

# "THE BOY"

A VERIAX STORY

**BOOK ONE**

1

Hans Shankar watched, and the boy watched back. As those cold eyes looked at him, Hans could read no emotion within them. He'd expected to see fear, anger, or at least some contempt, yet saw only a blankness which matched the boy's facial expression.

"*Dangerous*" and, "*not normal*" had been hissed into Hans' ear as he'd been told of the boy. They'd had to cuff him because the boy had somehow managed to break the cable-ties they'd initially tried, and had tied him against the frame of a dead car. All this, yet he was such a scrawny thing, with his weird reddish hair and pale eyes. Hans found it hard to believe that the boy could've not only killed two men, but two trained, fully equipped soldiers.

Soldiers, here, in the asshole of the world. Hans' mind was burning with the question of why that came to be, and who their odd little visitor was. No good people came here. This was Eregon – more commonly known as Shitpile to the locals – and it was where the wasters and losers and the worst-of-the-worst came to escape a world that didn't want them.

He spat angrily, digging his heel into the ground as unwelcome memories began to stir. He repressed them and turned his head as a small figure approached him, a flask clasped in her hands.

"Thanks, Val," he said to her with a smile, the memories dissipating slightly with her presence, and took the flask from her, gulping down a swig.

"You need to drink more," Valina said to him. "You don't take god enough care of yourself." He grunted, and took his eyes away from the boy to regard her. She was about the same age as the boy – around ten – though unlike him she was *normal*. Hans had found her as a baby, thrown away and discarded into the trash. How she'd survived the trip here in the garbage ships, and the fall when they dumped their loads onto the island, he never could guess. But she had survived, and she'd earned the right for a chance, so he'd taken her in and for all intents and purposes now was her father since whomever had spawned her obviously had had no interest in her whatsoever.

Whatever their reasons for doing that – and he was sure there was a tale to be told – nothing could have warranted their actions. He had given her a chance and, in doing so, gave himself one, too.

Valina looked over to the boy, her blonde hair matted with dirt and filth, but her blue eyes shone bright with intelligence. Hans figured that, had she not ended up here, she would have made something of herself; maybe a teacher, a doctor, a professor. Selfishly though, he was glad she was here with him. She was all he really had.

“He looks thirsty.” she said.

“Don’t go near him.”

He saw the danger even now. Val was the youngest person there by a good ten years, and always had been, and now here was a boy thrown in with them, a similar looking age – the possibility of a playmate. He understood how tempting it must be for her. She’d never seen another child in her life, and likely never would have if it hadn’t been for the boy’s strange arrival.

But he was no boy. No ordinary child.

The question was, what was he?

Still, he did look thirsty.

2

Hans rose slowly, flask hanging loosely in his hand. His back cracked as he stood and he grunted, though in truth he barely noticed it.

Hans reached the boy, taking another swig of the water into his mouth. The water tasted bitter and acidic – hell, even the water was rusty. The boy still didn’t move an inch, looking up at him. His lips were dry.

By Hans’s reckoning, the boy hadn’t had anything to eat or drink in at least the past sixteen hours. It had been early evening when they’d found him by the bodies of the two soldiers.

It had been Joner who’d found him. Said that the boy just been sat there, shivering and rocking back and forth like one of those crazy people in a mental asylum. But as soon as he lay a hand on him the boy had sprang up like a wildcat and attacked.

*“Fast he is. Like a rattlesnake; almost got the drop on me.”* Joner had told Hans. *“Lucky he’s just a boy, really, and that he was tired. Y’could see he were tired.”*

They had been forced to bind his hands, but when the cable ties couldn’t hold him, the cuffs sure did.

It looked barbaric, to keep a child locked up like that; in chains on the ground. Hans had no taste for it himself, but whoever this kid was and where he came from, his story and his very nature sure as balls wasn’t your average momma-and-poppa upbringing.

Squatting on his haunches but a yard away from the boy, Hans offered him the flask silently, and was still met with the same silence and a dead stillness in reply.

Hans grunted and took another swig of it to show that it wasn't laced with poison and would do him no harm (well, apart from relatively little harm drinking the piss that passed for water in this part of the world did to you) and again he offered the flask out, his arm extended toward the boy's mouth. "Drink." He said. Hell he didn't even know if the kid spoke the same language, "Just water."

Lowly, barely perceptively, the boy's small mouth opened slightly. Hans put the flask to his mouth and gave him a drink.

But as Hans withdrew, the boy spat it back out into his face.

Hans's left hand shot out, angrily, cuffing the boy hard over the head. It was a move brought about by reaction rather than premeditation.

Aside from the grunt of pain, which was the first noise Hans had heard the boy make, there was no reaction. Those dead blue eyes just looked at him.

It almost made Hans shudder to see a child have look like that in his eyes. He'd seen it before, but in hardened men, killers and scum – but not a ten year old.

Hans grunted, rose, and turned his back as he walked away back to his seat.

"I don't think he wants a drink, Val," he said as he returned back to her, playing the flask into her hands and sitting back down while wiping the water from his face with his sleeve. It cleaned his face up a little. Just a little.

Valina could see the real whiteness of Hans's skin under the grime that covered him, that covered everyone, and everything. With resources being so scarce and water being one of the most important of those, they hadn't the luxury of washing with it.

It wasn't something that bothered her; it was all she knew. She remembered when she'd been small (well, very small – she wasn't exactly well grown) Hans had bathed her in a plastic tub. Once she outgrew that he'd stopped washing her, and that seemed so long ago that she could barely remember what it felt like to be clean. It wasn't a memory she particularly clung to as she had quickly come to realise that living in the present was what mattered; being aware of here and now was far more important than daydreaming about the past. Still it was one of the better memories she had. Had she really thought about it, she'd realise that she hadn't collected all that many good memories in her life.

"Maybe he will be a bit later on." She offered, idly running the tip of her index finger over the rim of the flask's opening.

Hans looked down at her. “Not from you,” he told her, his hand on her shoulder, bending slightly to her and smiling. It was an ugly smile. It might have looked nicer once, if he’d been able to brush his teeth, but now it was ugly.

Ugly, but warm.

Hans's gaze drifted from her to the man that approached. It was Joner. Of all the people in The Pack, Joner was one of the few that Hans actually really, really trusted. Since he was a deserter from the Agency’s military, and so starkly honest about it, Joner’s honesty was a refreshing thing, and Hans took to him almost as soon as they’d met.

“We’re done. You should come.”

Joner had once been handsome, but the scar along his face and his now gaunt features, due to the malnutrition they all suffered from, erased most of his pretty-boy looks. But he was still relatively young, and still fit, and in being so he had two blessings many of the others did not. Hans nodded. He looked down at Valina again, “You stay here, and keep away from him,” he told her, motioning back toward the boy, who had now sat back against a sheet of corrugated iron.

“Yes father,” she said back, pulling out a doll from her inside pocket and perching herself up on Hans’s seat. She knew he wasn’t her real father, but it didn’t really matter – Hans was as much as one as she could ever have, now.

“Lead on, Joner,” Hans said, and the two of them made their way to Foxx.

3

The purpose built workshop - made almost entirely of corrugated iron - that the two of them approached was Foxx’s. There was even a sign that overhung the large opening at the front upon which was crudely spray painted the word “Foxx's”, as if anyone needed to know in a settlement that comprised of only eleven habitable buildings in total. Still, it didn’t matter, and if Foxx wanted to elaborate on his odd habits then let him. It was the little things like that that let you get by.

Foxx’s place was an important shack, because it was the primary place where junk was brought to be repaired or salvaged for use. Foxx had been a smuggler and thief in his time before coming to Shitpile; dealing with electronics, weaponry, machinery, and motor vehicles. In handling such expensive items, it left little to the imagination as to why he fled to this awful place. He’d become their engineer and storekeeper

Though Hans tried to resist putting more importance upon one man or another, he had to admit to himself that Foxx had proved invaluable to them, as his expertise meant that he was hugely important in finding useful things within the piles of junk.

They had just one working vehicle; a dune buggy called "Betsy", which Foxx had got running from spare parts and practically rebuilding them from scratch. Fuel was the problem, though. That was always hard to come by. The village had once had its own supply, but they'd bled that dry long ago, and now they just had a few gallons left, stored in canisters at the back of the workshop.

Hans and Joner entered Foxx's shack, which smelled of oil and metal. Betsy was parked neatly inside. The walls were covered in all manner of mechanical paraphernalia; parts from trucks and bikes and cars that they'd managed to scavenge and could put to some use someday maybe. They hung from the ceiling and filled shelves, and Hans had no idea how Foxx knew what he had in there or where anything was. Hell, maybe he didn't.

Foxx was standing over a worn workbench upon which was scattered the various items of equipment they had salvaged from the dead marines.

Foxx turned to them, his dark skin obscuring his form to them in the dim lighting. The only illumination came from candles positioned sporadically around the shop, placed wherever they would fit among the jumble of motor parts.

Foxx turned to them, the whites of his eyes gleaming in the gloom. He waved them to come a little closer.

"This is everything," he told them, his voice deep rumbling. Hans imagined that he had once commanded a lot of respect with that voice; that when he spoke, people listened. It matched his large frame which, while it had never been fat, had certainly reduced in bulk since he arrived around two years ago.

"Hell of a haul..." Joner said, it was easy to detect the excitement in his voice. Before them was the most hardware they'd seen on the island – so new, and expensive, and *theirs*.

"These rifles, what do you make of them?" Hans asked Joner.

Joner stepped forwards and took one of them from the table, checked the mag, looked down the sight. "Standard SG12 models, both of them. Semi and automatic fire modes. About two hundred rounds for each, it looks like. Effective range of a hundred, maybe a hundred and fifty metres. Both of them in good nick." his face broke into a grin, showing a missing tooth in his upper jaw. "They'll blow those crazy fuckers off the face of the planet, let's put it that way."

Hans nodded. They were far superior to anything any of them had seen before. Great power... but great responsibility. His tone stayed downbeat. "Who knows about these?"

"Just the three of us, your daughter, and the boy,"

"We can trust Val," Hans told them. "The boy... well, he's talking to no one right now. We'd best keep this between us, too. The winds carry voices. If the Crazies find we have these, they'll come running for them, and the rest of it. Let's not give them a reason to come here, alright?"

The two men nodded, understanding. Hans was satisfied.

Foxx's eyes turned from him, out toward the boy. "What of him. Who is he?"

"Who knows? He's not talking."

"He killed those marines... I'm sure of it," Joner said, running a finger idly over the scar on his shaved head. It ran from just behind the ear and over the side of his cranium to end just above the eye. He licked his lips. "When I approached he didn't seem to notice me at all, like he was staring into space, in his own world. As soon as I touched him, he was like an animal. Tried to wrap his hands around my throat, just like I reckon he did with those other guys, so I knocked him the hell out."

"What the hell were a bunch of Agency troops doing here anyway?"

"Training mission, I'd bet," Joner told them, "That's my guess. Didn't go so well by the looks of it."

"What the fuck are they bringing kids on a training mission for?" Foxx spat.

"I don't know," Joner said. "He's got marks on his neck, though. It means something – he's Agency property."

Hans sneered. The thought of the kid somehow belonging to a cooperation like the Agency made a bad taste in his mouth. But if he belonged to them, wouldn't they come looking for him?

"What if they come back?" he asked Joner.

"They've left a lot of things behind – two dead bodies for a start – and since things didn't work out the way they planned maybe they'll come back and try to set things right, as they see it. Finish whatever job they needed to do here."

"We buried the bodies far enough away," Joner intoned, though his voice was none too convincing. "They don't really come back for the dead, though, or anything like this." He waved his hand over the equipment laid out before them. "Vehicles and machinery they'll make an effort for, but not people and guns. People and guns are expendable."

"What about him?" Foxx motioned towards the boy. "Would they come for him?"

Joner rubbed his head, obviously struggling with the answer. “If he’s important enough, yeah.”

It was an ugly thought, but the clarity of the situation burned into Hans's mind. They couldn't risk The Pack being slaughtered for the sake of keeping him.

“It’s probably best that he’s not here if they come looking for him.” Hans murmured, nodding to himself. The others nodded grimly.

“You CAN’T!” came a squeal from behind. Valina ran in from where she'd been hiding, and she grabbed his trouser leg angrily, clutching it in her small hands.

Valina had developed quite a knack for the sneaksman’s trade, often surprising him and the others by suddenly appearing, even upon those like Joner, who might pride themselves on being alert from being ambushed. But even training in the Agency’s elite couldn’t stop him from being surprised by the young girl on occasion.

Sometimes it was amusing. This was not one of those times.

“No, Val, not here.”

She smacked him in the side. It didn’t hurt, but the blow made him grunt “You can’t send him away! He’ll die!”

“Shh!” he hunched down to her, angrily silencing her. “Keep your voice down!” he snapped. Someone would hear her wails and what they planned, and it was best that he be kept ignorant of everything they decide about him.

Tears were in her eyes. She’d seen a friend in him. She wanted someone her own age to spend time with, to play with. His heart went out to her. He’d seen grown men, tough men, break down as they realised they were trapped here, with no land for hundreds of miles over the open sea. He’d seen men tried to swim back to the world, never seen them again, and know that they’ll have drowned. They’d rather do that than face a lifetime on Shitpile. How hard must it be for a child to grow up in such a place? How lonely? He couldn’t fault her for it – he felt it too.

“You can’t take him away,” she said to him, softer now. “He’s not done anything. Look at him, you chained him up, and now you’re going to take him away. It’s not fair.”

Maybe it wasn’t, but life wasn’t fair. He knew it better than most.

Though they hadn’t actually really decided anything, his mind was already made. The boy was too much of a risk to keep around The Pack. He offered them nothing, and endangered them too much. As their leader, Hans had to look after the people. If saving them from a confrontation with Agency troops meant giving the boy back to them, then so be it.



"I'm sorry, Val. I'm so sorry," was what he said, as he held her, and she cried and accepted how things were.

But then she said: "I call Treaty."

Hans broke the hug, and held her at arm's length. "Val, don't."

"I call Treaty" she repeated. "I can do that, can't I? I'm a member. I can do that."

"She can," Joner said. "You know it."

Hans released his hold on Valina, and stood.

"Very well, I won't decide anything. We'll bring it before everyone and vote on it."

4

The boy watched, waited, listened, heard it all, and did nothing, because there was nothing he could do.

5

Within the main square of Beckside, Pack gathered for the Treaty to decide the fate of the boy.

They crowded in the yard around which most of the shacks had been positioned, and which was used for general meetings such as this one along with communal activities that were held to keep their spirits up, such as games, races, and holding fights between captured seagulls.

Hans stood atop a large stone, one that likely had sat there unmoved for thousands of years, which served as a natural platform to speak from, and addressed The Pack.

"Hail!" It would have been an odd greeting to use in the rest of the world, as it was old language and rarely used. In this archaic, primitive place however, it seemed to fit just fine.

"Hail!" they answered back as one, almost like a war chant.

"You know me. I am Hans Shankar. Many of you see me as your leader. While I would question why, I do as well as I can for the good of us all." He spoke plain and true – he'd been elected their leader, or at least their prominent decision maker, not through a ballot, but through his ability to lead through decisiveness, level headedness and charisma. He'd never asked for it, but now it was his.

He paused, looking out over their faces. Men and women among them, looking up with their filthy faces, in their dirty clothes and ramshackle huts. And yet, listening to what he had to say now, as a single community, joined by the needs survival and the need for some sort of

decency in their lives. What they'd built here wasn't much, but they'd built it from nothing, and he felt an unfamiliar sense of pride build in his gut.

"A Treaty has been called, and thus, a vote must be made. Before I speak further, I ask you to think upon your choices hard, and make up your own minds on this – it is no small matter."

The Treaty was something that he'd come up with in the early days of The Pack forming. Disliking the responsibilities of leading a group, he'd come up with it to encourage others to take part in decision making, instead of dictating everything himself.

He gestured to the boy, who remained chained where he was. He wasn't even watching; his head slumped. The boy had not eaten or drunk anything in almost a day now. Whether the boy was unconscious or merely resting, Hans hadn't checked, but he strongly suspected the latter. It unnerved him. The longer the boy was with them, the more Hans wanted to be rid of him.

"This boy has been found on the island. He has had neither food nor water – refusing both. He appeared shortly after the military helicopter was seen to the south late yesterday, and it is believed that he has connections with The Agency. It is thought that, possibly, he has been involved in the killing of two Agency troopers, and so he is clearly not fully aligned with them. But keeping him here with us may well be putting us all at danger from The Agency, if they do decide to come back for him. However, he is just a boy, as you can see; alone, afraid, hungry. We can grant him aid, we can grant him shelter – we have the facilities. Do we do this, or do we offer him back to them, in case The Agency return with their guns and their soldiers, looking for him?"

The boy hadn't moved. Some of the people within the crowd shifted uneasily and murmured to one another

"If you have things on your mind, I would speak them now."

"Does the boy speak for himself?" called a woman of middle age, with dark, matted hair. She might've been pretty, if she was cleaned up, and some of the gauntness taken from her face by a few weeks' worth of good, varied food. Hans knew her – he knew them all – Elaine, she had killed her husband, she said, after years of his abuse. The courts would not have been lenient on her as she had been married to a judge, so she had fled. Elaine was one of the really good, decent people on the island. Hans liked her more than he wanted to admit to himself.

"He has not spoken," Hans told her. "He will not speak, eat, or drink. We get nothing from him."

"What about now?" Elaine asked, and called to him. "You! Boy! Are you awake?"

The boy didn't reply. Still, he did not move

“Are you daft, boy? Deaf? At least give us your name!”

Slowly, the boy raised his head. He looked at the people gathered there, and stayed silent.

“The brat does not want to stay. Let them have him – it's what he wants.” A man said. There were general nods of agreement among some of them there.

Then a smaller man stepped forward. Kyle. He was one of the younger of the Pack, and certainly one of the most intelligent. He looked to Hans, and then to the boy. “He's a strange kid to be sure, but it seems pretty harsh not to help out a boy.”

“He's more than a boy..” Joner stepped up. He was near the front of the crowd – he was never far away from Hans at any time, truth be told. He turned to the crowd, addressing them grimly. “When I found him, he had killed two men. He is quick and he can fight. If he would join us, he could be prove.”

“Useful?” Someone spat. “He's from the Agency! I came here to get away from that! We ought to just do him in right here and now. Let them carry his body back to wherever they grew it then!”

Joner scoffed. “Not a good idea to give them their property back dead, don't you think?”

The man fell silent.

Hans pursed his lips, his eyes turning to the boy, wondering what he must be thinking.

“Joner, do you think they'll come for him?” Foxx asked. It turned out to be the crucial question.

Joner nodded slowly. “I think they might, yeah.”

“Do we want to risk it?” Hans asked, his voice casting over the crowd. “We will cast the vote...”

“Wait!” a small voice yelled out. “I want to say something!”

Valina was but a child, but she had as much right to have a say as any of them. She spoke up, her voice clear and true; belying her youth.

“I know there is no room for kindness in this place. There's no room for being nice. But I wouldn't be here if Hans hadn't been nice to me when I was a baby. It is the same here. The boy might be different, but we should offer him help. Please help him!”

She finished and lowered her small head, somehow looking ashamed. Hans didn't think she had anything to be ashamed of. Though he did not agree, the child's ideology shone through quite admirably. She would have made a fine public speaker, had she had any real chance in life.

“We know the situation. We will cast our votes. All those in favour of keeping the boy say ‘Aye’...”

6

The boy listened intently, without emotion, without any real thought for himself. He heard their verdict, and it mattered not to him.

7

“Y’know they call it ‘Shitpile’?” Brooke said.

“Sounds about right,” Blake answered as he finished lacing up his boots tightly. “The people on it won’t be any better.”

Brooke shrugged, chewing his gum and showing his pearly whites with his butter wouldn’t melt smile.

“Some say it’s the last free place. Only place The Agency hasn’t got its claws into.”

“Hey don’t talk like that. They don’t like you talking like that.” Blake finished booting up, and hooked his body armour on. *Snug fit.*

“See what I mean?” Brook’s pearly whites peeked out again. “C’mon man, we’ll be late.”

Blake looked at his watch. 20:27. Three minutes.

“I’m ready.”

“Don’t forget your helmet!” Brook threw it at him, passing it like a basketball. He caught it, even though he wasn’t ready for the throw. “Let’s go.”

He the strap under his chin and grabbed his trusty SG12, “Marie.”, who he’d named after his girl. Only two more weeks until he was on leave.

*I’ll see you soon sweetheart.*

They exited the bunkhouse, running out through the base toward Helepad Two. Night was closing in; the base was beginning to be blanketed with the familiar glow of halogen lights. Marines ran this way and that, machinery whirred overhead as a helicopter came into land, and then to their left as a mechanised unit went out on manoeuvres.

*It’s all happening more often.*

The two of them dashed for the helipad. He could see the transport waiting for them, ready to take them out over the sea.

“I should have known you two would be last on site!” barked Sgt. Morgans.

“We’re not late, sir!” Brook told him, as they formed up alongside the other fourteen marines of their squad; Brubecker, Mcgowan, Ellis, Russel, Stanford, Pinson, Daniels, Marquez, Cotton, Elmore, Butler, King, Pullman, and Woods.

“You’re late if I tell you you’re late marine! And you’re late! Now all of you get your assess in that chopper! Let’s go find this VERI!”

8

They led the boy out to the cliffs. The sky was darkening, the wind had picked up, as the waves along with it as they crashed far below.

Only a small group of them brought the boy here, like some sacrificial offering to heathen gods. Many were willing to eject him from Beckside, but not so many wanted to do the deed. Joner was there, though he had voted against such action. Despite it being he that had confirmed The Agency would likely come and seek him, he would have preferred to keep him regardless. Hans admired the man’s integrity if nothing else. It reflected upon how strongly he felt about how The Agency operated.

Joner had found and buried the dead marines, and so he was the one that led them back to that same place, where they would then leave the boy.

Of course, Hans was among those whom came to the cliffs, as well as two others who were really there just to make up the numbers. Hans would have preferred more to come, but four was enough. Valina had wanted to come along, but Hans had forbid it – there would no good done with it, and he wanted her hurt no more with thoughts of the boy and imaginings of having a playmate. Even if the boy was free, he would likely not even know how to play.

The cliffs were five miles away from Beckside, and during the journey though the mounds of trash they said little, with the boy remaining as silent as ever. He remained handcuffed, for safety’s sake. Hans wasn’t so sure what The Agency would do with the boy how that he had killed two of their own (and he almost certainly seemed to have done just that). Yes, the handcuffs were needed, for if he had done that to his own, what might the boy try to do to those that lived on the island?

Hans knew they had made the right choice – the boy must be removed. He didn’t belong on Shitpile. If he belonged anywhere at all, it was back with those that created him.

“It’s here,” Joner said suddenly, as they were walking across the cliff in the waning light. Hans looked out over the ocean below them, peering off miles into the distance. He did it every time he saw the sea; he couldn’t help it.

Nearby was the wreckage of several automobile skeletal husks that leered at them after decades of being dumped here. "Tie him to one of those," Hans told them. "Then let's get out of here..."

He allowed himself to inhale the fresher sea air. One got used to the stench of the island, and one could easily forget what real, fresh air smelt like apart from times like this. The wind was blowing from inland, so the air still had the taint of garbage to it. It was still a lot better out here, though. A lot better.

Though he wanted to be rid of the strange boy and to Beckside, there was a part of him that longed to stay for just a little longer to smell the sea, feel the wind, *feel* the air. He could tell it was going to rain soon; there was a heaviness in the skies.

The boy did not resist as they knelt him down by one of the cars and used a second pair of cuffs to tie him to the car, one hook around the chain of the other cuffs, the other around the bodywork. It's rusty, but it's heavy, and the boy is weak; he's not eaten or drunk anything for over twenty eight hours now. It will hold him.

Hans hunkered down on his haunches and looked at the boy once again. "Joner here says your friends should come for you soon enough." He almost followed that statement *with an if they don't*, but bit it back. If they didn't, they were leaving him out there to die, and they all knew it.

He reached down inside his coat inside pocked and brought forth a drinking flask. "You might not want to turn this away this time."

The boy didn't, and drank the few mouthfuls Hans gave him. Those pale eyes looked at him the whole time; not accusing, not pleading. Just looking, cold, calculating, staring. Hans was afraid what kind of man the boy might grow up into, if he got the chance, and what monsters any others like him were going to be like.

The boy drank his full. He drank the whole damn flask.

Hans rose to his feet. "Let's go," he said to the others.

He turned to leave and walked a few steps. Behind him, Joner knelt beside the boy and whispered something in his ear; the words lost in the wind to all but the two of them.

The Raptor swooped down over the ocean towards the island of Ergeon carrying it's cargo of the sixteen marines, sergeant and two pilots.

“ETA 3 minutes!” shouted Sgt Morgans, his voice calling above the whirl of the rotary blades and the roar of the wind as it rushed by them. “Only use your live rounds against unknown hostiles on the ground. The VERI is to be taken *alive*, men, so that's what your rubber bullets are for. The VERI is fitted with a tracking device! Use it to find him, and we want to take him alive. Remember, he's responsible for the deaths of two marines by his own hands. Do not take him lightly marines! He is not just a boy!”

*Not just a boy. Then what is he? A machine?* Blake didn't want to think about it too closely. Before them the island loomed. It had been the world's dumping ground for the last three decades; he was sure he could smell it even now. The mounds of waste could be seen on the horizon, standing out on the horizon as the sun set behind it in a brilliant display of reds yellows and golds, seeping away as night closed in.

10

The boy saw it before he heard it. The wind was against him, blowing the sound of the chopper away from him, but he saw the spotlights on it as it came across the ocean for him. Those that lived here – that Joner – had been right. They would come for him. The boy knew all too well that they would. His actions would warrant investigation.

Why had he done it? It was just the way it was. He couldn't explain it. He had never thought to try to, it was just what had happened – he had acted, and now played out the consequences. It would mean discontinuation. He didn't care. He had been taught not to care. He didn't matter; his life was theirs. He owed them everything.

Yet separated, he had, just for an instant, decided he owed them nothing. Yes, *he had decided* something, and it felt good, it felt really good. And now he'd been away from the pills and the injections for just over a day, which was longer than he'd ever been without, he felt even better.

11

“Sir, he's right there”

“What?!” Morgans swung his torso into the cabin at the co pilots words.

“Look sir, there!”

Morgans looked down out of the cockpit window, the spotlight showing a patch of the island fifty feet below where they hovered. At first he saw nothing but the car wrecks that lay

strewn in a pile where they had been dropped, but then he noticed the boy sitting by them, looking up at the Raptor.

“You’re right!” he exclaimed, the constant buzzing of the tracking device on his wrist confirmed that they were right above the beacon inside VERI a-X. “Take us down!”

This was going to be easier than he thought.

“Wait, what’s that? What’s happening down there now?”

12

The boy was only aware of her presence when she laid a hand on his arm. He startled; it was one of the few times he’d been surprised. Despite the wind and the rain, and the whirring of the chopper lowering overhead, he should have heard her coming. She was *quiet*.

“Keep still,” she told him. It was the blond girl from the people who had chained him here. She had in her hand a small bunch of keys. They rang out softly as she held them in her fingers, fumbling, picking one out. He felt her at his wrists; the key scraped against his arm. It was too dark for her to see, so she felt with her fingers.

The Raptor was lowering now. Forty feet above them, thirty, twenty five...

“Do not move! Stay where you are!” a voice called out from it; militant, authoritarian, familiar to him, but it made her jump.

“I can’t see!” she exclaimed, and then even as she said it, he felt the key slip into the lock of the cuffs he wore and turn, slipping his left hand free.

*Twenty feet....*

He turned, taking the key from her. He could see. He slotted the key into the other wrist, looking at her. In her eyes he saw something he hadn’t seen before. Softness. Kindness. He knew that they’d try to kill her.

“Go! Run!”

His voice was hoarse from thirst, but she heard and didn’t not question. Fear filling her face, she disappeared into the jumble of wrecked cars behind and out of sight.

*Fifteen feet... jump ropes descended...*

The marines disembarked.

13

“Go! Move! Go!”



Ellis went first, then Standford, Brubecker, then Blake. It did stink on the island; a putrid, sickly, heavy smell like a rotting wet dog. He tried to ignore it. Brooke followed him, then Daniels, King. They fanned out, weapons raised. The rotor blades kicked up a vortex that sent small debris flying all over the place; crisp packets, beer cans, broken pottery, shards of glass. In the slight disorientation that followed Blake had lost sight of the VERI for an instant. When he saw him again, he was running.

*Ah, shit!*

“FREEZE!” came the order from the Raptor. No such luck, the VERI ran behind some trash and out of sight.

They were all out of the Raptor now. It ascended into the sky again, to get an aerial view in infrared.

“Night vision on marines. Stay close, remember, we’re taking this one alive.” Came Morgan’s voice through their headsets.

Brooke looked at his wrist, seeing the dot of the transmitter to the east, thirty feet away. He’d sure feel a lot safer if he was packing live rounds. Hell, what was he worried about? Yes it was one of those “Versatile Elimination and Reconnaissance Infantry,” he’d heard rumours about. One of the new, improved ones. But it was a *ten year old* VERI, and there were sixteen marines and their sarge on his tail, with air support!

Yet still that bad feeling he had wouldn’t leave.

He put his visor down and activated the night vision, as did they all, before advancing into the waste piles. The rain came down more now, heavy drops pitter-pattering on the different materials around them loudly.

14

As he watched them coming, he realised that a strange thing had happened in his head. He had his freedom – he was actually free. Now that he had it, he wanted it, craved it.

Despite their best efforts, The Agency had not managed to quell his fundamental, basic human desire to have free thought and free choice over their actions. It rose in him now, like bile, but he liked it. The drugs inside him wanted to repress it, which is why it must feel so bad in his stomach, but he would fight it and be rid of it; be rid of those that came to claim him back. Those that approached were the enemy, then. He’d only been taught one way to deal with enemies.

There was a broken old walking stick protruding out of the junk nearby. He reached for it and pulled it free, his fingers wrapping over the shaft which ended in a splintered point. Then he moved, for they approached too closely and he was not ready. He moved, and he hid, and he waited.

15

Blake never forgot what he saw next. Woods was on point, his gun raised high, watching his footing. He did everything right. The tracker showed that their target was close. Very close. There was an overturned bath on its side with the base facing toward them. Sgt Morgans silently signalled toward it – that was where he was hiding. Blake was one of those that moved outwards, while Woods, Ellis and Stanford moved in toward the bath. Woods kicked it over, and it rolled away empty. At exactly the same time – and Blake was sure the son of a bitch had somehow freaking planned it, the first lightning crash struck, and with it the VERI shot out from under a pile of papers and right at Woods with something in his hand. He heard Woods scream in his ear, and saw him drop to his knees, his hands clutching his throat. The VERI dashed away.

“Fire! Fucking FIRE!”

Shots rang out, the rubber bullets ricocheting off the bath, the papers, the debris strewn around. The VERI had shrunk back into the pile of garbage.

“Gurghhh... gurghhmmgh!”

Woods’ gurgles sounded through in all of their ears.

“Hold position! Elmore!”

Morgans was with Woods, Elmore – the medic – joined them hurriedly. While he hunched over Woods, the rest of them kept their eyes open, moving their weapons this way and that. Lightning crashed again, and thunder rolled.

Blake’s heart was beating ten to the dozen; every shadow which was cast by the lightning looked like it could be that little freak ready to leap out again. Still, there was no panic. They were marines, and they had all seen war before; injuries and death. But none of them had seen it inflicted by a child in such a swift, precise move.

Blake saw Elmore and Morgans talking, their microphones lowered away from their mouths. He saw Elmore shake his head – Woods was already moving less.

“Little shitting bastard!” someone spat down the mic. It was Brooke.

“Shut your mouth soldier!” Morgans demanded. “Orders are to take him alive. Stay sharp – let’s move!”

They advanced. The downpour increased all the while, the ground was slick with water and mud. Blake had to spend half the damn time looking at where his feet were going, lest he fall or put his foot through a protruding nail. He checked his tracking device, which showed twenty feet away.

“Raptor do you have eyes, repeat do you have eyes, over?”

“Roger Sergeant, infrared only, infrared only. Weather’s hindering flying also.”

“Do you see anything?”

“One contact, 12 o’clock, fifty meters from your position... negative! TWO! I say again! TWO contacts, one 12 o’clock, fifty meters. Another, three o’clock, thirty meters!”

“There was a girl, as we were landing” someone said, McGowan probably.

“Affirmative marine. Ignore her. Exterminate her is necessary, but follow the beacon. Move out.”

16

His heartbeat was steady, his breathing even. This is what he’d been trained for.

Something was wrong, though. They approached again, toward him, even though in the chaos he was sure he’d been able to slip away without being seen long enough to tell where he’d been going. Yet, once again, they come right for him – they knew where he was. This was something he had no knowledge of why it was happening, but it didn’t alter his plan very much. A man’s greatest enemy is his fear. The boy had none, at all. The sixteen that followed him all had a breaking point – he was going to find it. He had found the perfect spot.

Closer... just a little closer.

17

The beacon led then down between two gigantic piles of crushed and wrecked cars and other vehicles. Blake could see how they’d been piled up by the dumping ships dropping the loads from their cargo holds, dropped like great burial mounds that loomed above them.

Thirty meters away from the beacon – from the little bastard. He was hiding in the damn garbage piles.

“We’ll have to flush him out,” Morgans said. “Brubecker, Butler, Stanford. Circle around to the back of this trash and conceal yourselves. We’ll try to make him retreat towards you.

“Yes sir!” The three of them backed off and started to make their way around the trash dumps. It only took them a few moments, a minute maybe. It helped that they were guided by the chopper above. Eventually the call came: “We’re in position, sir!”

Blake knew what the next call would be.

“Right, we’re going to force that little bastard out! Gas! Gas!”

The call for gas was reacted to with the instinctive motion of drawing out their respirators and affixing them into their nasal passages. It looked a little like a handlebar moustache, if handlebar moustaches were made of metal that is. While they were doing this, Sgt Morgans unclipped a grenade from his belt and threw it into the pile of wreckage. It went off with a dull thud, like a water balloon popping, and released its vapours. The gas was an irritant; it caused the eyes to close and breathing to be difficult, and exposure of over thirty seconds or so brought on prolonged vomiting. In short, ‘Crank’ wasn’t nice stuff at all.

It was green in colour, and Blake watched it spread out over the heap and drift back downwind toward them.

18

The boy knew all too well what they were going to do. He knew the gas and he knew that he had to avoid it. As soon as the grenade went off he moved. He didn’t retreat, he moved forwards, into the cloud, closing his eyes for as long as he could, and holding his breath. He moved downwind with the gas, it covered his approach. Night vision or not, they couldn’t see through it for a few moments until it cleared enough, but that was all he needed.

One of the soldiers emerged through the green murk. The boy approached swiftly, close to the ground. As he was seen the man gave an alarmed shout before bringing his weapon to bare. Three shots went off from the semi-automatic shot, one of them grazing him in the shoulder, and then he set upon the man.

He didn’t bother going for anything but the respirator; wrenching it off the man’s face, he immediately put it over his nose and made a run for it. The other men shouted out, and shots followed him as he dashed to the left and out of sight again. Hiding momentarily behind a giant loud speaker, he was only now aware of the ache in his shoulder from the shot. He pulled his shirt aside briefly, only then seeing the red welt rising and realising they weren’t using live rounds.

They were trying to take him alive.

19

“Get him out of here!” Morgans ordered to Ellis, as Pinson doubled up and emptied the contents of his stomach out onto the floor through his mouth. Ellis dragged him away quickly, guiding the half blind man away from the gas.

“The rest of you, after him! Go!” They did, running after the boy in the direction he’d disappeared in. They ran for fifty feet and stopped. No sign of him, even though the trackers said they were on his vicinity.

“We’re tight on fucking top of him!” Daniels exclaimed

“Well where is he then?! Right on top of us?” That came from Marquez.

It made them look up to see, in the green vision of their night vision visors, a boat, *a boat*, tipping towards them from the mound above. It was swaying; clearly it had been teetering anyway. A second later, the boy heaved the boat over its tipping point and sent it rolling down to them.

“FUUUUCK!”

It didn’t have far to travel – but they didn’t have long to move. It caught two of them under its hull as the small vessel slid down the side of the trash mountain onto them.

Blake saw it all. He saw Cotton get caught full on as it crushed his ribs before rolling over onto him. Pullman almost escaped with the rest of them had he not lost his footing on the slick ground. It rolled onto him and crushed his legs, and his scream chilled them to the bone. They ran to help him, heaving as one to lift the small vessel, off him while Daniels pulled him out, with his legs ragging useless and limp behind him.

“King get up here! King!” Morgans called for his medic, who was still back a few hundred meters tending to Woods.

“Yes sir, I’m on my- Urrghh!”

King’s reply was cut short with a *\*thwack\** noise and a muffled cry.

“King! Respond! King, come in dammet!”

There was no sign of the VERI anywhere. They formed a protective circle, guns raised high, over the injured Pullman and Morgans on his radio.

"Fuck it - I'm switching to live ammo. I'm gonna kill this bastard!" someone yelled.

Pullman, Cotton, Woods, and maybe King down. Ellis with Pinson who was throwing his guts up somewhere, and Brubecker, Butler, and Stanford waiting in hiding for a for that

wouldn't get pushed toward them, but may instead pick them off as and when he chose. Man, it was fucked up. It was the most FUBARed Blake had ever known a mission to go.

"Marines, converge on my position! Everyone get your asses here, now!"

"Fuck this shit man...!" Brooke said quietly to Blake, "take him alive my ass!" He tapped Blake on the arm and drew his attention to what was in his hand.

A grenade. Not just any grenade either - a ~MKIII.

"Are you crazy?!" Blake exclaimed, in the lowest voice he could manage. "We're not supposed to have access to those kinda weapons yet. If they find you with that they'll kill you!"

"No, no they won't. But that crazy bastard out there will. I'm telling you bro, the first chance I get I'm going to blow his ass off the face of the planet."

"They'll throw you in jail for disobeying orders! You know it!"

Pearly whites showed under that visor. "I'll take the fall for it. Either that or we all die on this rock, and I ain't having that man, no way!"

Behind them, Morgans was on the radio channel to base: "We are three, possibly four men down, repeat, four men down! Request instructions, over!"

"Sgt Morgans," the reply came, "you are to stay on task. Capture the VERI alive and as unharmed as possible. Professor Reiksig was very clear on this."

They could all hear it. "See, man?" Brooke said. "They don't care, they'll let us die out here, and send another squad, and another, until they get what they want!"

Brook knew he was right. Hell he didn't have to say it, they all knew it, even Morgans knew it.

The radio from the chopper kicked in overhead: "Brubecker, Butler, Stanford alert! Incoming heat source on your position! To your right, look to your right!"

Butler: "Where? I don't see...nneargh!"

Stanford: "Brubecker, get down! Get out if the way!!"

Brubecker: "Gnurghhh... Uhhhh!"

Butler: "Oh fuck, back up! Back up requested! Die you little mother fuc- Uurrghhh!"

They stood there, in the rain, listening to it. Listening to their three comrades – their friends - die.

"Ah to the hells with this! Just call it in Serge! Just call it in so they can get us out of here!"

Marquez panted. Blake had never heard him talk like that before.

Ellis and Pinson joined them, Pinson still breathing hard, wiping his eyes, he'd lost his helmet.

There were ten of them, down from seventeen. One of them couldn't walk, another could barely breathe.

20

Professor Reiksig looked frantically from one monitor to the other. Some showed static, others showed completely motionless scenes where the helmet mounted cameras – or the people that wore them – had fallen to the ground.

“I told you!” he exclaimed. “I told you, your men were going in unprepared. There should have been two squads at least for this operation!”

Streeg looked back at the professor grimly. “So what do you suggest we do now? You know we can't halt the operation.”

“Let me talk to him...”

21

The boy watched them there, huddling together. A grim smile crossed his thin lips – he had them on the defensive; their fear was taking hold.

Warm slick blood that was not his own dripped down his arm and over his hand, within which he grasped a metal shard that had torn free of the boat as he had rocked it from where it had sat and rolled down onto his enemies. He had used the thin sliver of metal to take out the three stragglers, using the jagged weapon to carve through their throats and vital organs.

A scavenged assault rifle was strapped to his back now, and he wore a headset which he had taken from an enemy he'd just disposed of. He could hear every single word they said.

He waited for their next move before he planned his own. Would they continue to peruse him, or give up the hunt? He was answered when they turned toward his position – always knowing where he was, somehow. A voice called out from overhead:

“a-Ten!”

It was a voice he recognised, and knew well. He should – he'd heard that voice every single day of his life.

“Cease your hostilities and come in peacefully. You're sick, a-Ten, we want to make you better.”

*Sick of you. Sick of that life. Sick of your plans and your rules. I will not go back.*

“a-Ten! Give yourself up! That's a direct order!”

He physically winced when he heard the word *Order*, and, in the single most emotive action of his life thus far, the boy drew forth the assault rifle and let rip a few rounds at the Raptor flying above.

It caused the chopper to veer wildly away from the fire. The boy knew that he had no real chance of causing any real damage to it with the rubber bullets - he hadn't had the chance to snatch any live ammo yet- but they got the message he wanted to send nonetheless.

“Taking fire! Repeat, taking fire – evasive action!”

“Calm down! They’re just rubber bullets!”

"a-Ten. What are you doing?!”

“The little shit’s got a gun – we’re freaking dead! We gotta kill him”

“Shut up Russel! He only has rubber bullets for morons! Everyone get back in formation! Move!”

The boy watched as they darted behind what cover they could find, watching through the sight of the gun. Rubber bullets or not, the gun would fulfil its potential before this battle was over.

22

Blake slid down on the ground beside Brooke behind an upturned dressing room locker; the sodden ground soaking what parts of him the rain might have missed, the heavy droplets falling on the metal around them. He clutched his gun for comfort, but it offered little. His hands shook with more than the cold rain accounted for, and he thought of Marie, and he thought of home.

“He’s only thirty meters that way,” Brooke said in his ear, off-com as before so no one else would hear. “I’ve got a good arm – I could make that throw and blow him the hell up!”

The idea was looking more and more favourable to Blake. If it meant he was going to get off this rock and back home it was worth it. They weren’t fighting a disorganised band of freedom fighters here, armed with little more than small arms and clubs, this boy – this "a-Ten” had been bred and built for this kind of shit.

If he got out of this he decided, right then, that he’d quit the corps. He’d take any punishment that they might throw at him, it didn’t matter. They could fine him, they could lock him up for a year, whatever – they couldn’t do worse than sticking him on Shitpile fighting some psycho kid who was destroying them.



Then he and Marie could start another life together. Hells he'd even join in with her research into all that ancient history. It was all myth and legend to him and he'd never applied himself to looking too closely into things he couldn't see right before his eyes, but at that moment he would gladly do so; he just suddenly wanted to get the hell out of the life that they wanted him to believe he'd chosen for himself.

Yeah, right. Straight through mid-school and then 'encouraged' to join the corps for a minimum seven year stint, because he was able bodied enough, and too dumb to go to college.

"It will greatly increase your chances of gaining Credit with the System," he'd been told, which basically meant that he had to join up or he'd be screwed when it came to the day when he got sick and needed a doctor, or was too old to work, because then he'd be on his own with no support at all.

"Cover me, man. Fucking cover me!" Brooke grabbed his shirt, hissing the words urgently in his ear. "Do it or we're all dead and you know it!"

Exhilaration pushed through him. There were orders being barked through his earpiece, but he didn't even hear them.

"Go then, you crazy bastard!" Blake exclaimed without giving a thought to who might be listening. The time for caution and orders was passed him now, passed both of them and, in truth, passed most of those that remained there hiding in the wind, the rain and the junk. "Get the son of a bitch!"

23

"Get the son of a bitch!"

The boy heard it. He heard desperation and anger in the tone. He heard a man at breaking point. In doing so, he heard advance warning of the event which may otherwise have caught him by surprise.

One of the men sprang up from behind a changing locker he was hiding behind, thirty meters away.

"Brooke! What are you doing soldier? Take cover this instant!"

The soldier – Brooke – paid no heed to his commanding officer's call. The boy noted that he carried no gun. From this distance it looked like he had lost all of his sense and reason and was running toward him unarmed.

But no, he wasn't. There was something in his hand, small and dark.

The boy only noticed this as an additional observation as he lined up the man's helmet in his sight and fired. The rubber bullet struck through the wind and the rain and impacted against the helmet that he wore, hitting it hard, stopping him in his tracks.

24

Brooke choked and ringing resounded through his head as the bullet smacked into his helmet, pulling the strap under his chin tight against his neck. It choked him and he dropped to his knees, the grenade falling to the ground beside him. The strap was strangling him. With wet slippery fingers he loosened it and let the helmet fall from his head.

“Brooke Get your helmet back on!”

“Put your-”

The frantic cries of his commanding officer and his lifelong friend were the last things he ever heard.

25

The boy fired another shot, and his aim was true. A VERI's aim was always true. A bullet to the eye would kill you whether it was real or whether it was made of rubber.

26

Blake saw it. He watched it all. He heard the shot. He saw Brooke's head snap back and watched as he turned with the blood flowing out of his empty eye socket before slumping down head first in the dirt.

Blake and Brooke had grown up together. They'd come from a small town, and had known each other since they'd been seven years old. He often recalled being a boy with him, getting into trouble, being run off a farmer's land by a pack of dogs, getting stuck up a tree before falling out and breaking his ankle. Brooke had run for help for him. Brooke had let him copy the answers on his math test so he wouldn't have to be kept down a year. He had always thought Brooke was the better of the two of them. Brooke had introduced him to Marie. Brooke had taken him shooting with his dad's air rifle and they had gone rabbit hunting and camping.

And now Brooke was dead.

It took a three second pause for him to take it in and process that information. He always thought he'd be the first to go. He never thought he'd see his "bro" with his pearly whites lying dead in the mud with a rubber bullet lodged in his brain.

Every man had a snapping point – where he would lose sense completely and act on pure instinct, forsaking everything else, all consequence, all thought, to right what had been put right.

Blake snapped.

He had to kill the boy. The boy had to die!

"Fucking bastard!" he yelled out at the top of his lungs, surging up. He was over the locker before he was fully on his feet, firing madly with his assault rifle in the direction that the boy lurked. He was dimly aware of someone trying to grab him and pull him back, but he shook them off without a thought and didn't lose an ounce of his momentum.

He took a hit in the head, his helmet taking the brunt just like Brooke's had, but Blake wasn't even breathing any more. Another shot smacked into him as he reached the body of his dead friend, impacting on his chest. A little higher and it might've caught him in the neck and dropped him, but the body armour he wore bore the impact and he barely felt it.

He knelt down in the mud, next to the body of his friend, letting the gun drop from his hands and clasping the fallen grenade. His fingers slid over it, the metal feeling solid and heavy in his hand as he lifted it. Holding it made him feel a lot more assured than holding the rifle – this thing could actually kill. He grasped it in his hand. He'd never realise it, but at that moment he was grinning; his teeth bared as a wild beast.

Gone were the thoughts of survival, of Marie, and of escaping this place. The boy had killed Brooke, killed his best friend, whom might we well have been a brother to him, and that was all that mattered at that time, not Marie, not the orders being barked into his headset, not even the rubber bullet that caught him in the leg, hurting him as he began to stand, but not stopping him. He rose, the stinging pain barely even an annoyance. He could see the boy hiding in the rubble up ahead, bared his teeth in a ferial snarl and activated the grenade.

The boy watched as the soldier rose off the floor and hurled something at him. He'd fired three times and hit him with each shot, but rubber bullets were little more than stopping weapons. They could knock the breath from someone, knock them over, or knock them out,

but taking someone out with them that was encased in body armour wasn't something you could do twice in a row – especially when the second target was fuelled with rage and didn't seem to feel a thing.

The object was only about the size of an apple, and it was heavy too. The boy watched it arch toward him through the air. It beeped once with a red light.

*Grenade!*

He a bolt for it, breaking cover. He had no choice.

28

“There he is! Open fire!” Morgans ordered. A hail of projectiles flew over Blake's head as he fell to his knees. He wasn't far enough away from the blast.

He didn't care. He saw the boy dart away. He'd missed his chance. His head dropped. He'd fucked up.

29

Rubber bullets zipped around the boy. One of them caught him in the back of the leg before he ran ten feet and stopped him in his tracks, preventing him from running far enough.

“Got him!” someone yelled jubilantly through the intercom.

*Yes, you really have.*

30

The grenade detonated.

Agency MkIII Grenades were widely known for their explosive detonation and highly devastating effect. It ripped through the debris as it exploded, sending shrapnel flying in all directions, the sound of twisting metal filling the night sky. The marines dived for cover; Blake was thrown flat on the floor; pressed into the cold mud as pieces of hot metal flew over his prone body.

The impact of the blast unsettled the entire structure of one of the mounds and it began to slowly but inexorably lean toward them. A twisted mass of scrap metal began bearing down like a giant wave just past its apex.

“Go! Move! Move!” Morgans cried out, urging his men away from the danger. He grabbed Pullman and started dragging him to safety. Russel helped him, and it made the going a little easier.

Blake looked up from his prone position, hearing the groan of metal as it snapped and twisted, only just now seeing the avalanche of metal falling above him. He closed his eyes and saw no more.

Pullman grunted in pain as they dragged him through the mud, trying to help, but it was clear that they weren't moving fast enough. Parts of the mound were falling around them.

“Go! Leave me! You'll die!” Pullman gasped out, clearly in agony.

“No fucking way soldier! We're not leaving- “

31

Back at the control centre, Professor Reiksig and Captain Streeg looked on helplessly and in utter dismay as they watched the scene fold out before them. They saw Pullman, Russel, Blake and Sgt Morgans cameras all black out and turn into static as they were crushed to death under the giant landslide of wreckage that crashed on top of them; tonnes and tonnes of it.

The entire room was silent for a few moments afterwards, filled with the beeps of computers and the static from the video feed.

“DAMN!” Streeg exclaimed angrily, slamming his fist down into the nearest surface. He and Morgans had been friends – good friends.

He had been a good man. They all had been good men. Now only three were left; Ellis, Pinson and Elmore. They were the only ones out of the seventeen that had set out on this mission. Over the past ten minutes he'd seen them all slaughtered and could do nothing but looked on helplessly.

They'd been unprepared – they'd been in too much of a rush to get VERI a-X back. Now it was all too late, and it had cost the lives of so many good men.

He watched the last three screens which were active; the last three men who stood looking at the twisting pile of wreckage which had just fallen.

“Sir...” came a voice over the intercom. It was Ellis. “Come in? Anyone?”

Streeg took one of the headsets off the heads of the computer operators who sat before him, and spoke into it.

“Easy soldier. We're going to get you out of there.”

And damn right they were, there was no way he was losing an entire squad. They had no chance to complete their objective.

“Yes sir, thank you sir,” Ellis said back through the mic. Sir, the VERI...”

“Never mind about that now, soldier,” Streeg replied. He saw Reiksig take a breath and turn to him, as if to object, but then seemed to think better off it.

*Scum, all he thinks about is that cursed thing they’ve made out there. It won’t make a difference that it just killed over a dozen people – they’ll always have more to send.*

“Get back to the extraction point. The Raptor will pick you up.”

“Thank you sir, but sir, the VERI, well, I think he’s dead...”

Now Reiksig perked up, watching Ellis’ helmet camera. Ellis was looking at the sensor on his wrist, which was programmed to home in on the tracking device surgically planted into the VERI’s body. It was dead. There was no light on it showing where the tracker was, no readout of how far away it might be. Just a message which read:

DEVICE NOT FOUND

Now it was Reiksig’s turn to swear.

*You did it lads, you killed the bastard!* Streeg couldn’t help but grin out of the side of his mouth. The mission had been a failure, yes. The VERI was dead, not captured as they had wanted, but it was a victory for Streeg and every one of those men out there, because they had avenged every death that they had witnessed that night.

“Just come on in soldier, come on home.”

32

An instant of blinding pain was followed by merciful blackness which he was certain was his death. Had he had time to think on this, he would have felt neither sadness nor regrets about dying so young and in such a way. Indeed, it would have been something that he would have even expected, given his life up to that point, and would have been surprised had his life not ended in the midst of a battle.

When he looked back on things, Veriax would remember that moment of pain and blackness as a new chapter in his life; one that was far different from the first ten years, and one that he had not been trained to fully deal with.

**BOOK TWO**

33

Valina hid until she heard the sound of the helicopter disappear over the sea, before she emerged from her hiding place. Small and alone, she walked past the dead bodies of two of the soldiers, paying little heed to them at all. She had seen bodies before, and she had seen death – it was nothing new to her.

She went to the plume of smoke which was billowing up into the night sky, where the last explosion had gone off. She had watched as the pile of metal had fallen, which had signalled an end to the fighting. At the time, she had thought that it had meant the boy had killed them all, but no, she had watched as the three survivors staggered away and boarded the helicopter without the boy with them.

That must mean that he was dead, yes? They had come to capture him and take him back to wherever it is they came from. He'd fought back too hard, so they'd killed him. Yes, it made sense to think that he was dead, but nevertheless, she felt she had to be sure.

She reached the pile of debris. What had been tonnes of scrap piled high was now strewn around on the ground between the other piles in a mass carpet of rusted and twisted scrap metal.

She could see where the grenade had gone off; it had left a small crater in the wreckage. Several small fires were smouldering where it had ignited car seats and other scraps of upholstery, their fires spitting at the rain as it doused them.

By the light of the fires she made her way over the obstacles. Moving swiftly, the only sounds she made as she scrambled through the obstacle course were slight grunts as she pushed her way through the wreck and then a surprised little squeak as she accidentally came across another body of one of the soldiers.

He'd been unlucky; skewered through the chest by a pair of forks from a fork lift truck. She briefly spared a glance at his face, fear still etched on his features and empty lifeless eyes stared at her, before moving on, and reached the impact site of the grenade.

The light from the fires was bright here, and dazzled her as it reflected off all of the metallic surfaces in the area.

There was no sign of the boy, but she wasn't really surprised by this. If he had been in this spot when the grenade went off there wouldn't have been much of him left anyway. And if he hadn't been in this area – if he'd tried to run away, then he'd have run... that way.

She headed in the direction away from the bodies of the soldiers, where the ground was clearest of scrap, and found him.

With the flickering amber light cast from the fires, she saw him lying face down against a car. His boy looked so small and frail as she went over to him. It was hard to believe that he'd been the cause of all of this – that he'd been the one they'd come for, and he'd been the one whom had killed them.

Yes, she had seen death in her short life. Death was part of living on the island of Ergeon. Yet she had never seen so much of it, inflicted in such a short period of time, by just one person. Just a boy, he was too. Just a boy.

She couldn't help the tears that welled in her eyes. She wiped them bitterly away. She did not mourn for him. She mourned for herself. The tears were there because she was alone, and she'd seen the chance to have something – have a friend – and now she had nothing again. She hated The Pack for sending him away, hated them for robbing her of the chance to spend time with another child. They didn't know what it was like, none of them did. They were all adults, and she was more grown up than she ought to have been at her age. She knew this because of the scraps of toys they found. She'd found a box with a game in it labelled "For ages 8 12". She'd been nine at the time, so it was supposed to be suitable for her. Parts of it seemed to be missing, but she didn't care. She played with it anyway. But she played alone, as always. She thought it would have been a fantastically fun game to play if she had friends to play it with. But no one played here.

34

As she neared, she saw that the battle had taken its toll on him. The flesh on his back was charred and opened up; she could see his red insides. The blast had obviously hit him in the back, and carried him here.

There was suddenly movement to the side of her. She let out a shocked gasp, stumbling back as a figure emerged out of the gloom. Whoever it was lit a flashlight and the glare from it blinded her, making her wince and look away.

"Oh it's you!" It was Joner who spoke.

Valina let out a shuddering sigh of relief as he stepped into the dull glow from the fires and lowered the torch, the shadows making the scar on his face dance around in an ugly way.

"What do you think you're doing out here all alone then, eh?" he asked.



She shrugged. She knew he probably knew the answer anyway. “I wanted to see what happened to the boy.” She said. She decided it best not to bother following it with “*But I decided to risk my neck by stealing the keys from Hans and coming to help him by freeing him before they could take him away.*”

“And what in the hells *did* happen?”

“He... escaped. They tried to capture him, but, uh... didn't.”

Joner turned his head to look at the body of the boy. “No they didn't, did they Val?”

Valina just looked sad, then looked at him. “And why are you here?” she asked him.

He chuckled. “Because I am. Now, we'd best not be here anymore. The fighting may attract the Crazies. We should gather the weapons up that we can find. We don't- “

“Murgh...”

They both froze, and looked where the moan came from.

The boy's fingers on his left hand moved ever, ever so slightly.

“He's alive!” Valina exclaimed, dashing the few feet over to him but not touching him.

“Joner! He's alive!”

Joner thought that her face looked as much like an angel as he'd ever be likely to see for the remainder of his days. Her features lit up in the fire, joy on her face - her grin - shining through her. Though he did not understand her joy, he found that he was glad of it.

If Hans was her father, then Joner was an uncle. An uncle she'd go to when she couldn't go to her dad about things - like when she'd done something wrong and thought the news would come better from an adult.

Her child-mind had seen passed his scar and didn't care about his past or what he'd done or left behind, and he loved her for that. They all loved her, because she was one of the few innocent and pure things they had on Shitpile.

“Hello? Hi? Hello?” she spoke to him, bending close but was only greeted with rasping, choking breath while the boy still lay face down on the floor next to the car. He tried to move more, and then fell unconscious and remained still, only shallow breathing showing that he was still alive.

Joner came over, his eyes scanning the wound on his back; the skin flayed away, cauterised by the burns he's suffered.

“He's hurt really bad, Val,” he said, hunkering down. “A lot of burns. That wound will get infected in no time.”

“But you can fix him? You can heal him?”

“I don't know.”

And he didn't. He couldn't actually believe that the kid was still alive. His body had taken a hell of a blast from... what? A Mk II grenade? Surely not one of the Mk III ones?

"What's that?" Valina asked. She was looking at the boy. She was looking *\*inside\** the boy, into his wound.

Joner looked too, shining the flashlight on it, and saw what she was pointing out. There was a shiny metallic *thing* inside of him, just at the base of his ribs. It wasn't shrapnel, he was sure of it. It looked... manufactured. It looked *placed*. Something about it was eerily familiar.

"Hold this," he said to her, handing her the flashlight. "Shine the light down on it."

As she did, he took out his multi tool, and separated the pliers from it. Biting his lip (a habit he'd never been able to shake when he was concentrating), he managed to clamp them over the object and pull it out with a slight *\*squelch\** sound.

"It's a tracking device," he said, cleaning it off in the rain, turning it around in his fingers recognising it now. It was barely the size of a child's finger. It looked to have been damaged in the blast. "It's not working any more. They probably saw it had stopped sending a message after the blast and assumed that he'd been killed." He looked down at the boy. "They were almost right. They still might be. Here."

He handed it to her - he didn't know why. She barely looked at it, placing the device into her pocket.

"I hope we're not too late. Can we help him? We must!"

Must they?

Yes, they must. The kid deserved a chance, after all that. That's what Hans has said about Val all those years. "*She survived getting dumped in the trash, loaded into a cargo ship and dropped out here. She went through enough and deserved the right to have a chance,*" was what he said. Well, this kid right here had just fought off a squad of Agency troops, so is that didn't follow the same thinking Joner was damned if he knew what did.

"Aye, though I know now how Hans will react to it. I doubt he would approve. Nor would the rest of The Pack."

It was true. Even if Hans could be convinced, the boy would unsettle the camp. They'd be afraid of him, or at least the consequences of having him. Joner was convinced that The Agency wouldn't pursue him any more if they assumed he was dead, but even with his knowledge of how things worked, people wouldn't want to take the risk. If they were going to care for him then it would have to be done away from Beckside.

"I know," Valina nodded, as if she was coming to the same conclusion.

"Let's get him out of here first," Joner told her.

“I know a place not far from here. It’s sheltered.”

“A place, huh?” He questioned, raising an eyebrow.

She put her head down. “Yeah. A secret place.”

Joner nodded, and smiled.

Strictly speaking they shouldn’t move the boy in the state that he was in, but they had no choice. With all the noise the battle made, it was very likely that the Crazies would get there soon, and they didn’t want to be around when that happened.

“Good thing he’s not awake for this...” the ex-special ops grunted as he hoisted the boy up into a fireman’s lift, and made a foul face as he caught a waft of the smell of burnt flesh.

“It’s not far, this way,” Valina told him, leading away from the site and heading inland with the she carried lighting the way for them.

It was so quiet at night. During the day one grew used to the constant chorus of birds as they circled around, fighting for scraps of food and anything vaguely edible from the rubbish dumped on the island. When the cargo ships appeared, shaking the ground with their huge engines, the birds would all take flight, near blotting out the sun with their numbers.

And shitting over everything.

Everywhere he looked, Joner could see the white splatters of bird droppings covering everything. He smiled grimly to himself – they were living on a bird’s latrine.

They made hurried their way across the black landscape towards Valina's hiding spot.

35

“It’s here,” she said finally.

The ground had become rocky during the last several minutes of their journey, which had taken around a quarter of an hour. Joner could hear water running – they were near a river. The weather had cleared now, and the rain clouds were abating which let the moon’s light illuminate everything in a spooky pale blue filter.

They made their way down an embankment. There were trees here, and some were dead - something was getting into the earth to slowly kill them off. Those that weren’t dead were losing their auburn leaves as autumn set in.

The trees had trash stuck in their leaves and branches, and some had their branches snapped off with larger objects which had fallen on them. Near where they walked, several had been felled as a HGV had rolled down the bank over them. The vehicle had come to rest on its wheels and was now overgrown with vines and lichen, as if nature was exacting revenge on it

by smothering it to death. Still, there weren't many trees left on the island now, at least not in their area of it.

They reached the banks of a river. The dark waters flowed slowly down to the sea, which he guessed wasn't more than a mile away from where they were at. Upon the bank, half-submerged in the mud, was a wrecked porta-cabin - the kind of portable hut you get on construction sites that they use as portable offices. Its windows were smashed, but had been shored up with cardboard and fabric. The walls were dirty but intact. The door was missing. The place showed no outward signs of habitation.

"Nice little hiding place." he mused.

"I know," came her reply. "It's my place. Don't tell anyone about it."

"I won't," Joner told her, and meant it. He could understand what it meant to her, and knew why she wanted it kept a secret.

Everyone had their own way of escaping the harsh reality which they lived in. For most, they found it in sleep. Some had photographs, either of people they once knew or of other things that made them happy (Foxy had a poster of a sports car), others had memories, or did an activity like whittling or running or pick-up sticks. Whatever worked to keep you sane. This place was Valina's way of escaping - to go somewhere no one else could find her. She'd often go missing for hours at a time. No one really knew how she got away, or back in again. Hans had asked Joner to keep an eye on her, and he had. He'd watched her escape, and he'd followed her here, to this spot, but hadn't told her he knew about it. He hadn't told Hans, either, merely saying that she went away to think, and that she was safe when she did it. This was her place - her escape. He would rob her of it if she told anyone about it, and he couldn't bring himself to do that despite how sensible that might seem.

They went inside. The place was dark and smelled of damp, and probably wasn't the healthiest of places for a child to spend any amount of time at. There was a relatively clean mattress laid out on the floor, and a chair nearby. He spotted an oil lantern, a few cans of out of date food (all the food they ate was out of date, that's why it was dumped there in the first place), a couple of grubby old books and various nick-knacks which she'd use to occupy her time out here. He smiled at her ingenuity as he lay the boy carefully down, who was still breathing and remained mercifully unconscious.

"Nice place," he commented.

"Thank you," she said, bringing a flask over and setting it beside the boy. She caught Joner's look. "It's in case he wakes up and he's thirsty."

*There we go, the poor bastard, Valina's gone and made you into a pet.*

“He’s hurt pretty bad,” he said to her. It was warning he spoke – not to get too attached.

She nodded sadly. “I know.”

He stood up. “I should get back.”

“Alright,” she said, and made ready to leave, but he stopped her.

"You're not coming."

"Yes I am," she said. "I can carry things for you. And you know I can be quiet. We might find something to help the boy."

“This could be dangerous.” He told her. “The fighting will probably have been noticed by Crazies.”

"I know," she nodded. "It's okay. I want to come."

He sighed, "You need to stay behind me, okay? If anything happens – if we see anything that isn’t friendly, then I want you to run back to Becksides. Not here, Becksides, do you understand?"

She nodded again, “yes,” she told him.

He was satisfied. The kid wasn’t dumb. In actual fact, she was smarter than a whole bunch of people he knew.

36

They made their way back the way they had come. It had taken twenty-five minutes, or thereabouts, to get the boy back to Valina’s hiding place, and that was way too long for Joner to feel comfortable about going back there. He estimated that it would take around ten minutes to get back to the scene of the fighting – that made over half an hour for the Crazies to become aware of the fighting and arrive on the scene. That gave them far too long a time period for Joner to be happy about. Still, there was no telling when, if at all, they might arrive on the scene. That’s why they were called Crazies, because they were mad, unpredictable, and dangerous.

There was no sign of them, however, when they returned back to the battle site. Joner felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end; his nerves on tenterhooks, but he didn’t let it show to Valina.

He bent down to her. “We search for bodies. You take everything that isn’t a weapon from them – I’ll gather those up.”

“Don’t you trust me?” she chided, somewhat playfully, though there was the slightest edge to her voice. She was really asking, and wanted an answer.

Joner complied: "Val, you are still just a child. I would trust you with more things than most, but these weapons are not meant for your hands. Now come, we must hurry."

He moved off, and she followed. The fires had abated now, leaving behind only smouldering wreckage, which made it dark. They only had the one flashlight between them, but Joner distained its use at all, instead favouring stealth instead. If anyone was approaching, the light of a torch would let them know they were there long before they arrived. Thus, they went by light of the moon, which now shone brilliantly in the night sky after the storm.

The first of the bodies they reached had been crushed under a small sailing vessel, with only his legs protruded out from under the hull. His torso, along with the rest of the things he must have carried, were crushed underneath it. They moved on.

The second body had had his throat cut open by a splintered walking stick. Joner told the girl not to look as he scavenged from the body, unclipping the man's ammo belt. He inspected the rounds, finding both live and dummy ammunition. He took it all, along with the man's rifle and his knife. He pulled off the man's backpack and swiftly went through it. Though they were only on a short mission it was still packed as if they were going on manoeuvres for three weeks, with pots and pans, a tent, bedrolls and various equipment scattering everywhere. They could find a use for all of it; so rare it was to come across new material, and hopefully, maybe, he could come back later with more people and take everything, but for now they could only take the essentials.

Everything in the pack was so familiar to him. *They still pack these the same way*, he thought, his hands working effortlessly over the dark, recognising the items inside by touch.

"What are you doing?" Valina asked him. "I can barely see a thing."

He strapped the belt around his torso and slung the pack over his back. "We must remain hidden. I don't know how long we have."

And, just as he spoke, they both heard the noise. It was a dull faint drone at first, but quickly got louder until they could tell that they were the sounds of engines, and with them came the whoops and yells of the Crazies.

"Back! Get back! Hide!" Joner ordered as his military days came to the fore one again, his tone hushed and urgent.

Valina didn't need telling twice, and retreated with Joner some fifty meters away, and hid back behind a disused skip, rusted and dotted with holes.

Panting quietly and keeping very, very still, the two of them peered through these holes to see that moments later three motorbikes roared into view, revving hard and riding up on their back wheels. They were just about as filthy as the people that rode them, who looked little

better than humanoid sewer rats. All three of them were dressed in what looked like the remains of what clothes they had on when they arrived on Shitpile, with hair that hadn't seen any attempts of washing or maintenance in about that time too.

They whooped and cheered at nothing like madmen.

Then came the lower rumblings of something bigger, and a semi truck thundered in with the letters "FUK U" spray painted over the hood in pink. It towed a half wrecked trailer which now was little more than wheels and a floor, and carried a host of cheering, gibbering idiots that whirled flaming torches, wrenches, spanners, two by fours and other makeshift weapons around their heads, dancing up and down like they were at a rave.

"Lots of Crazies..." Valina shuddered quietly. Joner said nothing, just watched.

The semi stopped and the horn blared out. This act, for whatever reason, excited the crowd even further and sent them into a jubilant, insane dance.

Joner saw one of the filthy men staggering around on the back of the trailer, looking up at the sky, and then falling off it to the delight and hilarity of those who saw.

*They're all high as shit, on fizz or some narcotic.*

A man stepped out of the semi cab and scrambled onto the roof. He was a big man, well muscled, bald head. He shouted something out to the rest of them – it was impossible to hear what exactly because of the distance and the rest of the noise, but it sent the rest of them scurrying off the back of the trailer and swarming outward.

They watched as a group of four Crazies found the body of the marine they had just looted, and set upon it like vultures on a carcass, picking it dry. They didn't even notice that they body of the marine had had half of its equipment already taken away, as they fought over the boots, the pants, the jacket, the vest, as well as all the other gear.

"Urgh, it's awful..." Valina almost gagged, and looked away. Joner kept watching.

Elsewhere, the same scene was happening where the other men had fallen in the battle. This was exactly what Joner had sought to avoid – Crazies getting their hands on bullet proof vests and automatic weapons. Joner had collected one, and they had two more back with The Pack. That was three, against... how many? Valina had told him that three had got away, and in a squad of sixteen, that left thirteen guns out there. Twelve if they were lucky – if the one under the hull of the boat was too damaged to repair.

He watched on grimly.

One of the Crazies brandished one of the weapons now, strapping it over his shoulder. He fired a round into the air, gibbering and howling with laughter. The sound of the shots fired out into the quiet night sky. It made Valina jump.

The laughing man with the gun was not laughing for long. The big man blindsided him with a mean right hook to the side of his head, sending him dropping into the dirt. The bigger man stood over him, yelling down at him and wrenching the gun off him, at one point brandishing the barrel down at the writhing, fallen mans' head. He was likely pissed that he'd wasted some bullets that could better be used elsewhere on other targets, like The Pack.

Joner knew who that man was. It was Madd Dogg – the leader of the Crazies. This was the first time Joner had caught sight of the infamous Madd Dogg. A man who had built up his own small empire in the last couple of years. As he watched, he felt an unerring and unwelcome sense of recognition of the man slowly forming.

The Crazies were what happened when you lost it, when you couldn't take being stuck on this island any more, when all semblance of order, decency and morality left you and you realised you were stranded on an island away from all law and authority, with no consequences. Madd Dogg offered drugs, and women, and, well, what else could you need in a place such as this when you'd half lost your mind? They were all mad. They were the Crazies. It wouldn't have been so bad if they kept to themselves because, the island was big enough. But no, it wasn't, not for Madd Dogg.

Joner imagined Madd Dogg was some kind of school bully, who has his group of cackling hyena henchmen at his beck and call who would stand behind him and laugh as he made fun of other kids, saying things that likely weren't even that funny. Though he had never even got a good luck at him, yet alone spoken to him, Joner was pretty damn sure that, had he even ever gone to school, that's the kind of person Madd Dogg would've been.

Now this island was his playground, and the Crazies were his cackling hyenas who gathered around him because they decided it was easier to be with him than against him. He wanted to rule it, to be King, and The Pack, along with a few other scattered groups and individuals, were enemies of the insipid empire he was building. Quite why anybody would want to be king of an island that was almost covered knee deep in someone else's waste was quite beyond Joner's reasoning, but reason was something these people had lost. Perhaps it was something they never had, and if that was the case, then it was probably best that they end up in a place such as this.

Degenerates, all of them.

Pieces of Joner's memory fell into place as is familiarity of Madd Dogg became suddenly clear. His eyes widened as he realised who Madd Dogg was. *Gunther? It can't be...*



They were taking the stripped bodies away with them now, howling and dancing as they did it. Valina wasn't watching, she had tucked herself into a ball and was covering her ears with her hands, eyes tight shut. Joner was glad of it – she didn't need to see this.

He watched as they loaded the bodies onto the back of the trailer, and tried hard not to think about why they were taking them. It was a hard thing to do since a chant had broken out which, while muffled with the echoes caused within the skip, sounded a lot like they were chanting “Feast! Feast! Feast! Feast!”

They cavorted around as if they were performing some ancient witch dance, setting fires here and there where they could (that was how you could tell they were coming, most times – by the fires), and one of them thinking it would be a good idea to set one of the others on fire. The man's hair went up in flames and he ran around screaming before the others, who all found it hilarious, before dunking his head into a pool of rainwater and dousing the flames. And always the chant: “Feast! Feast! Feast! Feast!”

There was a new set of voices now, crying out in excitement. Joner tried to see through the waving arms and gyrating bodies to see what had now got their attention. They hoisted a body above their heads, crying it above them like a trophy. It was one of the marines, and they hadn't stripped this one.

*Was he? No, don't tell me! The poor son of a bitch is still alive!*

He was – they pulled him from the wreckage with his arms and legs thrashing. Joner thought he could hear his yells and shouts over the noise that the Crazies were making. They brought him before Madd Dogg, in the midst of their gathering. Joner couldn't see what went on, but it pleased the crowd, and they howled their delights to the stars like mindless savages.

“Is it over yet?” Valina suddenly asked in a small voice.

Joner shook his head. “Not yet. But soon,” he said, *for that poor bastard at least*. But the bodies had been stripped, they'd got what they'd come for. Soon they'd move off again, back to their trash warrens, and then he could get Valina and himself out of here and give Hans the ill tidings about the night's events. *But not about the boy, Hans mustn't know about the boy.*

The festivities seemed to be coming to an end now, and the Crazies, still with their chant (“Feast! Feast! Feast! Feast!”), were moving back to the trailer with their new treasures to go back to the holes they came from.

Mudd had been part of the Crazies for the past year. Or year and a bit – it was hard to tell how much time had past when you spent most of your days high off solvent abuse. He hadn't really had a lot of choice in joining the Crazies. They'd taken him in as soon as he'd got dumped here, in a "join us or we'll kill you" moment that hadn't taken him too long to decide which option to choose.

He'd run to the island because he'd killed his little sister. He hadn't meant to kill her; it had been an accident, but he'd panicked and fled. He knew how it would have looked to the authorities, so he'd ended up here rather than face the law's punishment.

Mudd had never been a bad kid; he'd never been in trouble and he'd never done drugs, that is, until he came to Ergeon. He hadn't been called Mudd either, he'd been called Chris... he thought. Was it Chris? Or Karl? He'd started to forget. Over the last twelve months he'd turned into a junkie, and needed his fix every day. Madd Dogg supplied it and that was why he stayed; it was why any of them stayed. They'd called him Mudd because that's all he was to them (he could have been worse things) and it was a name he hadn't been able to shake, so now it was the name he was reborn with.

Mudd had never forgotten how to ride a bike though. He'd been riding something since he'd been eight years old. There was a time before the accident that he had aspirations to take scrambling up professionally. Then he'd get paid to race around a course at break-neck speeds, dirt splattering his face, the feel of the bike under him. That future was lost to him now, but he still could ride and ride well, and he did still get to do that here so he had that part of his life before Ergeon to cling to.

It was one of the few semblances that remained of who he once was.

That was his escape.

He pulled his bike up from its side as it lay on the ground. He'd abandoned it, momentarily, to join the others in the scramble for the loot off the bodies. He hadn't manage to collect anything from them, but that was what he'd expected – there were far bigger and meaner guys in the Crazies than him, but he still had his bike.

He numbly swung his leg over the seat and sat on the bike, revving the throttle. Yes he was high on drugs (and was most of the time) but everything about the bike came second nature to him – including maintaining and cleaning it, since he kept better care of the bike than he did himself.

Man it felt good to be riding it again!

Gritting his teeth, he set off at a skidding start, spraying those behind him with mud. He didn't even hear the angry yells behind him as the sound of the engine filled his ears and he

raced off a little ways, just for the sheer hell of it, away from the group or a few hundred meters before skidding the bike around three hundred and sixty, sending up mud and other shit everywhere and howling up at the moon. He loved it, he fucking loved it!

He looked back the way he had come, and rode slowly back. His headlamp shone briefly over an upturned skip and he saw a flash of movement. Alerted, he shone it back towards the skip and saw the man and the girl hiding with it, watching him. The man was armed.

He never put any conscious effort into yelling something about them being there, but that action cost him his life nonetheless, and the bullet fired from Joner's gun ripped through his crash helmet and spilled his brains into the mud.

39

“Go! Go! On the bike!” Joner yelled at Valina, springing to his feet and grabbing her, yanking her up and sprinting to the bike. The Crazy had alerted the others; there were wild and alarmed shots coming from the mob behind them.

He kicked the body away and wrenched the bike upright, mounting it. Valina jumped on behind him, her arms encircling his chest hard, pressing herself tight onto his back as he revved it up and rode the bike away from the pack of Crazies.

The engine of the scrambler sounded loud into the night as it raced away. Joner glanced back and saw two lights in the darkness following them – the other two motorbikes.

Valina hung on tight as he raced up an embankment, the bike labouring under them for a moment. The engine sounded in good enough condition, but Joner was not a small man, and it was carrying two; they had to lose some weight – he had to get Valina off the bike.

He glanced behind him again, seeing that the lights were closer now. They were making ground on them. Everything around them was pitch black, and trees and rocks and debris appeared before him with just a few moments to react before they'd smash into them.

There was a bang, and for a moment he thought that the engine had backfired until he heard another and realised that what he was hearing were pistol shots.

He felt Valina's fingers grip his shirt. There was no point trying to talk to her; the bike was too loud, he just had to hope that when the time came she'd do what she had to quickly enough.

They had left the rest of the Crazies far enough behind them not to be an issue, and their two pursuers were still trailing too far for the two of them to be illuminated with their

headlamps, but they were still gaining. If there was a time to do what he was going to do then it was now.

He flipped off the headlamp and skidded to a halt. “Get off! Go! Don’t follow!” he hissed, urgently, harshly. He needed her to dismount without any complaints, without any “will you be alright?” or “no, we can make it!” He needed her to know she had to get off right then and there and, to her credit, she did. As soon as she was off, he threw the pack from his back to further lighten the load on the bike and sped away again. There was no time for instructions, no time for fair well wishes. He flicked the lights on again and changed direction. He watched as they both followed him and was glad of it. Valina could get away now, and she was safe.

The bike handled better now with the weight lifted off the back end, and he was able to manoeuvre it through the obstacles easier. Joner checked where the moon was to try and get some sense of where he was and where he was going, as the last thing he wanted was to get turned around in the dark and lead them either towards The Pack or head back where he had come, but thankfully he was doing neither.

The trees thinned out and rolling hills opened up before him, relatively free of the trash that filled most of the island, with the only debris here that which had been blown from further inland. It was good scrambler country, and his bike was a good one; perhaps recently discarded here. It was hard to believe that any of the Crazies would take much care of any of the vehicles they scavenged.

The gunshots still came, and he could hear the sound of their whoops and shouts. They were just chasing him for the fun of it now, but they were losing him. Had he had any small arms, he would have stopped his bike dead and turned to face them – after all there were only two of them – and the island would have been two Crazies less. As it was, he only had the rifle which was strapped to his back and untested. He may have to reload it with live rounds. He didn't have time to check.

**\*BANG!\***

The bullet hit the back of the bike in a freak, one in a million shot. It tore through the tire and put a hole through the wheel, which crumpled in its next revolution and sent the bike wildly veering to the left. Joner yelled out, extending his leg to steady himself with a reflex action. His ankle sank into the ground, but at the speed and velocity he was travelling at there was no way he was going to stop himself. His foot stayed still but his body and the bike kept on going, shattering the ankle and shattering his leg below the knee.

The pain hadn't even had time to register before Joner was flung from the bike and landed hard on the ground. Meanwhile the bike carried on for just a few more meters before slumping over on its side, the engine still ticking over, the front light shining upwards like a beacon.

Joner cried out, hard, his leg an appendage of pain and fire and needles poking through his skin. He felt his trouser leg become damp with blood as he sucked in air, his back arching out as he tried to cope with the agony.

He tried to move and fell back, shuddering, his entire form wracked with spasms from the injury. He gritted his teeth, pulling the gun from his back, the movement aggravating his injury ever more.

*Get it together you pussy!*

The other bikes approached, he heard the whine of their engines getting louder along with the triumphant yells of the two riders. They were gibbering like maniacs, celebrating the kill.

*I'm not dead yet you fuckers!*

Joner unhooked the gun from his back, the index finger of his right arm slipping into the trigger as naturally as blinking.

This thing better be loaded. He didn't much care whether it was with live or rubber bullets at that point - just so long as it fired something.

He compressed the trigger as they came into view, cresting the last hump in the land, leaving the ground and flying their bikes through the air with their handguns waving over their heads in a jubilant victory cheer.

The lethal bullets hammered from the barrel of the SG12, cutting through the air toward the bikers. They hit the first, the bike's light shattering, rounds piercing through the bodywork. Joner heard the man shout in surprise in pain as he was shot, and then the bike exploded as the bullets caused a spark that ignited the gas tank. The bike broke apart in an explosion of flame and metal which sent parts of it flying in all directions. One of the spokes from the front wheel was ripped off in the blast and shot forwards, impaling directly into Joner's right shoulder, piercing deep, smashing the shoulder plate bone within.

Most of it flew backwards into the path of the second biker, who was peppered with shrapnel from the bike. The back wheel span out and smacked him right across the forehead, the chain following, slashing his neck and face. He screamed as his bike plummeted through the dissipating explosion before him before he smacked into the ground head first, the bike landing on top of him and breaking his neck and spine.

He'd killed them, but Joner felt like he wasn't too far behind.

She lay in the dark for several minutes afterwards and heard the bikes fade into the distance with her heart beating heavily in her chest before she moved off.

If she knew how to, she'd have prayed for Joner's safety. She knew he was capable, and also knew no amount of well-wishing would change what happened to him. She told herself that she'd see him in the morning, and turned her attentions to her own fate. She tried to pick the pack Joner had discarded up, but it was too heavy. With gritted teeth, she resigned herself to dragging it behind her.

She headed for her cabin. It wasn't what Joner had told her to do, but the boy needed her help. Joner could go back to The Pack and tell them she was safe. She had to look after the boy.

The cabin was a lot closer than Beckside, too. The pack was too heavy to drag all the way there. The boy needed her help, too. She'd go to the cabin, then back home, she told herself.

She disliked being out during the night time. No, she *really* disliked going out in the night time. She could put up with the stories that were told, of gigantic rats, spiders, and other nasty critters which dwelt in the dark corners of the island, it was the sounds she sometimes heard at night that made her shudder with fear. She'd heard them more often when she was younger; in the days before when she and Hans had been alone and travelled within the island from place to place, scavenging as they went. In those days during the nights she could sometimes hear scratching and scurrying about by something that was a lot bigger than a regular rodent. Sometimes she thought she could still hear it, but could only hope that it was her overactive child's imagination playing cruel tricks on her.

Nevertheless, she still disliked the dark, and she had no light source with which to navigate with save the light of the moon. It was a good thing that she knew were way around with area well enough through her travels with Hans and her natural tendencies to just wander off from Beckside.

It wasn't unusual that she spent nights away from there on her own. She often went to the cabin, to her place, to get away and be herself. No one knew she went there, and Hans had told her not to leave and be out on her own. He was right; it was a dangerous place they lived on, but she felt compelled to disobey. In many ways, she felt safer by the river than she did back with The Pack.

The sound of the running water was comforting to her as she approached the familiar place.

Joner had sent her away and now she had a job to do. They'd rescued the boy, and now she had to save him, otherwise it would all have been pointless. Joner wouldn't tell anyone about what had happened, nor would he return to the cabin. Now it was her job to care for the boy and nurse him back to health. She didn't really know how to do that – she had little medical experience, but maybe there was something in the pack she had. She hoped that after all this he didn't die – she hoped that no one she knew would die.

She made her way hurriedly down into her cabin. The boy was still there and looked as though he hadn't moved at all.

Her heart missed a beat seeing this, thinking he may have passed away. She went to him and checked that he was still breathing. He was, and she out breathed a great sigh of relief followed by a little chuckle of gladness.

“Oh good, good, you're not dead,” she breathed. He didn't respond in any way, and just lay there, face down, breathing shallow.

In the dim light, the wound on his back just looked like a dark wet patch, but as she lit the oil lantern the extra light showed it for what it really was.

It looked as if most of the flesh on the left side of his back had been burnt away by the blast. She made a face and felt the urge to vomit, but suppressed it by looking away. Slowly, she turned to look at him again. The poor boy, it must hurt so much. That must be why he's unconscious – so he can't feel it. She better try not to wake him then; better let him sleep for as long as possible and try to tend the wound as best she could.

She was just about to turn away when she noticed marks on the back of his neck. She looked closer and saw that they were letters. Hans had taught her to read some when he could, though he'd never taught her about acronyms, and so when she read the letters V.E.R.I a-X, she put them together and mouthed "Veriax".

Before continuing further, she lay a large piece of chipboard over the doorway. Now, looking from the outside, barely any of the light from the lantern could be seen. She had to do that for safety - lights were bad out here in the dark.

She then dug into the pack. seeing what she could find. She pulled out a tent, a small sharp knife, packets of food, other boxes and tubes (she wasn't sure what these were). One of them had a flame on it, so she supposed it was for starting fires. There was also a green pouch with a green cross on it. She opened it, and knew at once that it was for healing. There were burn treatment dressings, bandages, cream, scissors and tweezers, adhesive tape, a pair of latex gloves, eyewash, alcohol wipes and a sheet of thin, silvery material – a blanket?

She rummaged through it all. It was just what she needed, yet she hadn't the skill to use it. If only Joner was there!

She was getting tired now, her adrenaline had run down and she was feeling the effects of a late and very active and stressful night.

She pulled on the gloves and used the pads on his wound (they even had little picture instructions, which she was glad of). She dabbed around his smaller wounds, a graze on his head, a cut on his arm, with cream and bandaged them. The whole process of caring for him took over an hour to complete, and when she was done her eyes were stinging with tiredness. She didn't even know if she'd done a good job. Her joints ached and her hands shook. She still had the presence of mind to cover him with the silver blanket, before clambering onto her own bedroll. The oil lamp was dimming as it ate the last of its fuel.

*Goodnight Veriax.* She thought

And then she was asleep.

41

The drugs were wearing off; enabling free thought. It let him dream that night, for the very first time. He dreamed a colourful, vivid dream that seemed to make up for all of those nights he's slept and only been witness to fleeting blackness before the mornings rallying call and that days set of training commenced.

Yet his dream was not a nice one. He knew nothing of niceness, for he had never been shown kindness. Had he failed in a task there were no kind words of encouragement for him, no assistance or aid. Nay, there was just the beating from the sticks of his superiors; the sticks that whipped the back, that hurt but never broke the skin, never harmed him, so he could always get back up afterwards and try again.

He dreamt of the sticks, and he dreamt of the tazer that would bring him down with its electric shock, shutting down his muscle control.

He heard the voice in his head, the voice of his commander. The words were lost to him, and only the tone remained, harsh and angry, berating him for what he had done, the kills he had made, the escape he had committed. All around him was concrete, and metal, all of it grey and hard, harsh and unforgiving. There was no comfort; just the beatings, the shouting, the feeling that he was so alone and no one cared, and it didn't matter because he did not matter. He was just a tool, a soldier. How dare he do what he had done? How dare he have left them, his family; the only thing he knew. He was sorry, he was so, so sorry. He screamed to them,



and he had never screamed before in his life. He told them how sorry he was, how he wanted to go back to them. They would not have him. He reached for them (even though, in his dream, he had no idea who ‘they’ were), and they were out of reach. He was alone, unloved, unwanted.

And he awoke with tears in his eyes.

42

Valina saw him awaken. Dawn had come hours earlier, and the morning was fresh and cold after the brief storm the night before. She had let him sleep while she had been huddled up with a comic and eaten a few bars of stale chocolate. Always she watched the boy, waiting for him to wake up – hoping that he would wake up. She didn’t want to stay here too long, she had to get back to The Pack, lest Hans begin to really worry about her. Joner would have returned by now and made an excuse for her, though.

The boy’s sleep had begun to get fitful as the morning dragged on; she’d watched as he had shuddered, and whimpered as he dreamed of something distressing. Then, when his pale blue eyes flickered open they were full of tears. He blinked three times and looked at her sharply, instantly awake, instantly alert.

He reminded her of an animal as he woke, looking alone and confused. She felt a shudder creep up her spine; animals could be dangerous and had a tendency of lashing out when they were afraid even if those around them meant no harm.

“It’s okay,” she said softly, “hi.”

He didn’t reply but instead tried to look around, raising himself up, and then gasping out in pain as he aggravated the wound on his back, falling back down on his front.

She threw her comic to one side and scrambled to him a ways, but stopped before she got too close. She was wary of him, wary like she would be if she’d been charged with caring for a fully grown and hungry lion (she’d never even seen a lion except in pictures, but expected that they’d be pretty damn dangerous).

“Don’t move too much! You’ve been hurt. Do you remember? You’ve been fighting.”

He breathed hard a while, and nodded, and she noticed that his lips were dry and cracked.

“Are you thirsty?” she asked him, reaching for the flask. Tentatively she offered it to him, holding the flask by her fingertips, but her hand did not shake when he took it from her and poured it over his mouth, spilling most of it, but lapping at it enough to sate his thirst enough to be able to speak.

“Why did you help me?” he croaked, in a voice far different from how he had spoken to her with when she had freed him and told her to run. It shook slightly, and it was quiet. Her fear of him eased up – at least he remembered her and knew that she’d helped him.

Still, she had little in the way of an answer for him. “Because... because it looked like you needed it.”

“Where I am?” came the next question – no thanks, not even a smile.

“My Place,” she answered, and then shook her head angrily at herself. “On an island – Ergeon. Do you remember?”

“Where are the soldiers I was fighting?”

“They’re gone.”

He winced, trying to move. He tried again, but still couldn’t, but still he seemed determined to raise from his prone position despite the pain it was causing him. Sweat broke out over his forehead.

“Hey, what are you doing? Lie down, don’t move, you’ll hurt yourself!” she lay a hand on his shoulder.

As soon as she made contact he stopped moving, looking back over his shoulder at her, at her hand, and felt him shudder under her touch. His reaction disturbed her somewhat and she withdrew, but he did remain still afterwards.

“Who are you?” she asked, “Where do you come from?”

“a-Ten,” he told her, and then asked: “Am I a prisoner?”

*Well, if you count getting stuck on this island in the first place with no chance of escape, then you sure are,* she thought, but as she didn’t think that was what he meant she replied with:

“No, I’m your friend.”

“Friend?” he asked, speaking the word as though it was part of some foreign language, and paused, thinking. “What Company are you with?”

Valina blinked. “Uh... The Pack?”

“The Pack?”

“Yeah...” she laughed a little, nervous. “Kind of a stupid name I guess – we should change it.”

He didn’t laugh, he didn’t even react.

“Are you hungry?” she asked, and he nodded.

She hurried to the back of the cave – to her ‘stash of treasure’ – and brought out a can of beans. She brought it to him. “Dinner’s up,” she said cheerily, as she opened it up with a can opener.

The way things were, people on Ergeon ate much of their food cold like that. They could light fires to warm it of course, and this was indeed preferable, but sometimes it was too wet for fires. Sometimes they just didn't have time. Whatever the reason, eating past use-by date canned food was the staple diet for many of those there when fresher food – fish, gulls, rats – hadn't materialised.

He wouldn't be able to eat it on his own as he let flat on his front, she thought. He made a big enough mess taking a drink of water! She sat cross legged by him and scooped out a spoon full of the beans, offering it to his mouth. He looked up at her somewhat warily, confused, but slowly moved his head forwards and took the food from the spoon with his mouth, and sat like that, spoon feeding the him, until the can was empty.

43

"I have to go, rest here."

"Go? Where?"

"Back to The Pack."

"To report in?"

"Something like that, yes," she smiled, his way of thinking did amuse her.

"What will you say of me?"

Her smile faded. "Nothing."

He watched her intently, noticing everything. "Your leader – Hans? He is hostile to me?"

She shook her head, slightly. "Not really. He fears you. He thinks you will bring harm to us."

"Extermination? No. Those where not my orders."

"Then what were?"

"That's classified."

She made a face. "I'm sure you won't have to worry about that now."

He nodded. "Everything's changed. I am... lost."

"So what were you doing here?" she pressed.

"Standard sweep of the area, secure, assess, report. Thirty minute duration. Treat any and all non friendly entities as hostiles." He rolled it all off like a robot.

"So if you met anyone, you'd have killed them?"

"Affirmative."

She shuddered a little bit. Then he said: "I disobeyed."

"Why, what did you do?"

“Killed friendlies.”

*You killed the two marines that Joner had found before he brought you to us, yes.* “Why did you do that?”

His head twitched a little bit when he thought, recalling the memories, almost looking in pain. It took him a good few moments and then said: “Because I *felt* I had to.”

He put emphasis on the word ‘felt’ like it was the word that encompassed all the reason for doing what he had done within it. Valina did not understand, but did not press it. He wasn’t going anywhere – he was not a threat while he was injured like he was. Regardless of all that she found that her fear of him was waning.

“I’m going to go back to The Pack now. I won’t tell them about you. You stay here; I’ll be back when I can.”

He nodded. Just nodded. No questions, nothing. He just accepted everything.

She brought him a few more cans of various foodstuffs (the last she had in her stash – she’d have to find more). “These should keep you going.” she said. Then she looked at him. “What’s your name anyway? Is it Veriax?”

“A-ten.”

“What?”

“A-ten is my name.”

“That’s a crummy name.” she chided, and laughed. “You have the word Veriax on the back of your head.”

“Versatile Elimination and Reconnaissance Infantry, unit A-ten.” Again, the monotone voice rattled out of his mouth.

Valina frowned. “Veriax is a better name. It’s similar to mine; Valina. They both start with the same letter, at least!”

No reaction, nothing. He wasn’t going to make a very fun friend.

She stood, “Anyway, I’m going now. Nothing else you’ll need?” He looked up at her, arching his neck, shaking his head somewhat dumbly. “Alright, catch you later, Veriax!”

Pain wracked his body. He leaned heavily on the strong shaft of wood he’d found after crawling several hundred meters with the loss of one of his arms and one leg. The wound on his shoulder wasn’t so bad, so long as he didn’t try to move his arm too much, the pain was reduced to a dull aching throb. No, that pain was nothing to the pain which shot through his

left leg with each passing moment. He hobbled slowly, carefully, trying desperately to keep his foot lifted from the ground. Even the slightest knock sent shockwaves of agony through the lower half of his leg which sometimes made him cry out involuntarily at the top of his voice.

Joner had known much pain in his life – he'd been shot two times – but he'd never had to contend with a shattered shin. Blood was constantly seeping from the wound where the bone had ripped a hole in his skin, weakening his strength with each and every step. He'd fashioned a makeshift tourniquet and fastened it to his thigh, but the wound still bled, and every step threatened to make him black out.

*Stay awake! If you sleep, you'll sleep forever.*

He stopped his terrible trek for a moment, leaning on the branch he had found and breathed heavy, panting in pain, sweat running down his forehead, dripping off his nose. He could taste it. His nostrils were filled with the smells of sweat and blood.

The way was longer than he had thought, he realised as he'd watched the sun rise higher above the horizon. He had hoped to have made it back to The Pack by mid-morning, but the motorcycle chase had taken him further afield than he had realised and his pace was horribly slow.

He needed a drink badly, and some pain killers. He needed to get back before the wound became infected, if it had not been already. Walking through fields of people's waste, the flies, the birds, the insects buzzing everywhere now that the day was heating up, none of those things would help his chances.

He gritted his teeth, forcing himself to take another step. And another. And another. Step by step he made his way back to Beckside, thinking he'd be damned if a pair of junkies and a lucky shot would be the way he went out of this life after all the crap he'd been through already.

45

Grabbing, screaming, gibbering; hands everywhere, grabbing, pawing, whooping, screaming and cheering.

Was he dead? Was this what hell was like?

His head was smacked by something hard and he blanked out again.

46

Blake awoke in a cage that was little bigger than he was. He came too slowly. First he was aware of the sounds – the banging and shouting around him. Later came the feeling of his discomfort, bundled up in a ball like he was, in a foetal position. He tried to stretch his cramped legs, but found that they could not, and nor could he extend his arms because the box he found himself within prevented him from doing so.

The wire mesh which it was made of bit into his back. He tried to move, to roll over, but he couldn't do that either. He could smell oil, his own sweat, and smoke.

*This is hell, then. I didn't think it actually existed, despite Marie's convictions, I never believed her. I wish I had, now. I wish... Well, I don't suppose wishing will get me very far in this place.*

“Wake the fuck up!”

He was jabbed hard in the side by something that sent electrical shocks jolting through his body, stunning him as his breathing locked up for the duration, his chest feeling like it was trying to crush its own lungs with the pressure it was putting on them. It only lasted a few seconds, but to Blake it seemed to last much longer than that. When it ceased he coughed up bile into his mouth and tried to spit it out, but it only ran down his chin and neck.

His eyes opened, finally, seeing where he was. His eyes locked straight with the eyes of a tall, skinny, filthy man. His hair was matted with filth and much of his grimy face was covered in a straggly unwashed beard from which protruded a set of yellow, crooked teeth. “Wakey, wakey, sunshine!” he grinned, brandishing the cattle prod at his face. Blake reared away as much as he could. He was locked in a small cage which would have been considered inhumane if it had been used as a chicken coup. Beyond his cage, the man, and the prod, he didn't see a much else.

The man cackled in an ugly laugh which sounded like the spluttering of a dead engine and a dying crow, delighting in the torment of his victim.

“Har har! Yes squirm for me soldier boy! Squirm!”

Blake was increasingly aware that he was not dead and not in hell, though considered if this was actually worse.

“Flix! Flix, get the hell away from him with that thing!”

“Sorry Madd Dogg,” he said, “Our little friend is awake!”

“Yes I can see that!” Madd Dogg grunted. He was a heavily muscled, bald headed man.

Madd Dogg leant over Blake in his cage; grinning down at him (his teeth weren't any better than the giant Flix's). "Well well, haven't you woken up on the wrong side of the bed this morning eh?"

Blake didn't answer him.

*Give them nothing but your name and number. Co-operate with what they want, remain unhurt, gather information about them.*

He remembered what he had to do if captured. He'd been trained for this kind of thing.

"Not the talkative kind are you? I didn't think you would be. It doesn't matter – you're not been kept for your conversationalist skills. Hoist him up!"

There was suddenly a whirr of old rusty machinery, chains clanking, and Blake's small cage was suddenly hoisted upwards off the ground. It tipped up on end as it was yanked from the other end. Blake yelled out as it was roughly tipped upside down, his bodyweight forcing his face against the wire mesh and twisting his back and arms uncomfortably. One of his arms was stuck behind his back and he couldn't move it for all his trying in the confines of the cage.

He grunted out in pain, breathing through clenched teeth.

*Give them nothing but your name and number!*

As he swung upside down in the small prison he got a better luck at where he was. Outside still; it was light now and the cold bite of the dawn air bit at his skin through his shirt. He was suspended via one of those automobile recovery trucks – the winch used to pull cars onto the ramp had been attached to his cage. Around him, several other vehicles were parked. He saw a very large semi truck with the letters "FUK U!" painted over it, and a wrecked trailer, and some other cars and bikes, all filthy and looking as if they were falling apart.

Around them the mountains of trash were piled and strewn around, though these weren't the same as the others which they had fought VERI a-X in earlier. Not the same kind that had come crashing down on him and knocked him out. This seemed more domestic waste – tightly packed pounds of landfill made up of old food packaging and household waste. The place fucking *stank!*

There were fires dotted around the clearing which had been made within the mounds, and people huddled by them. They were all filthy, sorrowful looking souls, crowding around for warmth. He saw them snorting up lines and smoking what he could smell was most likely fizz. There were spits stretched across the fires and lengths of meat, pork probably, were skewered over them, crackling in the heat that came off them. That was the only thing that smelt good here.

He couldn't see much else – his head was spinning, and throbbing from a very bad headache. If he could have felt his forehead he would have felt a lump from where he'd been struck when the pile of scrap metal collapsed upon him.

He was suspended some seven or eight feet from the ground. Madd Dogg stood below him now, looking up at him and grinning in little more than a sneer. A knife suddenly appeared in his hand. A sharp, long, gleaming hunting knife. Madd Dogg twirled it around his fingers with a careless, menacing ease as he addressed his captive: "Do you want to tell me why you came to this island then soldier boy?"

Blake remained silent.

"No? Tell me, make it easy on yourself!" Tucking the knife away, he picked up a metal bar and smacked the side of the cage with it, making it swing wildly. Though most of the impact was absorbed by the frame a portion of the blow did smack Blake in the thigh, hurting him.

Madd Dogg grabbed the cage and stopped it from spinning, his eyes staring up into Blake's. "I know they train you to play dumb. I know they tell you not to talk, but trust me, you'll talk, or you'll end up like your friends!"

He angled the cage around then, to show him the fires more carefully. He looked, and he saw that the carcasses on the spits over them were not pigs like he assumed they were, but people. Something shone in his eyes as he looked, horrified – dog tags!

"Urgh fuck..." he gasped out, disgusted, horrified...

Madd Dogg grinned, "Like that huh? They're mighty tasty! We've not had a feast like that for fucking years have we boys? Haha!"

They cheered from around their fires, waving clubs and guns.

*Savages!*

"You'll be next you little shit! Now tell me what you we doing here? Are there more of you coming?"

"Damn right there are," Blake croaked summoning his courage.

When he'd seen the pile of scrap metal slide toward him, cover him, he figured he died. It turned out now that he hadn't, but was as good as. Now he was stuck upside down in a cage in the clutches of a bunch of cannibalistic animals. If that didn't mean he was fucked then he didn't know what did. And he was pissed. He was so pissed at being sent on this mission to find that little freak that had killed off his squad and his friends. It looked like he was the only one left now, and look where it had got them. He'd just been a pawn, and had been one all his life. Well screw it, if now was his time he wouldn't go down whimpering and begging.



“They’ll come looking for me and the rest of us. When they find out what you’ve done you’ll be in more shit than you ever knew. And considering you live here, that’s a hell of a lot!”

Madd Dogg reached up and gripped the mesh, teeth bared at Blake.

"No, they're not," he sneered, his voice lowered for his ears only. "They didn't come back for men – I know that well enough – and they won't come back for you. I'm going to find why you're here, one way or the other."

He let the mesh go, sending him spinning in his cage.

Blake grimaced, both through the spinning, and the searing truth in Madd Dogg’s words.

“For now we’ll keep you hanging around in case we feel like some desert!” he laughed coarsely, a few of the others joined in, their laughter ringing in his ears.

47

“Where have you been, child?” Hans asked. His words may have been kind, but his tone had a nasty edge. “There was trouble last night. It was a bad time to go wandering off alone at night, you know.”

Valina dipped her head to avoid his gaze. It looked like shame, but in reality she had looked down so he did not spot the gleam in her eye. The mischievous gleam which read: *Yes, I know, I was there and I saw it all. I watched, hidden, as he killed them. Joner and I found that strange boy, and now I’m nursing him back to health in my secret place. He’s going to help us, father. He’s going to be my friend and be one of us!*

“I’m sorry father,” was all she said. *Why did Joner not make an excuse for me?* She felt something clutch at her stomach, as such things do when you have a feeling that something is wrong, or you’ve at least convinced yourself that something is.

Hans shook his head, and licked his lips almost nervously. “I have so much on my plate without having to worry about you, Val. Did you see Joner when you were gone?”

Now she sharply looked up. “Joner? Um... no. Is he not here?”

Hans shook his head, watching her. “No, he is not. He disappeared last night after you did, and he has not returned.”

Her heart sank down into the pit of her stomach. *What had happened?! Where is he? Oh, don’t let him be dead, don’t let him! If he was dead then it would be all her fault! She only wanted to save the boy! If they hadn’t, then they could have taken the weapons and left long before the Crazies got there...*

She could feel the blood draining from her head. She felt so faint all of a sudden.

“Val, is there anything you can tell me?”

She broke then, collapsing to the floor. Tears were welling in her eyes before she was even on her knees, and she sobbed with her face in her hands.

Hans didn't move, he didn't offer her any comfort. It was not for the lack of wanting to, on his part, but he resisted. He was afraid it would make her soft, and depend on him too much. On this island, you never knew which day would be your last, and if he suddenly were no longer around he didn't want her becoming a blubbering mess who was completely helpless because she's been totally dependant on him. Her disappearances showed him that he'd been successful in this. She could probably survive better on her own than most of them because, after all, she had grown up here and was used to it. She knew no different and had adapted more readily and easily to their surroundings. Still, it did not make him wish she would stop doing it.

“Oh... I'm so sorry!” she sobbed.

“Speak, child, and be swift.”

The truth bubbled forth then, spilling from her mouth between sobs and tears as she recollected her curiosity of the boy, of how Joner came for her, of their flight from the Crazies. Her words came forth so quickly and hastily that she almost told the whole of it - the boy and her hiding place and all - but thankfully she had the presence of mind to leave those details out.

Once she was done Hans was on his feet instantly. “Do you remember where this happened? Can you take us there again?”

She nodded, looking up and wiping her eyes. “Yes, I can.”

“Then we will leave at once, and take the buggy.” He was gathering things from the walls of the hut they were in – his rifle, a long coat – as he spoke. “Take us to where you last saw him, and the direction they were going in.”

“Yes, yes I will,” she said firmly, gathering herself. Her tears were gone now, as swiftly as they had come. The time for crying was done, and she was glad to be able to do something about what had happened. She stood, shaking a little, eager as anything to be off and find Joner. Hopefully he'll be alright; somehow, maybe, he'd still be alive!

Five miles later he collapsed, crying out in pain and shuddering as he fell to the ground exhausted. Well, that was that, he was dead and buried now. There wasn't anything much

else he could do about it – he'd pushed his body to breaking point and beyond, but it was just too far to travel; too far to get help. He felt spent and worn out. He'd been through a lot, had Joner, wars, missions, battles. He'd been shot three times, and broken bones, punctured a lung. He'd always been fixed up, though, but that had been because there'd been someone to fix him up. His thoughts became bleaker as he accepted his fate.

Even if he had got back to Beckside, there'd be no one to heal him up right. His shoulder may have healed itself, but not his leg. The bone had cracked and splintered through the skin, causing agonising pain and, worse still, opening it up to infection. Dragging it through the filth that the island was littered with wouldn't have helped, and once that happened he'd have to lose it. He shuddered inwardly. Even looking beyond the trauma that would cause – with the only sedative being home brewed vodka – he didn't like the cripple that he saw.

In his health he saw himself as a great asset to The Pack. Since he was the most experienced soldier he could not only fight but brought many other skills with him as well – medicine, navigation, discipline. Without a leg he would lose many of those, and would only be able to practice a handful of them while crippled. He would have to be looked after and cared for, wheeled around, his food and drink brought to him. He thought of the admiring gazes he received from certain people within The Pack who recognised the work he did, and how they would dwindle when his usefulness was reduced.

No, he would not have that. Why was he trying so hard to stay alive for anyway? It was his natural survival instinct that said he must keep going, must get help, must stay *alive*. But why? So he could continue this awful existence on this rock because he couldn't go back to the real world? He really didn't feel it was worth all the effort he was putting out.

“Ah fuck it,” he groaned, and let everything fade to black.

49

They rode southwards from Beckside on the buggy. Foxx had repaired it by scavenging parts from other wrecks dotted over the island. Hans was hugely grateful for Foxx's knowledge of engineering – without it they'd have no vehicles at all.

The buggy was well suited to the terrain of Ergeon; its soft suspension and four wheel drive propelling it over the rough, uneven ground which was packed with debris and trash. Three of them went to the cliffs, Hans and Valina, along with a man called Kyle Shaw, who was a capable driver. Kyle had been with them almost half a year. He'd proved an adept hunter of birds and rats, and had a sharp eye for valuable nick-knacks that he liked to collect. His

collection was no good to him, here, with all his fancy gadgets and technological wonders (ninety five percent of which did not work), but everyone there had their vices. It didn't take much initiative to work out that Kyle had been a thief and had run into trouble he felt the urgent need to get away from. Hans hadn't questioned about it, though, because to do so was not his place. He certainly would not appreciate someone prying into his past and asking the questions of why he personally had ended up on Shitpile, so he didn't inflict the questions on others either.

The truth is, they'd all done something to be ashamed of – something so bad that made them run away from everything they knew and loved in order to not face the consequences for whatever they had done, and none of them could, or would, claim to be innocent. What mattered now was what someone decided to do once they got there. No one from the outside world knows anything about Ergeon, and no one really wants to know, so when you get there you really don't know what to expect, and those that decided to join The Pack and try to make the best of things, rather than join The Crazies or wander and make their own way (like many did) proved to Hans that they had enough about them for him not to give them the tenth degree about who they were and why they were here.

Kyle drove the buggy (nicknamed Betsy by it's fixer, Foxx (Foxx the Fixer was a good and suitable name for him) as swiftly as he could along the rough terrain. There was a spare seat, and hopefully when they returned back it would be occupied by Joner.

Valina hoped that it would be so! She could not think of living with herself if something had happened, if he was dead. She rode in the back, holding onto the seat in front as the buggy bounced and threw itself around. It suddenly lurched upwards as Kyle hit a barrel, coming down again with a bump that shuddered the chassis.

“Sorry!” Kyle shouted, glancing back at her and flashing a smile at her. Kyle always seemed to be happy, or at least always tried to put a brave face on things.

She smiled back, but it was forced. She didn't feel much like smiling – she could barely even breath. She felt her heart pounding and her palms becoming slick on the seat as she perspired, and while she would have enjoyed the ride out on any other day, and gleefully taken in all the sights and sensations that an excited child could, but on this day her thoughts were only on Joner,. Even Veriax was at that moment all but forgotten to her.

They reached the cliffs, with the piles of scrapped cars and other vehicles towering over them like sleeping sentinels. The day was still chilly and overcast with a strong wind whipping up over the sea, making the air feel cool and damp with the sea spray churned up from below. Overhead gulls and other birds circled, looking for food. Kyle stopped the buggy, the engine

rumbling happily to itself and drowning out the calls of the birds above. "Where to?" he asked.

She stood in the back, looking around. There was no smoke now; the fires had burnt themselves out, but she got her bearings well enough and pointed towards the site of the battle the night before.

"There's been a battle here," Hans said in surprise "Val, do you know of this?"

Her mouth worked for a moment. The battle had been caused when she'd freed the boy, and he'd fought the marines. But she couldn't say that. "It was the Crazy's, dad. They'd just throw bombs, make explosions, just for fun."

It wasn't an unreasonable explanation. Hans seemed to accept it. "Which way?" he asked.

"Over there," she said, pointing. Now that they knew where to look, they could see the tracks of the bikes winding westward.

"There should be a body somewhere here – Joner killed one of them. That's why they came after us. We were seen."

Hans believed her, but did not tell her why the body wouldn't still be here. He didn't want her to know that they ate their dead. Not yet.

Kyle shoved Betsy into gear and set off in pursuit, following the tracks in the mud. It was not long before the ground dried up, becoming less muddy and firmer, grassier, with the tracks harder to see, and the open terrain giving way to a wood of sparse trees. Sparse enough to let Betsy through between them, at least.

"It looks so different in the daylight," Valina said to them. "Somewhere around here he told me to get off the bike, and I did. Then he changed direction and he led them away from me. That was the last I saw of him."

"Then we will have to track them," Hans said. "But there were three of them, and not long ago. It should not be difficult. Here, Val, ride up front with Kyle."

He jumped off Betsy as she was still slowly moving, and ran ahead as Valina clambered into the front seat.

She watched him as he ran on ahead, looking at the ground, following the tread of the bikes. Kyle followed, the engine ticking over, Betsy's tires rolling over roots and snapping twigs as she went.

"Hey, Val..." Kyle whispered, "do you want a sweet?" He opened his jacket pocket, within which were stuffed a stash of coloured, sweet tasting chewy balls. Val didn't know what they were called, but seeing them lit her features and lightened her spirits a little bit.

She took one, and only one. "Thank you," she told him, popping it into her mouth.

It tasted good – she often wondered why people threw so much away that was still good and could be put to use. She'd obviously never been to the rest of the world – the “real world” as Hans called it – but she had seen it in pictures and in photographs. Still it filled her with a sense of wonder. How wonderful it must be there if they discarded so many things, that they could afford to waste so much that they could still put to use. It baffled her in many ways, and though she had asked people about it she still could not comprehend what it must be like living in a place where things like shelter, heat, water and food were basic possessions. Here, you had to work for them, but the world where everyone came from... well, she questioned why any of them would rather come here than stay, and why they would do something to jeopardise having all that.

They were out of the trees now, and the ground undulated steadily. Betsy navigated the humps easily enough. Hans still jogged ahead of them, and progress was slow. Too slow, really, but Valina said nothing. What could she say? There was no way they could hurry.

It had been two, maybe three miles now. How far had they ridden? How far was left to go until they found Joner?

She thought her question had been answered when they crested a hill and came upon what was left of the three bikes. Wreckage was strewn over the area. There had been a fire; the ground had been scorched in places, and parts of the bikes still smouldered.

“Joner!” Valina yelled, leaping off Betsy and landing on her feet with guile and agility.

“Stop!” shouted Kyle, but she heard nothing. She'd seen a body. *It can't be him! It can't!*

It wasn't.

Hans had beaten her there and had already taken stock of the situation. There was not one body, but two. The one which Valina had seen had been in an explosion, and his remains were charred and blackened, and blown in two (she could not see where his lower half was, nor did she want to). Disgusted by the sight and the smell of it she turned to see the other body, lying crumpled under his bike, but it was clear by his clothing that his wasn't Joner either.

She looked around, tearfully. She saw the bike they'd taken together several feet away, with its back end largely missing, but there was no sign of Joner anywhere. “Where is he?”

“Not round here, that's obvious,” Hans said, examining the ground and the battle site. “It looks like his bike got shot and he had to take the fight back to these assholes.”

“So he won. That means he's alright.”

“It means he survived the fight only, but yes, he won. Hm, What's this?” he mumbled to himself, bending to the ground, examining.

“What...?” Valina asked, coming over slowly.

Kyle sat back in Betsy, watching them both with his hands draped over the steering wheel. He popped another sweet into his mouth and bit down on it, wincing. His teeth felt just about ready to fall out of his blasted mouth.

Hans draped his hand over a dark patch in the grass which was glistening and still wet. He brought it to his nose, smelling whatever it was on his fingers. “Blood,” he said, and gestured to his left. “And more of it there.”

He stood, looking at the ground, his eyes searching like a hawk for prey, scanning the ground, every inch of it. “More here, too. I think it’s Joner – it has to be. He’s been wounded.”

“Then we must find him!”

Hans nodded grimly. “Yes, pet, but it will be slow going I’m afraid. I must be sure not to lose his trail. He’ll likely be heading straight back to Beckside, but if he’s hold up along the way and miss him in our haste, then we may never find him.

She nodded, understanding. Despite everything, he suddenly felt very proud of her. “Go, then get back in Betsy and follow me.”

That’s how they proceeded, slowly, agonisingly slowly. Hans painstakingly looked for the next clue, a footprint here, a smear of blood there. Two things became quickly apparent to Hans as they tracked Joner. The first of which was that Joner was making his way back home, to Beckside, and secondly that he was walking with a crutch of some kind, so his going would be slow. It was a long way back to Beckside from where they were, Hans estimated something in the region of ten to fifteen miles, over unforgiving harsh terrain such as this. Joner better not be hurt too bad, or he’ll never make it.

Because they knew where Joner was going, Hans was better able to track him and predict where he might’ve gone. The land was naturally flat here in the hinterlands, but was made hazardous with a recent drop ship cargo which had been strewn everywhere, and some areas were worse than others with the trash. Joner would pick the easiest route to get to their destination, and so Hans chose those also.

They were gaining, he was sure. The blood patches were becoming redder, having had less time to congeal in the air. They were also more frequent which told him that Joner was slowing down and getting weaker, though he mentioned none of this bad news to the others, and he hoped that, at least for Valina’s sake, that they would find Joner well enough to get him back and nurse him back to health.

“There he is!”

Kyle skidded Betsy to a halt as Valina yelled out, and she was leaping from the vehicle before it had come to a complete stop. She had seen him lying prone before either Hans or Kyle had, and rushed passed her father to reach him as soon as she could.

Hans' cries were lost to her as she bolted passed him, and she was oblivious of him stumbling to the ground as he tried to grab her.

She reached Joner, his body lying face down in the earth. She heaved him onto his back, and then gasped in horror.

His skin was deathly pale and cold, his eyes closed, his body unmoving. She gazed upon him and her young brain came to a terrible conclusion. He was dead.

“Val!” Hans shouted. His stumble earlier had delayed him in getting to her, and he had not recovered himself swiftly enough to prevent her from reaching Joner first.

He saw the awful look on her face, the colour drain from her cheeks. She turned to look at him, and for an instant he didn't recognise the child that stared into his eyes.

“No... no...!” she murmured. She rose to her feet, away from the body. "no... no.."

“Val, I'm sorry. It wasn't your fault.” He sank to his knees at Joner's feet.

“YES IT WAS!” she screamed in a piercing, shrill voice which was so frightening coming from her small throat that it made him wince. “IT'S ALL MY FAULT!”

Then she bolted, not for Betsy, but away from them both and into a cluster of bulky refrigeration units which had been dumped decades ago.

“Kyle, stop her!”

Kyle revved Betsy and tried to cut Val off, but this only succeeded in making the distraught child to run faster toward the wall of wreckage she was heading for. Hans was on his feet almost instantly trying to catch her. “Val! Stop!” he cried. She did not listen. Kyle was manoeuvring Betsy around – he wouldn't be able to catch her on it for all the large debris scattered where she was heading. He jumped off it to pursue her on foot but landed awkward, yelping as he sprained his ankle.

Hans ran after her but she weaved within and over the old metal husks where he was forced to go around, and he lost ground on the nimble girl. She headed for a heap of trash looming above, comprised of rotting wood and household garbage.

“Val! No!” he yelled after her, almost catching her once, just his fingertips glancing her clothes before she disappeared into the mound of rubbish. He tried to follow, squeezing in after her. She'd entered via a gap held open by nothing but curtain rails and bits of plywood. As he tried to force his way in after her, with the gloomy, dark darkness stretching out before



him like the under canopy of some dense rainforest, he began to disturb the fragile integrity of the structure of the mound.

“Look out!”

Kyle had staggered after them, and it was just as well he did. Had he not been there to grab Hans by his coat and wrench him out of the pile he would have been crushed and buried by the piles of rotting timbers and debris that came sliding down from above.

It brought up with it a cloud of dust so thick that it completely enveloped them for a good few moments, hindering their breathing and forcing them to press their eyes shut.

The dust settled, and they took haggard, wavering breaths.

“Val! Valina!” Hans shouted at the trash pile, but it remained resolutely silent, and only the sound of his slight echo came mockingly back at him.

50

She wormed her way through the underbelly of the mound, her supple frame gliding past the timbers there. The place smelt of rotten wood and the air tasted of mould. Rats scuttled out of her way as she moved, and she barely noticed them. Cracked and broken pallets, wardrobes, planks, bed frames, tables and other furniture were crammed around her, but she slipped and slid her way through them in the near blackness with only the squeaking of the frightened rats and her own sobs breaking the silence.

Once she was deep, deep within the mound, she stopped, lying on her front, panting hard with tears dripping from her cheeks.

*Stupid stupid stupid! Stupid girl. He's dead, Joner is dead and gone, and it's all your fault.*

The structure creaked above her, low and threatening, ready to shift and collapse upon her, crushing her under tonnes and tonnes of wood. She didn't care; she still lay there, in the mould and damp, with the rats. She felt one crawl over the back of her legs, and still she didn't move. She didn't care about any of it.

There wasn't much air down here; her breaths came hard and heavy.

Let her die there then, like Joner. She'd had a miserable life, and she had nothing to look forwards to, only the constant struggle, the constant hunger, the constant wet and cold. She was sick of it, even though she had never known any other, she was sick to death of her life, of this place, and she thrice cursed whichever bitch had dumped her in the garbage so she ended up here. She damned Hans for finding her, for raising her here, for letting her grow up on this... this... *Shitpile!*

It had all been her fault, and now there was nothing. All because of that stupid... boy.

The boy, it had all been because of him. It had all been for him. And where was he now? Lying wounded in her cabin, barely to move. He was there because of her, too. If she hadn't had freed him the soldiers would just have taken him away. She didn't know what she'd do with him, but it couldn't be worse than lying there with a hole in his back.

Yet there was something she could do right, she could help him and heal him, so he wouldn't die. She'd die if she lay there any longer, suffocating slowly. That would be two deaths that would have been her doing. Three if she counted her own (which she would not have done). She should move. Yes, she should, and yet she did not, she just lay there, lethargic, her eyes closing slowly, her breathing slowing.

**PAIN!**

She yelled out as she felt the teeth bite into her ankle, sharp and deep, cutting through her skin easily. She shook her leg violently and there was a protesting squeak as she battered the rat away. Yet there were more of them shuffling all around her, in the darkness, she heard them, saw them, smelt them. She suddenly decided that lying there was not a good idea *at all*, and started to move again hurriedly, shuffling through the wooden beams. Still the rats scuttled and squeaked around her, behind, in front, each side, and above her; their scurrying panicking her, making her knock beams in her haste.

She felt them all around her, a swarm, the painful throb in her ankle wet with blood and attracting them. They were *hungry*. She felt a tug on her boots as one of them gripped them in it's teeth. She yelled, shaking it off. As she did she half turned, her elbow knocking whatever was above her and breaking it. It cracked open and from it gushed out a horrid mass of squeaking filthy fur and tails and teeth, pouring onto her back.

She cried out, feeling them scuttling on her back, their little claws digging through her clothing, sinking into her flesh. She struggled, thrusting herself away, further out of (or into?) the mass of rotting wood.

They were crawling all over her back now, getting into her hair, always scratching, nipping, biting. She was crying, she couldn't see; tears and dust in her eyes. The fact that she could be crushed under a thousand tonnes of timber was lost to her as she thrashed frantically about, crushing a rat under her elbow and feeling its bones sickeningly crack under her weight as she moved over it.

Panting and crying, her breaths ragged, her heart pounding, arms and hands searching forwards, pulling herself through, always going forwards, always looking for an exit. She had to get out – must get out, or she'd die, and suddenly the thought of death was terrible for her.

*Not like this, not eaten alive like this. No one will find me. No one will ever find out what happened to me!*

Her arms, legs and back were covered in little nicks and cuts.

“No, no, no more! Leave me alone!” she screamed, her squeal filling the small chamber she was in, joining the rats squeals. She thrashed wildly, panting, her feet battering backwards, and then to her side where they were trying to force their way around. Her foot impacted with a sheet of plywood, cracking it. She thought that would bring the entire thing down on top of her, crushing her along with her tormenters, but it did not. She saw a shaft of bright light shine from beyond, and she went for it, kicking it again and again, the wood splintering and breaking more and more with each stroke of her boot. There was light beyond, pouring into the dark tunnel she’d gotten herself in. It blinded the black rodents, so used to their dark surroundings, frightening them. She heard their wild, protesting chattering as their lair was invaded by the brightness.

A cold wetness was soaking through her clothes, though she barely registered the water until her arm slipped from under her and her head fell momentarily into it. The icy water jarred her senses, making her realise that it was slowly pulling her away with it. She gasped out, her wet fingers trying to purchase some grip on something, only to slide over slippery rotten wood. Her feet could find no grip on the slimy ground as the water bore her out of the rubbish mound.

The river enveloped her just as completely as the pile of scrap she had just escaped, dragging her down with it at speed. She struggled against the currents that edged her away from the bank, her arms and legs kicking as she managed to keep herself afloat. Between the froth and the splashes in her face, she saw dead trees and scrap heaps go by, as the river took her further and further downstream.

It had only been moments, but already the cold was sapping her strength; her limbs leaden and increasingly unresponsive. It wouldn’t be long before she could fight no more, the river would take her, and wash her body out to sea.

And then there it was, a tree hanging dead in the water, clutching to the bank as if it too feared being swept away. She made for it, her stubborn limbs fighting against her as she willed them into action, forcing her way toward it. She reached, her fingers clutching at bark, at branches, and managed to hold on.

The water seemed to come at her even harder then, buffeting her, determined to push her from the tree and welcome her into its icy depths. She panted for breath, sucking in air as she

found a better hold on the tree, eventually heaving herself over its trunk, and climbing up to the bank beyond.

51

She lay there face down, shaking and sobbing, sucking in great breaths of air and clutching at the ground. She coughed, hard, gagging, her body shuddering from the cold. She looked up, blinking.

There was no sound save for the wind in the trees and the sound of the birds overhead – always the birds overhead. Dead leaves blew past her as she struggled to her feet.

She recognised the river. She'd been here before, on one of her excursions from her den. Downstream was where she had to head now. Her den wasn't far away. There was food there, and medicine, and she could make a fire and dry her clothes. She could go back, and try and find Hans, but she didn't know how far she'd come downstream, or even if he'd be there when she got where she'd so foolishly run away from them. No, she would have to go to her den.

She forced her legs to move, one step at a time, following the river that had almost just claimed her life, but now led the way to her salvation.

52

She was practically crawling when she saw the cabin, gasping, her hands trembling uncontrollably and her knees feeling as if they would give way at any second.

Something was wrong with her, badly wrong. She breathed heavy, slumped to her knees, dimly looking up. The cabin was just yards away, but it felt like miles. She tried to crawl, but as soon as she lifted a hand up she fell forwards onto the ground and lay still.

53

The journey back was the hardest one that Hans had ever had to make. Kyle sat beside him, unable to drive now because of his ankle, and Joner's body was laid over the back seats.

He had waited for Val to come out of the pile of wood, called for her, and tried circling around after hour or more. He'd looked, frantically; his hands bared the cuts and splinters he'd given himself clawing at that terrible pile of rotten timber that had eaten her alive.

They had waited as long as they dared, but they had to get Joner back to Beckside. The terrible irony of it all was that Joner wasn't dead.

He had looked dead, that's for sure, but there was life in him. He'd lost a lot of blood, but his heart was still beating in his chest. He cursed himself for letting Val get away like that.

The poor child. His poor child.

He was consumed with self pity and doubt – emotions he had not felt for a very long time, because they had no place here. Now they welled up inside him, consumed him, as if paying him back for all those years he had suppressed them.

Valina was not dead; she had to be alive. She was stronger than he gave her credit for, after all.

Kyle at least had the sense to stay silent. He would share his grief, no, his *worry*, – they all would – but none so keenly as Hans did. He had the overwhelming urge to turn the buggy around and head back again, to call her name until his throat was hoarse and not return until he found her.

But he couldn't, because he had others to think of – Joner needed his help now. That, and they were almost out of gas.

With a grim face he drove the buggy back into Beckside.

54

When she woke up again she was inside the cabin. Her head hurt and her ears rang. She winced and grunted as she tried to sit up, but as soon as she moved her head the world span madly and she had to cease her movements.

“Lie still, rest,” a voice said, sounding like it was underwater. She passed out.

55

The next time she awoke things were stiller and clearer. She was at once aware that she was lying down and wrapped up beneath the silver sheet with her head resting on something soft. As she opened her eyes she could see the patterns of light on the roof above her as it shone through the waterfall. The sound of it was reassuring – it felt like she belonged here. She turned her head and this time there was no dizziness. The boy was there, watching her. He was sat upright and he certainly looked a lot better than when she last saw him.

Was that even possible? His wounds had been so great. How long ago was that? Time had passed, but how much? She tried to speak but her throat was as dry as a desert (or at least how dry she imagined a desert would be). He moved to her, offering her water from a flask. She drank it greedily, slurping the water up, spilling some across her mouth. She felt like she had never been so thirsty in her life.

“Thanks,” she said licking her dry lips, moistening them.

He said nothing, sitting back, watching her. She looked up at him, seeing he was wearing a grubby looking red t shirt that was far too big for him and a coat – her coat.

“How long...?” she asked, her throat so hoarse that she didn’t manage to finish the question.

“Three days,” he told her. “You had blood poisoning.”

“The rats...” she shuddered inwardly, remembering.

“You almost died.”

He’d saved her – their positions now were completely reversed. She was tired, so, so tired. Three days? Memories came flooding back into her mind about what had happened. Hans must be so worried about her. Oh and Joner, poor Joner. How had things turned out like this?

“You need to eat.” He told her.

“I’m so tired. Lemme sleep.”

“No, eat. Sit up.”

She did so, with a struggle. Her arms were covered in small bandages and there was one on the back of her neck. She reached around, running her fingers over it.

“Don’t touch it,” she was told, “it needs to heal.”

“And what about you? Don’t you need to heal?”

He looked up at her. “I’ll be fine.”

He’d been hunting, she saw. He’d caught two large gulls and they were before him now, already plucked and cooked. He ripped off one of their legs and offered it to her, and she took it eagerly, sinking her teeth into the bird meat.

He ate also. The meat was well cooked – he knew what he was doing.

“Thanks, Veriax,” she smiled with her mouth still full.

“That’s not my name.”

“Do you have another name?” she asked, “I mean, one that isn’t a number or something?”

He shook his head. “a-Ten.”

She scowled. “That’s not a name, it’s a number.”

“VERI a-Ten,” he told her simply.

“What about before then? Wasn’t there a time before you were a... a... VERI? Didn’t you have a name before then?”

“No, there was no before.”

She shrugged, and looked at him sadly, finishing the gull leg. VERI a-X handed her another and she took it willingly, sinking her teeth into it – she was ravenous!

“If there’s no before, then there’ll have to be an after. It’s behind you now.”

“No,” he said, sharply, afraid almost. “No, they will come back. The Agency will come to retrieve me again.”

“And what will you do them.”

“Kill them,” he stated, said as matter of factly as if he was going to shake their hands and say hello.

“Joner didn’t think they’d come back for you, and he’s– he was a soldier.”

“Joner? Who is that?”

She didn’t feel like answering that question now, his very name brought pain gripping her chest, so she drifted the question to another subject. “Check the inside pocket of that jacket you’re wearing.”

He did so instantly and pulled out a small sliver of metal. He held it up, examining it, and she saw by the look on his face that he did not know what it was.

“It’s a tracking device; it was in your back – inside you. It’s not working any more so they think you’re dead. If you’re dead to them, they won’t come back for you.”

He kept looking at it. He looked at it for a long, long time, turning it around in his fingers, examining it.

“They think you’re dead,” she said again, making sure he understood.

He seemed to understand. He nodded. “I thought they were late coming back.”

“Well, they’re not coming back at all.”

A vague hint of a smile traced his thin lips at that.

She finished the other leg, feeling quite full now. She had never eaten much in her life – always going without – so she was not used to eating so much. The two gulls laid out before her was as big a feast as she ever saw, and in fact she thought it was wasteful to just share it among the two of them. He was a damn good hunter. Skills like that would be well received back with The Pack.

With her belly full her eyelids became heavy once more and she could not win any fight to keep them open.

“Sleep,” she mumbled.

“Yes, you need to rest,” he told her.

“Veriax.”

“What?”

“Veriax. That’s your name now.”

“VERI-ax?”

“Veriax”

And then Valina was asleep.

56

Ethan Blake’s nightmare continued to get worse as they brought him inside. He hadn’t noticed at first, but these savages didn’t just live among the trash, they lived within it. They had buried out a network of tunnels and caverns within the piles of waste that was only held together by the sheer weight of everything compressing it down. The Trash Warrens, they called them.

He had been lowered from the recovery vehicle and dragged along in his cage like a catch from a deep sea fishing trawler, with people laughing and heckling at him all the way to wherever it was he was going. The giant man called Flix dragged him, alone.

*He must be one strong bastard* Blake thought, *this thing must way seventy kilos when it’s empty!*

He was dragged through the warrens until he emerged into a larger chamber which had an odd smell to it – one that overpowered even the stench of the trash which surrounded them. Blake knew what it was, it was Fizz, a narcotic which was banned on every continent of Alderon. Everywhere but here, of course, nothing was banned here.

“Ah, here he comes!”

It was Madd Dogg, his arms outstretched as he came toward them, still bare chested but sporting a long coat alongside his ripped jeans and rigger boots.

“Ethan!” he shouted, banging on the mesh of his small prison with his fist. “Gone all quiet haven’t you soldier boy?”

It wasn’t as if Ethan had been especially vocal during his time in the cage, but it was a true enough fact that he was feeling the effects of his capture. He hadn’t been given any food and food only a little bit of water throughout his entire incarceration and, more painful still, he had been cramped up in the cage for so long that he could no longer feel his legs and couldn’t make any of his fingers move apart from the index and middle on his right hand.



“Feeling a little down in the dumps are we?” Madd Dogg chided. “What do you think, folks? Shall we let him out to stretch his legs?”

There were cheers from throughout the chamber, from unseen people that were out of Ethan’s sight from his prone position.

“Flix, let him up.”

Flix bent over the cage, keys jangling in his hand. He thrust one of them into the padlock and turned it so it snapped open. The giant man flung the cage door open.

Here! Now’s my chance, leap out and make a run for it! Were Ethan Blake’s thoughts, but thoughts were all they were. Even if he had time to act before Flix grabbed him in his massive hands, Ethan’s limbs betrayed him. They had been cut off from the body’s circulation for hours and the muscles within them were locked and useless. Ethan screamed as the giant Flix pulled him out, grabbing under his armpits and pulling him out like a sack of potatoes. The blood started flowing down his legs, making them burn, throbbing. He could feel his rapid heartbeat throb in his legs as they were suddenly filled with blood again, filling them with intensely painful pins and needles. And when Flix dumped him into a chair and let his dead arms fall to his sides they too joined in with the same agonising feeling.

“Much better!” Announced Madd Dogg.

Ethan could better see his surroundings now. The chamber was a good twenty feet wide and almost twice as long. He saw it for what it was – a drug den, with filthy sofas and tables and chairs speed around, people lounging on them, all of them high. Most of the people there lay around in melancholy, idly smoking or injecting themselves with shit. There were both men and women, all semi naked; in the back of the chamber he saw a man receiving oral sex.

Ethen only took this in with a very brief glance around, before he was being strapped into the chair with leather bands – his arms to the arms, his legs to the legs, and one around his waist to the backrest. He couldn’t put up any fight while Flix did that; his limbs were still throbbing with pins and needles and would not move when he asked them to.

Once Flix was finished Madd Dogg was in his face so close Ethen could feel the stench on his breath.

“Now, maybe you’ll be more cooperative with answers now. What are you doing on my island solider boy?”

Ethan said nothing, and coughed. The smoke from the fizz stung his eyes and he tried to unsuccessfully blink it out.

Madd Dogg grabbed him by the hair and yanked his head back, snarling, spitting in his face.

“Still not talking? I have just the thing to loosen your tongue...”

He clicked his fingers and one of the whores wheeled an old tea trolley to them. Seeing it reminded Ethan of going to see his grandmother when he's been a child, when she'd been in an old people's nursing home. One had them had been wheeled around from room to room several times a day carrying a selection of tea, coffee and biscuits.

The one that was wheeled towards him now wasn't laden with such niceties however; it was full of fizz, in powder and liquid form.

Madd Dogg reached out and took one of the needles which had, obviously, already been used, and repeatedly by the looks of it.

Ethan couldn't help but break into a sweat. If that thing was to be stuck into him who knows what he might catch and what they might inject into his body. He knew enough about the stuff to know injecting it was the most potent way to feel its effects; affects which included brain haemorrhaging and comas as well as all sorts of psychological disorders. He'd never touched drugs before – he'd no idea how his body might react to it. While in his cage he'd prepared himself for the beating and torture which was to come, but he was completely unready for this.

Madd Dogg waved the needle before Ethan's eyes. "So soldier boy, are you going to tell me about why you're here, or am I going to get you out of your fucking mind before you do?"

Fuck it, Ethan figured. That shit would mess him up and in his position he had to talk. He might well be thought dead, and if that was the case then no rescue team would come for him. He'd have to survive as best he could if he ever hoped to get off this rock, and right now surviving meant telling this bastard what he wanted to know.

He told Madd Dogg everything he knew. He told him about the VERI. The unit had been taken on a simple training mission to the island and gone rouge. He and his unit had been sent in to recover the unit – a task that had met with complete failure.

His blood boiled as he recalled the fight, the death of his friend, the grenade going off. Madd Dogg was very interested in the fight, and Ethan told him about the girl releasing the VERI, the tracking unit, and everything else that happened. Madd Dogg listened intently, his eyes bright and moving, as Ethan told him all he knew. When he was finished, Ethan was dragged back to his cage, but he'd been spared the drug and the needle.

Madd Dogg spared him the drug - it was better used on others anyway. Afterwards, Dogg mulled over the information he had learned. No body of a boy or a girl had been discovered

when the Crazies had looted the wake of the battle. That meant they must still be alive. If the boy was still alive, the Agency would come back for him. He had to find the boy.

57

Dogg strode confidently from the chamber, heading outside, and then up towards a small shack which was away from the general areas of activity. He entered, finding Flix inside the dark room within.

The giant whirled around, a small, bloody knife in his big hand, but instantly relaxed as he saw who it was. “Soz,” he said, “you surprised me.”

Dogg hadn’t flinched. “I need to talk to you. Something big is happening.”

“Yeah?” Flix asked, returning his attentions to gutting and skinning the large, dead rat on the table before him. “Have you found a way to make more Fizz? We’re running real low.”

“Keep your voice down!” Dogg sneered, making the other recoil. “If those assholes out there hear us, we’re done. Do you understand?”

Flix nodded eagerly. “Yea, I do I do.”

Dogg looked out of one of the small openings in the wall of the shack, ensuring no one was within earshot.

“Good. And no, it’s not that...”

“Then what, Dogg?”

“I think I might have a way out of here.”

Flix stopped what he was doing. “A way off this island?!”

Dogg nodded. “Yeah. There’s a kid on this island. He’s real special to The Agency. They tried to take him once – that’s what the fight was about – and they’ll come again. We just gotta make sure we have him when they arrive.”

“What kid? Where is he?”

“Soldier boy back there says he’s friends with a young girl.”

Flix’s mouth broke into an ugly grin – there was only one young girl on the island. “That brat to hangs with those in Backside.”

Dogg nodded. “Exactly. We find her, we find him.”

“So what’re we gonna do, Dogg?”

“We pay them a little visit. Gather a raiding force. A big one – we gotta throw everything we have at this one. If we don’t get out of here soon, those cannibal sickos out there will be eating us for their next meal!”

58

“I need to go back soon,” Valina told him. She had been asleep again and had awoken far more refreshed than before. She felt delicate; like she might break if she moved too quickly, but it was a feeling she would have to deal with.

It was strange, but she hadn't dreamt of anything while she'd been out. Generally she would have – she always dreamed something – but because there had been no vivid images as she'd been in comatose she didn't feel like she'd been properly asleep, but rather had blinked and missed a few days.

“Yes, I know,” he said to her.

“They'll be worried, Hans will be worried.”

Veriax looked confused by the word ‘worried.’ “Your whereabouts will concern them.”

She smiled a little, liking the odd way he spoke. “Yes, it will. Hans will be worried for me. He's practically my father. Not my real one, but uh...”

She stopped herself from carrying on with the sentence, noting the strange look he was giving her. Would he even have a father? A mother? Any family at all? Would he even know what a family was? Probably not, no, not a real one. She could tell that he'd never been loved, when words like *worry* were replaced with words like *concern*.

“But what?”

If she thought she might upset him, she'd been mistaken. “Well, he takes care of me.”

“He didn't the last few days.”

She started at the harsh statement. “Well, no, but that was my fault.”

“Why was it?”

“I ran away from him. He told me to stop, but I still ran.”

“And you're going to go back? Will they not shoot you for deserting?”

She laughed out, the sound ringing around the cabin, filling it. “No.”

His eyes were searching hers. “I ran also, disobeyed orders. I would have faced punishment, maybe death, for what I did.”

“Oh, Veriax, it's not the same here. It's not like how you grew up. We help each other here, we're a family.”

“The Agency is Family, we Aid and Help by Being.”

She looked at him. He'd recited that out like a robot; like it was as spontaneous as scratching an itch.

"It's not your family any more though."

His eyes widened a little. *Was that some emotion she just saw?*

"We'll have to find you a new one. A better one." She paused, and then said: "Come with me."

"Back with you, to your... Pack?"

She nodded yes.

"They are hostile to me. I was a prisoner."

"They fear you."

"Good."

"Good?"

"Fear is a good thing to have on your side."

She sighed out, exasperated. "There are no sides! You must understand, it's easier if we work together here."

"No sides? No enemies?"

"Well... there are the Crazies."

"They are Enemies? Against your Pack?"

"Yes. They are."

"There are always enemies."

"I know," she said, sadly. "I don't know why people can't get along. We're stuck here, Veriax. You know that don't you? There's no real way off this island unless you wanted to sail past all the mines in the water. And no one's ever managed that."

He nodded. "I have been briefed on the island of Ergeon. One hundred and ninety-three miles in area, it has been used as a waste disposal site for the last fifteen years to prevent pollution from waste spreading to the overpopulated cities on Ibeos. At that time all inhabitants of the island were evacuated and relocated to new housing developments within Ibeos, but since then criminals and runaways have made their way to Ergeon to escape the law in its lawless environs."

It all rolled off his tongue, rehearsed from memory

"Wow," she said. "Well, I've been here forever and it seems you know more than me! I grew up here; I was, uh, thrown away as a baby."

He nodded. That was all. She laced up her boots. "Come with me?" she asked again.

But he shook his head. "No."

“There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“I’m not afraid.”

She believed him. Had he ever been afraid?

“Then why not?”

“Because I like it here.”

It was a simple enough reason, spoke honestly. Valina began to quickly realise that if she was ever going to get anything out of her new friend Veriax, it would be honesty.

“Alright,” she conceded. She shouldn’t feel too greedy anyway, and going back was probably going to be hard enough without having him it tow. “Stay here then, I’ll be back when I can – it might be a few days. Will you be alright until then?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll see if I can get some sweets or something nice when I come back okay? My friend Kyle gives me sweets.”

"You have a lot of friends."

She smiled, albeit sadly. Well, *one less, now*. "Take care of yourself."

She almost went to hug him then, but resisted. It had been an odd, impulsive feeling that she had wanted to pursue but she did not feel it right to do so. Veriax wouldn’t have been hugged much – he might not know what she was doing, and she was still slightly fearful of him. *He could just snap at any moment*. So she kept her distance, and left the cabin.

It wasn’t until after she had left and was walking toward Becksides, which was a good ten miles away, that she realised how much she had wanted that hug. Not especially from Veriax, but from anyone, to give her comfort about Joner’s death and about what she was about to face. Hans would be glad to see her again she knew, but there would be questions, and she would not lie about the answers no matter how much Hans disliked what he would hear.

59

“*Will you be alright?*” she had asked. He had replaced the bandages around himself, administered an antitoxin to her, bandaged and fed her, and she asked him if he was going to be alright? He had never had anyone ask that before. a-Ten felt that he would have to get used to a lot of new things happening

Like this new name he’d got, for example. ‘Veriax?’ He’d take it, though, it was fine by him. He’d been a-Ten all of his life.

“A-TEN! CLIMB YOUR ASS OVER THAT WALL OR YOU’LL BE ON LATRINE DUTY FOR THE NEXT TWO WEEKS!”

“A-TEN! HIT THE TARGET THREE TIMES FROM THIS RANGE OR YOU’LL REGRET YOU WOKE UP THIS MORNING!”

Now that he thought about it he wouldn’t miss that name any more. It was behind him now. All of that was behind him now, no more orders, no more drills, no more training, or drugs or beatings. It was all gone – he had escaped.

That was what he had wanted, wasn’t it? When he had lost his mind back then and killed those two soldiers? He hadn’t even been thinking at the time; his mind was too doped up on drugs to really know what he’d been doing, but something had triggered his actions. Had he actually wanted something? The thought of him acting without being told baffled him, but he’d been doing it since he got here. He’d noticed things he hadn’t noticed before since he’d stopped taking those pills they always had him eat. He’d heard rumours he’d die if he stopped taking them, or go mad. Well, maybe he was mad right now; what he’d done, and what he was doing, was completely insane compared to anything he’d ever been through before.

And he liked it.

60

A good few minutes after Valina left the cabin, Veriax followed her.

61

Hans ran to her, dropping to his knees, throwing his arms around her and pulling her to him close. She winced slightly from the pain as he pressed against the sore wounds, trying to hide her discomfort, and embraced him equally as hard. For a moment they stayed like that in the centre of town, the wind whipping about them. For that moment all that mattered was that she was back, she was safe, and she was alive.

“Val, I’ve been so worried. I thought-”

“I know, I’m so sorry!”

He pulled back from the embrace. There were tears in her eyes, and there was even one in his.

“Come...” he said, standing and reaching for her hand. Somewhat bemused, she let him take her hand and he led them back to their house. They lived together, in what once had been a

quaint cottage. It had a large fireplace and small rooms. While it had been largely burnt out in a fire, it had been repaired enough to make the ground floor liveable again.

Walking there, everyone she met greeted her cheerfully if they were near enough, or smiled and waved if they were further away, and she replied in kind. It was good to be back – it felt very, very good to be back. Yes, she had spent time away from there before; the odd night, a day, maybe even two, but she'd never almost died, or left on such bad terms.

And Joner! Oh goodness! Why was no one mentioning him? Why didn't people hate her for what she'd caused?

They entered Hans's study. He closed the door behind him, hanging his coat up on the peg which hung on the other side of it. She kept hers on, her hands deep within the pockets.

He sat down at the stove over the fire, kindling the wood into flame with a flint. "Are you hurt?" he asked her.

"No," she replied, and then realised that that was a lie. "I was. I'm getting better now."

"So you're alright? Hungry? Thirsty?" As he asked, he placed a rusty kettle over the fire.

She shook her head.

"You know how to look after yourself, don't you?" He smiled. There was something odd in it - something in his eyes. "I have something to show you."

"What?"

He stepped back towards a curtained doorway. He pulled it aside. "In there."

She approached, somewhat cautiously, but as curious as a cat. She saw a table, an empty wheelchair, a bed, and "JONER!"

She ran in passed Hans, who laughed as she did. Joner was laid on a bed, his foot and shoulder bandaged up. He had a lot more colour in his cheeks now, and grimaced as Valina pressed against his bad shoulder, but endured the discomfort and returned the hug with his good arm.

"I thought you were dead" she looked up at him, tearfully.

"I thought I was too," he said.

"You did look it," Hans intoned.

"I'm so glad you're okay." She said in a small voice.

Joner smiled a sad smile and glanced at Hans. The two of them shared a knowing look. He'd survive, yes, but it was unlikely that he'd ever walk again.

"Come now, Val. He needs to rest. He's still very weak." Hans ushered her away.

"Yes, sir," she mumbled, reluctantly sliding from Joner's grasp. He sat back again, and fell asleep as soon as they left the room.



Hans bent by the fire again, waiting for the kettle to boil. “Why were you gone so long? It’s been three days.” He was watching the kettle, not looking at her, watching the spout for steam. It was a habit he’d always had as long as she could remember.

“I was hurt. When I went into that pile of wood there were rats in there. I was attacked by them, and it was awful, but I got out again. I couldn’t find you...”

“Nor we you. We looked, Val, believe me, we looked, but there was no sign.”

She nodded. She felt so damn *bad* about the whole thing, but kept her feelings in check.

“And what was wrong with you? Where have you been?”

These were the questions she’d been worried about answering because she knew he would learn of her deception. She would have to tell him that he stole the keys from him – from this very room – in order to unlock the hand cuffs binding the boy’s hands, and she would have to tell him that she and Joner rescued him after she put herself in danger by placing herself in the firing line of a squad of Agency Troopers, and then spent days helping and healing the boy. Her counter-argument was that the boy (Veriax, she should call him Veriax) had saved her life. That would count for a lot.

She opened her mouth to speak.

There was a furious rapping at the door. Hans started. Before he could say anything the door opened, Kyle was beyond, poking his head around it.

“Hans! Crazies are on their way here! Lots of them!!”

The conversation they were having was forgotten. Hans leaped to his feet, knocking the kettle over as he did. “Stay here, Val. Stay in this room!” he said to her firmly as he threw his coat on, and then wheeled out after Kyle.

“Father!” she called. “Th-”

“Stay there!” He demanded. “Joner!” He called. “Watch her!”

Hans then slammed the door shut behind him.

62

“Where? Where are they?” Hans demanded, as he and Kyle hurriedly made for the edge of town. Kyle favoured the ankle he had injured when they had gone to look for Joner and was slightly limping along with it as they hurried, although it had got much better since the injury. “They come from the north,” Kyle panted.

The alarm bell was ringing and all around people were hurrying about gathering weapons and hiding away anything valuable. Hans had no need to shout a single instruction – everyone knew what to do. This had not been the first time The Crazies had come like this. On earlier attacks they had been swiftly hitting and running, trying to steal things of importance by driving their motorcycles through the town, snatching what they could. Little did they know yet that this attack would be very different.

To protect their town from raids such as these they had rigged barbed wire traps to be dragged across the entrances, built crude, movable barriers, and utilised the tallest points in the village as lookout points to keep to spot these kinds of attacks.

As Hans approached, people were already preparing, laying out the barbed wire, smearing grease over the road and spreading nails and shrapnel everywhere to unseat riders and burst tires. He ran into the last building on the left, knowing exactly where he was going and bolting up the stairs to where the watchman stood at the window, looking with a pair of binoculars out to the north.

“Let me see,” Hans told him, and the man handed the binoculars over. There was a worried expression on his face. “Don’t worry,” Hans told the man.

When he looked through them, Hans realised why he'd looked so worried. One of the lenses was broken but the other worked well enough, and as he looked through it and saw what approached his jaw slackened a little.

*So many.*

They'd brought the semi, and two cars – a far greater force than they'd encountered before. There looked to be two dozen, maybe thirty men heading for them, some of them brandishing assault rifles which looked the same as the two they'd scavenged when the boy had been found.

It took but a moment for Hans to realise that they hadn't a chance against the incoming assault.

“Run back into town,” he said to the watchman urgently, “tell everyone to get into cover. Quickly! Do it man!”

The watchman stared dumbfounded for a moment and then ran out of the room and down the stairs with Hans swiftly following him.

Out on the street he could hear the dull roar of the trucks engine as it approached.

“Get inside!” he shouted at those gathered there, preparing the last minute defences. The defences which were in place would defiantly have stopped any bikes, but there were no bikes approaching. They may even have stopped the cars, but he knew that the semi would

simply just plough right over them. They might pop one of its tires if they were really lucky, but what good would even that do when they faced assault rifles.

“Foxx!” Hans shouted the engineer over. “Where are the two rifles scavenged from the troopers?”

“Back at my place!”

Hans swore. Foxx’s place was way back near the centre of the village.

“Get them,” Hans told him, “and all the ammunition with them. Get one to me, use one yourself,” he pulled Foxx close to him, gripping his collar, and told him firmly in his ear: “Don’t let the Crazies get their hands on them!”

“Alright,” Foxx told him, and bolted as quickly as he could down the street into town.

Hans glanced around, seeing the truck approach. The sun was high and bright in the sky and it reflected off the cab of the truck, glinting and blinding him momentarily. There were still people in the street nearby. “Get into cover!” he shouted to them. “Hide! They’ve got guns!” If they hid – if they let the Crazies take what they wanted, then maybe they would just loot the place and leave.

He had to get to Valina! His thoughts, which had been a blur, now suddenly focussed on her. The Crazies would get into their town - nothing would stop that. This could be the end of everything. The thought of Valina being all alone when the Crazies broke through and ran amok overrode all of his other commitments now, and he bolted back to her.

He caught the shocked look of a woman’s face as he turned tail and ran. He knew who that face belonged to – Elaine. Maybe there would have been something there in another place and another time, but now he only saw hurt and surprise in her eyes as he ran from her and at that moment he knew that he would never see her alive again.

*We’re all going to die unless we get out of here. They’ve got their guns, and now they’re coming to kill us all!*

Behind him he heard the crash and a crescendo of laughing, howling and screaming as the semi crushed through their hastily erected, but utterly ineffective defences and rolled into town.

Veriax watched from his vantage point. He had moved his position by climbing up a steep embankment which overlooked the town where The Pack lived. From it he could see to the

north, and he saw the trucks approaching. He had no means to enhance his vision and further than it had been already via genetics, but he knew a hostile force when he saw one, and though he had never seen them with his own eyes he felt sure that these were the Crazies Valina had spoken of.

He watched the large truck enter the town and heard shots being fired as it did so. The wind caught up and he heard people shouting on the breeze. He remained still, watching the small cluster of buildings and the little dot-like people running around them. He would watch because he had no need to get involved in this. His training had told him that much – this was not his fight.

Yet there was little he could do to ignore the slight tugging at his heart

64

Hans bolted down the street. He heard the chaos behind him, panic spreading as word of what approached filtered down the village. Running down a side ally between two of the wrecked houses he heard gunshots and screams chase behind him. This was it, this was the end of The Pack. With each burst that was fired he imagined one of the people he knew dying. They had trusted him, all of them, he was their leader, but here he was scuttling away from them when it mattered most. It wouldn't matter – he wouldn't be able to do anything to help them. Even if they had the two assault rifles and the rest of their arms to bare against them they would still have little chance. The Crazies had gotten their hands on at least half a dozen assault rifles and they'd decided to make the most of them as soon as they could.

When the truck raced past him on the street behind him, he knew that he'd never reach the town square and their hut before the enemy did.

65

Joner would've insisted on having Hans listen to what Valina would have warned him about had he been aware of the swift conversation that had taken part in the other room. Alas, by the time he'd lowered himself painfully into the wheelchair and worked it into the front room Hans and Kyle had been long gone.

"He left! He just left!" Valina was frantic. "We have to tell them, Joner. We should have said about the guns!"

"I know Val, I know."

"Let me go after them. I'll warn them!" She went for the door.

"NO!" he shouted, and she stopped dead at its harshness. He saw her flinch. "I'm sorry, but no. We need to keep you safe. Hans told me to watch you, and I will."

"Then let's both go! I can push you. We can..."

"We can't. Val. Go into your father's room and get me the gun from under his mattress."

She looked confused. "Wait, gun?"

"It's there. Val. Please. Get it for me."

She frowned, almost protesting further, but complied.

It was when she returned with the ancient revolver that they heard the gunshots from outside.

66

Madd Dogg let out a howl of jubilation as he floored the accelerator on the semi, sending it crashing over the pitiful little barrier which had been put in place against them. Behind him, his howl was joined with the whoops and cheers of his fellows as they rode into The Pack without any opposition whatsoever.

*Not one shot – not one fucking shot, he thought, they're not even putting up a fight!*

He picked up the megaphone which was lying on the passenger seat and yelled into it: "Let em have it! But don't shoot the freaking kid!"

They opened fire on those of The Pack who were in the area; some of them fleeing down the street and others in the buildings around them. As he heard the sounds of the guns going off, the bullets whizzing around, the engine roaring out under the bonnet, he slipped his fingers into his coat inside pocket and brought forth an audio cassette with the words: "Inferis – Time To Die!" printed on it, and slipped it into the radio cassette player. Almost instantly loud heavy rock guitars and drums blasted out from the truck as it motored down the street toward the centre of the village.

67

Veriax startled when he heard the noise carry across the wind towards him as he watched, unmoving, as the truck ploughed down towards the centre of the settlement. He had never heard anything like it before – the only thing he recognised was the drums, which he had heard only to keep time to when marching, rowing, running and other forms of training. Now,

though, they kept beat with squealing electronic noises which sounded out over the landscape, piercing above everything else. The noise was raw and chaotic and full of energy. He liked it.

68

The heavy metal riffs of the band called Crucifix blared out along with the sound of gunshots and the squeal of tires as the truck roared into the main square. Hans had always hated heavy metal – he'd always been more of a blues kind of guy – but now he despised it with a passion.

*They're having a fucking party!* he swore to himself, gritting his teeth as he vaulted one fence and then another, his aging heart pumping hard in his chest. *They're in the square now. I'm not going to make it. Damn them all! Damn me!*

69

Valina heard the noise too and, though she had heard music before in the form of Foxx's harmonica and people singing, she had never heard anything quite like what she heard now. She hated it; it frightened her. The singing on it was fierce and aggressive, the guitars loud, the drums like a war beat, resounding around the small room she was trapped in.

70

Joner didn't give a shit about the music. The semi racing outside was reason enough to put the fear into him. His fear wasn't for himself, though. He was done, his leg was fucked. He was a cripple now and his use was over. Only thing to do now was to go out the best way he could.

He took the gun from her hand. "Val, get away. Hide!"

"No!" she yelled, as he knew she would.

"Get up the chimney!" he hissed, gritting his teeth as he looked at her fiercely. "Now, Val. You have to."

"I won't. I'm staying here with you. I'm not letting you die again."

Tears leaked down her cheeks and he let her hug him. His heart went out to her. He felt so fucking sorry for her. *Hans, you'd better live so you can take care of her.*

He pushed her away - emotionally one of the hardest things he'd ever done. "Go, Val. I know that's how you get out to go to your little hideout by the river."

Her eyes widened as she realised. He knew. He'd known all this time. And he'd never said anything to her - not to anyone.

"I love you." She said.

And then she span around and slid up the chimney, nimble as a cat.

He tasted his tears on his lips for the first time since he was a boy.

71

Hans broke out of some bushes that made up someone's garden a quarter of a century ago and into the square. He was a hardened man, but he still stopped for a moment as he looked on in horror at what he saw. Bodies littered the paving stones. They were all people he knew, all those who trusted him, and now they were dead.

The semi was doing laps of the square, the Crazies on the back of it shooting and killing as they went, people darted around, trying to find sheltered areas. Several fires had broken out and a new one started when someone from The Pack bravely threw a Molotov Cocktail at the truck, but it fell short and just sent a wave of fire harmlessly onto the street.

Crazies were disembarking from the trailer now, and were beginning to run amok. All around him he could hear the sounds of struggles and fights. Hans looked on as two of them ran to his house.

72

She wedged herself into the chimney. There was no way that a full grown man, or even slight woman, could hope to fit up such a small confined area, but luckily Valina was small even for a child, and her tiny frame fit snugly up the tight chimney. She edged her way up it, inch by inch, grunting with the effort of the climb. She managed to get six feet or so up the twenty-foot stack when she heard the door get bashed in to the room below her, and the noise made her freeze in terror.

Gunshots rang out – four loud, terrible shots. The loudness inside the confines of the chimney made her ears ring, and she grimaced and almost lost her tentative grip on its sides.

73

The town was overrun. Valina was in grave danger. Veriax could no longer stand idle, and he moved of his own violation and own moral compass and guidance, towards the village.

74

Hans made a break for it – he had to get to her. He had to help her and save her. He timed his run after the truck was passed the place where he was hiding, so that he ran behind it when most of the remaining Crazies were looking forwards or to the sides. It was almost one hundred metres between him and his house, and there was no cover to speak of. Nevertheless, he made his attempt to get there, breaking cover and sprinting towards it. As he did he saw Foxx run out from a street in front of him from his workshop, two assault guns in his hands, the straps hooked over his shoulders. He had his fingers on the triggers and, aiming them at the semi, pressed them down and opened fire on it.

Bullets rattled off the semi and the trailer, and he managed to kill three or four of them before they realised where they were being attacked from, and then returned fire.

A bullet hit Foxx through the leg, and then another one in his gut. He stopped firing, and went down.

A wall of fire erupted in the trucks path as someone managed to throw one of the cocktails right in front of it. The driver slammed the breaks on, making it come to a skidding halt. The sudden stop caused many of the Crazies on the back of the trailer to lose their balance, distracting them from seeing Hans as he bolted over to Foxx, swiftly kneeling down beside him.

Foxx was still alive, bleeding from the mouth and breathing heavy. He smiled up at Hans, blood smearing his teeth and lips “Got your guns,” he said weakly.

Hans smiled back, not just because he thought he ought to, but because he was filled with admiration and pride for the man. “Thanks,” he said back, pulling them away from Foxx. “Now stay down here and lay still.” He placed Fox’s hand over the wound on his belly “Keep pressure on this - I’ll try to come back for you.”

Foxx nodded, and closed his eyes. Hans wasn’t sure if he was dead then, but he meant what he had said. If he could come back for him, then he would.

With the two assault rifles in hand, Hans got to his feet and moved towards his home. It was then that he noticed the movement on the top of the roof of his home.



75

Valina pulled herself free of the chimney, gasping the fresh air after the hot, sooty air in the chimney. She wedged her chest out and leaned over the rim, looking down on what had been her home. There were fires everywhere, with plumes of black smoke billowing out of several buildings. She saw people running around beneath her. She could hear people fighting, and gunshots, and people dying.

*Why is this happening?! Why do they have to do this?!*

No answers to her bewildered questions came, or would ever come. She saw bodies lying in the square beneath her. She saw that awful truck, reversing now away from a large fire in front of it. She saw someone waving to her – it was Hans! She waved back, showing that he had caught her attention, and in doing so she almost lost her balance and slipped back down the chimney. He gestured wildly to her left, and ran in that direction. He shouted something, but she couldn't hear a word of what he said, and then he disappeared out of view behind a building.

*"To the left",* he was saying. *"Go down that way,"* maybe? She looked down at where she was. The chimney protruded out of a sloping, tiled roof which slid down to the left. She wasn't really thinking when she started climbing out of the chimney, swinging one leg out and then the other, and lowering herself down onto the tiles. There was no thought any more – just action. Bad, terrible things were happening around her. Had she not made this very journey so many times when she had made her secret escapes she would have fallen from the roof, but as it was her arms and legs did her thinking for her.

76

Madd Dogg was reversing the rig at this point, away from the blast of fire and glass which had gone off just feet in front of the truck, and as he did so he was glancing in his rear-view mirror (to see if he could run anybody over rather than to check for obstacles) and he saw Valina climbing down the roof.

"That's her! I see you! Oh I see you!"

He jammed on the accelerator and reversed the truck back into the building she was on. The trailer impacted the building with an almighty crash, knocking the men on the trailer off their feet once more, and also sending Valina tumbling from the side of the roof.

Hans had circled around and was nearing the side of his house, passing through the overgrown foliage at the back when the truck impacted with the building. The walls bucked and cracked with the impact, and the roof jumped with the force.

He heard the scream that Valina yelled out above him, he saw her body come into view as she slid right off the edge. He reacted instantly without a single second thought, tossing the guns away and positioning himself under her, arms outstretched. Valina fell just over twenty feet, and though he did succeed in breaking her fall with his body, when she impacted with him it was with far more force than he had reckoned with. He gasped out, feeling the weight impacting him. He felt his right arm pop out of its socket with the force, as he lost his footing under her. They fell together, both of them screaming, in a jumble of twisted limbs.

“Father... father...thank you.” Valina panted, trembling. “I thought I was going to die. Are you alright?”

Hans winced as she pulled herself off him. No, no he really wasn't, but he'd just have to be wouldn't he? “Yes. Are you?” he asked, as he pulled himself up to his feet.

“Yes,” she said.

“Then that's all that matters!”

Then: “WHERE ARE YOU?!”

The voice was close, coming from the square, and it neither sounded friendly nor was it anyone who Hans recognised.

“Back, get back!” Hans whispered to Valina, urging her back further into the overgrown foliage of the garden, snatching a gun up with his good hand. She did, her frightened face showing she would make no protest this time. Hans glanced back, seeing the bushes move, and a head popped out. It wasn't anyone he recognised – it was a Crazy, wrapped up in a head-scarf and wearing oversized goggles. He saw the Crazy, and the Crazy saw him. Hans levelled the assault rifle in his direction and let it rip in full automatic fire, the bullets zipping through the plants with leaves and branches flying everywhere. The man with the headscarf reeled backwards as he was hit, though Hans knew more were coming. He could hear the frantic shouts of their leader, and the words which were being bellowed froze his heart: “Kill everyone you like, but not the kid! Find the girl!”

Veriax bounded through the first open window of the first house he could find, and leapt in on two men leering over a woman who they had pinned to a table, pulling her clothes off despite her terrified screams. They stopped as soon as they saw him.

“It’s him!” one of them shouted, and then a small sharp knife sliced through his neck - a knife that came from a dead soldier’s pack. The other man threw a large heavy object at his head, but Veriax was already moving under the table, sliding under it and kicking the man’s kneecaps out. He screamed now, falling to the floor, and the Veriax soon turned his screams to gurgles. He noticed the glazed look in their eyes, the diluted pupils, the slightly clammy look to their skin.

Then he was moving out again, ignoring the woman and her whimpers.

“*It’s him!*” they had said. They knew him? But how? There was no point wasting time or concentration thinking of it.

Out of the house now, and onto the street. There was another of the Crazies here; this one had his back to him was going through the pockets of a dead man, giggling insanely. He was an easy kill – the knife sliding easily through his lung and into his heart.

Veriax had observed the layout when he had been a prisoner here, and had a good idea of where he wanted to be. Hans’ house was not far away – he’d identified it during his incarceration. He moved down the street toward the square, his eyes always moving, always searching, his feet making no sound on the flagstones. As he reached the end of the street which met the square a man came bolting the other way, laughing and gibbering to himself. Veriax took him down with a swift blow to the abdomen and then embedded his weapon into his skull.

Pulling it out with a crack, he looked around the corner. He saw the large truck jammed against Hans’ house, Crazies scuttling out of the open trailer and a man climbing out of the cab of it, barking orders. The music still blared. Veriax saw that big man as their leader and saw him as his next mark.

The bald headed man was moving with the rest of the Crazies towards around the side of the building. They weren’t looking in his direction. No one was looking in his direction. He made a break for it, running towards the truck which had been left deserted. Or had it? No, there was one man left on it, on the trailer to the rear of it. Veriax approached carefully, reaching the cab, the knife in his hand dripping with blood and gore so much so that it covered most of his hand and forearm.

The Crazy who had stayed behind had a gun.

79

Madd Dogg waved all of his men forwards “She’s down here! Get her! Don’t kill her you fuck-faces! Don’t kill her!!” he yelled at them, and could only hope that they realised what he meant and why. But he couldn’t trust them. They had done a fantastic job of bringing this place down; of looting and pillaging and killing, but when it came to *not* killing something he couldn’t trust them as far as he could spit, so he decided he’d best go himself along with them to make sure she wasn’t overly harmed.

He needed her to get to this VERI. He needed that boy, if anything to use him as a ransom. Madd Dogg saw him as a ticket off this rock at the best scenario, or at the very least could get him on his side.

Had he have turned around at that moment, and look towards a street leading away from the square, he would have seen the very boy he sought stalking across the square toward him.

80

Hans fell back, Valina before him, and knew they were getting cornered. They broke from the cover of the garden, and into the back alleys which were behind the buildings. They were narrow, and not a good place to get caught in a fire fight.

“Keep moving Val, that way,” he told her, his voice soft and calm, even though he was bathed in sweat and in a great deal of pain.

She obeyed his instructions, real fear on her face. *This is the first time she’s been in real danger like this – I never wanted her to experience it. The poor girl.* She was trusting in him completely. He couldn’t let her down.

The first of the Crazies came out of the garden behind them, wielding axes and sledge hammers. Hans let out a burst of five rounds, the bullets finding their marks easily in the cramped area, and the men fell screaming after being shot. He gritted his teeth against the pain as the shockwave the gun caused through his body shook his dislocated shoulder.

*All well and good when they’re armed with nothing more than clubs, but some of them have guns; and what about if we ran into any coming the other way, or if I run out of bullets? Then we’ll be dead for sure.*

The knife threw through the air, taking him in the chest. The Crazy guarding the truck looked down in amazement at the sliver of metal protruding from his body, especially since it came from the boy who was approaching him so deliberately. He never found out what the boy was going to do once he reached him, because he was dead before that time came.

Veriax took the gun off the man, as well as the ammo belt which he was wearing. He checked the magazine and was somewhat unsurprised to see that it was still loaded with rubber bullets, after the fateful mission was sent out to capture him. These people had the guns, but they didn't know how to use them.

He discarded the clip, loaded one of the live rounds, and cocked the gun. There was the sudden roar of engines and the two cars which he had seen earlier following the truck into the village revved into the square, circling around the semi.

Each was packed with Crazies – four or five in each – each one of them laughing and shouting and cheering wildly. It didn't last long. As soon as he saw the approaching vehicles he brought the gun up and fired upon the nearest one – a dirty red saloon which made about twice as much noise as it was supposed to. He aimed across the bonnet and into the windscreen, pelting it with holes, damaging the engine and maybe took a few of the occupants out.

It did one but not the other, as the engine kept on trucking away nicely to itself despite being shot, while the driver compared far less favourably and was killed near instantly as the bullet shot him in the chest. It didn't stop the car when his foot was jammed on against the accelerator, sending the vehicle hurtling towards the trailer.

It impacted hard, Veriax jumping clear just as it hit, crumpling the bonnet and sending the passenger half-way out of the windscreen, after breaking it with his head. He lay there dead, his blood dripping down over the wheel arch as the passengers stumbled out of the back after the crash, semi disorientated. Veriax shot them both..

There was a rev of an engine behind him, and Veriax turned to see the other car, a smaller, sportier car with no roof on it revving its engine some twenty metres away, readying for an attempt to mow him down. It might have succeeded if it moved as fast as it looked like it could and the driver could keep it steady, but there was a glint of something thrown from behind it and then the car was all at once engulfed in flames.

The four Crazies who sat in the car – who a second earlier had been sneering at the boy they intended to mow down – screamed as they were consumed with fire. Veriax watched on as

they tried to evacuate the burning vehicle with their hair and their clothes ablaze when the fuel tank of the vehicle itself ignited, sending a booming explosion echoing around the square as the car blew up, frying the people within it and sending their bodies soaring into the air, to come falling down – still burning – and land with sickening crunches on the stones.

A man emerged from where he'd been crouched, lobbing the make-shift bombs. He was a young man, unique in that clean shaven. Veriax learned later that his name was Kyle.

From the corner of his eye Veriax saw movement and reeled on it, bringing his weapon to bear. He would've fired instantly had it not been for the wheelchair, which instantly told him it wasn't one of the Crazies.

"Save your bullets." Joner told him. "There are more of them."

"Were's Valina?"

"They're here for her - I don't know why." The younger man said, trembling. "Oh fuck... Foxx..." He crouched near a still body on the ground. "You're dead..." he mumbled.

Gunfire rang out from behind a nearby row of buildings.

"Get her. Save her!" the man in the wheelchair barked.

Veriax recognised the militant tone to the voice. He responded, though the order was merely a catalyst to this own thoughts. He reloaded his gun and went after her.

82

Hans fell back, further and further. He'd taken out another five of them, but they still kept coming, and he was running out of ammunition. He'd tried to lose them within the small warren of small passageways and alleys that wound behind the buildings, once leading to allotments and gardens and garages, but it did no good. They seemed completely hell-bent on finding them – probably wanted to kill every last one of them, for no good reason at all.

He was hearing a lot of things as they retreated. The loudest was a voice which kept calling things like: "Find them!" and "Don't kill the girl!" It was the comments about "the girl" that concerned him the most – they were after Valina. For what reason this was he had no idea, but he didn't like it at all, and was determined to keep her from them, even if it meant giving his life up to do it.

He realised that he'd have to hide her. He could draw them off, distract them. Maybe he might even live. So long as she was alright. She was the only thing on this rock worth fighting for.

“Val, in here,” he whispered to her, “quickly now.” He ushered her into another garden, full of thorns and brambles. It would have to do. “Go to the back, go!”

She glanced back at him, suddenly understanding. “But-“

“Go!”

Bullets pinged against the wall over his head. He instinctively ducked as fragments hit his head, and backed away down the ally. He could only hope that she'd hide well enough and draw them away far enough.

“Come on you bastards!” he yelled, firing most of this ammo down the alleyway, backing down it rapidly, trying to keep their attention.

It worked. They came after him, laughing and whooping, heedless of the danger.

83

Madd Dogg heard gunshots ahead of him. Worryingly, he also heard gunshots behind him. They were strung out now, along the alley that ran behind the back of the houses. He paused, thinking for a moment, wondering if he were playing into some kind of trap.

The pause didn't answer his question. It did, however, allow him to see the subtle movement within the thorns to his side. He looked in for a better look, and sure enough there she was, crouched behind some ancient gardening pots behind a thorny old bush.

“A-ha!” he exclaimed, “There you are my pretty!” *The clever asshole tried to hide her!*

Her cry of protest went unheeded, her kicks and struggles unnoticed, as he plucked her from her hiding spot and threw the terrified child over his shoulder.

Gunshots were still ringing out. Too many for his liking; the town should have been subdued now. There shouldn't be anyone left to-

“Fuck, Madd Dogg! Fuck!”

The anguished wail of one of his men shattered his thoughts. The man was bleeding from his stomach, blood saturating his already filthy clothes. “We're getting slaughtered man.”

“What? What by? Are you telling me you can't beat a rabble like this with the weapons we have?”

“It's the kid, man. It's the fucking kid!”

Before Madd Dogg could question him further, a bullet struck the man through the back of the head. Madd Dogg glanced around the corner, and his eyes widened.

It was the VERI, it had to be. The ally was littered with bodies of his men, and the sounds of struggles were echoing seemingly from every direction.

Madd Dogg grimaced. The little bastard was here, but they'd lost the initiative. Most of his men looked to be dead. His plan wasn't changed, though. He still needed the boy. The Pack – a thorn in his side – were all but wiped out and most of the Crazies, who would have turned on him once the fizz ran out, were out of the way too. He just needed the boy. But not here, not now.

“VERIAX! VERIAX!”

The girl was shouting now. He disliked it a lot, and pulled her off his shoulder for long enough to smack her over the head, knocking her out cold. She was his biggest asset now. He'd calculated correctly that the VERI and she had some kind of connection, but now he had to get her away so he could fight another battle on his own terms.

Slinging her unconscious body over her shoulder again, he trampled through the brambles, ignoring their barbs cut his skin as he thrashed through them. He was met with a wall, and easily clambered over its six-foot height despite carrying Valina as well. He emerged on another street, smaller, narrower, and deserted. It was just a dirt lane. He followed it a little way, and emerged back into the square.

Bodies of his men were everywhere. His vehicles were totalled. Survivors of the Pack were gathering near them.

If they saw him, he'd be dead. As luck would have it, though, he'd emerged right next to a workshop where a dune buggy, with the name "Betsy" written across its bonnet, was parked.

The thing had been hotwired long ago by someone else, and the engine roared into life as he touched the wires together. With a grin on his face, he tossed Valina into the back and drove the vehicle horridly out of town, laughing as he heard cries of surprise and anguish follow after him.

84

He'd just killed the last of the invading Crazies as he saw the buggy race away with the small bundle in the back.

“We need to get after her,” Hans croaked.

Veriax had caught up with him just as the remaining Crazies were about to flay him alive. They'd had him pinned down and were about to start when Veriax had used what remained of his ammunition to kill them.

“Did you hear me? We need to rescue her!”



Veriax glanced at him, his features covered in blood from those he had killed. His training had been very successful in that regard. He knew how to kill. "I will." he said, the dust ball of the buggy getting smaller as the sun started to set.

"We will." Hans told him.

### **BOOK THREE**

85

Tomtom hadn't been with the Crazies long. In the past he'd run with Basher's Blackhearts, and before then he'd spent a few months with the Hotrods. Both those groups were now defunct, and it looked like this gang was headed the same way.

A couple days ago everything had been peachy. A supply of Fizz and a good selection of whores, along with the occasional raid here and there, suited him just fine. He'd have stuck it out alongside Madd Dogg and the rest of them for the rest of his life if nothing had changed. But it had. A few days ago Madd Dogg announces they've got access to a bunch of automatic weapons and were going to try them out on a small band nearby called The Pack. Tomtom figured was a pointless idea, since The Pack didn't seem like they had anything to offer them. Really it looked like they just wanted to be left alone and didn't pose too much of a threat. But Tomtom hadn't said anything, cos it wasn't his place to say anything. Besides, he was one of the few who wouldn't be going. Another odd thing, that; taking so many men for such an easy raid.

And yet none of 'em had come back. Madd Dogg had said jack shit why that'd happened, and hadn't even come out of the caves the past few days. If he and Jackknife weren't on duty out there, then no one would be.

But this would be his last night – he'd take off at dawn. Find some other place to- "hey where are you goin?"

"For a piss," Jackknife replied, not even bothering to look up as he strode past.

*Ignorant bastard. Yeah, sooner I get outa here there better,* Tomtom thought.

After ten minutes, Tomtom realised Jackknife wasn't coming back. Either he'd fallen asleep, or he'd done a runner too. Tomtom couldn't blame him. He considered leaving right there and then.

His moment of consideration cost him his life.

86

The attack came from above, Veriax dropping down on him like a rock. The knife, still slick with the other guard's blood, driving into his skull and killing him instantly with a sick crack and a dull grunt.

Hans emerged and dragged the body into one of the many ample shadows nearby.

"Stay out here," Veriax told him quietly.

"Fuck you. I'm going in."

"It would be easier with..."

Hans reached out and grabbed the boy, his fingers wrapping into the loose shirt that he wore. He looked into those odd eyes. "I'm going in with you. This is personal for me too, and I'm making sure it's done right."

"Alright." Veriax told him, resisting the temptation to break Hans's arms.

Hans released him, and they entered the cave together.

87

It had taken three days for them to get to the Trash Warrens.

The Pack had been totally decimated during the attack. Only thirteen of them had survived, and of those only seven were able bodied enough to help with the clean-up. Foxx had died - almost everyone had died. Elaine has survived, though Hans hadn't been able to look her in the eye since the raid. Kyle, and somehow the ever-resilient Joner were still breathing too. The clean-up had been a necessary, albeit time-consuming process. Fires had to be extinguished, supplies scavenged, wounds tended to. Veriax had popped Hans's arm back into place with ruthless efficiency, yet his technique had proved effective enough to allow Hans to have free use of his arm (with some notable discomfort – but he'd gladly overlooked that).

The bodies had to be buried, and they held a hurried mass-funeral for them all. Hans spoke at it, though he felt unqualified to do so. He had been their leader, but he didn't feel like he was now. He had abandoned them when they had needed him most and, while his reasons were doing so were justified, he regretted his actions nonetheless, wishing he'd been able to do

things differently, somehow. He felt like he'd forsaken them to save Valina, and hadn't even been able to do that.

It had been decided Only the two of them would go on the rescue mission. In truth, Veriax had been the weight behind that decision. He had intended to go alone, but Hans had insisted he go as well. Stealth and surprise were their main weapons in the rescue – there were still a lot more Crazies than there were people able to fight within The Pack.

Yet despite their haste, it had taken two nights before they were ready to leave, and another few hours on foot to reach the territories of the Crazies.

The Crazies controlled a relatively large area – a few square kilometres – which had once comprised some kind of quarry. Their borders were marked with stakes topped with strips of torn, red cloth which blew horizontal in the strong winds.

There may have been lookouts before the raid, but the Crazies had counted the cost of the battle.

88

The caves were dark, dank, and stinking. Barely lit by a decades-old lighting system that had been installed when the quarry had been dig out, the old flickering bulbs emitted a dull, yellow light which lent the caves a feverish, sickly tone.

Had Veriax been on his own he could have cut the lights and lent himself a large advantage to the upcoming task. Hans, however, did not have the augmented sight needed, and so they had to remain lit.

It turned out this was as much of an issue as perhaps it might've been, for the caves were found to be empty.

They'd drawn their weapons ready for a firefight, intending to strike fast and get Valina as quickly as possible. But the stillness neither of them were ready for, and, expecting a trap or ambush, proceeded through the caverns slowly and cautiously. Eventually they emerged into a large cavern, in which Madd Dogg awaited them.

He sat in an old leather armchair, leaning back in it with all the ease of a man relaxing after a full meal. In his hand he held a thick metal chain, which trailed down like a leash to the collar it was affixed to. Wearing that collar was Valina, her small, fragile frame starkly contrasting

Madd Dogg's bulk and power. She looked up as they entered, her face and hair even filthier than before, and let out a surprised gasp.

"I knew you would come," Madd Dogg intoned looking at them both.

They heard a movement, and a man even taller (though much scrawnier) than Madd Dogg emerged from the shadows behind them. The man carried a large handgun, wedged down the front of his pants.

*Why doesn't he have his weapon trained on us?*

Veriax could see no one else at all in the shadows which surrounded them - the five of them were alone.

"I'm glad you have," Madd Dogg continued. "We have important things to talk about."

"Val? Are you alright?" Hans asked.

She looked up, her eyes wide, afraid. The side of her face sported a nasty bruise, but she otherwise looked to be unharmed. She nodded. "Yes."

"Of course she is," Madd Dogg sounded hurt. "Do not worry. She has been in my care."

Slowly and deliberately, he let his left hand rest atop her head, his hand practically enveloping her skull.

Hans aimed his weapon at Madd Dogg's head, his finger on the trigger. "Don't touch her!" He could have ended him right then. Pulled the trigger and splattered his brains all over that chair. He knew he could do it – he trusted his aim and Valina was a safe enough distance away from Madd Dogg's head. Yet the tall man was behind them. Even if the tall man died, there would be more, *must* be more, who would raise the alarm (if the sound of the shots didn't do that anyway). Something wasn't right. Madd Dogg had left himself exposed, knowing they would come. Why?

That question burned in his mind, and caused him to hesitate.

A movement caught his attention. Veriax had moved his hand slowly to his belt, to where a small knife was concealed. He meant to throw it and kill Madd Dogg, but then what? They couldn't kill the tall man without causing noise and raising some kind of alarm. Had Madd Dogg counted on this?

"What do you want?" Hans asked.

"Merely to bargain." Madd Dogg sat forward. "We both have something the other wants."

Hans frowned. "What do I have that you could want? You took everything from me when you attacked us."

Half a smile crossed Madd Dogg's features. His hand lifted from Valina's head and pointed at Veriax. "Him."

Veriax's fingers touched the dagger's handle. He was ready to throw.

"The boy? Why?"

"That doesn't matter to you, does it? I just propose the exchange. Him for her."

Veriax's fingers curled around the blade handle. Hans didn't doubt that he could kill Madd Dogg, maybe even silently. But there was no way they could take the tall man down as well without a fight. Some kind of alarm would be sounded. Some kind of trap would be sprung...

"Better decide before that little friend of yours does something rash," Madd Dogg said, obviously aware of Veriax's movements.

Veriax was about to throw the dagger. Throw it through Madd Dogg's lung, kill him silently, then the tall man would follow, Veriax had seen the switch on the wall, cloaked in darkness. It could be an alarm or some kind of booby-trap. He'd have to kill the giant before it was thrown. They could...

Hans then turned slowly, the barrel of his gun aimed for Veriax's head.

"I'm sorry," he said softly.

89

Madd Dogg made good on his end of the deal. Valina, who protested at the exchange loudly, was handed over to Hans they were able to leave the warrens and the quarry unmolested.

Veriax had his hands bound tight with thick leather straps and a few of Madd Dogg's goons, who came running when the big man flicked a switch on the wall, led him back into the quarry.

"I see you've blood on your knife," Madd Dogg told Veriax as he took it from his belt.

"Killed the guards, did you? If you'd have just asked they'd have let you in." He cuffed him around the head, as if admonishing a naughty child.

Veriax was taken down to the base of the quarry, a ways away from any of the other fires, and there bundled into one of two small metal cages, one of which had a man curled tightly inside already. As soon as the mesh door behind him was closed and locked, machinery whirred reluctantly into life as he was winched up on the back of the pick-up truck and left there dangling, the other prisoner hanging beside him.

"Flix, stay with me. The rest of you get lost," Madd Dogg told the others, and the Crazies scuttled away, leaving Veriax and the other prisoner with Madd Dogg and Flix. who now had a cattle prod in his hand.

“You!”

It was the other prisoner's hoarse voice which rasped over to him full of malice and anger. Veriax twisted in his tiny prison to look upon the other. The wane light of the nearby fire assisted his eyes enough to see the man. Despite being filthy, Veriax could see his fellow prisoner hadn't been on the island long – the man wasn't scrawny enough. The prisoner's eyes burned with hate as they looked at one another.

"Have you two met?" Madd Dogg chided. "Oh, of course. yes. Blake! This is the *boy* that owned you and your squad ain't it? Killed most of you and gave us a good meal into the bargain eh?" He laughed, and Flix joined in. "You need to work on your throwing arm. The boy's alive, as you can see."

"I was hoping you were dead - I'll fucking kill you next time," Blake said through gritted teeth, glaring at Veriax.

"I'm sure you would," Madd Dogg told him. "But he's my prisoner now. So you ain't doing shit. Now, shut the fuck up and let me talk to him."

Flix stepped up, unprompted, and jabbed Blake in the side with the prod. Electric shook through him, making his body jerk around in the small cage, yelling out in pain.

Madd Dogg turned to Veriax. "My friend's a little eager with that thing. Won't take a lot to convince him to use it on you, boy. Well, not that you are a boy, are you? You're a *thing*. A *freak*. Blake here tells me you were grown in a jar. The perfect solder, apparently."

Veriax said nothing. He didn't even give Madd Dogg or his friend the courtesy of eye contact.

"I'm gonna ask you questions, and you're going to answer them, or Flix is going to have his fun. Now..." he took a small device from his pocket, "What's this?"

"It's a tracking device."

Madd Dogg couldn't hide his surprise that the answer came so fully. He turned to Flix, who grinned. Licking his lips, he turned back to Veriax. "And where's it from?"

"From my back. It was embedded in there."

"And... what's it for?"

"So The Agency can find me."

Madd Dogg nodded his head, his hope growing. "Yeah, that's right. That's how these soldier-boys found out where you were isn't it? How they knew where to find you."

"Yes."

"So, when are more coming?"

"They're not."

Dogg faltered. "Now don't play games here with me, son. They grew you, in a fucking jar. They trained you, and spent a shit-ton of credits forming you. You can see in the dark. You can move fast. You can remember things. Plus, you took out a bunch of marines. They must want you real bad, man, so don't pretend that ain't true."

"You're right."

"Yeah, so, when are they coming again?"

"They're not."

Dogg's temper erupted, picking up a nearby iron bar and whacking Veriax's cage around with it, sending loud clangs ringing, bruising his back, arms, thighs.

After several long moments, he let the bar drop from his hands, breathing heavy. "Look, you better start answering me, *freak*. You're my ticket outa here, you got that? When they come for you, I'm leaving with you. I don't care what they do - how long they lock me up for. I'm not staying here anymore. Do you understand? I want off this fucking island!"

"It's broken."

"What?"

"It's broken."

"What the fuck do you mean it's broken?"

"It doesn't work anymore."

Dogg motioned to Flix, who gladly obliged. The prod was applied, over and over. "Make sense, boy, make some fucking sense!" Madd Dogg would yell, as the boy cried out, his body erupting in spasms.

Blake watched on, grimly. He knew what the prod felt like, be he hadn't received it as much as the boy was now. In a way he was glad, because the boy had killed his squad and had resulted in him being stuck here, away from all he knew and loved. And in a way he hated himself for enjoying watching. After the fifth electrocution, he turned away.

91

It finally ended.

Madd Dogg span the cage around so he could see Veriax's face. The boy was a shuddering, panting mess. He held the device up again. "When are they coming?"

"It was damaged in the fight. The explosion that caught me must have disabled it. The Agency think I'm dead, now. They won't come back."

"Can you fix it?"

He shook his head, even smiling a little. "I didn't even know it was in me until it was pulled out."

"Fuck!" Madd Dogg screamed, and began living up to his name. He hurled the device away (losing it forever), kicked a nearby barrel over and picked up the pipe once again, wailing away at the barrel with all his strength, a curse word punctuating each and every loud bang as he crumpled the barrel so it was flat in the middle. "That's it, then. There's no way off this island."

"Dogg, quiet, the others will hear." Flix said, looking up into the quarry to see if his outburst had attracted any attention. He knew no one would be getting any sleep with the racket they were making.

"I don't give a shit, Pearce. Don't you get it? The Crazy's are over. This was our only way out, before the fizz runs out – before they rebel. It's another dead end." He slumped on the ground. "It's just you and me again. And don't call me Dogg anymore. I hate that."

"Oh... Okay Gunth, okay."

"Pearce and Gunther?" Blake interjected slowly.

Gunther rose from where he'd slumped, marching over to Blake. "Yeah, what of it?"

"You're the two that stole that Raptor, couple years back!"

"Hey, they still remember us," Pearce piped up.

"Yeah, that's us." Gunther stepped back. "Gunther and Pearce, gun-runners extraordinaire," he grinned in spite of himself. He'd missed using his real name.

"Yes, I've heard of you... you smuggled out a couple million credits worth of supplies out of the base that I'm-- I was stationed at."

"We did." Pearce said, looking wistful. Suddenly, they weren't on the island any more. They were back in their heyday, stealing guns from The Agency.

"Stole half the arms from the base, I recon," Gunther said. "Fat lot of good that did us, though. Shoulda stopped while we had a chance. One last job - one more job - and we'd be gone."

"The Raptor?" Blake asked. "How did you manage that one, anyway? Inside job?"

"Yeah, that's right. What was his name? Jonas or something? Anyway, he disabled the security on that thing and we just flew it on outa there."



92

His name hadn't been Jonas, it was Joner.

That was Joner's story of how he'd come to the island. He'd fell in with two smugglers and was making money supplying them with weapons to sell on the black market. The money had been good - too good - and he'd got suckered into that last job. They'd found a buyer for a Raptor chopper, and it'd set all of them up for life.

The plan went great up until they'd got shot down.

He'd disabled the security and the tracking device on the Raptor. He'd got Gunther and Pearce on-board. He'd drugged the coffee in the canteen so everyone on duty that night would be a little off-beat. Everything was just fine.

That was, apart from the automated missile guidance system, that he thought was down for maintenance, but had been put back online *early*. It hadn't recognised the chopper, since he'd disabled its security codes, and so it'd shot them down like any other unauthorised aircraft. Not before they'd made it to Ergeon, though.

He himself had leaped from the chopper before it crashed. Hell, he'd been the only one with the thought to wear a parachute. He figured Gunther, Pearce and the chopper all vaporised somewhere, and set about making the best of things - and that included finding Hans and the Pack.

He'd thought his two gunrunner associates killed and the chopper vaporised until that night when he'd peered through his gun-sight at Madd Dogg, to see the transformed Gunther in all his glory.

By then, his newfound knowledge arrived too late to alter anything that was to come.

93

"You disappeared off the grid." Blake said, remembering. "They say you ditched in the ocean and drowned."

"No such luck. Crash-landed here instead after we got shot down. Jonas baled on us. We managed to set it down anyway. But hell, crashing into the sea would've been better."

"Yeah, typical ain't it? Fifty million credits worth of chopper just sat there, with a busted tail rotor and a great hole in the front. Controls all busted to hell. Amazed I could land the thing - I hadn't flown a chopper in years, but I set her down as well as I could."

Blake had found himself listening intently as his captors reminisced. No one had ever, *ever*, had the balls to pull something like that before or since. It was an urban legend by now; there were no records of it, and talk of it was frowned upon. It had that rebellious quality to it that was strictly discouraged by The Agency, but very much appealed to someone just like Ethan Blake. But what they were saying made him suddenly vocal: "Wait - the Raptor's still here?" They both glanced at him.

"Yeah, hidden a few miles away." Pearce said.

Gunther pointed a finger at Blake. "Don't think we're stupid, boy. That thing won't fly, even if it will start."

"Yes but... does it power up?"

"What the fuck are you asking for?"

"Just answer! Does it have power?"

"Last time we checked, yeah."

Blake laughed, hard. He clasped his hands together. "I can get us out of here!"

"I told you, dipshit, it won't fly."

"No, no. Evac!" Blake said, almost laughing.

"What are you babbling about? The radio on the thing's shot out. I told you the controls are wasted!"

"Don't need them!" Black told then, exasperated. "Every Raptor as a homing beacon on it. If they haven't come for the one you stole, it means it's been de-activated. Which makes sense, since you were stealing it. Jonas must have done that. All you gotta do is punch a code in and *BOOM*, there's a beacon that The Agency will come straight for."

*It was kind of sick, when you thought about it. They'd come and recover a chopper lost two years ago, but made no attempt for the bodies of marines that'd died only a few nights passed.*

Gunther studied Blake carefully. "So, what you're saying is, if we get to the Raptor and activate this code on it, we'll be rescued?"

Blake hesitated. "Well, they'll come. And if we have the VERI with us..."

"Hey hey hey! There is no *us*, do you understand?"

"Woah, yeah, I get it, I get it... but I'm telling you man, take me with you, and I'll put in a good word for you both. Tell them you captured the little freak with me. They'd go easy on you for that, bring you back. You'd go to prison, sure, but you just said..."

"Okay, shut-up, wait!" Gunther cut him short. "Why should we believe that? You and this little bastard can just turn against us."

"Hey, man..." Blake pointed a trembling finger at the silent, stoic VERI unit. "I HATE that fucking thing, okay. It killed all my friends out there. And... fuck, man. I just wanna go home. I gotta girl, y'know, I wanna see her again. I don't wanna be here anymore than you guys!"

"Fuck, now he's blubbering," Pearce scoffed.

"He's got a point, though. It's a way out. Think about it, we do some time - maybe ten years - does it matter? But then we're *out*, and *free*."

Pearce nodded. They both agreed that a prison term was a lot better than a lifetime on Shitpile.

Gunther addressed Blake. "Alright, we let you out, we take you and your little friend to the Raptor. You punch in your code, and then your buddies from the Agency take us all outa here."

Blake gulped, and nodded eagerly. "Yeah, yeah man, sounds good!"

Gunther sneered, though. "And you better back us up out there. You better not mention one single thing that's happened here, you got that?"

*Oh, you mean like the cannibalism and torture, you mean?* Blake thought. Yes, these sickos had eaten his friends. But the VERI had *killed* them. It'd killed Brooke, his life-long buddy. If this plan meant getting out of this cage and off this island, he'd back them up all they wanted.

94

"You left him! We could go and save him, but you won't!"

Her voice was hoarse. She'd screamed and wailed almost all of the way back, more irate than he had ever seen her before.

Beckside, or what was left of it, was in sight now. The sun was dawning, casting long shadows over the ruins of the huts and houses. There were no signs of life there, whereas before he would've been able to see someone moving around out there, either on guard or cooking or going hunting. But now there was nothing.

He was weary. He hadn't slept. He was so tired.

"We could do something! You're leaving him to die. You're a murderer!"

He snapped.

"Shut up! You stupid, stupid girl. I saved *you*. *You're* the one that matters. Not him."

She stopped. He'd never spoken to her like that before. "I... I just want a friend."

He stopped walking, and slumped onto the earth beneath him. His limbs ached.

"I know," he said. "I'm sorry. I can't let anything happen to you."

"But I'm so sad. All the time. If I can't be happy, then why be alive?"

"You make me happy, Val."

"Why?"

"You just do."

"There's something else, isn't there?"

He looked up, surprised. "What?"

"When I was there... with the Crazies. The man who kept me, told me we're all here for bad things. Everyone's done something bad to end up here. Even you."

"You shouldn't listen to what he said. He's evil."

"But it's true, isn't it?" she pressed. "What did you do, dad? Tell me. I gotta know, cos it's why you take such good care of me, isn't it?"

He pursed his lips. She was right. Perceptive, intelligent child. She was *right*.

"Did you have another kid, out there? Tell me!"

It took him a long time, but he started to speak. He'd never spoken of it before, and had never wanted to. The memories were buried, deep down, and now that they surfaced, so did the tears he'd held back. He told her everything. He told her that he once had a family. Two children, a girl and a boy called Beth and Michael, and a wife – Valina. Yes, he'd named his foster child after his dead wife.

He was once a fire-fighter, in one of the big cities. One night, a fire had ripped through a building where poor people had lived, and killed everyone inside. They'd arrived too late to stop anything, but he'd been the first to enter the building. He'd never been able to forget the sight he saw - the burned bodies, cooked and charred, roasted alive together. He'd been discharged on medical, stress related grounds. He turned to drink more and more, to make the memory of it go away. He'd argued with his wife about it, more and more. They tried to keep it from the children, though.

One night, while drunk, he'd put the stove on to make himself some food, but he'd been so drunk he'd fallen asleep. The stove had caught fire, and set the entire building alight. The flames swept upwards, and the smoke choked his family as they slept.

He was a fire-fighter. He should have known better than that.

By the time people came to douse the flames, only he could be saved. He'd killed his entire family. After that, he had nowhere to go. He'd lost everything and given up. The next few years were a blur, but since he'd become a piece of human trash, he'd ended up where all the trash went - Ergeon.

There it was. He wasn't a smuggler or a thief, rapist, addict, dealer, or killer. He held a terrible secret, but he was no criminal. He was just lost, and didn't deserve to be there any more than she did.

She thanked him, kissed him, and held him. She said no more of Veriax, and they made their way into Beckside.

95

"Dogg? Dogg!"

The pest was at his heels, snapping all the time. Gunther gritted his teeth in anger.

"Were you goin, man? Where?"

He and Pearce were leaving the quarry, and the Crazies, for good. They travelled light - backpacks with a few provisions, supplies, and a few light arms each. They weren't going far, and they weren't looking for a fight, but you never knew what you were going to run into out there. The last thing they wanted was to be captured by a marauding group of bandits or killed by wild, starving dogs, when they were so close to leaving this place for good. That was why they'd waited until morning. That was why they'd decided to sleep first, and set out in daylight. They didn't want anything to go wrong.

Behind them trailed two prisoners, a boy and a marine, their hands tightly and securely bound, and with collars round their necks. Gunther and Pearce held their leashes.

The Crazy had spotted them leaving and came after them. Gunther thought he knew the man's name - Stone or Bone or some shit like that - but it barely mattered at all any longer.

"Just get back to sleep. Use what's left of the fizz. I don't care," Gunther replied, not even turning to look at the man.

"What do you mean, boss? The last of it? What about getting more?"

"There is no more."

"N-no more? But what about--?"

Gunther reeled on him, gun in hand, barrel against the man's chin. "Look, dickhead. I'm done. We're done. Now fuck off."

The man had the good sense to say nothing more. If he had, Gunther would've turned about and put a bullet in his head. Instead, he turned to the quarry, which now practically empty compared to how it was a few days ago, and went to get high with his clan.

Hans and Valina entered Beckside, its crumbling walls and corrugated iron providing a strange kind of familiar comfort as they returned home. Even with the wreck of the semi and the bullet holes and scorch marks all around the square where the bulk of the fighting had taken place, it was still home.

As they neared one of the only buildings that was still intact – Foxx’s workshop – they were surprised when the door swung open and a small group of people came out.

Hans looked upon their faces. Kyle, the youngest of them all, yet still twice Valina’s age, stood at the front. Behind him was Elaine, who fixed Hans with a cold stare when he looked upon her face. Four others stood before them, too, and Hans knew them all. They all had weapons in their hands – most of them wielding the assault rifles the Crazies had used in their attack. He didn’t like what he saw in their faces; didn’t know what he read there.

Joner wheeled himself out behind them, pushing himself in his wheelchair. He smiled, widely, and winked at Valina. “Heya, Kiddo.”

A smile burst from her mouth and she ran to him, falling into his embrace.

Hans stood alone. “You’ve reached some kind of decision while I’ve been away.” It wasn’t a question which he spoke.

Elaine nodded. “We have,” she said, the assault rifle she carried resting upon her shoulder with the ease of a soldier who’d carried one for years. “We called Treaty.”

“On what?”

“What to do now.

“And... what did you decide?”

“Yeah,” Kyle said. “We decided we want some payback.”

Hans’s eyes narrowed. “Go on.”

“We’re gonna get back at those assholes up north,” Elina announced.

Hans felt relieved, idiotic, and confused all at once. “The Crazies?” he asked incredulously.

“Yeah, them,” said another man.

“They killed so many of us,” Kyle said. “Killed Foxx... burned everything. Left us with barely a scrap to eat.”

“And you think that going and getting yourselves killed will make this better?” Hans asked.

“We’re not asking for your permission, Hans.” another told him.

“That boy that was here, Veriax. Where is he?” Elaine asked.

Hans’s gaze fell downward. “They have him.”

“It wasn’t father’s fault!” Valina cut in. “It... it was the best thing. Otherwise they wouldn’t let me go.”

“Those bastards were going to rape me,” Elaine said, shaking a little. “And kill me. That boy – Veriax – he stopped them. He stopped them all. Without him, we’d all be dead.”

They all nodded their agreement. Hans couldn’t argue against that. “There are still a lot of them,” he tried to reason. “They still have guns...”

“So do we,” said Kyle, raising his. “Ours are bigger. There’s enough ammo left – what better way to use it? I’m sick of living in fear of them.”

“And they don’t suspect an attack.” Joner interjected.

Hans’s eyes fell on him. “You’re behind this?”

He shook his head. “No, but I agree with it. I only wish I could come along. It would’ve helped if Veriax were here with us, but if he’s alive, he will fight for us.”

“Can you be so sure?” Hans asked.

“We’re not his enemies” Joner said.

“We’re his friends.”

Joner smiled at Valina as she said this, “Right, kid, we’re his friends.”

“Who will take care of the wounded?”

“I’m staying, so will Val.” Joner told him. “And those who are hurt have agreed on this too.”

He continued, cutting short what was to be Hans’ next argument.

Instead, he said: “If we go, we’ll probably die...”

“Wait- ‘we’? Who’s we?”

Hans hadn’t even realised he’d said it before he’d admitted to himself that he’d had to go. He’d made his peace with Valina, but The Pack, the people who he felt he’d abandoned when Beckside was attacked, he felt he owed something else. He needed to make his peace with them, too.

“Yes, we. All of us.”

“You haven’t slept, old timer, and we were planning on doing this round about now.”

“Well...” Hans said. “You sleep plenty when you’re dead.”

Valina came to him, slow. He crouched down to her.

“You’re going after him?”

He smiled. “Yes. It took me a while to realise but, we owe him that.”

Valina smiled, and slid her arms around his neck. “Thank you, father. Thank you.”

It had taken a little under two hours to find the crash site, and another hour to dig out the chopper from the trash. Gunther and Pearce had concealed it under some fishing nets and rope, but since then the site had been bombed by another load from a dumping ship and they had to clear away another set of waste which appeared to have contained all of the old appliance waste the world had to spare.

The Raptor itself was in remarkably good condition. Aside from the damage it had sustained from being shot down, and the dirt and grime amassed from lying for two years in the biggest scrap heap in the world, it looked perfectly salvageable and, Blake hazarded to guess, repairable too.

They had secured Veriax to the axle of a truck which lay on its side nearby.

Blake had convinced them to untie him so he could help clear the waste. He had been good on his word in this, and, although Gunther had feared that he might try something like freeing the VERI or escaping, he had done neither. Gunther had never trusted anyone besides Pearce.

Blake felt as though he was one of them now, and worked with them in their joint goal of escaping the island. He did so by helping them shift microwaves, washing machines, photocopiers, driers, and ovens away from the hull of the chopper.

“We better hope this thing still works!” Pearce said, finally managing to clear a way into the front of the cockpit.

Gunther clambered in through the broken front windows and slid into the pilot’s seat, which was damp and probably had things living within the torn leather.

“When was the last time you tried it?” Blake asked.

“Close to six months. Can’t come out here too often, in case we were followed.” Gunther answered, fumbling with the controls before him (half of which had been blasted away with the impact that had brought it down). “That and the fact that there wasn’t much... point!” The helicopter powered up as he flipped the ENGAGE switch, with external lights and various warning sensors going off loudly inside the cockpit.

“It works!” yelled Blake, punching the air with glee. His faith in the manufacturing build of Agency equipment was well founded, and his fears of their plan dissolving as the thing lay dormant evaporated.

“Yeah, yeah, it works. Let’s move the rest of this shit out of the way.”



“We need to get under it. There’s a panel... underneath.” Blake grunted, as he and Pearce lifted a washing machine to one side. He hunkered down on his haunches, sweat shining on his face, looking under the body of the Raptor. “Good, yeah, see there?” he said, pointing.

“I don’t see shit,” Pearce replied.

“Well, there’s a panel under there. All we gotta do is pop it open and enter the code!”

Gunther was emerging from the chopper again, sliding down some of the debris still left by the hull. “Get down under there and do it then boy.”

Blake’s face turned a shade whiter. “Well, I can open it, but...”

“But... what...?” Gunther asked, watching him very carefully.

“I don’t have a code.”

“What?!” Gunther boomed.

“Wait! I—“

Gunther’s fist smashed into the side of his head. Blake had been lucky the other hadn’t been holding a gun at the time, or it would’ve been a bullet which impacted with his skull.

The fist was bad enough, the impact knocking him clean over, losing his senses completely for a few seconds.

When he came to, Gunther was straddling him, his arm winding back for another strike.

“He will!”

Blake’s desperate cry mercifully stopped the blow from coming.

“Who will?”

Ethan Blake extended a shaking arm towards Veriax. “He will. I’m just a grunt – they wouldn’t give me a code to one of those things. But he’ll have one, I’ll bet my life.”

“You just did, kid.” Gunther growled, “You never mentioned this earlier.”

“You might not have brought me...”

Gunther grunted. That was true enough. He stepped away and marched over to the boy.

The VERI had been completely docile since the following night. He hadn’t uttered a word or made a sound, nor offered a hint of resistance as they’d led him out here and tied him up. His expression hadn’t changed at all the whole time. He didn’t even look up as Gunther approached, leering down at him.

“That right? You have a code for the beacon on that thing?”

Veriax did look up now, at the huge man towering above him. He nodded slowly. “Yes I do.”

“Pearce, get over here! Get your gun on this little shit. If he so much as looks like he’s going to do something funny, then fucking kill him.”

He then took out a long hunting knife – a really nice, well oiled, ornate one – six inches long and keenly sharp. “This is Shard. And if Pearce’s bullets don’t get you, he will. Now...” He cut the bonds holding Veriax to the truck, “...get down there and punch that code in. We’re taking you home.”

Rubbing his slim wrists to work the circulation back into his hands, Veriax approached the damaged Raptor.

98

They had expected a gun-fight, and most who had gone thought not to return. What The Pack found, though, when reaching the Crazies, was no longer a large mob of violent, dangerous criminals, but a group of ten or so meek fizz-pots, who were sat around the only fire left burning in the quarry.

The men there not only surrendered instantly and without a fight, but also pointed the way to where their leader, Madd Dogg, had gone, along with two prisoners. Yes, one of the prisoners was a boy.

Hans had left some of them behind to guard their new captives. What action would be taken there he wasn’t entirely sure, and he found himself not caring. That wasn’t his concern. They had little to go on, but they had to try. If they could find Veriax, then they would help him. He set off with Elaine and Kyle to try to find him.

99

Veriax lay on the earth, sliding himself under the chopper, Pearce and Blake looking on.

“Wait there, I wanna keep an eye on you!”

Veriax froze, as Gunther slid down next to him, the blade, Shard, pressed painfully into his side as he moved under the body of the Raptor alongside him.

It was dark under there, and smelled of damp. Still, there was light enough to see by (especially for Veriax), and room enough between the floor and the bottom of the vehicle to move around with a degree of freedom.

The panel Blake had spoken of was above where Veriax lay.

“Open it,” prompted Gunther, a short jab into his side, pricking the skin, urging him on.

Veriax worked the latch open using the leavers attached, until it came away in his hands. He lay the slab of hard metal on his stomach. It revealed a small opening, within which was a

number of dials and wires. In the centre was a keypad; it looked like it had waited patiently there for this moment all these years. The cursor on its LED display blinked patiently.

“Go on... enter it!”

Veriax could feel urgency within the man’s voice, as he reached up, and keyed in the code.

<INPUT SEQUENCE AND ENTER>

4-7-8-7-4-7-ENTER

<CODE DIRECTIVE S-D-S ACTIVE>

<PRESS ENTER TO CONFIRM>

ENTER

<INPUT COUNTDOWN TIMER AND ENTER>

“What’s this?” Gunther asked. “What’s it asking?”

“How long do you want to wait before it activates?”

“Fuck waiting. I’ve waited long enough. I want it right now!”

“Yes Sir.”

0-0-0-1-0-ENTER

<SELF-DESTRUCT-SEQUENCE-ACTIVE>

<10>

<9>

“You little fuck! What have you done?”

The knife came at him then, stabbing. Veriax had expected it, turning, the metal panel turning aside the hurried thrusts made at him under the confines of the Raptor.

<8>

<7>

“Gunth? What’s going in on there?”

<6>

<5>

“Get out! Get the fuck out!” Gunther yelled, losing his knife in his haste as he scrambled from under the vehicle. “He’s set it to explode!”

<4>

They bolted, scattering in all directions.

<3>

Veriax, momentarily forgotten in the race, emerged and sprinted for cover behind the truck he’d been tied to earlier.

<2>

<1>

He vaulted the truck.

<0>

Just like Blake had said back at the quarry: “All you gotta do is punch a code in and *BOOM!*” Hans and the others heard the explosion, a little over half a mile away. That, and the plume of black smoke which followed, showed them exactly where Veriax’s position was.

101

The blast had sent debris flying in every direction. Large, mangled chunks of metal shot out from the chopper and the scrap around it, travelling at colossal speeds.

Pearce didn’t know anything about it. He’d not reacted fast enough, getting himself caught out in the open and having part of the helicopter’s rotor blades cut him in half, before other various fragments of it ripped him to shreds.

Veriax was knocked forwards with the force of the explosion, sending him cart wheeling behind the truck which, thankfully, shielded him from most of the danger. Disoriented, he had hit his head on something hard, and reeled as he tried to make his senses align themselves again. His head was ringing, his vision blurred. He tried to sit down, but fell backwards, hands clasped to his head as his vision swam. He lay there, letting things settle, breathing hard. He had to move, he knew, a primal, base instinct told him get up off his ass and find somewhere safer. His vision rocked, slowly returning and settling down.

Just in time to see the bulk of Gunther emerge above him and pin him violently down to the earth.

102

“You fucking, fucking, fucking little shit!”

Big, strong hands clasped his neck, a vast, muscular bulk atop him. He coughed for air, but none came with the relentless hands clamping on his throat.

“Die! Just die!”

Veriax could hardly hear the words yelled in his ear, assailed by a million senses at once, each more terrible than the last. His brain was telling his hands what to do, how to escape, but his hands wouldn’t listen. They weren’t connected to him anymore. They wouldn’t move. Everything was getting black, so black.”

There was another explosion then. Not as big as the first, but big enough to set his ears ringing all over again. The hands left his throat, though, and he breathed in the cold, bitter air in deep, ragged breaths.

He coughed, rolling onto his side. His vision clearing enough to see Blake standing over the body of Gunther. The barrel of the gun in Blake's hand smouldered, and matched the hole in the side of Gunther's head.

"I couldn't. Couldn't watch that happen." Blake said. "You looked so small. You're just a boy. I had to..."

Veriax sat upright, his senses returning. The ringing in his ears continued, and likely would for some time.

"You blew it up. Why? We could've been free."

Veriax looked up, looked around. "Here is free."

"To you maybe. I had a life. Before all of this, I had a life, friends, a girl."

"She thinks you're dead, now."

Blake grimaced. "Yeah. I know. So what, this is it, then? Might as well put a bullet in my brain right now."

"You could. There are other options."

"Yeah? Like what?"

"Start again."

103

"What's your favourite flavour?"

"Hm?"

Valina could hardly speak, her mouth full of the sweets Kyle had treated them to. "I like the strawberry ones. I like the colour too."

"How do you know they taste like strawberries?"

"What's a strawberry?"

Veriax shook his head. "I was never allowed one."

She looked at him, and giggled. "Then these are strawberries." She said, throwing one of the sweets into his lap. He took it, and popped it into his mouth.

He looked across at the people in the village square. Blake was talking to Joner, Hans was talking to Elaine. He was talking to Valina.

It was so strange. Chaotic. Conversations, with different people, whenever, however they wanted, about whatever they wanted. He'd struggled with the concept. He could get up, right then, and walk westwards for a day. No one would stop him, he could just do it. Blake's interpretation of freedom was strange to him. A lot of things were strange to him. The sweet taste in his mouth was another one of them.

"What about the Crazies?" she asked, suddenly.

Hans had offered them a choice: to leave and never bother them again, or try to join The Pack. A few had joined, but in order to do so they had to come off the Fizz. It was a tough ordeal for everyone, it seemed, but they were trying.

"It's been a week now. Have you seen them shaking, without their drugs?" she asked again, without really waiting for an answer to the first question. He was slow to respond generally anyway – he hadn't had an opinion before. "You can hear them cry out at night time. It's really creepy."

"Drugs are bad," he said. He knew his opinion on that subject alright. Since he'd stopped taking his, his mind had been waking up in all kinds of new ways.

"They are." She agreed. "I guess some of the Crazies weren't really bad. They were just on drugs. It made them act bad."

Veriax nodded, fully understanding that.

"Sweets are good!" she laughed, lightening the tone, popping another into her mouth, giving him a playful nudge.

"Don't eat so many of those," he said. "There'll be none left."

"You're right. Don't want to waste anything. You can't waste anything here, can you? Especially not, well, people. I guess that's why we let those Crazies join us."

"They're not Crazies any more, Val." He said, another part of his mind waking up. "Same as I'm not a VERI any longer."

"No, then what are ya, hm? Veriax?"

He turned to her, and smiled. "Your friend."

-END-

## Appendices

The following are logs recovered from Agency Archives, showing insights into their dealings with the events which occurred within The Boy.

Project 'Warbreed'

Diary Log of Professor Reiksig

Extracts to follow...

Log Date: Monday, 07 June 1984

I am pleased; all goes according to plan. The artificial wombs have retained their integral structure and all fifty of the VERIs continue to remain stable. I am confident that the addition of Niocinel7 to their bloodstreams will make this experiment far superior and much more stable than all previous attempts. Commander Streeg has, as ever, been sceptical of the entire project. I honestly do not know why such an archaic warmonger was detailed to oversee such a delicate and evolutionary project, but all the research data shows that this time this should be much more successful than the previous project. I hope so; it's my head on the line this time.

Log Date: Sunday, 27 June 1984

The VERI's have been removed from the wombs as scheduled. I'm elated. All are stable and everything goes to plan, so far. That's it for Stage I. Now Stage II begins - they must all be moulded into hardened obedient combat units. I have concerns of how the stress of the environment will affect their behavioural patterns, as previous tests show the human mind, no matter how well force fed, will always desire more. Niocinel7, if administered regularly and in the correct dosage, should remove those free radicals from their thoughts without causing them to become overly docile. If this is not carried out... well, the mess from the previous attempt shows the results.

<END>

Project Warbreed

Audio log of conversation between Captain Streeg and Sergeant Morgans

Extracts to follow...

Log Date: Friday, 13 October, 1994

Streeg: It's bad; it all fucked up.

Morgans: What happened?

Streeg: I'd feel a damn sight better if I knew. If it was hostile fire, then it's something they'd be able to deal with better I think. But nah... the kid just flipped out on us. Heh, kid? I don't know why I keep calling them that - they're machines, or monsters, or something. The whole thing just gives me chills. Being out with them, I dunno, they're like robots. Well, apart from when they go crazy like that.

Morgans: Which one was it?

Streeg: Unit a-Ten.

Morgans: The one with the red hair?

Streeg: Yeah, that one.

Morgans: He always freaked me out the most.

Streeg: Yeah. And later today I'm going to have to go in and give my take to those arrogant scientists on why we lost one of the VERIs on their first ever training mission. Like they'd give a shit what I think.

Morgans: You know the drill, play it by the book, just tell em what they wanna know. Hell I don't need to tell you that - I've known you since the Academy.

Streeg: \*sigh\* If they get their way there won't be any more Academies in a few years time - just things growing in jars.

Morgans: Fuckin sick when you think about it, if it gets to that stage. Still seems they have a long way to go judging by what happened out there.

Streeg: Two dead soldiers and a half a billion credits down the drain... yeah.

Morgans: I gotta go man - shouldn't been be talking about this.

Streeg: This line should be secure.

Morgans: Yeah, Should!

Streeg: Can't trust the Agency as far as you can throw it I guess, even if you're knee deep and shovelling it's shit.



Morgans: Especially if that's the case, I think

<END>

Project 'Warbreed'

Diary Log of Professor Reiksig

Extracts to follow...

Log Date: Friday, 14 October, 1994

The loss of one of the VERI Units in the operation on the twelfth of this month is of grave concern. While the financial loss is certainly to be taken into account, there are further, far reaching consequences of which I am concerned. I am recording these notes to form the basis of an official report which I will present towards Management at the soonest opportunity.

The primary contributor of this is the apparent failure of the drug Niocinel<sup>7</sup> to control the unit's thought process and keep it in a stable condition.

By all accounts, all of the units received their dosage before boarding the helicopter to the island of Ergeon. The twenty of them were accompanied by a squad of ten regular marines from the Agency's ranks, led by Commander Streeg.

As I noted before in my other reports, I felt that Streeg's methods were not congruous to the project's aims or the VERIs unique mentalities. His command style may win the hearts of regular, hung-ho marines, but the VERIs require a more measured, assured approach. However, it is my personal opinion that his leadership did not cause the failing of VERI a-X, at least not primarily.

The tasks they were to fulfil should not have overly stretched the mental capacities of the VERIs either. Though they certainly have the capacity for as much reasonable thought as a human (albeit, a ten year old one), it was important not to overly stress them in their first time away from facility training. I feel that this was the case, as a simple sweep-and-clear control of a sector should not have taxed them overly much, especially in an area so desolate and with such little resistance - if any. Indeed, although life has been detected on the island, what people were there would be little more than savages. I had hoped that some conflict with them had been reported, as it would have been interesting to see how such people fared against the VERIs. Such a conflict, however, was not forthcoming.

Thusly, I do not feel that the operation itself was to blame, as the other VERIs all performed perfectly and as predicted. a-Ten was an exception.

As has been reported, a-Ten showed no signs of irregular behaviour during or immediately after disembarking after the flight. Body monitors show a regular, normal heartbeat of 45 bpm, and everything seemed normal on his head mounted camera.

It was only after he became separated, only for a brief moment, that he began to lose control. It seemed that even in that brief moment of solitude where he was out of touch from the others that he seemed to override both the drug induced behaviour and the conditional training he received throughout his lifetime.

After this time, just before he breaks his own camera after failing to respond to repeated calls to stand down, we see him discard his equipment in the junk piles and then kill one of the marines by strangling him. Since two marines did not return to the helicopter when the call was given, one can only surmise that a-Ten got to another marine as well.

The causes behind this anomaly cannot easily be described. Many other of the VERI subjects were out of visual range of any of their peers for periods during the exercise before this occurred with no signs of such things happening.

It would appear that since this is such an isolated incident there may well have been nothing we could do to prevent it. As much as we have strived to, we have been unable to completely quell the personalities of each VERI. Though we have made vast progress in such fields in the

years since the last attempt, it seems such things have not been totally eradicated. It should also be noted just whom the father of a-Ten was, and such individuals, while used for their obvious positive sides, should not be included in the program because of potential upsets such as this one.

While we must endeavour to improve our behavioural control methods in the future, our thoughts must turn to the next plan of action.

As we know that a-Ten is still alive, I am going to recommend that we observe him and what he does on the island as a case study. Though we could bring him back in for testing, it is my recommendation that there is little we can learn from him that cannot be done on one of the other VERI's we still possess. It would be far more useful to see how his survival and combat skills can be put to good use by surviving on the island. We can track him by the device within him, and can have the Satellite watch him continuously. This, I feel, will prove a valuable insight into how effective our training is and where it can be improved and modified. I am going to bring these recommendations forwards tomorrow.

<END>

Project 'Warbreed'

Diary Log of Professor Reiksig

Extracts to follow...

Log Date: Saturday, 15 October, 1994

Tonight was quite possibly one of the most distressing nights of my career, nay, my entire life. As expected, they elected to send in a "rescue" mission to find missing VERI a-X and bring him back to us. A sixteen man squad was sent in on one of the Raptor transport helicopters, lead by the distinguished Sgt Morgans, to find and recover the unit.

What was not accounted for, nor really expected, was the brash hostilities that the VERI displayed upon seeing our troops. Over the course of the following events, the VERI proceeded in killing off over half of the squad despite several orders. I even took upon myself to try to talk the unit into ceasing its hostilities, but my attempts only seemed to aggravate the situation further.

It was highly unfortunate that one of the marines decided to disobey orders not to use lethal force, as the deployment of one of the new MkIII grenades was used against the VERI in a moment of, what I can only assume, was a moment of blind panic and desperation. Sadly, the deployment of such a potent weapon meant that the VERI was terminated - vaporised likely - and four other marines died from the fallout of the blast also.

It is such a shame to see such a loss. The VERI was not only a monetary disaster, but VERI a-X in particular showed great potential. If not for the tenacious tendencies of VERI a-X, he could well have been an exceptional fighting force, as he showed tonight by near wiping out and entire squad of experience marines at just ten years into the training.

Once again I must reiterate my concerns regarding the donor father - stricter testing must be used and only the most exceptional but also the most agreeable men must be used in the program.

Still, we must try to derive positives from these events. It was at the very least an opportunity to see the VERI in action, and I must admit I am most impressed with his performance. One must bare in mind that the VERI was unarmed at the start of this encounter and still managed to disable most of the "enemy" forces which he faced. Considering that he was alone, and only half way through his training, it can only be surmised the training thus far is highly effective. I must admit, I do look forwards to seeing how the rest of the EHU's perform in operations while working fully as a team, fully armed and fully trained, although admittedly such an event will be at least ten years away.

The fact that the behavioural habits of VERI a-X altered so radically and so swiftly is cause for grave concern, and I must do my best to assure The Council that it is and will remain an erroneous event that will not occur again. I think the only way to alleviate their worries is to increase the dosage of niocin17, at least over the next few months and coming years, by a small amount. It will take them towards tolerance levels with regards to being able to function and perform without becoming overly docile, but with experimentation as should be able to find the limits for each of the individual nineteen VERIs remaining.

I shall continue to monitor them all personally and be a regular input into their daily lives. I can only continue to think that instilling myself as a father figure will only cement their loyalty to this institution and The Agency as a whole.

Despite tonight's setbacks, I cannot help feel a little excited. Seeing an VERI in action was truly awesome to behold and I will be reviewing the recordings from tonight's conflict with my fellow colleagues to analyse them. If the Agency needs any proof that this operation is worth the time and the money it is taking, then I think we captured it tonight.

I can only speculate on the effectiveness of Batch B, once they are placed into prediction.

P.S.

Streeg can keep his marines, his camaraderie and his hung ho attitude, the time of the marine is drawing to a close. In a generation's time, we'll have VERI's to do all the fighting for the Agency, and then Streeg can go into polishing boot leather for a living for all I care.

<END>