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Written by Justin Cronin

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First published in Great Britain in 2016
by Orion Books,
an imprint of The Orion Publishing Group Ltd,
Carmelite House, 50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN (Hardback) 978 0 7528 9789 9
ISBN (Export Trade Paperback) 978 0 7528 9791 2

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc



www.orionbooks.co.uk

For my family

*And how am I to face the odds
Of man's bedevilment and God's?
I, a stranger and afraid
In a world I never made.*

—A. E. HOUSMAN, *LAST POEMS*

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PROLOGUE

From the Writings of the First Recorder (“The Book of Twelves”)

Presented at the Third Global Conference

on the North American Quarantine Period

Center for the Study of Human Cultures and Conflicts

University of New South Wales, Indo-Australian Republic

April 16–21, 1003 A.V.

[Excerpt 2 begins.]

CHAPTER FIVE

- 1 Thus did it come to pass that Amy and her fellows returned to Kerrville, in the place of Texas.
- 2 And there they were to learn that three among them had been lost. And these were Theo and Mausami, his wife; and Sara, who was called Sara the Healer, wife of Hollis.
- 3 For in the place of Roswell, where they had taken shelter, a great army of virals had laid siege, killing every kind. And only two of their company survived. And these were Hollis the Strong, husband of Sara, and Caleb, son of Theo and Mausami.
- 4 And a great sadness was upon them all, for the friends that they had lost.
- 5 And in the place of Kerrville, Amy went to live among the Sisters, who were women of GOD. And likewise did Caleb do the same, to be cared for by Amy.
- 6 And in that same period, Alicia, who was Alicia of Blades, and Peter, the Man of Days, took up arms with the Expeditionary, who were soldiers of Texas, to search for the Twelve. For they had learned that to kill one of the Twelve was to kill his Many also, sending their souls unto the LORD.
- 7 And many battles were joined; and many lives were lost. But neither

could they slay the Twelve, nor find the places wherein they dwelled. For such was not the will of GOD at that time.

- 8 And in this manner did the years pass, five in sum.
- 9 And at the end of that time, Amy received a sign; and this sign was a dream. And in that dream Wolgast came to her, appearing as a man. And Wolgast said:
- 10 “My master is waiting; and the place of his waiting is a great ship in which he dwells. For a change is upon the land. Soon I will come for you, to show you the way.”
- 11 And that man was Carter, Twelfth of Twelve, who was to be called Carter the Sorrowful; a man righteous in his generation, and beloved of GOD.
- 12 And thus did Amy wait for Wolgast’s return.

CHAPTER SIX

- 1 But there was also in that time another city of mankind, in the place of Iowa. And this was known as the Homeland.
- 2 And in that place abided a race of men who had drunk the blood of a viral, so that they might live, ruling for many generations. And these were called Redeyes. And the greatest of these was Guilder the Director, a man of the Time Before.
- 3 And the viral from which they took their sustenance was Grey, called the Source. For in his blood was the seed of Zero, father of the Twelve. And Grey abided in chains, wherein he suffered greatly.
- 4 And in that place the people lived as captives to serve the Redeyes, doing all they wished. And one of these captives was Sara the Healer, taken at the place of Roswell, whose friends knew not that she lived.
- 5 And Sara had a daughter, Kate; but the child was taken away. And the Redeyes told Sara that her daughter had not survived, causing a great woe in her heart.
- 6 And it came to pass that the child was given to a woman of the Redeyes. And this was Lila, wife of Wolgast.
- 7 For Lila’s daughter had died in the Time Before; and though many years had passed, the wound was still sharp in her mind. And she took comfort in Kate, imagining her to be the daughter she had lost.
- 8 And it came to pass that certain people of the Homeland rose up against their oppressors; and these were the Insurgents. And Sara joined with them. And she was sent to Lila to serve her in the Dome, wherein the Redeyes dwelled, that she might learn more about their ways. And in this manner did she discover that her daughter yet lived.

- 9 And in that same time also, Alicia and Peter discovered the lair of Martínez, Tenth of Twelve, in the place of Carlsbad; and there they did battle with his Many. But they did not find Martínez, who had fled from that place.
- 10 For Zero had commanded Guilder the Director to build a mighty fortress, wherein the Twelve should reside, to feed upon the blood of beasts and the blood of the Homelanders also. For their Many had devoured nearly every living thing upon the earth, making it a wasteland, fit neither for man nor viral, nor any kind of animal.
- 11 And in accordance with this design, the Twelve told their Many to leave their places of darkness; and they died. And this was known as the Casting Off.
- 12 And the Twelve commenced their journeys to the Homeland, a distance of many miles, so that they might preside over the earth.

CHAPTER SEVEN

- 1 But there was one who did not heed Zero's words; and this was Carter the Sorrowful, Twelfth of Twelve. And he instructed Wolgast to guide Amy to the place wherein he dwelled, that they two might join against his fellows.
- 2 And Amy heeded this command and left the place of Kerrville for the place of Houston. And in her company was Lucius the Faithful, who was a helpmate to her, and a man righteous in the eyes of GOD.
- 3 And in the place of Houston, Amy found the ship, which was the *Chevron Mariner*; and in its belly Carter dwelled. And many things passed between them. And when Amy emerged, her body was no longer that of a child, but of a woman; and in the company of Lucius she set out for the Homeland, to do battle with the Twelve.
- 4 And in that time also, Peter, the Man of Days; and Michael, who was called Michael the Clever; and Hollis, husband of Sara, likewise journeyed to the Homeland, to learn what was there. For they had come to believe that Sara was held captive in that place and many others also.
- 5 And with them were two companions. And the first of these was Lore, who was Lore the Pilot. And the second was a criminal, called Tifty the Gangster.
- 6 And in that same period, Alicia likewise made her way to the place of Iowa, pursuing Martínez, Tenth of Twelve, whom she had vowed to slay. For Martínez was the most evil of these demons, a killer of many women, and a scourge upon the earth.

- 7 But Alicia was taken captive at the Homeland, and endured many tribulations at the hands of the Redeyes and their helpmates, who were called Cols. And the worst of the Cols was Sod. But Alicia was strong and did not yield.
- 8 And when one night Sod came to her cell, so that he might have his dark way with her again, Alicia said: "Loosen my chains, so that you may take your pleasure more easily." And she wrapped the chains around his neck, killing him in this manner. And she made her escape, slaying many others.
- 9 And in the wilderness beyond the walls of the Homeland, Amy appeared to her; and Alicia saw that she was now a woman in body as well as mind. And Amy comforted her; for they were sisters in blood.
- 10 But Alicia had a secret; and this was the blood-hunger. For the seed of the Twelve was growing strong within her, making her a viral. And this was a great heaviness in her heart, for she loved her fellows deeply, and did not wish to be apart from them.
- 11 And in that same time, Sara was discovered by the Redeyes; and she was made a captive, and suffered many violations. For Guilder the Director desired that all who had risen up against him should know his wrath in fullest measure.
- 12 But the hour of reckoning was at hand; for Amy and Alicia had joined with the Insurgents, to take arms against the Redeyes. And among them a plan was hatched to liberate the people of the Homeland and destroy the Twelve and rescue Sara also.

CHAPTER EIGHT

- 1 And it came to pass that Peter and his fellows arrived in the place of Iowa, so that all were in attendance, making a mighty force. And the greatest of these was Amy.
- 2 For she had surrendered to the Redeyes, saying: "I am the leader of the Insurgents; do with me as you will." For it was her design that Guilder in his fury should unleash the Twelve to kill her.
- 3 And all did come to pass as Amy had foreseen; and the hour of her execution was established. And this would occur in the Stadium, a great amphitheater from the Time Before, so that the people of the Homeland might see.
- 4 And Alicia and the others concealed themselves in that place, so that when the Twelve were revealed, they could use their weapons upon them and upon the Redeyes also.

- 5 And Amy was brought before the crowd, and bound in chains; and upon an armature of metal she was made to hang. And Guilder took great delight in her suffering, exhorting the multitudes to do likewise.
- 6 But Amy would not give him satisfaction. And Guilder commanded the Twelve to devour her, so that all in attendance might know his power, bowing down before him.
- 7 But Amy saw that she was not alone; for among the Twelve was Wolgast, who had taken Carter's place, so that he might protect her. And Amy said to the Twelve:
- 8 "My brothers, hello. It is I, Amy, your sister." And no more words were spoken by her.
- 9 For she began to shake, and her body became as a bright light shattering the darkness; and with a furious roar Amy became as one of them, taking the form of a viral, mighty to behold. And this was the Letting Go. And one to see was Peter, and another Alicia, and a third Lucius, and all the others also.
- 10 And the chains were broken, and a great battle joined; and a great victory was won. And many lives were lost. And one of these was Wolgast, who sacrificed himself to save Amy; for his love for her was like unto a father's for his child.
- 11 And in this manner the Twelve perished from off the face of the earth, freeing all its people.
- 12 But of Amy's fate, her friends knew nothing; for she was nowhere to be found.



I

THE DAUGHTER

98-101 A.V.

There is another world but it is this one.

—PAUL ÉLUARD

CENTRAL PENNSYLVANIA

*August 98 A.V.**Eight months after the liberation of the Homeland*

The ground yielded easily under her blade, unlocking a black smell of earth. The air was hot and moist; birds were singing in the trees. On her hands and knees, she stabbed the dirt, chopping it loose. One handful at a time, she scooped it away. Some of the weakness had abated but not all. Her body felt loose, disorganized, drained. There was pain, and the memory of pain. Three days had passed, or was it four? Perspiration beaded on her face; she licked her lips to taste the salt. She dug and dug. The sweat ran in rivulets, falling into the earth. That's where everything goes, Alicia thought, in the end. Everything goes into the earth.

The pile beside her swelled. How deep was enough? Three feet down, the soil began to change. It became colder, with the odor of clay. It seemed like a sign. She rocked back on her boots and took a long drink from her canteen. Her hands were raw; the flesh at the base of her thumb had peeled back in a sheet. She placed the web of her hand to her mouth and used her teeth to sever the flap of skin and spat it into the dirt.

Soldier was waiting for her at the edge of the clearing, his jaws loudly working on a stand of waist-high grass. The grace of his haunches, his rich mane and blue roan coat, the magnificence of his hooves and teeth and the great black marbles of his eyes: an aura of splendor surrounded him. He possessed, when he chose, an absolute calm, then, in the next moment, could perform remarkable deeds. His wise face lifted at the sound of her approach. *I see. We're ready.* He turned in a slow arc, his neck bent low, and followed her into the trees to the place where she had pitched her tarp. On the ground beside Alicia's bloody bedroll lay the small bundle, swaddled in a stained blanket. Her daughter had lived less than an hour, yet in that hour Alicia had become a mother.

Soldier watched as she emerged. The baby's face was covered; Alicia drew back the cloth. Soldier bent his face to the child's, his nostrils flaring, breathing in her scent. Tiny nose and eyes and rosebud mouth, startling in their humanness; her head was covered in a cap of soft red hair. But there was no life, no breath. Alicia had wondered if she would be capable of loving her—this

child conceived in terror and pain, fathered by a monster. A man who had beaten her, raped her, cursed her. How foolish she'd been.

She returned to the clearing. The sun was directly overhead; insects buzzed in the grass, a rhythmic pulsing. Soldier stood beside her as she laid her daughter in the grave. When her labor had started, Alicia had begun to pray. *Let her be all right.* As the hours of agony dissolved into one another, she had felt death's cold presence inside her. The pain pounded through her, a wind of steel; it echoed in her cells like thunder. Something was wrong. *Please, God, protect her, protect us.* But her prayers had fallen into the void.

The first handful of soil was the hardest. How did one do it? Alicia had buried many men. Some she'd known, and some she hadn't; only one she'd loved. The boy, Hightop. So funny, so alive, then gone. She let the dirt sift through her fingers. It struck the cloth with a pattering sound, like the first spits of rain upon leaves. Bit by bit her daughter disappeared. *Goodbye, she thought, goodbye, my darling, my one.*

She returned to her tent. Her soul felt shattered, like a million chips of glass inside her. Her bones were tubes of lead. She needed water, food; her stores were exhausted. But hunting was out of the question, and the creek, a five-minute walk down the hillside, felt like miles away. The needs of the body: what did they matter? Nothing mattered. She lay on her bedroll and closed her eyes, and soon she was asleep.

She dreamed of a river. A wide, dark river, and above it the moon was shining. It laid its light across the water like a golden road. What lay ahead Alicia did not know, only that she needed to cross this river. She took her first cautious step upon its glowing surface. Her mind felt divided: half marveled at this unlikely mode of travel; the other half did not. As the moon touched the far shore, she realized she had been deceived. The shining pathway was dissolving. She broke into a run, desperate to reach the other side before the river swallowed her. But the distance was too great; with every step she took, the horizon leapt farther away. The water sloshed around her ankles, her knees, her waist. She had no strength to fight its pull. *Come to me, Alicia. Come to me, come to me, come to me.* She was sinking, the river was taking her, she was plunging into darkness . . .

She awoke to a muted orange light; the day had nearly passed. She lay motionless, assembling her thoughts. She had grown accustomed to these nightmares; the pieces changed but never the feeling of them—the futility, the fear. Yet this time something was different. An aspect of the dream had traveled into life; her shirt was sopping. She looked down to see the widening stains. Her milk had come in.

Staying was not a conscious decision; the will to move on was simply absent. Her strength returned. It approached with small steps; then, like a guest long awaited, it arrived all at once. She constructed a shelter of deadfall and vines, using the tarp as a roof. The woods abounded with life: squirrels and rabbits, quail and doves, deer. Some were too quick for her but not all. She set traps and waited to collect her kill or took them on her cross: one shot, a clean death, then dinner, raw and warm. At the end of each day when the light had faded, she bathed in the creek. The water was clear and shockingly cold. It was on such an excursion that she saw the bears. A rustling ten yards upstream, something heavy moving in the brush; then they appeared at the edge of the creek, a mother and a pair of cubs. Alicia had never seen such creatures in the flesh, only in books. They prowled the shallows together, pushing the mud with their snouts. There was something loose and half-formed about their anatomy, as if the muscles were not firmly stitched to the skin beneath their heavy, twig-tangled coats. A cloud of insects sparkled around them, catching the last of the light. But the bears did not appear to notice her or, if they did, did not think she was important.

The summer faded. One day, a world of fat green leaves, dense with shadow; then the woods exploded with riotous color. In the morning, the floor of the forest crunched with frost. Winter's cold descended with a feeling of purity. Snow lay heavy on the land. The black lines of the trees, the small footprints of birds, the whitewashed sky, bleached of all tone: everything had been pared to its essence. What month was it? What day? As time wore on, food became a problem. For hours, whole days even, she barely moved, conserving her strength; she hadn't spoken to a living soul in nearly a year. Gradually it came to her that she was no longer thinking in words, as if she had become a creature of the forest. She wondered if she was losing her mind. She began to talk to Soldier, as if he were a person. *Soldier*, she would say, *what should we have for dinner? Soldier, do you think it's time to gather wood for the fire? Soldier, does the sky look like snow?*

One night she awoke in the shelter and realized that for some time she'd been hearing thunder. A wet spring wind was blowing in directionless gusts, hurling around in the treetops. With a feeling of detachment, Alicia listened to the storm's approach; then it was suddenly upon them. A blast of lightning forked the sky, freezing the scene in her eyes, followed by an earsplitting clap. She let Soldier inside as the heavens opened, ejecting raindrops heavy as bullets. The horse was shivering with terror. Alicia needed to calm him; just one panicked movement in the tiny space and his massive body would blow the shelter to pieces. *You're my good boy*, she murmured, stroking his flank. With her free hand she slipped the rope around his neck. *My good, good boy. What do you say? Keep a girl company on a rainy night?* His body was tense with

fear, a wall of coiled muscle, and yet when she applied slow force to draw him downward, he allowed it. Beyond the walls of the shelter, the lightning flashed, the heavens rolled. He dropped to his knees with a mighty sigh, turned onto his side beside her bedroll, and that was how the two of them slept as the rain poured down all night, washing winter away.

She abided in that place for two years. Leaving was not easy; the woods had become a solace. She had taken its rhythms as her own. But when Alicia's third summer began, a new feeling stirred: the time had come to move on. To finish what she'd started.

She passed the rest of the summer preparing. This involved the construction of a weapon. She left on foot for the river towns and returned three days later, hauling a clanking bag. She understood the basics of what she was attempting, having watched the process many times; the details would come through trial and error. A flat-topped boulder by the creek would serve as her anvil. At the water's edge, she stoked her fire and watched it burn down to coals. Maintaining the right temperature was the trick. When she felt she had it right, she removed the first piece from the sack: a bar of O1 steel, two inches wide, three feet long, three-eighths of an inch thick. From the sack she also withdrew a hammer, iron tongs, and thick leather gloves. She placed the end of the steel bar in the fire and watched its color change as the metal heated. Then she got to work.

It took three more trips downriver for supplies, and the results were crude, but in the end she was satisfied. She used coarse, stringy vines to wrap the handle, giving her fist a solid purchase on the otherwise smooth metal. Its weight was pleasant in her grip. The polished tip shone in the sun. But the first cut would be the true test. On her final trip downriver, she had wandered upon a field of melons, the size of human heads. They grew in a dense patch, tangled with vines of grasping, hand-shaped leaves. She'd selected one and carried it home in the sack. Now she balanced it atop a fallen log, took aim, and brought the sword down in a vertical arc. The severed halves rocked lazily away from each other, as if stunned, and flopped to the ground.

Nothing remained to hold her in place. The night before her departure, Alicia visited her daughter's grave. She did not want to do this at the last second; her exit should be clean. For two years the place had gone unmarked. Nothing had seemed worthy. But leaving it unacknowledged felt wrong. With the last of her steel, she'd fashioned a cross. She used the hammer to tap it into the ground and knelt in the dirt. The body would be nothing now. Perhaps a few bones, or an impression of bones. Her daughter had passed into the soil, the trees, the rocks, even the sky and animals. She had gone into a place beyond

knowing. Her untested voice was in the songs of birds, her cap of red hair in the flaming leaves of autumn. Alicia thought about these things, one hand touching the soft earth. But she had no more prayers inside her. The heart, once broken, stayed broken.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

Morning dawned unremarkably—windless, gray, the air compacted with mist. The sword, sheathed in a deer-hide scabbard, lay across her back at an angle; her blades, tucked in their bandoliers, were cinched in an X over her chest. Dark, gogglelike glasses, with leather shields at the temples, concealed her eyes. She fixed the saddlebag in place and swung onto Soldier’s back. For days he’d roamed restlessly, sensing their imminent departure. *Are we doing what I think we’re doing? I rather like it here, you know.* Her plan was to ride east along the river, to follow its course through the mountains. With luck, she’d reach New York before the first leaves fell.

She closed her eyes, emptying her mind. Only when she had cleared this space would the voice emerge. It came from the same place dreams did, like wind from a cave, whispering into her ear.

Alicia, you are not alone. I know your sorrow, because it’s my own. I’m waiting for you, Lish. Come to me. Come home.

She tapped Soldier’s flanks with her heels.

2

The day was just ending when Peter returned to the house. Above him, the immense Utah sky was breaking open in long fingers of color against the deepening blue. An evening in early autumn: the nights were cold, the days still fair. He made his way homeward along the murmuring river, his pole over his shoulder, the dog ambling at his side. In his bag were two fat trout, wrapped in golden leaves.

As he approached the farmstead, he heard music coming from the house. He removed his muddy boots on the porch, put down his bag, and eased inside. Amy was sitting at the old upright piano, her back facing the door. He moved in quietly behind her. So total was her concentration that she failed to notice his entry. He listened without moving, barely with breath. Amy’s body was swaying slightly to the music. Her fingers moved nimbly up and down the keyboard, not so much playing the notes as calling them forth. The song was like a sonic embodiment of pure emotion. There was a deep heartache inside

its phrases, but the feeling was expressed with such tenderness that it did not seem sad. It made him think of the way time felt, always falling into the past, becoming memory.

“You’re home.”

The song had ended without his noticing. As he placed his hands on her shoulders, she shifted on the bench and tilted her face upward.

“Come here,” she said.

He bent to receive her kiss. Her beauty was astonishing, a fresh discovery every time he looked at her. He tipped his head at the keys. “I still don’t know how you do that,” he said.

“Did you like it?” She was smiling. “I’ve been practicing all day.”

He told her he did; he loved it. It made him think of so many things, he said. It was hard to put into words.

“How was the river? You were gone a long while.”

“Was I?” The day, like so many, had passed in a haze of contentment. “It’s so beautiful this time of year, I guess I just lost track.” He kissed the top of her head. Her hair was freshly washed, smelling of the herbs she used to soften the harsh lye. “Just play. I’ll get dinner going.”

He moved through the kitchen to the back door and into the yard. The garden was fading; soon it would sleep beneath the snow, the last of its bounty put up for winter. The dog had gone off on his own. His orbits were wide, but Peter never worried; always he would find his way home before dark. At the pump Peter filled the basin, removed his shirt, splashed water on his face and chest, and wiped himself down. The last rays of sun, ricocheting off the hillsides, lay long shadows on the ground. It was the time of day he liked best, the feeling of things merged into one another, everything held in suspension. As the darkness deepened he watched the stars appear, first one and then another and another. The feeling of the hour was the same as Amy’s song: memory and desire, happiness and sorrow, a beginning and an ending joined.

He started the fire, cleaned his catch, and set the soft white meat in the pan with a dollop of lard. Amy came outside and sat beside him while they watched their dinner cook. They ate in the kitchen by candlelight: the trout, sliced tomatoes, a potato roasted in the coals. Afterward they shared an apple. In the living room, they made a fire and settled on the couch beneath a blanket, the dog taking his customary place at their feet. They watched the flames without speaking; there was no need for words, all having been said between them, everything shared and known. When a certain time had passed, Amy rose and offered her hand.

“Come to bed with me.”

Carrying candles, they ascended the stairs. In the tiny bedroom under the eaves they undressed and huddled beneath the quilts, their bodies curled to-

gether for heat. At the foot of the bed, the dog exhaled a windy sigh and lowered himself to the floor. A good old dog, loyal as a lion: he would remain there until morning, watching over the two of them. The closeness and warmth of their bodies, the common rhythm of their breathing: it wasn't happiness Peter felt but something deeper, richer. All his life he had wanted to be known by just one person. That's what love was, he decided. Love was being known.

"Peter? What is it?"

Some time had passed. His mind, afloat in the dimensionless space between sleep and waking, had wandered to old memories.

"I was thinking about Theo and Maus. That night in the barn when the viral attacked." A thought drifted by, just out of reach. "My brother never could figure out what killed it."

For a moment, Amy was silent. "Well, that was you, Peter. You're the one who saved them. I've told you—don't you remember?"

Had she? And what could she mean by such a statement? At the time of the attack, he had been in Colorado, many miles and days away. How could he have been the one?

"I've explained how this works. The farmstead is special. Past and present and future are all the same. You were there in the barn because you needed to be."

"But I don't remember doing it."

"That's because it hasn't happened yet. Not for you. But the time will come when it does. You'll be there to save them. To save Caleb."

Caleb, his boy. He felt a sudden, overwhelming sadness, an intense and yearning love. Tears rose to his throat. So many years. So many years gone by.

"But we're here now," he said. "You and me, in this bed. That's real."

"There's nothing more real in the world." She nestled against him. "Let's not worry about this now. You're tired, I can tell."

He was. So very, very tired. He felt the years in his bones. A memory touched down in his mind, of looking at his face in the river. When was that? Today? Yesterday? A week ago, a month, a year? The sun was high, making a sparkling mirror of the water's surface. His reflection wavered in the current. The deep creases and sagging jowls, the pockets of flesh beneath eyes dulled by time, and his hair, what little remained, gone white, like a cap of snow. It was an old man's face.

"Was I . . . dead?"

Amy gave no answer. Peter understood, then, what she was telling him. Not just that he would die, as everyone must, but that death was not the end. He would remain in this place, a watchful spirit, outside the walls of time. That was the key to everything; it opened a door beyond which lay the answer to all the mysteries of life. He thought of the day he'd first come to the farmstead, so

very long ago. Everything inexplicably intact, the larder stocked, curtains on the windows and dishes on the table, as if it were waiting for them. That's what this place was. It was his one true home in the world.

Lying in the dark, he felt his chest swell with contentment. There were things he had lost, people who had gone. All things passed away. Even the earth itself, the sky and the river and the stars he loved, would, one day, come to the end of their existence. But it was not a thing to be feared; such was the bittersweet beauty of life. He imagined the moment of his death. So forceful was this vision that it was as if he were not imagining but remembering. He would be lying in this very bed; it would be an afternoon in summer, and Amy would be holding him. She would look just as she did now, strong and beautiful and full of life. The bed faced the window, its curtains glowing with diffused light. There would be no pain, only a feeling of dissolution. *It's all right, Peter, Amy was saying. It's all right, I'll be there soon.* The light would grow larger and larger, filling first his sight and then his consciousness, and that was how he would make his departure: he would leave on waves of light.

"I do love you so," he said.

"And I love you."

"It was a wonderful day, wasn't it?"

She nodded against him. "And we'll have many more. An ocean of days."

He pulled her close. Outside, the night was cold and still. "It was a beautiful song," he said. "I'm glad we found that piano."

And with these words, curled together in their big, soft bed beneath the eaves, they floated off to sleep.

I'm glad we found that piano.

That piano.

That piano.

That piano . . .

Peter ascended to consciousness to find himself naked, wrapped in sweat-dampened sheets. For a moment, he lay motionless. Hadn't he been . . . ? And wasn't he . . . ? His mouth tasted like he'd been eating sand; his bladder was dense as a rock. Behind his eyes, the first stab of his hangover was making its presence felt.

"Happy birthday, Lieutenant."

Lore lay beside him. Not so much *beside* as coiled around, their bodies knotted together, slick with perspiration where they touched. The shack, just two rooms with a privy out back, was one they'd used before, though its ownership wasn't clear to him. Beyond the foot of the bed, the small window was a gray square of predawn summer light.

“You must be mistaking me for somebody else.”

“Oh, believe me,” she said, placing a finger against the center of his chest, “there’s no mistaking you. So how does it feel to be thirty?”

“Like twenty-nine with a headache.”

She smiled seductively. “Well, I hope you liked your present. Sorry I forgot the card.”

She unwound herself, swiveled to the edge of the bed, and snatched her shirt from the floor. Her hair had grown long enough to need tying back; her shoulders were wide and strong. She wrenched herself into a pair of dirty gaps, shoved her feet into her boots, and turned her upper body to face him again.

“Sorry to run, *mi amigo*, but I’ve got tankers to move. I’d make you breakfast, only I seriously doubt there’s anything here.” She leaned forward to kiss him, quickly, on the mouth. “Give my love to Caleb, okay?”

The boy was spending the night with Sara and Hollis. Neither ever asked Peter where he was going, though certainly they had guessed the kind of thing it was. “I’ll do that.”

“And I’ll see you the next time I’m in town?” When Peter said nothing, she cocked her head and looked at him. “Or . . . maybe not.”

He didn’t really have an answer. What passed between them wasn’t love—the subject had never come up—but it was also more than physical attraction. It fell into the gray space between the two, neither one thing nor the other, and that was where the problem lay. Being with Lore reminded him of what he couldn’t have.

Her face fell. “Well, shit. And I was so damn *fond* of you, Lieutenant.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

She sighed, looking away. “I guess it’s not like this could have lasted. I just wish I’d thought to dump you first.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have let things go so far.”

“Believe me, it’ll pass.” She lifted her face toward the ceiling and took a long, steadying breath, then touched a tear away. “Fuck it all, Peter. See what you made me do?”

He felt awful. He hadn’t planned this; up until a minute ago, he’d expected that the two of them would just drift in the current of whatever-this-was until they lost interest or new people came along.

Lore asked, “This isn’t about Michael, is it? Because I told you, that’s over.”

“I don’t know.” He paused, shrugged. “Okay, maybe a little. He’s going to find out if we keep this up.”

“So he finds out—so what?”

“He’s my friend.”

She wiped her eyes and gave a quiet, bitter laugh. “Your loyalty is admira-

ble, but trust me, I'm the last thing on Michael's mind. He'd probably thank you for taking me off his hands."

"That's not true."

She shrugged. "You're only saying that because you're being nice. Which is maybe why I like you so much. But you don't have to lie—we both know what we're doing. I keep telling myself I'll get him out of my system, but of course I never do. You know what kills me? He can't even tell me the truth. That goddamn redhead. What is it with her?"

For a moment Peter felt lost. "Are you talking about . . . Lish?"

Lore looked at him sharply. "Peter, don't be dense. What do you think he's doing out in that stupid boat of his? Three years since she's gone, and he still can't get her out of his head. Maybe if she were still around, I'd stand a chance. But you can't compete with a ghost."

It took Peter another moment to process this. A mere minute ago he wouldn't have said that Michael even *liked* Alicia; the two used to quarrel like a couple of cats over a clothesline. But underneath, Peter knew, they were not so unlike—the same cores of strength, the same resolve, the same stubborn refusal to be told no when an idea stuck in their teeth. And, of course, a long history was there. Was that what Michael's boat was all about? That it was his way of mourning the loss of her? They'd all done it in their own fashion. For a time, Peter had been angry with her. She had abandoned them without explanation, not even saying goodbye. But a lot had changed; the world had changed. Mostly what he felt was a pure ache of loneliness, a cold, empty place in his heart where Alicia had once stood.

"As for you," Lore said, rubbing her eyes with the back of her wrist, "I don't know who she is, but she's a lucky girl."

There was no point in denying it. "I really am sorry."

"So you've said." With a pained smile, Lore clapped her palms on her knees. "Well, I've got my oil. A girl could hardly ask for more. Do me a favor and feel like shit, okay? You don't have to drag it out or anything. A week or two is fine."

"I feel like shit now."

"Good." She leaned forward and took his mouth with a deep kiss that tasted of tears, then pulled abruptly away. "One for the road. See you around, Lieutenant."

The sun was just rising as Peter made his way up the stairs to the top of the dam. His hangover had settled in for the long haul, and a day spent swinging a hammer on a blazing rooftop wasn't going to improve it any. He could have

done with an extra hour of sleep, but after his conversation with Lore, he wanted to clear his head before reporting to the jobsite.

The breaking day met him when he reached the top, softened by a low-hanging stratum of clouds that would burn off within the hour. Since Peter's resignation from the Expeditionary, the dam had become a site of totemic importance in his mind. In the days leading up to his fateful departure for the Homeland, he had brought his nephew here. Nothing especially noteworthy had occurred. They had taken in the view and talked about Peter's journeys with the Expeditionary and about Caleb's parents, Theo and Maus, then gone down to the impoundment to swim, something Caleb had never done before. An ordinary outing, yet by the end of that day, something had changed. A door had opened in Peter's heart. He had not understood it at the time, but on the far side of this door lay a new way of being, one in which he would assume the responsibilities of being the boy's father.

That was one life, the one that people knew about. Peter Jaxon, retired officer of the Expeditionary turned carpenter and father, citizen of Kerrville, Texas. It was a life like anybody else's, with its satisfactions and travails, and he was glad to live it. Caleb had just turned ten. Unlike Peter, who at that age was already serving as a runner of the Watch, the boy was experiencing a childhood. He went to school, he played with his friends, he did his chores without much prodding and only occasional complaint, and every night after Peter tucked him in, he drifted into dreams on the cushioning knowledge that the next day would be just like the last. He was tall for his age, like a Jaxon; the little-boy softness had begun to leave his face. Every day he looked a little bit more like his father, Theo, though the subject of his parents never came up anymore. Not that Peter was avoiding it; the boy just didn't ask. One evening, after Peter and Caleb had been living on their own for six months, the two of them were playing chess when the boy, hovering over his next move, said, simply, with no more weight than if he were inquiring about the weather, *Would it be okay if I called you Dad?* Peter was startled; he had failed to see this coming. *Is that what you want to do?* Peter asked, and the boy nodded. *Uh-huh*, he said. *I think that would be good.*

As for his other life: Peter could not say quite what it was, only that it existed, and that it happened at night. His dreams of the farmstead included a range of days and events, but the tone was always the same: a feeling of belonging, of home. So vivid were these dreams that he awoke with the sensation that he had actually traveled to another place and time, as if his hours of waking and sleeping were two sides of the same coin, neither one more real than the other.

What were these dreams? Where did they come from? Were they the prod-

uct of his own mind, or was it possible that they derived from an outside source—even from Amy herself? Peter had told no one about the first night of the evacuation from Iowa when Amy had come to him. His reasons were many, but most of all he couldn't be sure the whole thing had actually happened. He had entered the moment from deep sleep, Sara and Hollis's daughter out cold on his lap, the two of them bundled up in the Iowa cold beneath a sky so drunk with stars he had felt himself to be floating among them, and there she was. They had not spoken, but they didn't need to. The touch of their hands was enough. The moment had lasted forever and was over in a flash; the next thing Peter knew, Amy was gone.

Had he dreamed that, too? The evidence said so. Everyone believed that Amy had died in the stadium, killed in the blast that had killed the Twelve. No trace of her had been found. And yet the moment had felt so real. Sometimes he was convinced that Amy was still out there; then the doubts would creep in. In the end, he kept these questions to himself.

He stood awhile, watching the sun spread its light over the Texas hills. Below him, the face of the impoundment was as still and reflective as a mirror. Peter would have liked a swim to shake off his hangover, but he needed to fetch Caleb and take him to school before reporting to the jobsite. He wasn't much of a carpenter—he'd really only ever learned to do one thing, which was to be a soldier—but the work was regular and kept him close to home, and with so much construction going on, the Housing Authority needed all the warm bodies they could get.

Kerrville was busting at the seams; fifty thousand souls had made the journey from Iowa, more than doubling the population in just a couple of years. Absorbing so many hadn't been easy and still wasn't. Kerrville had been built on the principle of zero population growth; couples weren't allowed to have more than two children without paying a hefty fine. If one did not survive to adulthood, they could have a third, but only if the child died before the age of ten.

With the arrival of the Iowans, the whole concept had gone out the window. There had been food shortages, runs on fuel and medicine, sanitation problems—all the ills that went with too many people wedged into too little space, with more than enough resentment on both sides to go around. A hastily erected tent city had absorbed the first few waves, but as more arrived, this temporary encampment had quickly descended into squalor. While many of the Iowans, after a lifetime of enforced labor, had struggled to adjust to a life in which not every decision was made for them—a common expression was “lazy as a Homelander”—others had gone in the opposite direction: violating curfew, filling Dunk's warehouses and gambling halls, drinking and stealing and fighting and generally running amok. The only part of the population that

seemed happy was the trade, which was making money hand over fist, operating a black market in everything from food to bandages to hammers.

People had begun to openly talk about moving outside the wall. Peter supposed this to be just a matter of time; without a single viral sighting in three years, drac or dopey, the pressure was mounting on the Civilian Authority to open the gate. Among the populace, the events in the stadium had become a thousand different legends, no two exactly the same, but even the most hardcore doubters had begun to accept the idea that the threat was really over. Peter, of all people, should have been the first to agree.

He turned to look out over the city. Nearly a hundred thousand souls: there was a time when this number would have knocked him flat. He had grown up in a town—a world—of fewer than a hundred people. At the gate, the transports had gathered to take workers down to the agricultural complex, chuffing diesel smoke into the morning air; from everywhere came the sounds and smells of life, the city rising, stretching its limbs. The problems were real but small when compared to the promise of the scene. The age of the viral was over; humankind was finally on the upswing. A continent stood for the taking, and Kerrville was the place where this new age would begin. So why did it seem so meager to him, so frail? Why, standing on the dam on an otherwise encouraging summer morning, did he feel this inward shiver of misgiving?

Well, thought Peter, so be it. If being a parent taught you one thing, it was that you could worry all you wanted, but it wouldn't change a thing. He had a lunch to pack and "be good"s to say and a day of honest, simple work to wrestle to the ground, and twenty-four hours from now, he'd start it all over again. *Thirty*, he mused. *Today, I turn thirty years old.* If anyone had asked him a decade ago if he'd live to see it, let alone be raising a son, he would have thought they were crazy. So maybe that was all that really mattered. Maybe just being alive, and having someone to love who loved you back, was enough.

He had told Sara that he didn't want a party, but of course the woman would do something. *After all we've been through, thirty means something. Come by the house after work. It'll just be the five of us. I promise it won't be any big deal.* He picked up Caleb at school and went home to wash, and a little after 1800 they arrived at Sara and Hollis's apartment and stepped through the door and into the party that Peter had refused. Dozens of people were there, crammed into two tiny, airless rooms—neighbors and co-workers, parents of Caleb's friends, men he had served with in the Army, even Sister Peg, who, in her dour gray frock, was laughing and chatting away like everybody else. At the door Sara hugged him and wished him happy birthday, while Hollis put a