The train hadn't just stopped. Someone had boarded it. *Or something*, her inner voice repeated.

"I don't know. No weapons fire so that doesn't seem likely. I wouldn't want to guess right now. He still sounded as calm as if this kind of thing happened every day of the week. Was that part of army training or was he simply the kind of person who kept cool in a crisis?"

"A virus, I'm telling you," Mr. Mets Cap called out from behind them. "A flesh eating virus like in the movies. Something like that was killing those people. Could be airborne. We're better off down here."

As if to prove him wrong, the sickly sweet smell of death drifted from the tunnel ahead of them. Lila tensed, terrified of stepping into an animal corpse in the dark. Dead rat? Pigeon? Raccoon? Images of every bloated, fly-ridden creature she'd ever seen by the side of the road filled her mind and she automatically slowed.

Ari squeezed her hand and pulled. "Come on. The faster we get past whatever it is, the sooner we can breathe."

He was right. Without her hands free, Lila couldn't cover her mouth and nose. All she could do was hold her breath, which would ultimately force her to draw in a deeper lungful of the sickly odor as they didn't get past it fast.

"Shine the light. See what it is." Ann Hanson's voice was panicked, as on edge as Lila felt.

"Do you really want to know?" The tall, older man's voice sounded distant and Lila guessed

was at the end of the line.

~~Ari paused and flicked on the lighter. Its tiny glow was as bright as a flaming torch in the~~ darkness. Lila blinked as her eyes adjusted, then focused on the dirty, damp cement floor. There was a little pile of something furry decomposing only a few yards away. A disgusted shiver rippled through her. Luckily it wasn't directly in front of them so they wouldn't have to navigate around it.

"Keep going," she told Ari.

He let go of her hand to wipe his on the side of his pants, flipped the lighter closed and moved forward. She grabbed hold of his shirt and nudged him in the back. Her fist clenched, bunching up the shirt and she pressed her nose into her arm to shield it from the stench of death.

Ari walked faster. No one complained as he kept up a steady pace until they'd left the eye-watering smell behind.

"Shouldn't we be getting close to the station by now?" Deb asked.

Ari didn't answer. Lila guessed he was as clueless as anyone else about how far they were from the nearest platform—or whether this passage ran parallel with the subway tunnel above. The idea took hold of her that they might not come to another manhole cover, that maybe Everett was right and they should've stayed close to the spot they entered. Her heart beat faster as she imagined being trapped down here forever. A mental image of layers of concrete and dirt between them and the open air made her breathing grow short. She was going to give herself a panic attack if she didn't calm down. In. Out. She breathed, slow and easy. *Let it flow. Deal with whatever happens.*

"Hey, Captain!" The teen yelled. "My sister needs a break. Can we stop for a minute?"

Ari stopped and Lila bumped into him. Deb, in turn, ran into her. She imagined the lot of them tumbling one into another like the Stooges and again crazy laughter threatened to burst from her lips. Lila put both hands to her mouth and leaned against the grimy wall.

"Okay, roll call," their leader commanded. "Say your name so we know everyone's still together."

"Deb Reeves here. Anyone mind if I have a cigarette? I need one bad."

"Patricia Scheider. I'd prefer you didn't. The air down here is foul enough as it is," the white-haired woman's crisp tone allowed for no argument.

Lila pulled her hands away from her face. "Lila Teske still here."

"Derrick and Ronnie Bronson," The boy said.

"I can say my own name! I'm eight. I'm not a baby." The high voice was indignant and petulant. Lila wondered how much longer Ronnie could go before she broke down and threw an all-out tantrum. She thought she might join the kid in crying, screaming and kicking her legs. That sounded pretty good right about now.

"Hector Ramirez."

"Ann Hanson."

"Joe Morgenstern."

The names floated through the darkness.

"Do you think we should turn back?" Ann's voice came closer, marking her progress toward the front of the line. "What if we can't find another way out? Or what if we walk right past it in the dark? We should've listened to Mr. Everett and waited for someone to come help us. Wandering around like this is a big mistake." Again her voice sounded as if she was barely holding it together and might fall apart at any second. Ann didn't seem like the kind of person a person wanted to depend on in a crisis.

"Second guessing never accomplishes anything," Mrs. Scheider said briskly. "We're here now. We must move forward."

"I agree." Joe's voice also sounded nearer. Everyone was clustering into a group. "There's bound to be more than one exit and it makes sense there'd be access near a station."

"God knows what we're gonna find up there. Everybody dead or dying," Hector moaned.

"Mr. Ramirez, there's a child here. Mind what you say." Mrs. Scheider reminded him.

~~"Dude's right though," Derrick chimed in. "Something's going on. The way those people were screaming, maybe it was like nerve gas or something. Or maybe--"~~

"Shh. Stop it," Lila interrupted. "Let's not conjecture. It's not going to help anything. We'll find out soon enough what happened."

"Jesus, I need a cigarette. Gimme back my lighter."

Ari didn't hand Deb the lighter but did flick it on again. The glow illuminated the faces of the little group making them into eerie yellow masks. "Lila's right. Last thing we need is to start panicking or making up crazy stories. We should think about arming ourselves though. Does anyone have a pocket knife or anything that could be used in self defense?"

"Pepper spray on my key ring," Lila volunteered, then remembered, "which is in my backpack on the train."

Just then a scream echoed through the tunnel from far behind them. Everyone stopped talking and froze. Lila glanced at Ari. His eyes reflected the fire glow and she saw fear in them before he flipped the lighter closed. "Shit!"

She had no doubt Omar Everett had been discovered and attacked. Whatever was up there was now down here, and might have a clue there were more people.

"Gimme the little girl. I'll carry her. We've got to move!" Ari's voice was harsh.

No one argued. Lila seized the hand closest to hers--slender, fine-boned, she thought it might be Ann's—and grabbed the back of Ari's shirt again. Ronnie's leg was around his hip as he carried her. Her knee bumped against Lila's hand.

The group moved forward fast now, marching in silence. And from far away Lila could swear she heard echoing footsteps coming after them.

* * * * *

Chapter Three

The little girl was heavier than Ari had expected, but no more so than the packs they'd had to run with on the obstacle course at boot camp. He wished he'd put her on his back instead of holding her slung around his waist which was an awkward way to carry anything. He also wished to hell he had a weapon. Any weapon. A piece of pipe or a baseball bat would be great, but he'd be happier with an assault rifle. Of course, even an AK-47 wouldn't do much against a flesh-eating virus or nerve gas. He didn't know what had happened on that train, but agreed with the others it was something out of the ordinary.

He listened hard, trying to hear beyond the stumbling feet and harsh breathing of the little group of travelers. The concrete tunnel echoed so it was difficult to tell what he heard, but he thought there were footsteps coming from behind them.

The girl whimpered and gripped his shoulders, her little fingers digging in. She smelled like strawberry gum and sweat. Maybe he was supposed to give her some kind of encouragement or tell her not to worry, but he saved his breath for trotting faster.

"Slow down." The voice sounded like Ann, that woman who'd wanted to stay behind. He wished she had if she was going to hobble the group. He ignored her plea and continued to stride quickly. His palm swept along the wall, keeping them on course and feeling for ladder rungs. He kept his gaze focused toward the ceiling, searching for a break in the blackness, a sign of light to indicate an opening from what felt like an endless coffin. Perhaps he'd been wrong to lead these people down here. Maybe they should've stayed on the track like everyone else and taken their chances that way. Now they were trapped in this tunnel below the tunnel. At least there seemed to be only one possible route. It'd be much worse if there was a maze of choices.

At that moment, as if fate was amused by the idea, the wall vanished from beneath Ari's hands. They'd reached an opening. He turned on the lighter and saw they were at a crossroads. They could continue straight or angle left. Instinct told him to keep going forward, but self-doubt whispered he could be making a big mistake and leading everyone farther away from the station.

He thought about how the train had pulled away from the platform and clicked down the tracks. Hadn't they veered right? The subway wasn't laid out in a perfect grid. There were twists and turns.

"I think something's coming. We should get moving." Lila's voice behind him was low and tense.

"There's another tunnel. I'm trying to decide which way to go," he whispered back.

People were talking, asking about the hold up, calling out whatever came into their minds.

"Shut up!" he snapped, wishing he could gag every one of them. "All of you shut the hell up." His heart pounded. He shifted the heavy kid in his arms. She tightened her legs around his waist and pressed her head against his chest. Jesus, this kid was depending on him to get them out of here. All of them were depending on him, and he didn't have a clue which way to go.

Lila pressed her hand against his back, her palm warm and reassuring splayed across his spine. "Breathe," she said. "Slow your heart rate, clear your mind, and listen."

Easier said than done, but he obeyed, closing his eyes, which ached from trying to search for a glimmer of light the entire time they'd been hiking through this limbo. He breathed in the dank, oxygen-deprived air and slowly released it. Breathed again and smelled the rotten scent of garbage. Garbage meant people. People meant an access to the tunnel. And wasn't that the faintest whiff of slightly less stale air on his left cheek?

Ari opened his eyes and looked down the branching tunnel. He thought he could see a faint glow. At the same time, he heard footsteps, definite footsteps echoing from far away.

"Move out," he said just loud enough so the group could hear him then plunged into the left hand passage, heading toward the gray light.

The resounding footsteps from behind pattered faster and sounded louder. Whatever was on the trail was trotting now. Ari wrapped his arm around Ronnie and broke into a run, barely touching the wall now to keep his course straight. The dim light became clearer and he headed for it. He stopped when he reached a grate overhead, and the group piled into him. There were no ladder on the wall beneath the grate, no ladder to safety, only the faint light coming through slats half covered by a drift of something, probably litter.

Ari cursed, "Goddamn it!" He peeled Ronnie off him and set her down then moved along the wall feeling blindly for rungs. There had to be some exit nearby, perhaps a manhole cover he couldn't see because it fit so tightly. If the footsteps behind them weren't growing louder, he wouldn't be panicking, but as it was his heart pounded so hard his chest hurt. They had to find a way out, now.

His knuckles rapped hard against iron. He seized hold of a metal bar and searched for the bottom rung with his foot. Locating it, he climbed quickly to the top of the ladder, reached above his head and felt rough concrete and cool metal. He traced his finger along the lip of a circle before pushing up against it. He held his breath, terrified the cover would be locked from above, but the heavy plate shifted. He grunted as he lifted and shoved it aside.

There was no time to make sure the subway was clear. The danger coming from behind was more urgent. Ari climbed down a couple of rungs before dropping the rest of the way to the ground and landing in a crouch.

"Go!" he ordered Derrick.

Derrick clambered to the top and out the hole. Ari had been worried Ronnie would freak out about climbing the ladder, but she scurried up it like a pirate climbing rigging into her brother's waiting arms. Ann then Deb went, followed by Mrs. Scheider, who climbed slowly but steadily. Joe went behind her to ensure she didn't slip and Hector followed him.

At last only Ari and Lila remained.

~~"Go ahead," he urged, glancing down the tunnel as he pushed her toward the ladder.~~

There were moving shapes looming in the dark, coming closer, running fast but with an odd reeling gait. Were they people or something else? Disbelief flooded through him at what his imagination dared to cobble together from years of watching horror movies. Ridiculous, impossible images of werewolves and monsters flashed through his mind coupled with thoughts of Fred Krueger or Jason striding along with deadly intent.

But these things weren't striding. They were fucking *running*, and Lila was only halfway up the ladder. The group of people—they *were* people—was briefly illuminated in speckled light and shadow cast by the grate. Ari saw their distorted faces for an instant before he stopped looking and started climbing as fast as he could.

He quickly caught up to Lila as the first of the creatures reached the circle of light coming from the open manhole cover above. Ari glanced down and glimpsed pale skin, a red mouth and black eyes looking back at him. The thing was at the foot of the ladder, climbing up behind him.

"Go, go, go!" he screamed at Lila. He kicked at his pursuer's head, his foot connecting with its face. The creature's head snapped back, but it kept climbing.

Ari kicked again, connecting with its chest and this time he knocked it off the ladder into the darkness below. But there was another coming right behind it. Ari pushed his hands against Lila's ass, boosting her up and out of the hole. He climbed the last few rungs and vaulted through himself, yelling, "Shut it!"

Hector and Joe slid the cover into place and stood on it, their combined weight keeping the hole closed even as something pounded on the metal plate from below. Ari searched frantically for something with which to seal the exit. There was a bench bolted to the floor and a vending machine next to it. He yelled at Derrick to come help him move it. Ari's muscles strained as they wrestled the heavy machine a couple of inches across the floor.

"Hurry," Hector yelled as the pounding from below continued.

Lila and Deb came to lend their strength and the four of them pushed the vending machine across the floor to the manhole cover.

"We'll tip it face down," Ari said. Joe and Hector took the weight as he and Derrick rocked the machine toward them. The two men stepped off the cover, letting go of the machine so it crashed to the ground. From beneath the machine, the pounding noise continued for a moment. Then there was silence.

"*Dios*, what the hell is going on?" Hector voiced everyone's thoughts.

"Whoever they are, there could be more. We should keep moving, but find someplace where we can catch our breath," Joe advised.

Ari rubbed his wrenched shoulder and took a look around the empty platform. Only not so empty. Mingled with the usual trash on the ground were lumps of stuff scattered here and there. It was difficult to make out what they were in the glare of emergency lights that cast everything in sharp relief as if they were living in a black and white movie.

He walked closer to take a look at a pile of shredded rags and red sludge, his stomach tensing as his eyes recognized what they saw before his brain could wrap itself around the concept. Body parts. That's what the lumps were. Limbs, bones and bits of entrails. It looked like a massacre had taken place with very little of the victims left behind.

"My God," Lila's voice came from beside him. "What happened here?"

Ari's gaze flicked to a corpse lying near the wall. He could swear its hand had moved. "I think that one's still alive."

He jogged over and crouched beside the mangled body of a man in an overcoat way too hot for

the day. Probably a homeless guy. They always seemed to wear layers of everything they owned winter or summer. The stench of blood and excrement rose from the sprawled form. Ari held his breath, put a hand on the man's shoulder and gently rolled him over. You weren't supposed to move an injured person, but as bad as this guy looked, it hardly seemed to matter.

The dead man appeared to have been ripped apart by some kind of carnivore. Bites of flesh were ripped from his face, throat and chest. One eyeball still attached to the brain by red tendrils lolled against his cheek. His legs sprawled at impossible angles, a shard of bone protruding through a hole in one of his trouser legs.

The rest of the group had clustered around, except for Ann, who was keeping Ronnie away from the sight. He swallowed the bile rising in his throat. He didn't want to feel for the dead man's pulse. He didn't want to touch him again. "Anybody here have any medical experience?"

"I'm..." Joe Morgenstern gave a short, bitter laugh. "I'm a dermatologist."

Ari looked back down at the dead man's ruined face. Macabre jokes about skin conditions fluttered in his mind like bits of litter caught in a whirlwind. "Could you take a look at him?"

Morgenstern crouched and reached for the man's wrist.

"No way that guy's alive," Derrick helpfully pointed out.

"Why don't you go help Ann with your little sister," Lila snapped. "She's scared out of her wits. She needs you."

Dr. Morgenstern laid the man's hand down and shook his head. "No pulse. He's dead."

"Okay." Ari nodded and rose to his feet. "We've should keep moving, get above ground and find out what's happening."

"A virus, I'm telling you. We've probably already been infected." Hector scratched obsessively at his arm.

Joe stood. "Mr. Ramirez, I think we can discount an airborne pathogen or all of us would have been showing symptoms by now. You can relax."

"Werewolves or vampires could rip up people like this." Derrick dared to say aloud what Ann never would have, even though the insane idea of monsters had been whispering in his brain.

Mrs. Scheider shot Derrick a quelling glance. "Don't be ridiculous, young man. This is no time to be inventing nonsense."

"I'm serious. You can't deny *that*." He pointed at the remains at their feet. "That's real, and no human being did it."

"Come on. Let's go." Ari started to step away, but spared a last glance for Homeless Fred and at that moment the man's single closed eye snapped open. Ari leaped back.

The corpse on the ground began to move, struggling to rise.

"Jesus Christ!" and "Zombie!" Ari and Derrick shouted simultaneously.

Ari seized Lila's hand--she always seemed to be right beside him—and began to run. The whole thing was like a bad drug trip, outrageous and endless. They would spend eternity running through tunnels chased by monsters.

When they reached the stairs, he glanced back at the dead man, still trying to stand on what were probably broken legs. He wasn't making any headway and didn't seem to be much of a threat. Ari scanned the group to make sure everyone was accounted for. Dr. Joe carried Ronnie. Hector held hands with Mrs. Scheider, making sure the older woman kept up. Deb, Ann, Derrick and Lila, whose hand he gripped like a life preserver, were all together.

Ari led them upstairs to the mezzanine level of the terminal where there were a few shops, restrooms, ticket booths and more carnage. Body parts littered the floor near the turnstiles and benches, but there weren't any animated corpses stumbling around. Whatever had gone through here had moved on. Maybe.

The revenants—if that's what they were—that had chased them through the storm drainage tunnel would have to return to the last open manhole to get out. It would take at least twenty minutes for them to retrace their steps and another twenty to come down the subway tunnel. That should give the group a short time to recover before going up to street level to find God knew what kind of chaos. Before they faced it, they needed to rest and arm themselves.

The power was out in the terminal too and emergency lights cast the area in a gloomy glow. Ari spotted a glass-fronted convenience store and headed toward it, sweeping his gaze from left to right. Nothing appeared to be moving. A glance behind told him the zombie from the lower level had not followed them up the stairs, but it might. He needed to find a weapon to kill the thing if it reared its ugly, eye-lolling head again.

Ari held up a hand to bring the group to a halt while he checked out the shop. Inside, he found magazines, books, DVDs, candy, shelves and coolers full of beverages and snacks—and the unmoving remains of the clerk behind the counter.

He beckoned the rest of the group into the store. "Why don't you pass out bottles of water," he suggested to Ann, who seemed the type who needed a task to perform to keep her focused. She nodded and went to the cooler for some Ice Springs.

"Joe, you watch that door and Hector, the other. If you see anything move, I mean anything, I'll let me know."

"What are you gonna do?" Hector raised his bushy brows.

"Look for weapons. There must be something around here." He sounded self-assured, as if he knew what he was doing, but Ari felt like he was poking his way through a mine field. Somehow he had taken charge, but he had no business doing it. He was no leader.

Lila and Deb picked up some of the scattered items from the floor to make space to sit, while Mrs. Scheider tried to make a call on her Blackberry. "Still not getting a signal," she announced.

"Me either," Hector said. "No bars."

Ann came from the cooler with arms full of bottled water and headed toward the checkout. Ari stopped her. "Uh, there's nobody to take your money. Why don't you go ahead and pass those out."

"Oh, of course. Yes." Her blue eyes were wide and dilated. Didn't that mean a person was in shock? Well, hell, they all were.

He searched behind the counter, trying to ignore the bits of clerk stuck to everything. It wasn't like he expected to find a gun or bat, this wasn't the kind of convenience store like in his neighborhood, but there was nothing useful for self defense. However, there was a display of flashlights near the register. Ari stepped over a shred of polo shirt with a name tag attached—Maria—and hefted one in his hand. It didn't weigh much and wouldn't be useful as a club, but at least they could have light if they needed it. He gathered all the flashlights from the display and passed them to the group sitting on the floor.

After another scan of the silent station outside the shop, he continued searching for weapons. Maybe he could pelt the zombies with hard candy or whip CD cases at their heads like Ninja stars. He spun the display rack of sunglasses and decided the center spindle could be detached without too much difficulty. He flipped the rack upside down to dismember the pole from its base and top.

He glanced at the group. Ann offered Ronnie a box of cookies and a stuffed unicorn. She stroked the girl's hair back and offered her a Kleenex to wipe her tear-streaked face. Meanwhile, Derrick was following Ari's lead, searching for something to use as a weapon.

"We've got to find a phone that works and call 911," Joe said, "let them know about the accident and that there's something...strange going on."

"A zombie attack." Derrick casually said the word that made Ari cringe at its absurdity. "You think they'll believe it?"

"Maybe, if it's a widespread phenomenon." Lila picked a tote sack from a hook and began to fill with snack foods.

"Zombies. Don't be ridiculous." Joe continued to scan the empty station.

"We all saw it," the teen argued. "You said that guy was dead, no pulse, and then he was getting up. Only thing I know that can do that is a zombie. You can call them revenants if it sounds better to you, but they're still the same thing. Animated dead people."

"I must have missed his pulse or his heart temporarily stopped. People have close encounters sometimes," Joe said.

"He was dead, but he was moving. Zombie," Derrick stated flatly.

"Please stop saying that." Mrs. Scheider frowned. "Dr. Morgenstern is right. We need to concentrate on something sensible like finding a working phone so we can call emergency services. Whatever's happening, it *is* an emergency."

Ari thought the network would be overloaded and there was no way they'd get through, but since they didn't have a usable phone anyway, it didn't seem worth bringing up the point.

"I agree about trying to get help, and I'm sure everyone here has family they want to call. But we have to be careful and prepared for whatever we might find up there." Ari freed the center pole of the sunglass rack at last. The long cylinder might be awkward to carry, but it would do for cracking heads. "It could be total chaos and we may need to fight. There might not be cops or anyone else waiting to help us." One look around the bloody subway station should convince them of that.

"Oh, God," Ann moaned softly and rested her forehead on her knees. Hector muttered under his breath and Ari thought he might be praying.

For a moment, they were all silent. He was glad no one was having a major meltdown, making things harder than they already were. Maybe there living in a big city prepared a person for survival or maybe they were all too shocked to react appropriately. Only Ronnie was smart enough to cry his eyes out.

"With all the emergency preparedness drills we've had since 9-11, I'm sure there'll be military teams on the job soon," Ari continued. "But meanwhile, we have to stay alive. If it is...what Derrick is suggesting, we need to know if the city's been overrun by them and how to protect ourselves." *From zombies.* The ridiculousness hit him and he suppressed a laugh. Probably best if he wasn't the first to break down since he seemed to be the leader.

"I've got to get to my wife and kids." Hector took off his baseball cap and rubbed his forehead. "They're clear out in Brooklyn."

"My sister and me were on our way to our dad's place. He and Mom are going to be freaking out if we don't show up." Following Ari's lead, Derrick had another display rack on its side and was struggling to take it apart.

"My girlfriend's office is near here," Deb said. "If I can't call her, I'm going to go to her."

Everyone splitting up and running off in different directions the moment they hit the street was exactly what Ari wanted to avoid. "We should stick together until we know what's going on. Work as a unit."

Lila looked up from packing water bottles into one of the tote bags. "It sounds like you have a plan. What do you think we should do?"

Ari considered what he'd learned from hours of playing Gears of War 2. "Recon first. A couple of us should go up to the street and report back on what we find."

"While the rest sit here waiting for those things to attack from below? No. You said it yourself. We should stick together, do everything as a group," Lila said.

She had a point. This place was only safe temporarily. But Ari thought whatever was happening above could be even worse. He didn't like the idea of dragging along Ronnie, Mrs. Scheider or anyone

else who might be a hindrance, not until they knew what to expect.

~~The others started weighing in with opinions, giving ideas or suggestions which felt less like~~ group discussion than a situation crumbling into confusion. One of them had to take control and make a final decision. Might as well be him.

"This recon won't take long. Just a quick scan of the area. Meanwhile, the rest of you gather anything that might be useful to take with us, food and water and anything that could be used as a weapon. For example, lighters and aerosol cans can be makeshift flamethrowers." He wanted to keep them occupied rather than worried and waiting. "Derrick, why don't you come with me? Hector and Joe, guard the others."

"What's with putting the men in charge of the weak womenfolk?" Deb crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow. "We're not useless."

But it was Lila who demanded to go along. She hefted an umbrella in her hand, flourishing it like a fencing sword. "I'm armed. I'm going with you. Mrs. Scheider, lend me your phone, please. I'll be mine on the train."

"Fine. Let's go." Ari walked from the shop, giving no one else a chance to offer more arguments.

"Aye, aye, captain," Derrick muttered, flanking him on the left and brandishing his metal spindler. Lila fell in on the right with her umbrella-spear clenched in her fist.

Ari motioned them to stay behind him as he went up the stairs toward the street, stepping over mangled body parts that littered the steps. He hugged close to the wall and listened as he neared the entrance. The traffic noise had more than the usual quota of sirens, the wails of emergency vehicles announcing something big was happening.

His pulse raced and his skin was slick with sweat. He gripped his weapon tighter and took another step up just as a fire truck shot past on the street. A few people raced by, their feet pounding the pavement. No one tried to go down the stairs to the subway. Who would want to be underground in the middle of a power outage?

Ari crept up another step then raised his head above the pavement like a small animal poking its head from a burrow to check for predators. The area was complete anarchy and all he could think was "How did things get so fucked up so fast?"

There'd been a car accident on the street. Maybe more than one, it was hard to tell. At least a few cars had collided. Others had been abandoned, their doors left wide open. The one stoplight he could see was dark and there was no cop directing the gridlocked traffic. The flashing lights of the fire truck disappeared around a corner and he realized it had been driving on the sidewalk, plowing past all obstacles that got in the way. People ran in all directions, but not as many as he would have expected. Like in the subway, it seemed the revenants had swept through and moved on, leaving blood, gore and pieces of bodies in their wake.

In the plexi-glass cubicle sheltering the subway entrance only a few feet from Ari lay a face. Not a head, only a face discarded like last year's Halloween mask. After one quick glance, he looked away. He didn't need to see something like that too closely.

"911 has a recorded message about all circuits being busy." Lila reported as she jabbed a number on her phone. "I'm calling my boyfriend—ex-boyfriend. He's an intern at St. Andrews. Maybe he can know something."

Ari pulled his own phone from his pants pocket and tried to reach his mom, but got her voicemail. Calls to his friends yielded the same results. He felt sick as he imagined why they might not be answering their phones.

Now what? He tried to imagine what his drill sergeant, Vogt would command. Climb a wall, do a few sets of pushups. Nothing in the book about responding to a full scale zombie attack.

"What's going on?" Derrick moved past Ari to take a turn looking at the carnage outside the

foxhole. He pulled back, pale as a corpse, hugging his skinny arms around his body. "What are you gonna do?"

"Get someplace safe. Find a battery powered radio so we can learn what's going on and what's being done about it. Get better weapons" Ari took another look at the street, ignoring the confusion and concentrating on the layout. There was a large sporting goods store within sight, the perfect place for guns, blades, bats, bows, and other supplies. It should be as safe a place as any to squat while they took stock, and maybe they'd find other people there. Preferably living ones.

The sound of shattering glass and screams came from farther down the street. Ari's gaze swept toward the source of the noise. A storefront window had burst out about a block away. He couldn't see what had broken through it until the people scattered to reveal a blood-streaked man staggering to his feet while a revenant lurched disjointedly after him. Running people blocked Ari's view, but he saw the moment when the predator caught her prey and bit down on his shoulder. Her teeth ripped right through the fabric of his shirt. Ari hadn't known blunt human teeth could do that.

He dropped down into the relative safety of the subway entrance, breathing as if he'd run five miles and pressing his body tight against the wall. "We'd better go back down."

Lila held up her hand and continued talking. "Doyle. Doyle! I can't hear you. You're breaking up. Hello? Doyle?" She flipped the phone shut with a curse and handed it back to Ari. "The connection was terrible and Doyle was...in shock I guess, like he'd checked out."

Ari understood that. He felt light-headed and disconnected himself, observing everything as if from a distance.

"He and some others are trapped in a wing of the hospital. He kept saying, 'They're coming. I can't hear them coming.'" Lila's voice broke. Ari prayed she wouldn't start crying, he couldn't deal with that. He needed her to keep being strong.

"My mom works at St. Andrews, too." He thought about her bending over the steam press in the laundry and a shambling creature coming up behind her, but slammed his mind shut when the image of gnashing teeth and clawing hands got too graphic.

"The hospital is across town so these attacks must be going on all over the city," Lila said.

Derrick jabbed his finger on the keypad of his cell phone, his acne-sprinkled face contorted in a scowl. "My mom's not there. I'll try my dad."

Ari was nervous. They should go back to the group and get them moving to the new location before the zombies from below made it to the terminal. But first he took one more look at the street, carefully avoiding glimpsing the disembodied face to his left. People still ran in all directions, a few zombies among them, snatching, grabbing and biting. Cars attempted to make it around the jam in the street by driving onto the sidewalk. A cop car crawled through the stalled traffic and finally came to a halt.

Two officers piled out, guns drawn, shouted something then began shooting into the crowd. Ari jerked as the shots popped. A man reeled backward, fell to the sidewalk, then climbed back to his feet. Zombie. The word was becoming less ridiculous now. The man stumbled toward the police like a drunk. Each fired several more rounds but still the thing kept coming.

"Head shot!" Ari muttered. "Has to be a head shot."

His hypothesis was proved wrong as the female cop shot the creature point blank in the forehead. The impact made it teeter backward before resuming its steady course toward the police cruiser. The other cop continued to shoot as he backed toward the car and got in the driver's side. His partner ran toward the other side of the cruiser, but the zombie caught hold of her Kevlar vest and pulled her toward him before chomping into her throat. Blood gushed in a fountain as the creature severed an artery, spraying them both in red.

This entire scenario played out within seconds, so fast Ari could hardly process it. Instead he

mind focused on the details. *Cop wearing a flak jacket? They at least know there's rioting going on but probably not much else.* If he'd learned one thing during his short stint in the military, it was that people in charge were often as ignorant as everyone else about what was actually happening during a crisis, especially in a bizarre situation like this. These weren't terrorists with guns, but reanimated dead people. When a point black shot to the head didn't take them down, what was a cop to do? Apparently drive away, because that was what the policeman did. The stupid metal pole in Ari's hand seemed more useless than ever.

"Did you see that? Did you fricking *see* that?" Lila was beside him, staring at the chaos.

He grasped her arm and pulled. "Come on. Let's go."

Ari started downstairs, tugging Lila along with him. Derrick followed with the cell phone still clutched in his hand. "Why won't anybody answer?"

Ari's foot skidded on a slick of red goo. He half fell down a couple of steps, dropping his makeshift weapon. The pole rolled down the rest of the stairs with a loud clanging.

Lila grabbed his arm and hauled him up off his ass. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." He rubbed his elbow which had whacked the concrete steps sharply and continued on his way. He picked up his club at the bottom of the steps and jogged down the short hallway toward the terminal with Derrick and Lila on either side of him.

Deb waited there, smoking a cigarette. "What took you guys so long? What's happening?"

Ari glanced at his watch. They'd been gone less than five minutes. "Chaos. The cops don't have any control. People are running all over the place and there are more"—he forced out the words—"zombies."

Deb exhaled a puff of smoke. "Jesus Christ. I've got to get to Julie."

"I know you're worried," Lila said. "We're all worried about someone, but going off alone is a bad idea."

"There's a sporting goods store nearby. We should try to get there, gather some gear and arm ourselves," Ari added. "After that we'll discuss where to go next, and if anyone wants to split, they can."

Just then a little girl's piercing shriek echoed through the corridor. The wail made the hair rise on Ari's neck. He hefted his metal pole in one hand like a javelin and raced toward the sound. With the others pounding behind him.

* * * * *

Chapter Four

Lila's heart nearly stopped at Ronnie's horrifying wail coming from the station. Ari took off like a shot with Derrick right behind him. Deb cursed and tossed her cigarette to the floor. Lila gripped her ridiculous umbrella and followed, mentally preparing for the slaughterhouse they might find.

As she raced over the cement, her breath hitched in and out as if she'd run a few miles instead of several yards. Her mind felt disconnected from her body and from this never-ending nightmare. There was no way to comprehend what was happening. The best a person could do was react to it with at least a little courage and common sense.

They rounded the corner to the platform. Lila couldn't see anything wrong—other than the bits of carrion which had already been there. There were no zombies and after one piercing shriek, Ronnie hadn't screamed again. The group was clustered inside the shop, people Lila already felt strangely bonded with although they'd only just met. Joe argued with Hector, while Ann and Mrs. Scheidt crouched on the floor beside Ronnie.

Derrick barreled past the others. "What happened? Is she all right?"

Ronnie's arms were wrapped tight around Ann's neck and the woman held her close, rubbing her back and murmuring something.

"She saw something that frightened her," Mrs. Scheider said.

Hardly surprising given the circumstances, Lila thought as she crowded into the store along with Ari and Deb.

"Damn it, Ronnie! You scared the crap out of us." Derrick knelt by her.

The girl lifted her blotchy, tear-streaked face from the blond woman's shoulder. "I couldn't help it. I saw a spider, a big one. It was huge! I had to scream." She glared at the two older men. "And then he yelled at me. He shook me."

"I didn't," Joe said. "I grabbed her arm and told her to be quiet. I didn't mean to frighten her."

"You don't yell at scared little kids. That's no way to calm them down." Hector glared then spoke soothingly to Ronnie. "It's okay, *hija*."

"God, Ronnie. You're such a big baby." Derrick shook his head and set his weapon on the floor.

"We're all in danger. We can't have kids screaming. That's all I'm saying," Joe muttered.

"He's right. It's bad up there and we sure as hell don't want to draw any attention down here. Seems the whole city's in crisis that's not likely to break any time soon, but we can't stay here either." Ari jerked a thumb toward the subway tunnel. "Not with what's still down there."

He described what they'd witnessed and told about the sporting goods shop. "I think we can make it there, and I'll feel a lot better after we're armed."

"What good does it do when a shot to the head doesn't even kill them?" Hector asked.

"Do you have a better idea, Mr. Rodriguez?" Mrs. Scheider sounded cool and composed even though her coiffure and couture were considerably less crisp than they'd been on the train. "Taking any action is better than taking none at all."

"Medulla oblongata!" Derrick suddenly whirled around from studying a rack of chips. "That's why the shot to the forehead didn't work. It doesn't matter if their brains are damaged. In some zombie lore the heads must be completely severed. Cutting through the nervous system at the base of the neck stops them from functioning."

"You're saying they have to be beheaded," Ari said.

"That's my guess."

They all stared at Derrick. He sounded so certain and they were so desperate to believe anything, Lila thought, even the guess of a kid raised on too many horror movies. Well, why not? Would a scientist have a better idea of what stopped a revenant?

Just then, a movement in the terminal caught her attention. Lila turned toward it. Something was moving in the shadow of the stairs to the lower level. She squinted and touched Ari's arm. "Hey, what's that?"

He turned to look. They both stared at the thing crawling out of the darkness of the stairwell. It was the dead man from downstairs. Lila recognized the trench coat. They hadn't worried about the revenant pursuing them since his legs were broken. But apparently the creature's will was stronger than its physical disabilities, because the zombie was crawling relentlessly toward them.

Ari took a step forward. "Goddamn it." He picked up the pole he'd leaned against the counter and strode toward the creeping menace. Lila trailed after him, unable to look away from the abomination making its painstaking way across the floor. The thing's shoulders hitched and its hands braced against the cement as it hauled its broken body forward like a wounded soldier trying to escape a battlefield. Behind her, the others continued talking. Then one by one their voices fell silent as they saw the crawling zombie.

Ari jabbed the man in the side with his pole. Lila reached out a hand and whispered "no" to herself. It seemed so wrong to poke at the pitiful creature. But in an instant the zombie turned from

pitiful to dangerously feral. It whipped a hand out lightning fast and gripped the pole, almost pulling from Ari's hands. The creature looked up and bared its teeth, the dangling eye on its cheek bouncing jauntily at the sudden movement.

Ari jerked the pole from the creature's grip, raised it and brought it down on the zombie with a audible thump. Again and again he hit the undead thing, but still it wouldn't stop crawling. The zombie reached for Ari's foot. He leaped aside and smashed its hand with his boot. He slammed the pole across the back of the creature's neck several times.

"Find me something sharp to cut its neck with," he called out.

"Use the pole like a spear. Jab into the hollow at the base of its skull. That should impale the medulla." Joe went toward him, but didn't rush to help.

His suggestion was easier said than done. Ari tried to impale the zombie but it twisted away from his stabbing blows. The broken body thrashed like a landed fish, making it nearly impossible for him to hit the right spot. When at last he drove the pole into the creature's flesh, blood gushed from the wound. The heart must still be pumping. Lila watched in horror as the thing spasmed.

Ari's arm muscles strained as he pushed against the pole, keeping the dead man pinned to the floor. "Not working. Somebody get a knife."

Lila dashed back into the store, searching frantically for anything sharp enough to cut through flesh, gristle and bone. There was nothing. She could think of nothing to help. *Blind panic. This is what blind panic feels like.*

"One of these shelves," Hector yelled. He swept the items off a metal display shelf and Derrick helped him pull the shelf from the frame. Hector ran with the shelf toward Ari and the struggling zombie.

Joe and Hector's bodies blocked Lila's view. But she didn't want to see any more. She waited beside Mrs. Scheider, her body tense as she caught glimpses of Ari wielding the sharp edge of the shelf over the prone zombie. He grunted as he bore down, driving metal through flesh. The thing that had once been a man made a gurgling noise and lashed out with its arms and legs once more before going still.

"It worked," Derrick whispered.

She glanced at the white-faced boy beside her. Although his makeshift weapon was clenched in his hands, he hadn't gone to help. Neither had Joe or Hector. They'd stood nearby, letting Ari do the job alone. Lila realized with a flush of shame she'd done the same.

Hector moved, affording her a glimpse of Ari standing over the finally dead zombie. He dropped the metal shelf with a clatter and stooped to grab the pole he'd tossed aside. Straightening, Ari walked toward the shop. His expression was grim and his hands blood-spattered. He stopped and looked around at the rest of the group.

"More of those things may be coming. We've rested long enough."

No one argued as they gathered the things they'd commandeered from the store. Lila shouldered two totes full of water, juice, and food, their combined weight pulling on her shoulders. She gripped the red umbrella, which seemed totally useless now, but acted as a sort of security blanket for her psyche—something to hold onto.

When they were all ready, Ari led them upstairs to the street, going first to check that the way was clear. He called back over his shoulder. "I don't think it's going to get any better than this, very few people on the street and no undead that I can see. The way to the store looks clear."

Lila glanced at Ann Hanson beside her. The woman's expression was calm to the point of blankness. She held Ronnie's hand and bent to whisper to the whimpering child. Lila could see that Ronnie was Ann's red umbrella, something to cling to and take care of while the world fell apart.

"Move out," Ari called.

The group climbed the stairs as a tight unit, emerging from the shelter of the underground to the danger of the streets. Ari kept them moving at a fast clip, down littered sidewalk and around abandoned cars as they crossed the street.

Lila looked at buildings around them, so familiar and normal. This was her city, but eerily empty as if it was early morning instead of the middle of a busy weekday. Had the people all run for shelter clearing the streets, or had the government given some evacuation procedure to follow? Maybe there was some location they should be heading. Although they'd only been underground for a short time she felt like she'd missed an important inter-office memo instructing them on how to respond to a zombie attack.

The trek from the subway entrance to Superior Sporting Supplies was surprisingly uneventful. Other than having to step around gore, there was nothing to impede their progress. Within minutes all nine of them were safely inside the building. The scent of leather and plastic from shoes, bags, jackets and other gear pervaded the store. It was a clean odor of new things at odds with the primal smells of blood, bodily waste and sweat she'd been inhaling. Lila wished she could scrub herself as clean and new as the store smelled, and scour her mind of all the horrific images that polluted it.

Power was out here, too. Light flooded in from the front windows, while a few emergency lights illuminated the back part of the store. Rows of display racks made dark tunnels down which anything might hide, but they didn't find another living soul in the store. No dead ones either or signs of death. Perhaps the people who worked here had stepped outside to see what was happening and had gotten carried away in the madness.

"We'll sweep the entire store and make sure it's safe," Ari said. "Lila, wait by the front door and lock it when I give the all clear."

He put down his makeshift weapon and took something more lethal from the hunting and fishing area, a knife with an eight inch blade. Ari, Hector and Joe went toward the back of the store to secure the storeroom, while Deb and Derrick checked out every aisle in the store. Everyone returned to report the building was deserted and Lila locked the door.

At the gun counter, Ari chose rifles and ammo from the gun cabinet after he'd found the keys. "That cop's gun might not have stopped that zombie, but if we blow the whole head off, they aren't going to keep going."

He handed out weapons to everyone except Ann and Ronnie. Ann was helping the little pick out a pair of tennis shoes to replace her sandals. Lila glanced at her own sandals and decided she'd better get better footwear for walking, too. But first Ari gave them all a tutorial on how to use the guns.

Lila held one called a CVA Buckhorn 290 Magnum. It was heavy. She breathed in the sharp tang of gun oil and metal as she rested the stock against her shoulder. She never would've imagined where she got up this morning with her mind twisted in knots over Doyle that she'd find herself several hours later with a rifle in her hands, learning how to squeeze the trigger. Lila shook off the foggy feeling and disconnect and brought her attention back to what Ari was saying. If she concentrated on the motion of what she was doing, she could keep her panic at bay.

"We don't want to draw attention with random gunfire. Don't shoot unless you have to and make every shot count. Aim for their heads and don't think of them as people, only targets. They aren't people any more."

"What if the guns don't work?" Hector, always the pessimist, sighted down his unloaded rifle and squeezed the trigger.

Ari smiled grimly. "Run like hell." It was the first time Lila had seen him smile and even though his smirk was ironic, it looked good on him.

He suggested they each find a knife, baseball bat or other weapon. Some did that, while others took the opportunity to make calls on the three available cell phones. The store phone was down.

because of the power outage apparently of this entire section of the city.

~~Lila put down her new rifle and borrowed Ari's phone to call her parents. They were hundreds of miles away in Ohio and hopefully safe if this situation only affected the New York area. She was desperate to believe it was true, although there was nothing to give her any such hope. With something so crazy, what was the likelihood this wasn't a wider phenomenon?~~

The phone rang five times, each ring ratcheting her tension up another notch, before her mother picked up. "Hello, Lila?"

"Yeah, it's me, Mom. Is everything all right there?"

"Your dad and I are okay. What about you? We've been watching the news. It's terrible! How are you? Are you safe?"

"A store. I was on the subway with these other people when it was attacked and we escaped. We haven't seen any news yet. We don't know what's going on. The city's a mess. These things are killing people."

"Oh, sweetheart, we've been so worried about you. I called your cell over and over."

"I left it on the train with all my stuff when we ran." Hearing her mom's concerned voice made her eyes sting and she blinked away tears. "What's happening, Mom? What are they saying on TV."

"These attacks are happening all over the country. Stories are coming in, but no one really knows anything. You know the media. If they don't have any idea, they bring on experts who make up theories. The general consensus seems to be this is some kind of virus. But you tell me how a virus can make dead bodies rise and walk." She drew a deep, audible breath and her voice was steadier when she continued. "You know I'm not the most religious person, but if this isn't the damn apocalypse, I don't know what is."

There was a noise in the background and a "give me that" before her dad's voice thundered in the phone as if he was trying to yell all the way from Ohio. "Lila, listen to me. Are you somewhere safe? You need to get someplace safe, lock the door and ride this out. That's what your mom and I are doing. Whatever's happening, the army will get it under control soon. You just have to protect yourself until then."

Lila looked at the rifle and ammo, the scope and night vision goggles lying on the counter beside her. "I'm trying, Daddy. I'm with some people from the subway and this one guy has had some military training. He's kind of our leader. I'm not at my apartment and I can't get there. It's blocked away, all the public transport systems are shut down and the streets are jammed with abandoned cars. We haven't decided what our next move should be yet."

"Let me talk to this guy."

Lila glanced at Ari, selecting vests and boots, holsters for the knives and other gear. "He's kind of busy right now. Has the President or someone made a statement yet? Is there something we're supposed to do or something the military is planning on doing? And are you sure you and mom are okay?"

"We're fine. Don't you worry about us. Our house is so far out of town, we're not in the thick of things. Wouldn't even have known anything was going on if I hadn't happened to turn on the TV."

"Dad, arm yourself. I know you don't have a gun but you need to get an ax or butcher knife. Anything sharp. We think you have to behead these things in order to stop them. Ari killed one the other way, and one of the people here thinks it's about severing the spinal column."

Ann came up beside her, clearly wanting to use the phone. "I've got to go now. The phones are down here. We only have a few working cells and no way to recharge them. Take care of yourself. Dad. Tell Mom I love her. I love you both."

"Love you, too. Call again as soon as you can. Let us know what's happening."

"I will." She hung up and surrendered the phone to Ann, the weight in her chest nearly choking her.

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