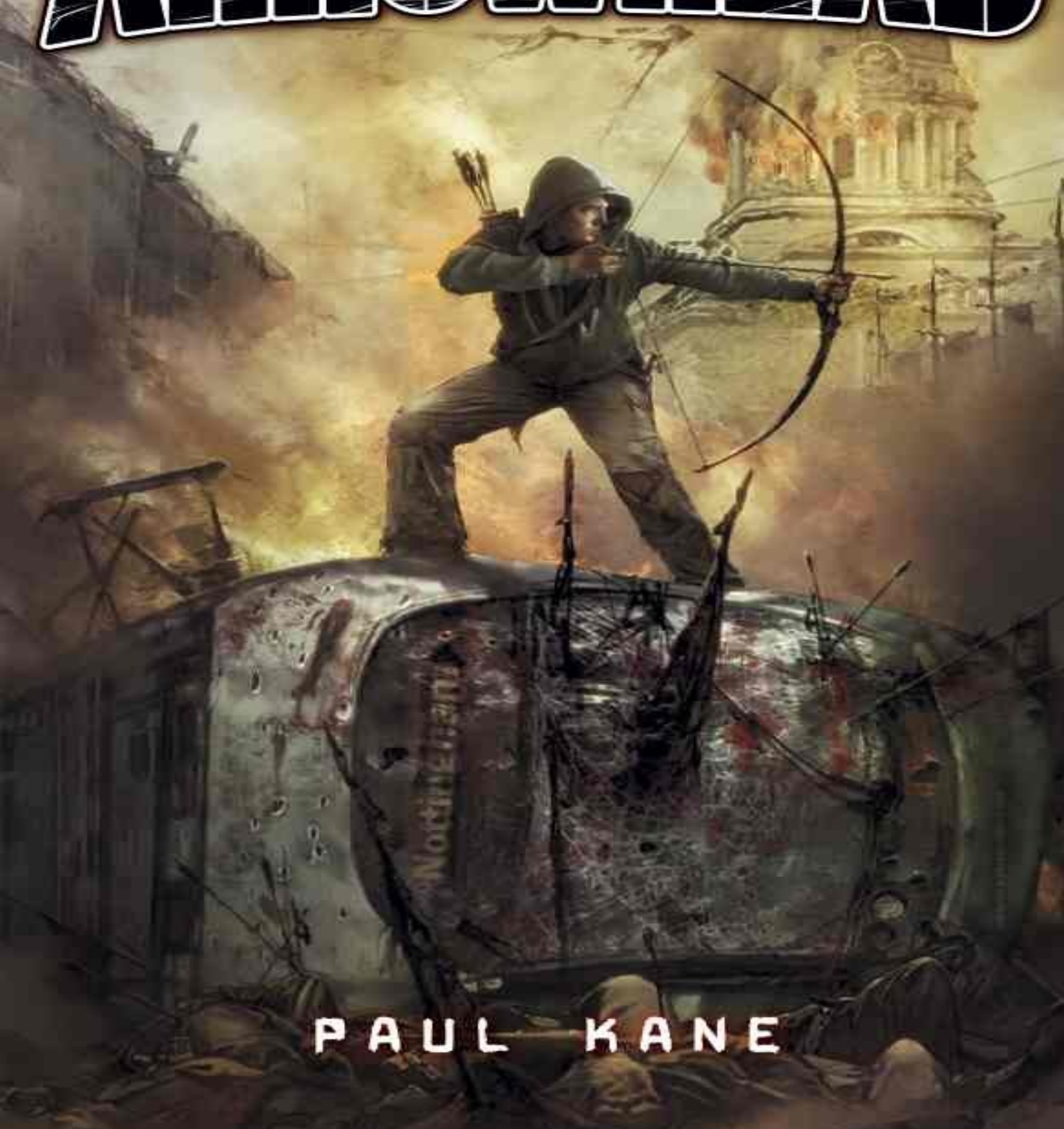


THE AFTERBLIGHT CHRONICLES

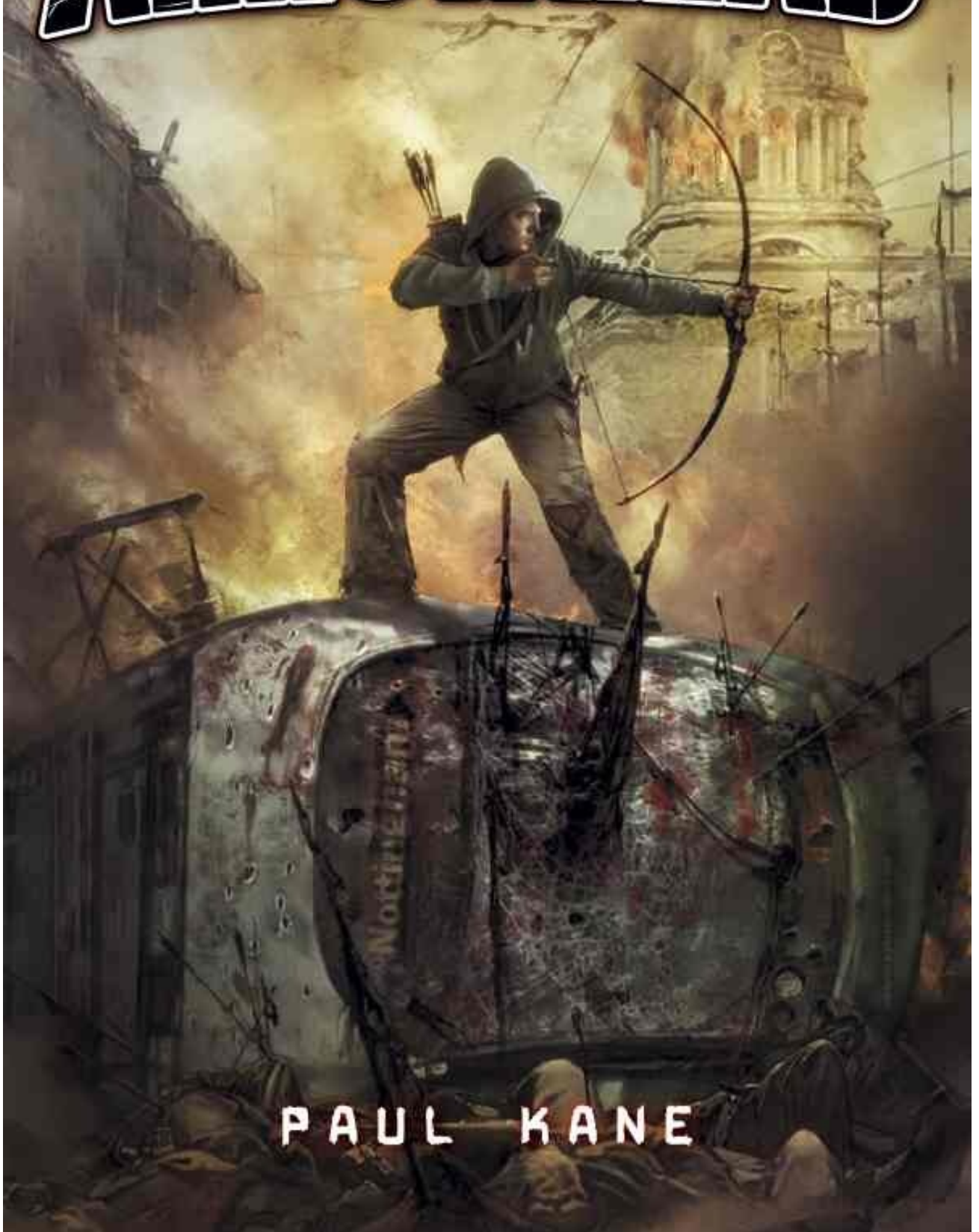
ARROWHEAD



PAUL KANE

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Granger retreated, slowly, glancing down at the ground as he went. Nervously, he checked around him in case he set anything off. Too late he heard the cracking sound below, then the next thing he knew he was being yanked upwards, the net closing in around him and pulling him into the air. His gun fell out of his hands, the mike from his head. He felt his stomach roll as he was hoisted up, only stopping when it reached a certain height.

There he was left, dangling. He took deep breaths, calming himself down. You're still alive, still alive. Just caught in a net, that's all. You can get out of this.

Even as he thought it, someone passed by beneath him wearing a hood. He paused to look up at Granger, and the youth thought that was it - his time was finally up. Then the hooded man went on his way, disappearing into the undergrowth as if he'd never really existed at all.

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ARROWHEAD

PAUL KANE

For Mum and Dad who helped me find my path through the forest, and for my darling Marie who coaxed me out of it.

In the first decade of the new millennium a devastating plague swept the planet, killing all but those with the blood group 'O negative.' Communities crumbled, society fragmented and in its place rose the rule of tyrants and crazed cults lead by dangerous religious revolutionaries.

This is the world of The Afterblight Chronicles...

The spirit of Robin Hood
Lives forever in Sherwood Forest
And in the hearts of those who seek him...

CHAPTER ONE

The arrowhead embedded itself in the wall just millimetres from his left temple.

Thomas Hinckerman had screwed up his eyes as the crossbow was raised, flinching only slightly when he heard the impact; in one way relieved to still be alive, in another wishing this ordeal would be over soon, one way or the other. The apple on top of his head wobbled slightly. There was a wetness running down his face. He assumed it was sweat. But when he opened his eyes and looked down - carefully, so as not to dislodge the fruit he was balancing - he saw the spots of red on the floor. The bolt had nicked his skin...

And seconds later there was pain.

Not that he could feel it much - this latest wound paled into insignificance compared with his others: the bullet hole in his shoulder, for example, the fingernails dangling off, pulled with pliers, the missing teeth, or how about the cigar burns on his stomach? Still, he'd fared better than his friends, Gary and Dan. Their bodies were still cooling on the floor near the entrance to the station.

It had been his idea initially, taken from those stories of refugees trying to enter Britain simply by walking, long before the virus came and took its toll. Before The Cull. Back then those people had wanted in, but now it seemed like a much better idea to get out of the country before things grew even worse.

Thomas suggested it to Gary, a former scrap metal dealer, and Dan, who used to be a butcher, because they felt the same. He'd met them at the local impromptu meetings just before The Cull, when everyone was still trying to figure out what could be done about their loved ones, their neighbours, those who were dying all around them. They weren't the kind of folk Thomas would have mixed with before all this, not the sort of men you'd see hanging out at the library where he had worked. But fate had thrown them together, and they'd stuck like glue: through all the madness that had followed.

Now they were dead. Just like he would be soon. Thomas was under no illusions about that, not after he'd seen them murdered in cold blood. His last memories of the men he'd trekked thirty-one miles with, sharing adversities he never would have thought possible, were Dan's brains exploding all over his own shirt, feet still twitching as he hit the ground, and Gary dancing like a puppet as he was riddled with bullets from a machine gun.

The three of them had emerged from the tunnel and into the station at Calais that morning, their torches almost out of batteries, supplies exhausted a day ago, glad to be free, glad to be back above ground. They'd passed dormant trains, their yellow noses rusting, glass at the front smashed. They'd seen no one, not until they reached the station. There Gary spotted a lone figure sitting on one of the benches inside the foyer.

They must have been watching from the start, though; because as the trio walked over to make contact, Dan was already dropping, a bullet coming out of nowhere to blow half his head away. And then the other men emerged - a half dozen or more, heavily-armed; one with silver hair carrying what looked like a sniper's rifle. That's when they'd pulled Gary's strings...

They'd been waiting, too, he found out. Waiting for someone like him to come. Thomas had been left alive - just clipped with a bullet - to tell them what he knew.

He was dragged to his feet by two men, one with a paunch, the other smoking a cigar. Their leader wasn't a huge man, but carried himself well. He had the air of someone much larger. He was dressed in grey and black combats, and was wearing sunglasses. When he took these off and stared into Thomas's face, he saw that the man's eyes were just as black as his glasses. There were jewelled rings on most of his fingers. He spoke with a French accent and his first question was: "Are you in pain, Englishman?" When Thomas nodded, the man smiled with teeth as yellow as the noses of those trains. Then he stuck two of his ringed fingers into the hole in Thomas's shoulder. His whole body jerked, but he was held

tightly by the men on either side.

When Thomas had recovered enough to speak, he whispered: "What... what do you want from me?"

"Information," said the man.

"A-about what? I don't know anything."

He smiled again. "We will see."

Thomas was introduced to a broader man with olive skin and short, cropped hair. Thomas was told that his name was Tanek. "When Tanek was in the army," the man in combats told him, "his speciality was making people talk." The Frenchman nodded firmly, and that's when the pliers had come out. Tanek had gone to work on his fingernails first, grasping the little one on his right hand firmly, then yanking it off, the nail splitting and cracking as it went.

Thomas let out the loudest scream of his life. Even getting shot hadn't hurt like that. Through the tears, he saw the outline of the Frenchman's face again. "I need to know about the place you've come from," he told Thomas.

"W-What...?" Another nail was pulled. "Yaaaaaahhhh..."

The Frenchman slapped his face. "What is the situation in England? Do you understand me?"

Thomas shook his head.

"How organised are the people over there. Are there communities? Are the defence forces still operational?"

Thomas laughed at that one, which earned him another lost nail. "Everything's gone to shit," he shouted back at the man. "It's chaos. Fucking chaos! Why do you think we came through the tunnel? It's like being back in the dark ages."

The Frenchman chuckled this time. "I see."

They continued to question him for at least a couple more hours, asking him everything he knew about Dover, where they'd entered, about the surrounding areas of Kent, what he'd heard about London and other regions of England - which was very little since The Cull. Thomas had no idea why they were putting the questions to him, but he answered as honestly as he could, especially when Tanek pulled out his molars, then snatched the cigar from one of the men holding him and used that too. He cooperated as well as he was able and his reward was to be handcuffed to a notice board, ruined fingers dangling limply, while some of the men took it in turns to play 'William Tell' with a crossbow. Tanek handed around, and an apple - a fresh golden apple that would have made Thomas's mouth water had it not already been filled with blood. And had his mouth not been taped over because they were sick of hearing his cries.

As he opened his eyes now, he saw that motorcycles were being wheeled into the station, six or seven in total. He also heard one of the men call out their leader's name: De Falaise.

The man came to join Tanek, just as another bolt was clumsily fired from the crossbow. It wound up in Thomas's right thigh. His muffled grunt caused much amusement amongst the group.

De Falaise raised a hand to stop the game for a moment, walking towards Thomas. "I thank you for your help, it was fortuitous that our paths should cross," he said. "From what you have told us, it would appear there is much in the way of opportunity for people like us in your land. Unlike the situation we leave behind... Your people are weak; we are not."

It was then that Thomas knew what he had in mind. De Falaise and his men were going to use the bikes to make the same trip he'd done, but in reverse, shooting up the tunnel and into England just like one of the bolts from Tanek's crossbow. And they would probably do just as much damage.

"In return, my gift to you, Englishman," said De Falaise. Thomas looked into those black eyes, and thought for just a moment the Frenchman might let him live, let him go. Then he saw that smile on De Falaise's face, and struggled against his bonds, the apple falling from his head. De Falaise stepped aside and there was Tanek, with his weapon now fully loaded - aimed at his head. Unlike the others, he

would not miss.

In seconds it was over, and De Falaise was already giving the order to move out, to take the bikes down to the tunnel so they could be on their way. Tanek paused before leaving, to pick up the apple and take a bite.

"Come," said De Falaise, laughing again as he led the way. "There is much to do, much to see. And a country just as ripe for the taking."

CHAPTER TWO

The hunter had been crouching in the undergrowth for almost two hours when the creature finally wandered into the clearing. His prize. After tracking it for the best part of a day, he knew that this was one of its favourite haunts. This would be the place where he'd look into its eyes, where he'd feel that familiar adrenalin rush from bagging such a fine catch.

So he'd settled himself down to wait.

He was a patient man. And, besides, it wasn't as if he had anything else to do, was it? No going down the pub for a pint and game of darts, no cosy nights in front of the TV. Those days were long gone now, a distant memory... most of the time. The problem with waiting was that the mind needed ways to amuse itself. Against his will, he found himself drifting back, remembering. Thinking about the man he used to be and the life he'd once led. It felt like a dream.

"Read to me some more, Dad... please..."

Mentally, he tried to shake the memories from his head in the same way his old Golden Retriever used to shake himself dry. How little Stevie would laugh when Max did that - he could see the boy's face now on that holiday in Wales. They'd left the campsite and taken a walk down by a long river. Then they'd let the dog off the lead to run around and he'd immediately jumped in the water to chase fish he'd seen. After swimming with his head held high, Max had finally realised there was no way on Earth he was going to catch the thing. He'd sprayed them all when they ran across to him. Stevie had laughed and laughed, as Joanne held up her hands to...

"Robert... Robert, come back to bed. It's Sunday morning."

They were random, these recollections. That one was from back when they'd first got married, back when they used to lose themselves in each other every weekend. Back before Stevie came along and would climb in with them on a Sunday morning, bringing the papers with him. His son would read the comics while Robert took the sports section and Joanne would comment on what was happening in the world; which usually involved some soap or pop star spending thousands on rehab when everyone knew they'd be back on booze and drugs within a month.

"Listen to this: the government are stating categorically that there's nothing to worry about, Rob... That the people infected are 'isolated incidents', and there's only a slim chance of it becoming airborne."

He squeezed his eyes shut, but the images didn't disappear. Robert went way back now, to his graduation from training college in fact. Remembering how proud his parents had been of him that day; at least he'd given them something before the crash two years later. And he had to admit to feeling a swell of pride himself as his name was called.

"Would you please step forward, Constable Robert Stokes." He could see the crowds of people, the flashes of cameras as they snapped pictures. The applause was deafening. He thought he could change the world back then, make a difference.

Fast forward to the riots when the system was breaking down. The stones and half bricks that were hurled, terrified people hitting them with lead piping, with sticks. So many faces, so much panic.

Robert and his family had moved out of the big city a long time ago, when Stevie was only four. Joanne had argued that she didn't want her husband on the streets facing gun crime and goodness knows what else. She didn't want Stevie growing up without a father (a sick joke when he thought about it now).

"You ready?"

"Push the swing Dad, come on!"

"Okay, you asked for it."

"Higher, higher! Can we go on the roundabout next?"

"Sure thing."

"You're the best, Dad. The best."

Of course, he'd argued that there were pockets of violence everywhere, but he could see it from her point of view as well. In the end he'd listened and they'd upped sticks from the place where he was born and bred. But he hoped to return one day.

They hadn't really gone that far. Robert put in a transfer to a market town north of Nottingham called Mansfield, taking out a mortgage on a house between there and Ollerton. They'd been so happy there. He enjoyed community police work well enough and they lived in one of the most beautiful areas of England, only a short distance from rolling green fields, from woodland and forests - plenty of places to take Max out for walks. Yet close enough to 'civilisation' that Joanne could go shopping she wanted, and pursue her ambitions to run her own accountancy business now that Stevie had gone to school. She always had been a whizz at maths, even when they were young...

"Hi, my name's Robert - I'm in the class above you."

"Joanne. You're friends with Tracey's brother, aren't you?"

"Yeah, that's right. A bunch of us are going out on Saturday, to the pictures. I was wondering... Well do you want to come?"

It was ironic that the violence and the death found them all those years later. But it was the same countrywide in those dark days just before The Cull.

If the time prior to that had been a dream, then surely what came next was a nightmare; one from which he was constantly praying he'd wake. As friends on the force stopped turning up for work, as kids from Stevie's school were kept off sick, as more bullshit about the virus appeared in the papers and on the TV news... Nobody had taken it that seriously at first, not after all that business with SARS and Bird Flu. All that changed when they were smacked in the face with it.

Grimacing, Robert relived that night when Joanne had suddenly begun coughing in bed. Turning on the bedside lamp, he'd rolled over to find her holding a tissue up to her mouth. When she brought it away again, there was a bright patch of red there. And her eyes, God in Heaven, her eyes...

"You've got the most beautiful eyes, do you know that?"

"Charmer."

"It's true."

She was looking at him, petrified. They both knew what it meant - had seen enough about it to recognise the symptoms. Then they'd heard the coughing coming from Stevie's room as well.

The scene was playing out in his mind in slow motion: slamming open the door and snapping on the light; seeing crimson splattered all over the ten-year-old's duvet; Stevie crying because he didn't know what was happening to him; Max barking at the foot of his bed.

He'd bundled Joanne and Stevie into the car, knowing it was no use phoning for an ambulance. He and some of his colleagues had waited four or five hours for one to show up just a few days before. Tearing down the country roads, and thankful for all those lessons about how to drive at speed when in pursuit, Robert was soon brought to a halt when he reached the nearest hospital.

The car park was overflowing. People had left their vehicles on grass verges, double and triple parked; wherever they could. He'd had to abandon his vehicle half a mile away from the building itself, then he'd carried Stevie on his shoulder, holding up Joanne with his other arm as they made their way to the Accident and Emergency department. The place was heaving, packed to the rafters with patients, some on trolleys, sitting or laying down - or both - some making do with a couple of chairs for a bed, but most were strewn around the reception area and the corridors like beggars hoping for a handout. It was like something out of those history books from school, monochrome etchings which showed people suffering from the Black Death. Doctors and nurses wearing scrubs and masks flitted about in front of him, so Robert grabbed the nearest one and demanded that the man examine

his wife and child.

"Look around you, mate - all these people need attention, and they were all here before you."

"I'm a police officer and-"

"You think that matters anymore?" shouted the man in scrubs. "You think it matters whether you're with the police, the emergency services or... or..." The man coughed. "People are dying... people..." He coughed again, except this time it was loud and wracking, chorusing with the others. The doctor pulled the mask away from his mouth, revealing the blood inside it. Then he looked up. "Oh Jesus," was all he said.

It was at that moment the penny dropped. It really didn't matter anymore: nothing did. Because they were all fucked. The medicos didn't have a clue how to stop this, not even the government - of this country or any other - knew what to do.

Reluctantly, Robert returned home with Stevie and Joanne, made them as comfortable as he could, trying to force cough mixture and paracetamol down them as if they had a common cold or a dose of the flu. Robert waited it out with them, just like he was waiting here today. Knowing that any minute now, because he'd been exposed to the virus as well, he'd start coughing up blood. They'd all go together if they were going to go at all. He watched his wife and son pass their final few hours back in bed, in each other's arms, heaving up their liquefied lungs, fighting for breath. Max lay beside them on the mattress, whining as if he could sense what was about to happen. Robert had spent his whole life trying to protect people, and now he couldn't even protect his own family from the microscopic bastards that were ravaging their bodies. As they slipped away from him - Joanne first, taking a final wheezing breath, followed by nothing; then Stevie while he stroked the boy's blond hair, not knowing how to answer his questions about why he felt so ill or why Mum wasn't coughing anymore - Robert cried until he thought his tear ducts would burst.

"Help me, Dad... it hurts... make it stop!"

Max licked at Stevie's face, trying to bring him round. The boy didn't move.

Robert slumped over their still bodies, clutching their clothes, screaming at the universe, at God, at anything and everything, before finally exhaustion took him. Conversely now he didn't want to wake, to face what had just happened. But when he did at last, realising that this was all real, wrapping them in the blankets they'd died beneath, he held on to the one and only shred of hope left.

"Stop wriggling about, Stevie, you're taking all the covers. And let your Dad read his sports section."

"Kay."

Robert waited once more, it must have been days... maybe even a couple of weeks, but he didn't feel the passage of the hours. This time it was his own death Robert anticipated. He willed the cough to come, the blood, for the virus to take him. He was ready for it. Oh, was he ready.

Robert existed on what was left in the house - tinned food mainly that Joanne had squirreled away; she was a terror for keeping the cupboards overstocked. Though he hardly felt like eating or drinking his survival instinct was too strong to simply let himself starve to death. He fed Max, but left the door open so the animal could supplement his diet elsewhere if he chose. Or perhaps for another reason altogether.

"You're going to have to find a new owner soon, boy," he'd tell the old dog daily, "because I'm not going to be here for much longer."

Then even that was snatched away from him by the men in gas masks, the hooded yellow-clad figures in their wagons, sent to scoop up the dead that littered the streets in a vain attempt to halt the spread of this infection. Even this far outside the towns and cities, the pavements were covered. The men broke down the doors of houses, checking inside, coming for the victims of the virus, spraying crosses on walls of buildings to be gutted with flamethrowers. Robert heard them approaching down

the street, the megaphones blaring, but it hardly registered. Not until they were actually inside his house, waving their guns around, did he acknowledge their presence.

Max leapt at one of them, clawing at his plastic suit. The man struck the dog on the side of the head with the butt of his automatic rifle. Max fell to the floor with a whine and lay there twitching. Robert jumped out of his chair, but when a rifle was swung in his direction, he froze. He watched anxiously as a couple more men ascended the staircase. Was this what had become of the authorities in his absence? Robert wondered, bully boys throwing their weight around?

"Two of 'em up here," came the muffled call from upstairs. "Been there a while as well by the look of things."

"Leave them where they are," Robert warned the man pointing the gun at him. "I'll be joining them soon enough."

The fellow gave a cold laugh. "You not seen the news lately, or what passes for it these days? If you haven't got it by now, chances are you never will. You must be O-Neg."

"O-Neg?" Robert gaped at him.

"Completely immune, you lucky bastard. Though it's a wonder you haven't caught somethin' else of them stiffs."

He couldn't take it in. He wasn't going to die after all - leastways not from the virus. But Robert felt far from lucky: he'd lost everything he ever cared about and now he just wanted this all to end.

The men came back downstairs and told him he'd have to go with them. They were looking for people like Robert, apparently. Someone in 'power' thought they might actually be able to develop an antidote from them.

"And what... what's going to happen to Joanne and Stevie... My house?" Robert asked.

"Same as all the others with infected dead inside. *Poof*," said one of them, opening his fist like a flower in bloom. "The rest of us can't run the risk of catching it when we've gone to all this trouble."

Tears welled in Robert's eyes as a man to his left grabbed his arm, attempting to drag him outside. "I'm not going anywhere," he told them.

"Oh yeah?" the first man brought up his rifle, aiming at Robert's head. He took a step towards the barrel, pressing the cold metal against his forehead.

"Do it, get it over with."

They all looked at each other. "He's too valuable," said the second man, shaking his head.

"Don't you understand, I don't want to live anymore!"

"Tough shit," said the third man, and they began to drag him out through the door. Robert elbowed one, lashed out at another, but all this earned him was a punch in the stomach.

Outside, two of them held Robert while the third sprayed a red 'X' on the front of his house and signalled to a truck behind. Robert looked on through the tears as more men climbed out with flamethrowers, tanks strapped to their backs. While he struggled, these 'firemen' disappeared inside, only to emerge moments later, leaving a trail of flames in their wake. And then, as if the rest of it hadn't been enough, something crawled from the spreading conflagration, looking for all the world like a demon emerging from Hell. Fur alight and whimpering with pain, Max made it a few steps down the path, before collapsing into a burning heap. They hadn't even bothered to check he was dead before setting the house on fire; or maybe they just didn't give a crap.

It was too much to bear. Robert reached up and pulled one of the men's gas masks off, then swung it at his other captor.

"*Oh-shit-oh-shit-oh-shit-*" gibbered the man whose mask was hanging off, fumbling to replace it, while Robert wrestled out of the other one's grip. Then he ran.

"Get him!"

The third man shot into the air, careful not to hit their prisoner, but at the same time powerless to

stop him.

Robert made it round the corner, ~~glancing back over his shoulder only once~~. His house and everything in it was a blazing inferno, much like many of the others nearby.

"Goodbye sweetheart," he whispered to his wife. "Goodbye son. I love you both very much."

The men would come after him, he knew that, but they wouldn't kill him. Instead they'd take him away somewhere to be prodded and poked, to provide a cure for the men in the masks and their superiors. People he'd once served (*no, not like that... never like that!*). So Robert ran, harder and faster than he ever had in his life. He didn't have a clue where he was going, just that he had to hide - he needed to get away from people: the living and the dead. Robert calculated that if only those with O-Neg blood were immune, as the man back at his house had said, then most of the population had already been wiped out. Joanne would probably have been able to give him a more precise estimation... if she'd been alive.

On his journey he came across a small abandoned army surplus store, which had been partially looted, the window smashed and whatever was in the display long since stolen. That wasn't what interested him. Robert climbed through, hoping that there might be at least some of the things he'd need: a change of clothing for starters. He found a pair of tough khaki combat trousers, a green t-shirt and a hooded top that fitted him, plus a long, waxy outdoor coat. All that remained was to find a decent knife, a compass and some twine. Once he'd scrounged them up, he left whatever money he had on him by the till.

In the end it was a logical choice. Head for the woodlands at Rufford where he'd spent so much time with Max, where he'd taken Joanne and Stevie occasionally at weekends and bank holidays. Robert would let the oak, silver birch and ferns hide him from what was left of society, live out his life until death took him from natural causes; hopefully soon. Maybe he'd just slip and break his neck one day.

Until then, he would get by. Robert would draw on the survival training he'd gone through as part of his job. He'd thought it was daft at the time, all those role-playing exercises, the team building out in the middle of nowhere. But he'd picked up quite a few things on those courses without even realising it. Unlike some of the lads, he'd actually been paying attention when the tutor had explained about things like making shelters and hunting if you were stranded. In fact, the first thing he'd done when he got to the woods was construct a simple lean-to between a couple of trees. He'd whittled down branches to make the poles, tying these together with the twine, then he'd covered the framework over with all the foliage he could find in the surrounding area. A new home, designed for one.

For water, to drink and to wash, he visited the huge lake at Rufford or trapped rain - filtering it through material torn from his disused clothing, then boiling it over a fire. This Robert made when it grew cold at night with a bow and drill, spinning the sharpened piece of wood on a fire board until it caught light. Using kindling, he'd build it up and warm himself.

For food, he picked edible mushrooms to begin with, then set simple snares and drag nooses to catch small animals, placed over trails or runs, attached to poles. These were large enough to comfortably pass over the creatures' heads, but then grew tighter as they struggled to get out. In his former life he might have felt some guilt about doing this, but it was a different world now. He was a different person. Plus which, he'd eaten meat all his life, hadn't he? Just never thought about where it came from. Now that was his responsibility, because Robert couldn't allow himself to become weak, not when the men might still come after him. He would also catch ducks and geese by the water, using a bolas - two stones connected by the twine and thrown, after some degree of practice, around the bird's necks to weigh them down. And he'd hunt small game with a sharpened spear, not throwing it as you might see in the movies, because that was a good way to lose the weapon, but jabbing at his prey. Then he'd cook whatever he could find over a spit beside the lean-to.

But the bow he used to light the fire gave him other ideas as well. Robert selected a hardwood -

dead, dry wood as opposed to greenwood - branch about two metres or so long that was relatively free from knots and limbs. With his knife, he scraped down the largest end so that it had the same pull as the smaller one. The wood had a natural curve to it and he was careful to scrape from the side facing him, knowing that otherwise it might snap the first time he used it. Robert spent ages attaching the twine and getting the pull of the bow just right. Moving on to the arrows, he used the straightest dry sticks he could find, scraping and straightening the shafts. For the arrowheads, he used sharpened stone - then attached feathers from his previous hunts to the shaft, notching the ends. In many respects all this was the easy part, because Robert only had limited experience with a bow and arrow, amounting to the handful of times he'd taken Stevie for archery lessons on holidays.

So he'd practised; for many hours. Drawing back the bow, letting the arrows fly into a target carved on a tree. To begin with Robert had been miles away from the trunk, let alone the target, but gradually his aim improved.

Just like darts... only with bigger arrows, he'd tell himself.

He recalled the day that he hit the bull's eye - he'd been determined to do it before the dark skies emptied their load. The sense of satisfaction was tremendous, and for a split second he'd almost forgotten where he was and how he came to be there, turning and expecting Joanne and Stevie to be behind him, clapping.

"Way to go, Dad, way to go."

"Quite the outdoorsman, now, aren't we?" Joanne's beautiful eyes were filled with love, not terror. Her smiling mouth not stained with blood anymore.

But all was quiet except for the usual sound of birdsong.

As the first spots of rain came down, Robert had hung his head, pulling the hood up. Then he'd returned to camp for the night, walking past the cloth catchments which were collecting the water.

Once again, the days blurred into each other - and Robert could only go by the fact that the grass on the once neatly-trimmed golf course and the parks was now knee-length, that the beard he'd begun growing was thick and bushy, that he'd had to begin stockpiling meat in the ice houses at Rufford, man-made stone buildings set into mounds of earth that would keep it chilled, and insulated by the soil. He'd busted off the barred doors to these and used them as his own personal larder.

The meat mainly came from sheep in the fields, in particular the shaggy Hebrideans that had been introduced to the scrubland before The Cull: easy, slow-moving targets. But he'd noticed that deer were running free now too in the woods, and this was a chance to really put his new-found skills with the bow to good use. The first time he'd attempted a kill, he'd completely messed it up, stumbling through the undergrowth like the most uncoordinated of bulls blundering into Ming vases, alerting the startled deer to his presence. Since that day, he'd learnt to be very stealthy, and adept at blending into his surroundings. He'd bagged more deer and sheep than he could remember, ensuring enough to eat through the past two winters at least; and enough skins and wool to keep him warm during the colder months.

But today he was hunting something altogether different. Something that was worth all the waiting, the crouching, the memories that had come flooding back. Because there, in the clearing, was the magnificent sight of a stag: its strong grey and white torso moving fluidly as it paused to sniff at the air.

Robert held his breath. It was the ultimate test of his hunting skills; one false move and he'd tip off his quarry. Through the long grass and ferns, he looked at the animal, and he was so sure it was looking back at him. All hunted creatures were aware of being watched - if only on a subconscious level - he'd observed. It was the same thing he'd seen when he was just about to give chase to a pickpocket or bootlegger. They'd make a break for it just a fraction of a second before spotting Robert. The trick was to be quicker than them.

If he was going to make his move, it had to be right now. Robert rose, breaking cover: the leaves, twigs, and branches he'd used to camouflage himself falling from his body. Though he'd been hunkered down low, unmoving all this time, his legs were far from stiff and his muscles held him steady. Simultaneously, he raised his bow, which could easily have been mistaken for another branch—another piece of camouflage, were it not for the taut twine attached to its length. Robert and the stag exchanged a glance, the merest of heartbeats and yet lasting forever.

Hunter and prey.

It was only during this time that he felt something akin to being alive again, felt a surge of energy that reminded him he wasn't just a shadow, simply a ghost of his former self.

But in this animal, he also recognised a kindred spirit; a once proud creature reduced to a victim by circumstance.

Robert lowered the bow, nodding to himself and to the stag. The animal stood there stunned for a second or two, not understanding how it could still be alive - the hunter had him in his sights. But it didn't question this for long, running off back into the woods; vanishing from sight.

Robert watched it go, knowing that another kill had never really been the purpose of this exercise. He didn't need any more meat, and didn't hunt just for sport - Robert didn't have a trophy room in the lean-to. They'd shared something in that one brief moment, the stag and him. Both knew what it was like to be on the run, what it was like to escape.

Above all else, both Robert and the stag knew that he could have taken that life, but chose not to.

All of which meant that the hunter, the hooded man, was still the victor.

And so it was his turn to disappear back into the trees.

CHAPTER THREE

How had this happened? How had they gone from being the hunters to the prey?

One minute, they'd been the top dogs around here, now they were facing a serious ultimatum. Granger still couldn't quite believe it, back to being pushed around again, just like when he was growing up. Back to following orders.

In the past it had been his mother's boyfriends issuing them, a succession of no-hopers who seemed to view him as their personal slave half the time. His mother said nothing to them, mainly because she did the same: *fetch me this, fetch me that, make us something to eat, get us something to drink*. And if he didn't comply immediately, he was looking at being beaten around the living room of their tiny council flat in Finchley. Granger might have blamed it on growing up without a father, except that particular 'role model' would probably have made things worse from what little he'd heard. That's if he could have stayed out of jail long enough.

None of the boyfriends had lasted, not once they'd got what they wanted out of Granger's mum: somewhere to stay rent free for a while and someone who wouldn't complain in the bedroom when they forced her to do the most depraved things. He could hear them at night, no matter how much he pulled the pillows up around his ears - the moans and the screams, and, sometimes, the crying afterwards. That was when he wanted to go to her, when he felt what you were supposed to feel for a mother. The last boyfriend, Jez, had been the worst of the lot. He'd even been dealing from their flat. And, once, when they were alone in the place together, Granger had said something back to Jez so he pulled a handgun on him, one of those customised replica imports from abroad.

"You're a smart kid, aren't you? Got a smart mouth... How smart are you now, eh? Eh?" he'd said, turning it on him. Granger closed his eyes, fully expecting the man to shoot. Luckily, his mother had come home at that moment, and Jez had tucked the gun quickly back away in his jeans.

It wasn't even as if school was an escape from what was going on. His teachers barked at him because he hadn't done his homework - especially his old French teacher, Mr Dodds. When did he even have time? Where was he supposed to work? As for the other kids, he never fitted in with them either. They all had their little gangs and they made it abundantly clear he wasn't welcome in any of them, pounding it into him when he didn't get the message. As for girls, well, who would look at him twice?

When he'd left home at sixteen, bailing as soon as he could to move into a shared digs only one step up from a squat - his mother's cries of "You ungrateful little sod!" still ringing in his ears - it had been the people down the dole office who'd lorded it over him. They sent him to interviews for jobs he so obviously wasn't qualified to do. Until, eventually, he'd been taken pity on. Hired as a labourer: paid peanuts for the privilege of being a dogsbody to the other workers on the building site.

"Hey, streaky bacon," a site manager called Mick always used to call across, in reference to Granger's gangly teenaged frame, "we're parched over here - fetch us another round of tea, will you. Come on, move your skinny arse!" Then, when he brought the tray across, they'd make fun of him again, getting him to pick up tools from the floor, then kicking him over. It was just a bit of fun, they said. That's all.

Granger used to wish they would drop dead; wished every last one of them would just drop dead, in fact.

He'd never expected his wish to come true.

People hacked and coughed in the streets, spraying blood over pavements, falling where they stood in some cases.

And while everyone else got sick from the disease they were calling the AB Virus, Granger finally got a break. Instead of coughing up blood, his actually saved him. Against his better judgement, he'd called round to see his mother while she was still alive... just. Even when she was dying, she'd ordered

him to fetch her stuff; bring pills so she could get better.

"There isn't anything that can do that," he'd told her.

"You... ack... you fetch me something right now you... ack... you fucking-"

"You ain't going to get better, Mum!" he said, finally losing his temper. "There isn't a medicine on this planet that can cure you. How d'you feel about that?"

She coughed and spat blood in his face, though whether it was intentional or not Granger didn't know.

"I'll be seeing you," he told her as he began walking out, knowing full well that he never would again. Then he'd gone to the bathroom and washed his face, drying it on the towel. It was as he was doing so that he noticed a shape behind the shower curtain. Granger jumped, but the thing didn't move. Slowly, he reached out and pulled back the plastic curtain. Jez was lying there in the bath, a needle sticking out of his arm and sticky redness dribbling from his mouth. He'd OD'd rather than face the final stages of the virus. Granger had seen plenty of dead bodies lately, but not up close like this. He shook his head, remembering what a bastard this man had been. Bending down, he cocked his head and whispered, "Who's the smart one now?" Then he lifted the body, checking the back of the man's jeans for the pistol he always kept about his person. Taking it, Granger had turned his back on Jez, his mother, and the place where he'd grown up.

To Granger's mind, he was at last reaping the rewards of years of misery. During The Culling Year when those in charge had attempted to stop the spread of the plague, there had been rich pickings for the likes of him. Rumours flew around of soldiers trying to take control, even of something big taking place on Salisbury Plain, but it hadn't affected Granger's plans. He'd moved relatively freely from place to place, taking whatever he liked from the shops, stuffing his pockets with money (it never occurred to him at the time that this would be useless later on) and generally having the time of his life... while everyone else was losing theirs.

And he encountered more like him, young men who saw opportunity in the wake of this new turn of events. Granger befriended a few - like Ennis, who he found working his way through the entire stock of beef burgers in a deserted McDonald's: it was where he'd used to work before it all hit the fan. Others he gently 'persuaded' to join him. Just having the pistol helped in that respect, though later they found all the weapons they needed when the men in yellow suits who were supposed to be cleaning up the streets came down with the virus too. Their numbers grew, all with a common goal - to help themselves to everything they'd been denied before. Granger finally had a gang to call his own and, though he knew there must be more in other parts of London, beyond that even, they ruled the roost in their little corner of the world. They called themselves 'The Jackals' and operated out of Barnet's council offices in Whetstone. Granger liked the irony of that; sticking it to the owners of his former home.

Girls, the ones that were left alive - and the ones who needed protection from other dangers on the streets these days - suddenly found Granger irresistible. Some of them were pretty good looking, as well, the kind he wouldn't have stood even the remotest chance with before.

At last they were the ones on top. None of them, especially Granger, would ever have to take another order or do as they were told ever again.

Or so they'd thought.

Then came the night of the attack. The first Granger knew about what was happening was when he got a garbled message over his walkie-talkie. It was Ennis, on watch outside, screaming that a bunch of men had come out of nowhere and taken down a handful of Jackals in one fell swoop. Granger, who was in the middle of making paper aeroplanes out of old council records, rushed to the window to see that Ennis was right.

Men on bikes were shooting at the building, making passes and picking off the Jackals on guard

duty downstairs. They were much better trained than his gang. Older too, nothing like the punks they fended off in the past.

"Ennis..." he shouted into the mouthpiece. "Ennis, get back inside and bring the rest of the guys with you! We'll hold them off from up here." But, even as he said it, he heard windows smashing from several different directions at once. The men were entering the building right now, giving them no time to prepare. Looking back, Granger would realise just how amateurish The Jackals had been - how much more they could have fortified the building in readiness for just such an attack. Though even then, he doubted whether they'd have stood a chance against merciless professionals like these.

Granger called to the rest of his 'men' further inside the open-plan office, telling them to group at the stairwell, just by the lift doors. There were hardly any replies.

By the time he got down there it was all over. Those Jackals who hadn't been shot were on their knees in the entranceway to the office itself, hands behind their heads. Yet more were being marched down the stairs, along with some of the girls who'd been keeping them company. Granger raised his pistol, the one he'd taken from Jez so long ago and which he always kept about him - mainly as a reminder that he would never be pushed around again.

Several automatic rifles swivelled in his direction, clacking, ready to fire. Granger's gun hand began to shake.

"Gentlemen... Gentlemen... Écoutez!" came a voice from the doorway. There was a distinct accent that Granger recognised from those French lessons with Mr Dodds. "Hold your fire. This is obviously the very person we have come here to speak with." The man the voice belonged to came forward. He had dark eyes, which bored into Granger, making him feel cold inside. He smoothed down his black and grey combats as if he were wearing a Savile Row suit.

"Get out," shouted Granger, his voice wavering. "Get out now or..." But he had nothing to back the threat up with.

The guy facing him, their leader - he could tell by the way he was carrying himself - smiled chillingly. "Oh, I believe we will stay for a while. Won't we?" he said to his men, and the closest half dozen - obviously his elite - nodded their heads. "After all, we have a lot to discuss."

Discuss? Granger couldn't see much room for manoeuvre in that department; it was a pretty clear-cut situation. This man had them by the balls. "What... what do you want?"

"What does any of us want?" answered the man. "Respect, loyalty... Fear."

They both knew he had the latter, and probably commanded the others through it. "I'm... I'm listening," Granger told him.

"Of course you are. All right, my proposition is simple," explained the man, taking off a pair of black leather gloves and revealing the rings on his fingers. "It's one I have put to several little 'operations' like yours, on the way to London and through it. Some listened. Some didn't."

Granger raised an eyebrow. "Proposition?"

"Yes. Un choix. You understand? A choice." He walked past one of the girls being held captive, who was only wearing a shirt, and ran a finger down her cheek. She flinched and he gave a small laugh, revealing hideously yellow teeth. Looking back over at Granger, he said, "You and your people can either join us or..."

"Or what?" Granger demanded, albeit half-heartedly, regretting this even as the words were tumbling from his mouth.

"Tanek?" called the leader to one of his men. The crowds parted and a huge, bulky soldier with olive skin and short hair stepped forward. Granger couldn't help thinking that he should drop the 'e' in his name and just go with 'Tank'. He held Ennis by the scruff of the neck, was practically carrying him like that, the boy's feet barely touching the floor.

"Granger... I'm sorry, I-" Tanek threw him down on the ground.

"Now," began the man wearing the smart combats, "show our friend here what the alternative to joining us would be."

Tanek unhooked the crossbow that was dangling on a strap from his shoulder, and aimed the weapon at Ennis's head.

"No!" shouted Granger, raising his pistol.

There was a nod from their leader, and Tanek turned in Granger's direction. Quicker than anything he'd ever seen in his life, the larger man had fired, the bolt catching Granger's gun hand, sending the pistol flying out of his grasp and then pinning his hand to the wall. He shrieked in pain as the bolt drove itself through his palm. Tanek then turned the crossbow - so unusual in its design, not needing to be reloaded it seemed - back on Ennis. He looked up pleadingly at Granger, then the bolt was fired directly into his head.

Granger howled, the pain in his hand forgotten for a moment. His friend, his 'second in command' was dead. The girl in the shirt was shaking and crying, the other members of The Jackals - how stupid that name sounded now - gawked at Ennis's body in disbelief.

"You bastard!" Granger spat.

The man in combats pointed to his chest with one finger, like it had nothing to do with him. "You asked. We gave a demonstration. As simple as that." His accent grew thicker with each word. "Now, what you have to ask yourself is, can we get past this and work together?"

Work together? He had to be joking. After what he'd just done to Ennis... But Granger knew what the option was. When this man had said there was a choice, he'd been lying. Really there was no choice at all.

"So, your answer, if you please." The man clasped his hands behind his back, tapping one booted foot. "I am waiting."

Granger, still in agony from the bolt in his palm, hung his head, nodding.

"Excellent, then allow me to introduce myself. My name is De Falaise. My aim is to bring order to this country, oui? Like your comrades here, England is on its knees. I intend to offer it the same choice I gave you: a killing blow or the chance to serve."

Granger stared at him; this guy was insane.

"Myself and my men are heading north," De Falaise continued, visibly enjoying his speech. "As my ancestors recognised, the seat of true power is not the capital at all. That, mon ami, is just for the tourists. It is from another place entirely that we will expand. We will reach out to every corner of the island, crushing any form of resistance. You are now a part of my army, making history, as it was once made long ago. In years to come people will look back on this moment as the start of something truly wondrous."

He actually believes what he's saying, thought Granger. *He wants to become like the King of England or something...* But then, stranger things had happened. And wasn't it only what Granger himself had done on a smaller scale? Hadn't this been his kingdom until De Falaise came along? Now instead, he was one of the subjects in another man's realm - or maybe even the fool?

De Falaise returned Granger's stare. "So, do we understand each other?"

Granger nodded reluctantly again.

"Then answer me."

"Yes," Granger whispered. "We understand each other."

"Louder."

Granger gritted his teeth then raised his voice. "I said we understand each other."

De Falaise grinned. "Good." He reached up and yanked the bolt out of the wall, and Granger's palm. The younger man screamed again as blood flowed freely from the wound. "You may want to bandage that before we set off."

Granger, breath coming in hisses, gasped: "S-Set... Set off?"

~~"That is correct. We leave for the army base at Hendon within the next half hour,"~~ De Falaise informed Granger, then told the rest of them: "Make yourselves ready."

As his men escorted The Jackals out, Tanek joined De Falaise standing in front of Granger. De Falaise handed the bloody bolt back to its owner, who wiped it with a cloth. "Do you know, I can see this being the start of a beautiful business arrangement, non?"

Granger sneered at him and De Falaise laughed.

He laughed long and hard, almost until it was time to leave the council offices at Whetstone.

CHAPTER FOUR

At first he thought they had come for him, finally.

Robert was aware of voices before he saw the group of men. They were skirting the edge of that particular section of woodland, about seven or eight of them in total. He'd been checking some of his snares when the sound of their talking carried to him. Robert had frozen. He hadn't heard another human voice in as long as he could remember - not since the men in the yellow suits...

"You must be O-Neg... Completely immune, you lucky bastard..."

"He's too valuable..."

"Get him!"

Surely they couldn't have tracked him down after all this time? There would be a certain irony to it if they had. If the hunter was again being hunted.

Leaving the looping trap, and stuffing the last wild rabbit into his skin-pouch, he'd moved swiftly and silently along the edge of the wood, before climbing up a tree to gain a better view. The first time he'd tried this it had been like being a kid again, doing something forbidden, and he heard his late mother's words in his head: *"Come down from there at once, Robert, before you really hurt yourself!"*

There was a part of him that wanted to get hurt this time, wanted to get hurt severely, in fact. Fall down and crack his skull open; wouldn't that be nice? But there was just as big a part of him that really didn't want to break his back and not be able to move, laying there dying slowly. Not a good end.

Better than Joanne's. Better than Stevie's.

It was like the bow and arrow: the more times he'd done it, the better he'd become. Now, Robert was so used to it, he could scale even the largest of oaks. Up through the branches he went; strong hands, roughened by the elements, hauled him higher and higher. The tips of his boots found notches and ridges, much like a mountain climber scaling a rock face.

When he was high enough, he looked down at the scene. It was then that he actually saw the men. No yellow plastic suits, no gas masks or flamethrowers. Just blokes dressed in ordinary clothes, if a little the worse for wear: trousers, shirts, some in jumpers. They were carrying bags, had backpacks slung over shoulders. They knew each other well, were chatting and... yes, even laughing once or twice. Robert's eyes scanned the men but he could see no sign of rifles, automatic or otherwise. Which begged the question, who were they and where were they going?

He decided to find out. Call it a policeman's curiosity, which he didn't even know he still had, or an attempt to find out as much as he could about a potential enemy. Whichever way you looked at it, he was on the move.

Robert leaped from one tree to the next, trailing the men at height until they headed out across a field. If he wanted to know where they were going now, Robert had to break cover and follow on foot. But this didn't mean exposing his position. The men would still have no idea he was behind them.

As he crested a small hill, Robert saw where they were making for. In a big field just off the road, folk were gathering in fairly large numbers - large for post-virus times at any rate. Dozens of them: men, women and children. Some brought sacks, some trunks, some holdalls. From his hiding position behind a hedgerow, Robert noticed there were a couple of cars, a couple of vans, but these were few and far between. He guessed petrol was a rare commodity these days, with nobody to keep refilling pumps, without anyone to bring it over from abroad.

Some had reverted to using horses for transportation. Robert watched as a woman dismounted her steed, swinging a bag down as she went. Set up here and there were makeshift tables, trays with legs, or blankets laid on the ground. People were getting things out of their bags to place on these, arranging them carefully.

My God! It's a bloody car boot sale. Robert thought to himself. To his surprise, he found the corner

of his mouth curling up. *An honest to goodness car boot sale!*

Only there weren't enough 'car boots' to justify the name. It was more like a market, just not as well laid out as those in Mansfield. The purpose was the same, however. Except Robert saw that here the traders were swapping items rather than paying money for them. In this 'society' what use were coins and bits of paper with the Queen's head on them? This part of England, at least, appeared to have regressed back to the barter system. Having seen nothing of his fellow man in an age, Robert was suddenly engrossed in the unfolding dramas; the flurry of activity as people from miles around gathered to do business. He'd completely forgotten what it was like to be in the proximity of other human beings, to have that contact with them. Was there a part of him now that missed it? No, it was better that he shut himself away, pretended the rest of the world didn't exist. Live out the remainder of his life ignorant of how the human race was getting along. It had no need for him and vice-versa.

But the same twist of fate that had saved him, killing the two most important people to him in the process, had other ideas.

Robert had been so distracted by the ad hoc market, he didn't notice the man behind him until it was too late.

"What ye doin' skulking about there?" said a voice with a thick, Derbyshire accent. "Aye, you there - you with the hood on. Get up and turn yessen around. And don't get any funny ideas about that bow yer carryin'."

Robert rose slowly, trying to stop himself from shaking. Was it fear or just excitement at being addressed after so long, at having someone other than a wild animal acknowledge his existence? He heard the distinctive click-clack of a gun being primed for action. And, sure enough, when he turned around, he was greeted with the sight of a man - early 40s, though he might have been younger, it was hard to tell after what he must have gone through in the past couple of years - and he was holding up a double-barrelled shotgun. It was a farmer's weapon, probably wielded by an ex-farmer. There'd certainly been enough of them round these parts. The ruddy complexion had faded somewhat, but Robert could tell that he must still spend a lot of his time outside. The pigeon-chested man wore a checked shirt beneath a tank top with holes in it, his trousers were loose as if he'd lost weight, and his boots had definitely seen better days.

"I'll say it again. What ye doin' spying back here?"

Robert said nothing, not even when the man lifted the shotgun higher, not quite aiming at him, but not pointing it away, either. Robert held up his hands to show he meant him no harm.

"What's a matter, can't ye speak or summat? Bit slow, eh?"

Robert shook his head to indicate that there was nothing wrong with his faculties. It had just been so long since he'd spoken, he wasn't even sure if he could anymore. Carefully, he began to reach across into his open coat.

"Keep yer hands where I can see 'em," instructed the man, moving forward.

"I..." began Robert. The sensation of talking felt odd; alien even. The look of shock on his face must have registered, because the man frowned.

"Just what's yer game? We don't want no trouble at the market."

"No game. No trouble," Robert assured him. With each word, his voice grew stronger. "I've just come along to trade."

"That so?"

"It is. If you'll let me...?" Robert reached into his coat again, very slowly, the shotgun trained on him the whole time. "Easy... easy... See, in my pouch."

The man drew nearer to get a better look. "Rabbits?"

"Rabbits," repeated Robert.

Then the 'farmer' began to laugh: long, hard chuckles that caused his frame to shake. "Oh, that's a

good un," he said eventually. "Rabbits... Judas Priest! What yer thinking of swappin' for them scrawn devils?"

Robert shrugged, pulling down his hood. "Whatever I can."

Lowering his shotgun, the other man wiped the tears from his eyes. "Aye, I'd be interested to see it an' all. Well, come on. Let's take yer down there, then, before all the best bargains are gone."

For a second, Robert hesitated, the very thought of meeting, of mixing with that number of people was terrifying. What if the men after him should happen by? "Is... is it safe?" asked Robert.

The man frowned. "Safe? What yer talkin' about?"

He didn't have a choice, he had to ask. "The... the men in yellow suits. The ones who set fire to the bodies."

He looked at Robert like he was insane. "Where yer bin, on Mars or somethin'?"

"Something," admitted Robert.

"They haven't bin round for ages, that lot. Not since the early days."

"What happened to them?"

"Dead," said the man, his face stern. "Like everyone else."

"So there was no cure?"

"Cure?" He laughed again, but there was a bitterness to it this time. "There were never any cure. Look, are ye comin' to the market or not? I haven't got all day."

Robert gave a small nod, and they began to walk across the field. The closer they came, the more he wanted to run - even though he knew the fear was irrational.

What if he's wrong - what if they're still out there somewhere, looking for you?

You heard what he said, they're all dead. Only the O-Negs are left. It's the grand total of the human race.

But...

"So, yer a poacher?" the man said, interrupting Robert's argument with himself. He nodded at the bow to emphasise what he meant.

"Can you poach something that doesn't belong to anyone anymore?"

"I meant before, like?"

"Not exactly," Robert said. *And you wouldn't believe me if I told you.*

They were nearly at the market and Robert could feel all eyes turning upon him. He wasn't a regular here, and everyone knew it. It was the same feeling as when he used to enter an unfamiliar neighbourhood to make an arrest.

"Well, 'ere we are then," said the man. "My name's Bill, by the way. Bill Locke." He stuck out his hand and Robert examined it for a moment before looking back up at his face. Such a simple act of humanity, of friendship, and it threw him completely. Then he reached out and shook it. The man's grip was rough and firm, once again emphasising that he'd worked with his hands all his life; Robert couldn't compete with that - too many years of domestic bliss before embracing the wild.

He noticed the man was waiting for something, then realised he hadn't told him his own name. "I'm..." I was... *I used to be a man called Stokes. But what am I now? Who am I now?* "They call me Robert."

"How do then, Rob."

Bill finished pumping his hand, then let him go. Robert noticed that the people in the market seemed to accept him more now that they'd seen the handshake. Whatever Bill did here, whether it was organise the events, provide security, or simply trade, he was well respected.

Robert looked around at what was on offer. On one stall there was hand-made pottery, plates and cups; on another knitwear. A young woman of about twenty was selling these, but Robert imagined some old lady with O-Neg blood, sat somewhere knitting with whatever wool they could get her. And

there were piles of other clothing, manufactured before The Cull: no dresses and skirts for women now, though, only more practical fare like trousers and jackets. One man had axes, knives, hammers, tools of various sizes and shapes - set out in front of him, obviously scavenged from hardware shops. A few batteries caught Robert's eye, mainly because he hadn't seen anything even remotely technological in so long. He found medical supplies on another blanket, antiseptics, pills - some identifiable, some not - plasters and bandages. There were suitcases, haversacks and holdalls, which at first he thought were just what the items had been carried here in, but then he saw people bartering for these, too.

There were tins of food, just like the ones Joanne had stockpiled and on which he'd lived after his family had died, but there was more fresh food to be found than anything else. Fruit and vegetables, which looked more appetising than anything he'd ever seen in a supermarket. Someone had taken the time growing these: ripe tomatoes, apples, runner beans, potatoes, most of them sold by a willowy woman with auburn hair. Very few pieces of fruit from more exotic climes, Robert noted, such as bananas or oranges. Hardly surprising now that there were fewer people to bring them in from overseas (*and just what was happening over there anyway - were they in the same state as this country?*). Everything here smacked of a survival instinct he could relate to, of human beings making do in the face of adversity. The ones that were left behind were obviously slowly forming communities of their own. He could tell that by the handfuls that had been sent to represent them at the market.

The meat - pork, beef and chicken - looked mouth-wateringly good, and now Robert understood why Bill had laughed when he showed him the rabbits. They weren't even skinned or properly prepared. Maybe next time he could bring some tastier treats from the ice houses.

Next time? What the hell was he thinking about... Robert couldn't come back here again. Couldn't allow himself to get drawn into the world again, to make friends, to talk with other people. Even if it were true and the men in those gas masks were no longer a problem, he still had his waiting to do, was still sworn to live out the rest of his life - however long or short that was - alone.

"Your first time here, huh?" said someone to the left of him. Lost in his thoughts, Robert gave a start. Then he looked over and his mouth dropped open.

Stevie?

He blinked once, twice, then saw the reality of who was in front of him.

The boy was twelve or thirteen, with a scruffy mop of hair that had once been blond - possibly could be again given a proper wash - and deep green eyes. He was wearing a baggy tracksuit, with a belt round the middle that had numerous pockets attached. He looked like he was playing superhero, but Robert knew full well that every single pocket would be filled with something important. The lad had a rucksack slung over his shoulder, which appeared to be full.

Robert opened his mouth, then closed it again, having completely forgotten what the kid had said.

"I haven't seen you here before," he continued, not put off by Robert's silence. The boy looked him up and down. "Would've remembered you, that's for sure. You have much to trade?"

Robert shook his head.

"That's a pity. It's a good market today, lots on offer. Isn't always that way, you know. Have to make the most of it while you can. I'm Mark, by the way."

Again, Robert just gaped at him. Was there a resemblance, or was it just in his head? True, Mark had a similar hair-tone, but his eyes were a different colour and he was much thinner, the cheekbones less padded with puppy fat.

"Who you here with, Mark?"

"What do you mean?"

"Your parents-" began Robert, then kicked himself when Mark looked down. Of course they were

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