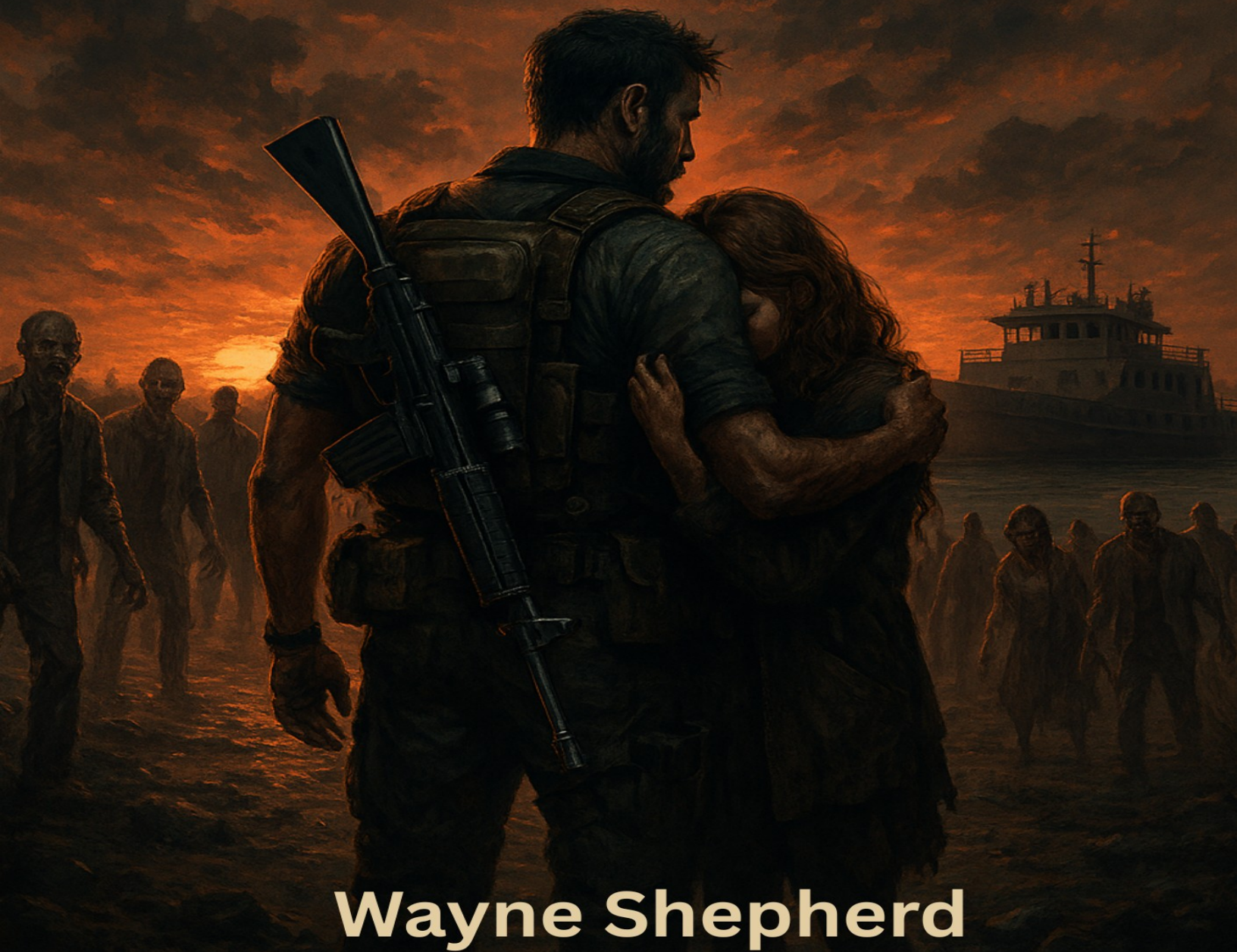


SOLOMON'S FURY

SHORES OF THE END



Wayne Shepherd

SOLOMON'S FURY

Shores Of The End

WAYNE SHEPHERD

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Content Warning:

This novel contains horror themes, graphic violence, and vague references to sexual violence, including rape. Reader discretion is advised.

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*To my mother, who gave me the gift of stories and showed me how
to love them.*

*And to my family, whose patience, support, and occasional eye-
rolls made this book possible.*

Note to the Reader

Thank you for choosing to read this book. As an independent author and self-publisher, I am committed to continuously improving my work. In this edition, I have corrected several errors and made clarifications based on feedback from readers of earlier versions.

If you spot anything I may have missed, I welcome your input for future updates. Your support and understanding mean a great deal.

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The Pale Beast

Ambalavato, Madagascar, was a place where three rich biomes intersected. There were mountains to the south, rainforest to the north and east, and plains to the west. The people of Ambalavato mostly still lived by the old ways and traditions. They were superstitious—worshiping ancestral spirits and fearing the things that lurked out there in the darkness.

Ravo, barely sixteen, stood next to a cluster of Madagascar palms growing atop the cliff in front of the cave where he and his grandfather, Raoult, lived. He looked down the steep terrain at the village below.

Only those with the keenest eyesight could pick out the hints of modernity among the thatched huts and rustic farmland: the steel implements used for farming and raising cattle—things they had traded for with the outside world to make their lives just a small bit easier. Even then, their lives were still hard.

A rustling in the underbrush of the jungle beyond the village caught his attention. A group of hunters emerged from the rainforest. They appeared jovial and festive. Several hunters had lemurs and a small boar slung over their shoulders, but two of them carried a stick between them. From the stick hung a massive beast the likes of which Ravo had never seen. His eyes widened, and he rushed back into the cave.

"Grandfather... you must come."

His grandfather, who raised cattle and also held the position of the town's medicine man, had been napping on his woven cot next to the fire. He woke with a start and sat upright, rubbing his eyes.

"What is it, Ravo?"

"The hunters have returned, and they have killed some sort of beast—unlike anything I have ever seen. We must go down to the village and see what it is," Ravo answered excitedly.

Raoult yawned and placed a hand in the small of his back. He raised the other hand. "Give me a moment." He lifted a jug of water, took a long drink, and wiped his mouth. "Let's go." He motioned for Ravo to get moving.

They picked their way down the arduous trail that ended in the center of the village. It took a while, with Raoult's frail body not wanting to cooperate.

The hunters had a small crowd gathered around them, gawking at their catch. Ravo worked his way through the crowd and pushed to the front. When he saw the creature, he gasped audibly. It was large and muscular, with thick white fur and a face that, at first glance, looked like a dog's—

but it also had the wide nostrils of a pig. The creature's eyes were open, dark pools with blood spilling out and coating its coarse, matted fur. There was smeared blood around its mouth and nostrils. Its mouth held some of the largest and sharpest teeth Ravo had ever seen.

His eyes widened, and he became animated as he turned to the hunters and villagers. "You mustn't eat the creature."

There were groans of disapproval, and someone asked, "Why is that, Ravo?"

He puffed out his skinny chest. "Remember the warning from our ancestors, the one Grandfather taught us: Beware the pale beast that carries the breath of the undead."

Raoult stepped forward. He allowed his hand to hover over the creature but wouldn't dare touch it. His eyes grew wide with realization. "Ravo is right!" He raised a hand into the air. "This beast will curse the village. You must take it far from here, out beyond the baobab trees, and burn it on an altar to the gods." He looked around at the crowd. "We are all in grave danger due to its presence here."

The largest and fiercest hunter, Manda, stepped forward. He looked at Ravo and then Raoult. He placed his hand atop the creature's head and said, "We conquered this beast. Now you know we must eat it to take its spirit."

It was their tradition that not only did you get sustenance from the meat of an animal, but you also took on the attributes of its spirit. If the animal was strong, it gave you strength. If it was fast, it made you faster. Whatever spirit the beast had, it passed on to those who ate it.

Raoult shook his head. "No... please. I will give you one of my cattle to eat—a strong bull—and you can offer the beast as a sacrifice, like I said."

Manda considered it. He looked at the other hunters. The beast had been ferocious, and they had all been injured in the fight to kill it. In his mind's eye, he saw its strength, speed, and power. He became hungry for it—not for the meat, but for its spirit. A quiet agreement passed between the hunters.

"I am sorry, Raoult. We must do this."

Ravo looked at the hunters and noticed that more than one looked a shade paler than normal. One was visibly shaking as he held a piece of cloth to a wound on his wrist. Ravo grew afraid then. He was going to protest, but he knew they wouldn't listen. He took his grandfather's arm and whispered, "Let's go home and stay there, please. We don't want any part of this."

Raoult took another look at the beast. He then nodded to Manda. "What happens next is on your shoulders. You have been warned." He turned to Ravo and said, "Let's go."

A great feast was held that night in the village. The pale beast, the boars, and the lemurs were being roasted over a massive fire—the savory smell of cooked flesh wafted up to the caves. Ravo's stomach lurched, and his heart sank. He and his grandfather had eaten a meal of roasted locusts with herbs earlier and washed it down with warm milk. He was still hungry, always hungry at his age, but he didn't dare move from where he sat watching.

Screams woke Ravo in the middle of the night. He had fallen asleep leaning against the entrance to the cave. The fire in the cave had died down to embers, and a gentle smoke wafted by him and out into the darkness. Ravo listened carefully to the sounds carried to him by the wind: pleas for help, screams of agony and terror. It was too dark in the village for him to see what was happening from his position—but he didn't need to see to know that it was horrific.

"Ravo?" His grandfather called out, causing him to jump. "What is happening?"

"The curse, Grandfather. It is true," he answered.

They stayed in the cave for the next three days, surviving on insects, stale water, and spoiled milk, as the spirit of the undead traveled from one villager to the next. And when there were no more victims for the newly undead to devour, the undead began to wander off in different directions, searching for more prey.

Ravo and Raoult waited two more full days after the last of the undead had gone before they climbed down from the cliff and headed into the jungle.

A Little Help

“Fire, damn it!” Segun Ayanda, a sergeant chief in the Madagascar Ground Forces, called out. The undead were pouring out of the village of Fenoarivo like water—which was ironic, because the name of the village roughly translated to Full of Blessings. Some of his men had run their magazines dry shooting at the approaching undead, who didn’t seem to be affected in the slightest.

They were slow, but the undead were relentless, causing his men to walk backward slowly as they fired. Segun had witnessed one of the undead fall and stay down when a corporal shot it in the head—accidentally—after tripping in a hole, which caused his aim to waver. Segun immediately ordered his men to hold their fire, then gave the command, “Take your time and aim for their heads.”

There were too many of the undead, and they were growing dangerously close to his troops, so Segun gave the next command. “Fall back to the trucks!”

His men—the bravest of the brave under normal circumstances—turned in terror and ran. They climbed into the backs of the high trucks to escape their pursuers and to resume their assault from an elevated position.

The village was densely populated, and it was like shooting into the ocean as they rained down bullets on the infected villagers. Some made it to the trucks and were pounding their palms and fists violently against the sides.

“Sergeant Chief, look!” a no-rank soldier shouted, pointing toward the sky.

Segun shielded his eyes as a plane passed high overhead, spilling out black dots behind it. He watched, fascinated, as the dots grew larger—parachutes, descending.

“The American Special Forces!” he exclaimed, the realization hitting him. He had been told earlier that morning by the sergeant major that they would be coming to the region, but he hadn’t realized they would arrive so soon—or at his location.

No sooner had the Green Beret paratroopers—who wore oxygen masks—landed from their high-altitude, low-opening (HALO) jump from a C-130 Hercules aircraft than they began to form up and engage the undead without hesitation. Their weapons were advanced, and they wore helmets and optics Segun had only seen in movies—and secretly dreamed about. When they fired, their weapons were silent, and they moved together straight at the undead like a well-oiled machine. Between his own troops and the American Special Forces team, they eliminated all of the undead from Fenoarivo in no time at all.

One of the paratroopers approached the trucks afterward. He scanned Segun's men until his eyes met Segun's.

He removed his helmet. "You must be Sergeant Chief Ayanda," he said. "My name is Captain Manny Rodriguez. I was wondering if my men and I could catch a ride with you—twenty miles southeast of here. Brigadier General Mamadou Ese told my boss, Major Penning, that you guys might need a little help, so here we are."

Segun was quiet for a moment, processing the request and his current situation.

Captain Rodriguez spoke up again. "We can hoof it to the next destination if we have to, but I'd rather not..."

Segun narrowed his eyes at the captain, then his face split into a toothy grin. "Why not?" he bellowed. "It's the least I can do. How many of you are there?"

"Twenty-four," Captain Rodriguez replied.

Segun nodded. "It'll be a tight fit, but we can get you where you need to go. Tell your men to hop in."

"Thank you very much, Sergeant Chief," Captain Rodriguez said. Then he turned to his men.

"Let's move!"

Camp Lima

Major Penning shook his head side to side, slapped a mosquito, and yelled, “Corporal Johnson, would you please shoot that fucking zombie over there at the fence?”

The young corporal, who had been setting up a generator with two other soldiers, startled and snapped to attention. “Sir, yes, sir!”

He grabbed his rifle, fumbled with it for a moment, and then turned to scan for the target. When he saw the zombie, he shuddered. Its face was torn open, revealing its tongue, which flicked in and out of the mangled opening. Its one good eye was laser-focused on his group. He swallowed hard, aimed carefully, and squeezed the trigger. The rifle cracked, and the zombie’s head jerked back. It slid into a lifeless pile against the wire.

“Good job... Corporal Johnson. You men need to pay better attention to what’s happening around you. Keep your head on a fucking swivel. Do you understand?” Major Penning said firmly.

The soldiers all snapped, “Sir, yes, sir!”

“Now, Corporal Johnson, go tell the Bravo Unit we’ve got another corpse here for them to process,” Major Penning ordered.

The corporal barked another “Sir, yes, sir!” and then took off toward the huge red tent with the biohazard symbols emblazoned all over it.

Major Penning looked around the camp. It was buzzing with activity as soldiers erected tents, set up generators, and filled HESCO barriers and sandbags. Camp Lima—the name given to the new base—was coming along nicely.

He wiped a hand over his face and slapped another mosquito. He took a deep breath. He was having trouble accepting his new reality—where fucking zombies existed. It seemed like only yesterday that General John Brickston, head of USSOCOM (US Special Operations Command), had contacted him and asked him to go to a farming village in the middle of nowhere in Madagascar to evaluate an unusual outbreak. That was a fucking understatement.

When he arrived—with two members of his team—after a globe-hopping flight to a hole-in-the-wall airport, they had been met by members of the Madagascar Armed Forces, who took them on a long, bumpy ride to their final destination. The tiny village (which didn’t even have a name)...

The village consisted mostly of thatched huts, with a couple of shabby concrete buildings topped with tin roofs. Inside one of the concrete buildings, a small clinic had been set up by a Christian missionary medical organization. He had been led straight to the clinic to see a patient strapped down to a cot.

The major's breath had caught in his throat. The patient was obviously dead—his skin a light blue color, his eyes pools of black. Dark purple veins rose beneath the surface of his translucent skin. His mouth, nostrils, and eyelids were ringed with bruised hues of purple.

A short, chubby, and overly sweaty doctor named Paul Atkins, from Michigan, spoke up. "His name is Manda. A young kid named Ravo followed him here to the village. He convinced some of the village men to help him restrain and bring him to the clinic. That wasn't an easy task, let me tell you..." The doctor pushed his glasses up his nose. "It's the damndest thing—he has no vitals whatsoever. No pulse, no oxygen, no heartbeat. Nothing. He's clinically dead, but as you can see..." He laughed nervously and rolled up his sleeve to reveal a nasty wound. "He's still trying to bite everyone who even comes close to him."

The major and his team had given the patient a full workup with the mobile lab equipment they had brought with them, and he had sent samples back to the CDC in Atlanta. Everything confirmed they were dealing with something that shouldn't exist.

While waiting on the CDC results, the major had interviewed the young man, Ravo, and—using an interpreter—had listened to the origin story. The thing that stuck with him most was that the infected villagers had scattered in all directions. That meant the infection was likely to spread and could get out of control very quickly.

He had immediately made a video call to General Brickston—giving his report. In response, the general had sent supplies and reinforcements: eighty soldiers and twenty-four Green Berets to establish Camp Lima. The Madagascar Ground Forces had added two hundred troops to go to Ambalavato—where it all started—and scour the region for the missing villagers.

"Sir..."

Major Penning snapped back to the present. Corporal Johnson stood in front of him, smelling heavily of the disinfectant used in the containment tent.

"Yes, Corporal Johnson, what is it?" he asked, feeling foolish that he had done the very thing he had reprimanded his men for—allowing someone to sneak up on him.

"Sir, I did as you said, sir. Is there anything else you need, sir?" The corporal stood at attention.

"At ease. No, Corporal Johnson. Go back to what you were doing," he replied.

After the corporal left, he realized he was absolutely exhausted and decided to go to his quarters and take a nap, since he had been burning the candle at both ends since arriving.

Later that night, Major Penning stood outside his quarters, feeling refreshed from his nap and a quick meal. He sipped black coffee.

He stared out into the night. Just beyond the camp's perimeter fence, the forest loomed. Thick, tangled brush pressed in like a wall, and even with the firelight from the burn barrels and the portable flood lamps that dotted the camp, visibility beyond a few hundred feet past the fence was terrible. He hated it. He'd seen jungles before—operated in worse places, for sure—but this one... it was different. He couldn't shake the feeling that something was out there, watching them.

A loud growl crackled through the radio clipped to his shoulder.

“Camp Lima, this is Echo Patrol—be advised, we have movement in the trees, north of your position. Nothing is showing up on infrared.”

Major Penning frowned. He grabbed the mic. “Copy that, Echo. Do not engage. Fall back to our position.”

The major didn't want an international incident if those under his command were overly trigger-happy. For all they knew, a group of hunters or curious villagers from a nearby community might be passing by. He scratched his head. That didn't explain the lack of infrared signatures.

He motioned to a nearby sergeant. “Sergeant, wake up the quick reaction team. Get the drones back up. I want eyes over Echo's current location five minutes ago.”

The sergeant nodded and bolted. Penning turned back to the tree line, his jaw clenched.

A scream—blood-curdling, horrific—pierced the night. Gunfire. More screams.

He keyed his mic. “Camp Lima calling Echo—report!”

There was static—no response.

“Camp Lima calling Echo—report!”

Again. No response.

He rushed to meet the quick response team. “Echo is not responding.”

The gruff sergeant in charge of the quick response team replied, “Sir, let us go get 'em.”

Penning frowned. “Wake Delta Team for support. I don't doubt your tenacity, but we don't know what we're dealing with.”

More gunfire... it was closer. Someone from Echo was doing cover fire.

“Put a rush on it,” he added.

“Major!” someone shouted from behind him. He turned. It was one of the doctors from Bravo Team. They almost gave him a fucking heart attack.

“What is it? I have a little situation here...” he replied tersely.

The doctor was pale under the lighting. His hands were shaking, and he wiped his forehead with a sweat-soaked sleeve.

“Sorry. I was told to report my findings to you. We’ve been running tests non-stop trying to identify the cause of this ‘condition.’ We found something in the brain tissue—its structure appears to be viral-like, but it’s like nothing we’ve ever seen on Earth before.”

“It’s not a virus?” Penning asked.

“We don’t know what it is, to be honest. It is something... alien.”

Penning nodded. “Alright... thanks for the update.”

He watched as the quick response team and Delta Team exited the gates and rushed toward Echo’s last known location. Feeling helpless, he yelled, “Where the hell are the drones?”

MaxPhilco Shipyard

Solomon Phillips set down the two cinder blocks he was carrying onto the low scaffolding, where two masons were busy laying blocks. He stepped back, took the kerchief from his back pocket, and wiped the sweat from his brow, admiring the masons' progress. They were working quickly on the new reception area for his shipyard.

Herman, the older of the two masons, stopped working, cupped a hand to shield his eyes from the sun, and looked over the top of the wall. He pointed east with his trowel and said grimly, "Hey, boss—you might want to take a look."

Solomon grabbed his T-shirt from the nearby scaffolding, pulled it over his head, and walked over to the doorway. He looked out.

"Shit," he muttered under his breath. Then he went back to the scaffolding, retrieved his handheld radio, and spoke into it.

"Billy! Someone opened the gates and let the protesters inside the fence."

"Be right there!" Billy responded. Billy was Solomon's best friend and head of security. He moved quickly from a nearby construction trailer, where he had been eating his lunch in the air-conditioning. He met Solomon with his pistol drawn and ready.

The protesters saw Solomon as he exited the building, and several were now sprinting down MaxPhilco Shipyard's long asphalt drive, flanked by fences on each side. Others followed behind, shouting and waving signs. Solomon clapped a hand on Billy's shoulder.

"I'm sick of this shit..." he sighed. "Just hold position next to me and let me handle them."

Although he intended to handle the problem diplomatically, he wore a back brace that doubled as a holster—a small nine-millimeter tucked in the side beneath his shirt. He touched it, a silent signal to Billy, then put on his biggest smile and started walking to greet the protesters.

The first protester to reach him was a pasty, flabby man in his thirties with a ponytail. He wore sandals, shorts, and a shirt with a graphic depicting an elf. He was at least a head shorter than Solomon's six-foot-six-inch frame. Still, Solomon raised his palms in the universal sign for peace, but the protester had other plans. He screamed something unintelligible, raised his sign, and brought it down in a fast chopping motion at Solomon's head.

Solomon didn't enjoy fighting—he would cross the street to avoid one. That being said, his fighting philosophy was based on a simple paradigm: Action—reaction.

He swiveled instantly out of the way of the protester's oncoming strike and countered with a powerful blow to the man's solar plexus. The protester's eyes rolled back in his head and he collapsed hard to the pavement—his sign clattering across the ground.

Action—reaction.

A second protester, middle-aged and overweight, threw down his sign and pulled out a fancy knife—the kind wannabe tough guys buy at gas stations or flea markets. No serious fighter would be caught dead with a toy like that, Solomon thought, arching an eyebrow.

He called out, “Drop the knife. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

The armed protester scoffed. “Mother Nature says ‘screw you,’ asshole!” He took a step forward. “Drop the knife!” This time the command came from Billy, his pistol now aimed directly at the man.

Other protesters began to flank the knife-wielding man, shouting encouragement.

“Kill him! Stab him! Just do it!”

The man’s expression changed, and he charged. He made it two steps before two gunshots cracked through the air in a deadly staccato. The first shot punched a hole in the protester’s chest; the second tore through his shoulder. He collapsed to his knees, eyes glazed over in death, the knife clattering to the ground as he fell backward in an awkward, lifeless arc.

Solomon heard the distinctive rack of a pistol slide—someone else cocking a gun. A woman was raising a pistol at him from the front of the crowd.

No hesitation.

Action—reaction.

Solomon rolled forward, gravel scraping his back. He grabbed the fancy knife, came up to one knee, and in one smooth motion, aimed and hurled it at the woman. He’d intended it as a distraction while he drew his pistol, but the blade buried itself deep in her throat. She gurgled, blood spraying. Half her face disappeared an instant later when Billy shot her. She hit the ground hard in a lifeless pile, her weapon skittering away from her now-dead hands.

I’ll be damned. That fancy knife actually worked, Solomon thought. He drew his pistol and stood up tall and erect.

The rest of the protesters—some now covered in blood spatter and gore—broke and ran.

The heavy doors of one of the shipyard warehouses slammed open, and more than a dozen armed men in tactical gear poured out, weapons ready. They had been running a training drill inside the warehouse and now sprinted to support their charge, Solomon—some surrounding, others giving chase.

They tackled and apprehended the fleeing protesters, binding their wrists and ankles with ratchet ties.

Solomon turned to one of the men. “Timmy, get to the guardhouse and check on the security guard Ernie. Close the gates and find out why the hell they were opened in the first place.”

“Yes, sir!” Timmy nodded and jogged down the driveway, pistol still in hand.

“We need to call the police,” Solomon stated the obvious. He suddenly felt claustrophobic with his security team flanking him so tightly.

He turned toward his office, which was on the fourth floor of the rectangular office building, his entourage trailing behind. He whispered to Billy, “This is going to be a damned media nightmare.”

He scrubbed a hand down his face, already imagining the headlines:

Billionaire Murders Environmental Protesters.

The police came and arrested the protesters who had been captured. After processing the scene, taking statements, and reviewing security footage, they removed the bodies of the two deceased protesters.

Detectives pored over the evidence, while Solomon and Billy sat in his office with his high-dollar lawyer, Richard Thornewood of Thornewood and Croft.

Meanwhile, the media descended like vultures on the shipyard, sending drones into the air and using long-lens cameras in an attempt to peek at the scene of the confrontation—or perhaps catch a glimpse of Solomon himself.

Richard excused himself for a while before returning and sitting across from Solomon and Billy, licking his lips before speaking. “The police aren’t going to charge either of you, in light of the overwhelming evidence for self-defense. I spoke directly with the county prosecutor. She said that barring any new evidence, she confirmed what the police said.” He licked his lips again.

“They are, however, going to push for the maximum charges possible against the protesters who were arrested. It seems they filmed themselves plotting to do bodily harm to you if they got the chance—and, well, you know how it turned out.”

He was old-fashioned. Despite the high-nineties heat and sweltering humidity typical of their part of Florida, he always wore a sharp three-piece suit.

Solomon leaned back in his high-backed leather chair and pressed his fingertips together. “We need to reinforce the shipyard. One of the workers could have been injured—or killed—and that would’ve been on me.”

Richard tapped his pipe against his wrist and then lit it. He spoke around it as he puffed. “Don’t talk like that. You’re a retired Major, a decorated Green Beret who came from nothing. The only thing you share with your grandfather Max—other than the fortune you inherited—is his DNA. You had no hand in how he ran his affairs.”

Solomon leaned forward. He had been shocked when his grandfather, Maximilian Phillips, CEO of MaxPhilco Corp., died and left everything to him—instantly making Solomon the wealthiest and most hated man on the planet.

He and his grandfather had been estranged and, to his knowledge, had only met once in his entire life—when he was just a child. Max’s only son, Solomon’s father, had been a Baptist preacher, much to Max’s chagrin, and his mother a housewife. His introduction to his grandfather had been brief and without ceremony.

“I know I didn’t do anything to deserve it,” Solomon agreed. “But it was me they were after, nonetheless. I just don’t want anyone else to get hurt.”

He stood, walked to the minibar in his office, poured a few fingers of rum into a glass, added a splash of cola, and took a slow sip—savoring the sweet warmth as it spread through his chest.

“What kind of reinforcements are you thinking of?” Billy asked. He was nursing an ice-cold bottle of beer, still trying to settle his nerves after being forced to shoot two protesters.

“I don’t know. The property is three hundred acres, but only forty acres are really being used right now.” He walked over to a framed map of the shipyard hanging on the wall. “If we could surround the forty acres here—where the docks, warehouses, and offices are—with those HESCO barriers or maybe high interlocking concrete walls, like we used in the military...” He and Billy had served together as Green Berets, always watching each other’s backs.

He drew a finger across the map. “There’s the storage container lot to the north. It already has a high-security steel fence around it and a security guard posted twenty-four hours a day. So, I don’t think we need to include that.”

Billy nodded. “That’ll stop those nosy bastards from being able to look in so easily, too. I’ve also been thinking—since we already have patrols inside the shipyard at night, we might want to include some guard dogs or drones.”

“That’s all well and good...” Richard interrupted, “but I would need to check with your insurance company to see if they’d be willing to underwrite a policy for guard dogs. If someone gets bitten, it could mean a huge liability.”

Solomon cleared his throat. “Okay, Richard, you check on that. Billy and I will start working on the logistics. We’re just spitballing ideas right now.”

“Alright, whatever you want,” Richard replied. His face puckered slightly, and he raised a finger. “I’ll call the county, if you like, and see if we can get permits and clearances for those... what did you say they were called?”

“HESCO barriers and T-Walls. They’re just modular systems—good for building strong walls quickly,” Solomon explained.

Richard eyed Solomon’s attire down his nose—a wrinkled shirt, dirty jeans, and work boots that had seen better days. “Perhaps you could just build a block wall. You seem to enjoy playing with those already,” he drawled.

Solomon’s eyebrows arched and he burst out laughing. “Richard, you are a brave son of a bitch with big balls, who isn’t afraid to speak your mind. That’s one of the things I love about you.”

“Well... that’s why my hourly rate is what it is,” Richard replied. “You pay me for my ‘big balls,’ as you put it...”

Billy and Solomon exchanged a look and roared with laughter.

“What is so funny?” Richard asked, pouting.

Solomon walked over and clapped Richard on the shoulder. “You are way too serious all the time—that’s why we’re laughing. Why don’t you pour yourself a drink? Whatever you like. And don’t take offense to a little teasing. It’s been a rough day for Billy and me. If I didn’t think you were a great guy, you wouldn’t be sitting here right now.”

Richard opened his mouth to reply, but Solomon’s gray-haired secretary, Mrs. Worthington, appeared at the open door and gave a polite knock.

“Sorry to interrupt, Mr. Phillips, but a helicopter just landed on the helipad. Timmy told me to let you know.”

Solomon immediately sobered. “Thank you, Mrs. Worthington.” She nodded and left.

Billy stood up, but Solomon raised a hand. “Will you two excuse me? Looks like I have visitors.”

General Brickston

Solomon exited the office building through a side door and followed a path that led to the shipyard's helipad. A sleek black Sikorsky S-76 helicopter sat on the pad.

Heading straight for him was a sharply dressed soldier carrying a case, with steel-gray eyes and gray hair, flanked by an entourage of four uniformed soldiers. His face split into a wide grin when he saw Solomon.

“Major Phillips! How the hell have you been?”

Solomon smiled back. “Can't complain.” They shook hands in a firm grip, and the soldier clapped a fatherly hand on Solomon's shoulder.

“General Brickston, let's go inside—out of this heat and humidity.”

The general turned to the soldiers behind him and raised a hand. “We'll be speaking privately.”

“Let's go to my office. It's this way...” Solomon said.

A few minutes later, they were alone in the office. The general poured himself a small whiskey, sat down across from Solomon, and took a long sip.

“That's good whiskey right there, young man.”

“I've got cases of it. I'll send one with you when you leave,” Solomon replied.

“I might just take you up on that,” the general said, taking another sip. “Ahhh... that is smooth.”

Solomon cracked open a beer from a local brewery and took a sip. “So, John, what brings you all the way down here to my corner of the world?”

“I saw you on the news earlier. What the hell was that about?” the general asked by way of response.

Solomon exhaled, then recapped what had happened and added, “One of the companies I inherited was MaxPhilco Oil. Back before I was even a gleam in my parents' eyes, Max built a pipeline straight through a protected habitat. Oh... he had all the permits, even brought in ecologists and environmentalists, did everything right and by the book. And there has never been a single incident. But it didn't matter—people have been pissed off ever since. That's what started this whole thing...”

He took another pull of his beer before continuing. “Now I've got that project over on Turtle Bay Island. Same story. Because of Max's reputation, I brought in the experts, jumped through miles of red tape. I'm building a self-sustaining, hurricane-proof, eco-friendly city—not hauling oil—but to them, I'm the same as my grandfather.”

The general smirked and raised his glass. “If they won't listen to reason, fuck 'em.” He downed the last of his whiskey and leaned forward, adjusting his uniform.

“You living on the island now?”

Solomon narrowed his eyes. He knew the general was stalling, but couldn't figure out why.

“Yeah. Got a house over there. The city's almost finished. We've got a ferry running every two hours between the shipyard and the island, twenty-four hours a day. I've been splitting my time between my office at home and the office here. It helps break up the monotony and keep things interesting.”

There was an awkward silence.

“Do you remember my wife, Rachael, and my daughter, Chloe?”

Solomon leaned back in his seat and looked up at the ceiling. “I remember Rachael from the Christmas party at your house. You and your wife showed me lots of photos of your daughter that night—I think she was off at a sleepover, right?”

The general nodded. “Right. Listen... Rachael and I aren't doing well. We've been talking about divorce. My fault mostly—hell, entirely—I'm never home. Plus... she's twenty years younger than me.”

“I'm sorry to hear that, John. Honestly,” Solomon said. “What can I do? I mean, what do you need from me? Just name it.”

Solomon didn't know what he was expecting—maybe a loan, or even advice. Instead, what the general said next threw him for a loop.

“I want to send Rachael and Chloe to live on your island. I'll rent or even buy a home from you, if you have one available.”

Solomon stood. “Of course I have a home they can live in, and your money is no good to me.” He drained his beer and dropped the empty into the bin. “But... why? What aren't you telling me?”

The general let out a breath, then reached down, picked up his case, and removed a slim laptop.

“What I'm about to show you isn't just about my family. This is bigger than both of us. It's highly classified.” He placed a hand on the laptop. “I checked your clearance on the way here, and I know you still have high-level access through MaxPhilco's Army contracts, so here we are.”

He opened the laptop, turned it on, and set it on Solomon's desk. They leaned in as the general double-clicked a file named Manda.MP4.

A video played—shaky, handheld footage of a corpse strapped to a bed, dark eyes wide open. Figures in medical ‘spacesuits’ moved around it, working methodically. Suddenly, the corpse sat up, muscles tight against its restraints.

“Son of a…” one of the figures cursed, flinching. A different voice said, “Patient has no vital signs, but is somehow displaying full autonomy—as if the body is being controlled by an unknown process.”

The footage jumped. Now the corpse’s head sat on a steel tray, a bone saw beside it. The corpse’s eyes followed gloved hands as they reached in and lifted the skull cap, revealing the brain. The brain was dark, covered in an inky black substance.

“This black substance is alien in structure,” the voice said. “Under the microscope, it shows a crystalline pattern similar to a virus, but it’s unlike anything currently known to man.”

The hands removed a sample with tweezers, dropping it into a test tube.

The voice was shaky now—“This substance is incredibly contagious. One drop entering a host—bite, scratch, even an open wound—results in a complete takeover within three days, as we witnessed in Dr. Paul Atkins of Michigan, who was infected by a bite from this subject and is now showing the same symptoms as Manda here.”

The general shut the laptop. “Again, this is extremely classified.” He licked his lips. “The footage was uploaded via satellite from a camp in Madagascar. Not long after, the camp suffered a mass casualty event. Twenty-eight members of our team on the ground were killed.”

Solomon sat back. “What the hell did I just see? Was that a fucking zombie? John… you’re not pulling my leg, are you?”

“I wish I was,” the general replied grimly. “I had the same reaction when I first saw it.”

“How the hell do you even process something like that, John?” Solomon grabbed another beer, cracked it open, and took a long pull.

“When you figure it out, let me know,” the general said. “That footage is from a few months ago. We thought we stamped it out completely in Madagascar. But a case popped up here in the U.S., in a tiny Kansas town, not long ago. We have no idea how it got here. We moved fast—locked it down. For now. But I’m scared for my family. Divorce or not, I love Rachael and Chloe, and I don’t want them exposed.”

Solomon paced the room. “Of course your wife and daughter can come here. I can have my pilot, Harold, remain at your disposal to bring them in my jet.” He paused. “Do you still live in Washington?”

“Yes.” The general removed a business card from his pocket and slid it across the desk. “My direct number is at the bottom. I’ll speak to them tonight and let you know when to pick them up in the morning, if that’s satisfactory.”

“Yes. That would be fine,” Solomon agreed.

The general looked around the office. “You know, I want to do something for you... No, it’s not just for you—it’s for my wife and daughter as well. I have a discretionary budget, and since your company is technically a government contractor, I’d like to send you some things you might need—if this thing goes the way I think it might.”

“You don’t have to...” Solomon started.

The general raised a hand. “No... I insist. When I speak to you in the morning, we’ll discuss it further.”

Solomon nodded. “Hope for the best. Prepare for the worst. I remember you saying that to us over and over again.”

After a few more minutes of quiet conversation, the general left. Solomon sat alone—his mind racing.

This was huge—massive—apocalyptic, even. He needed to do something to prepare.

Reinforcements to the shipyard seemed more urgent than ever.

Fucking zombies... It felt surreal.

He stepped out into the hall and walked down to the office that temporarily held his secretary’s desk until the new reception area downstairs was complete.

“Mrs. Worthington, come into my office. I need you to take notes. We’ve got a lot of plans to make.”

Restless

Solomon couldn't sleep that night—not after what had happened at the shipyard and the general's visit.

He tossed and turned in the dark, staring up at the ceiling fan as it spun lazily overhead. That man—no, that creature—kept flashing in his mind. The eyes, wide and vacant. The sudden movement. The inky black substance covering the brain. Zombies.

The very word felt ridiculous. Fictional. Something from horror movies and late-night cable, not real life.

He remembered staying the night at a friend's house as a kid, staying up watching George Romero movies—Night of the Living Dead, Dawn of the Dead. His father would've lost it if he'd known.

Afterward, he and his friend had laid out their entire zombie apocalypse plan: first stop, the nearest big-box store that sold guns. Load up, hunker down, wait it out. It had all seemed so simple. So fun.

Solomon let out a low chuckle in the dark.

Then the laughter died in his throat.

It was real.

He had seen it with his own eyes. A real, honest-to-God zombie.

He sat up in bed, ran a hand through his hair, then swung his feet onto the cold floor.

Back then, he was just a kid with wild ideas. Now he was rich. Connected. Smarter. And he had an island and shipyard to protect.

Solomon crossed the room and grabbed his phone off the nightstand. He typed out a message to Billy:

“In the morning, double-check all perimeter fencing. Full lockdown protocols. Call it hurricane drills if anyone asks. Bring in the outside security contractor—to test our system and make recommendations.”

He paused, then added one more line:

“Armory inspection. Inventory everything.”

A half-hour later, he was sitting in his kitchen, sipping black coffee, a scratchpad and pen nearby—his mind racing with contingency plans, supply chain access, clean water redundancy, communications, power generation—survival.

He walked over to a window and looked out at the Gulf beyond the edge of Turtle Bay Island. It was calm. Peaceful. Too peaceful.

If what the general said was true—and Solomon had no reason to doubt him—then it was only a matter of time before that calm shattered.

He turned and went back to his scratchpad—scratching notes—calls to make—lists to update—people to protect.

And it all had to look normal.

No panic. No alarms.

Just a man preparing for a disaster that may never come.

But if it did... he'd be ready.

Rachael

"You have spent millions in the last three months. That is on top of the construction budget." Richard was smoking his ever-present pipe as he picked up a stack of papers. "One of the top items here in the ledger is hurricane preparations. I can't imagine what kind of preparations you're making that would cost that much."

Solomon sighed. Richard wasn't his accountant, but he had allowed him access to his books to check for signs of embezzlement or mismanagement. Richard had a keen eye for numbers and was honest to a fault. Solomon reached behind the laptop, where Richard was video streaming, and grabbed his coffee mug. He took a sip. It was too damned early in the morning for this, he thought.

"Well, if you look at the net income for last month, what I spent was a drop in the bucket. You know I've built this city to be hardened against Category Five hurricanes and storm surge, but that doesn't do any good if the residents starve to death, die of thirst, or from hyperthermia in the aftermath. It's always hot as hell in Florida after a hurricane, you know. I wanted to make sure the residents wouldn't just survive—they'd thrive."

He loathed lying to Richard about the true reason for his urgency and wasn't sure if Richard believed him. But he had made a promise to John not to tell anyone what was really happening, and he would keep that promise.

"You did the right thing, Solomon." Richard held up his palms. "I just felt it was my duty as your lawyer to point out these peculiar and large outflows of money."

Solomon forced a smile. "I appreciate your attention to detail, as always. The numbers should look better on next month's statement."

His doorbell camera chimed. "Excuse me, Richard, someone's at the door. Do you mind if we continue this conversation later?"

Richard squinted and shook his head. "Not at all. It's your dime."

Solomon disconnected the call. Then he looked at the display on the nearby wall showing the feed from his doorbell camera. He picked up a remote, pressed a button to disengage the front door lock, and spoke into the remote's microphone. "Come in, Rachael. I'm in my office."

Rachael appeared at the doorway to his office a few moments later and strode directly to his desk. He closed his laptop, removed his reading glasses, and folded his hands.

"Good morning, Rachael. How can I help you?"

She was striking—beautiful in a girl-next-door sort of way—athletic, but with curves in all the right places. She had shoulder-length brunette hair, hazel eyes, and a soft face with full lips, which were now pouting.

"I think Chloe and I should pack up our things and go to my mother's house."

Solomon was caught off guard. "What? I mean, why do you think you should do that?"

Three months earlier, when he had gone to the Tampa Airport to pick up Rachael and Chloe from their flight on his private jet from Washington, he had been surprised to see that three people were waiting instead of two. There were Rachael and Chloe—and another woman who had left Solomon speechless the moment he laid eyes on her: Aimee. She had fiery red curly hair, emerald eyes, and a smile that had completely disarmed him. Rachael had introduced her as a friend—a schoolteacher she and John had hired to make sure Chloe didn't fall too far behind in her studies.

"I'm tired of being treated like a child. Did you know that John and I were getting a divorce before he sent me here?" she said, her expression angry.

He nodded. "Yes, he mentioned it."

"Is him sending me and Chloe here just some ruse to delay the inevitable? Tell me the truth."

He raised his hands. "I can't say any more than what your husband's already told you. But I can say this—from my own heart—I think leaving would be a grave mistake."

She locked eyes with him. "Why should I stay?" she fumed.

He looked up at the ceiling, then made eye contact with her. "Do you trust me?" He pressed a finger against his chest.

That question seemed to catch her off guard. Her shoulders fell, and she let out an exasperated sigh. "I do trust you. You've been nothing if not kind to us."

"I'm telling you that I think you should stay," he replied. Then he added, "Maybe you can take Chloe and go to the mainland for the day—have lunch, see a movie, go shopping, whatever you two would like to do. My treat. And after you come home, if you still want to leave for your mother's, I'll arrange the transportation myself—even against my better judgment."

She stepped closer to him. Her eyes locked onto his. "I'm not stupid, you know. Or prone to hysteria. I know something is happening. I see the fences going up and the shipments of supplies coming into the island."

Then she exhaled, and her expression relaxed. "Maybe you're right. I could take Chloe out for the day. Maybe that'll be enough to relieve this tension right here... that I'm feeling." She pressed a finger against her chest and a palm against her stomach.

"Yes, it might," he answered simply. Then he asked, "When do you want to leave?"

"Why not now?" she said. Then something shifted in her—a visible change—and she took a step back.

"Okay. You can go get ready, and I'll make the arrangements." He then added, "I'd like to send someone with you. Her name is Shira, and she can dress casually to blend in."

Her eyes narrowed a bit. "Who is this Shira?"

"She was a former sniper with the IDF. She's a top-tier bodyguard. I'd feel a lot better if she was there watching over you. I have powerful enemies, and they could try to hurt me by targeting you and Chloe."

There was something hanging in the air between them—a tension you could cut with a knife.

He willed her to leave. John was one of his oldest and dearest friends—he would never betray his trust.

Her eyes softened and she smiled—a knowing smile, as if she could hear the conversation in his head. "Alright. I'm going to get ready."

Solomon didn't need to drive often on the island—he enjoyed brisk walks and the fresh air—but today he was behind the wheel of his oversized, armor-plated SUV, heading to the house where Rachael, Aimee, and Chloe lived. He pulled up close to the curb.

Shira was already waiting, dressed in a pair of jeans, sensible shoes, a teal T-shirt, and a light plaid long-sleeved shirt with the sleeves rolled up to conceal a low-profile holster at her lower back. Her jet-black hair was pulled up in an elegant updo, and her dark brown eyes scanned the surroundings. She opened the passenger door and leaned in.

"They're coming," she told him.

He took out his wallet and handed Shira a credit card. "Use this to pay for everything. If you need anything too, you're more than welcome to buy it." He also took out a roll of assorted bills and handed it to her. "There's five thousand dollars here—just in case."

"What's the limit? I've been eyeing that brand-new Mercedes..." she teased.

Solomon laughed. "Do you really want a new Mercedes?"

She smiled. "No, no, no... I'm fine. I might just grab something to eat; I was about to make something when you called."

"Whatever you need," he repeated.

Rachael, Chloe, and Aimee exited the house, and Shira waved to them. She introduced herself formally—having only made a brief introduction before—and then opened the back door of the SUV so they could climb in. She got into the front passenger seat.

“Is this car bulletproof? The windows are thick... Look, Mom!” Chloe, a gangly fifteen-year-old doppelgänger of her mother, asked excitedly.

“It is,” Shira answered with a smile. Then she closed the door and settled into the front seat.

They arrived at the ferry within minutes, as traffic on the island was light. Most residents had followed Solomon’s example: walking or biking everywhere.

Solomon handed the keys to Shira and climbed out. Then he said, “I gave Shira my card. The four of you have fun.” He waved as Shira drove onto the ferry.

No sooner had she pulled aboard than Solomon’s cellphone rang. It was General Brickston. He answered, “Hello?”

The general sounded tired. “I tried to reach Rachael, but she isn’t answering.”

Solomon told him about his conversation with Rachael that morning and their planned outing to the mainland. “I hope I didn’t overstep my bounds; it was the only way I could think of to handle the situation diplomatically.”

“No... you did good. It’s just that this thing has shown up again—this time in Canada.”

Frustration crept into the general’s voice. “The Prime Minister just went on TV and announced they’re shutting down the borders to try and contain it. They’re using a cover story, calling it a flu variant, and have enacted a quarantine and a media blackout.” He cleared his throat. “We truly thought this damned thing was over—ninety days without a single new case.” He sighed.

“It’s bad, Solomon. I’m getting early reports that thousands are showing signs of infection. And with how this spreads, it’ll likely be tens or even hundreds of thousands soon, if drastic measures aren’t taken.”

“What’s the United States’ response to this?” Solomon asked.

He walked over and stood next to a pylon, watching as the last of the passengers and vehicles boarded the ferry. He waved at two armed guards nearby who had been monitoring the boarding process.

“The President is taking a wait-and-see stance. I advised him to close the borders and cancel all flights.” There was a pause. “He said he didn’t want to create panic. Dammit, if this thing hits a big city like New York, panic will be the least of his worries.”

Solomon didn’t respond; he just listened. The implications pressed on his conscience like a knife.

“Just keep me in the loop as much as you can. I’ll tell Rachael you called when they return, but I can’t guarantee she’ll call you back. She seemed quite angry.”

“I’ll keep you in the loop. Just tell my wife I called... and that I love her and Chloe,” the general said before hanging up.

Final Warning

For the next month, Solomon had watched the scene playing out in Canada carefully. Unofficial reports had leaked onto the Internet claiming that those infected were becoming angry and cannibalistic. The Canadian government, in a stunning affront to liberty, shut off the Internet to the entire country—creating a firestorm across the U.S. political scene and drawing the ire of all Western nations.

It was all the pundits on TV seemed to talk about: how Canada had gone dark, much like North Korea, shutting out the world.

Solomon had remained diligent in his preparations, working long hours and sometimes not sleeping until he was at the point of collapse.

One morning, Solomon awoke early and was sipping a cup of black coffee while going over his agenda for the day. His cellphone rang. He picked it up—it was General Brickston, whom he hadn't heard from at all in the last month.

“Hello?” he answered.

“Turn on the news,” General Brickston said.

“Which news?” he asked.

“Any news... just turn on your TV.” Then the line went dead.

Solomon stared at his phone for a moment. “What the hell?” he muttered. His heart thudded against his ribs. He dug around in a kitchen drawer to find the remote for the TV he rarely used and switched it on. He didn't subscribe to paid TV services, so he clicked one of the smart TV's built-in news applications.

The screen flickered, then stabilized: live footage of a rain-slicked Seattle filled the screen. The iconic Space Needle loomed in the background, its spire blurred by a thick, gray haze that made the city look ghostly.

Sirens screamed—distant and near—overlapping into an almost constant bleating. A low, almost subsonic thump-thump-thump vibrated through the speakers like the heartbeat of a dying city.

A female reporter—her rain-soaked hair matted to her face—stood stiffly in front of a barricaded coffee shop. Panic buzzed in the background like white noise.

She squinted against the rain and looked into the camera. “Good evening... I'm—I'm Sarah Chen,” she said, her voice cracking. “I'm reporting live from what is rapidly becoming a nightmare in the heart of Seattle.”

She flinched as something crashed nearby, a car alarm shrieking to life—mixed with screams of anger and panic.

“We are experiencing an... unprecedented situation. One that defies explanation and, frankly—” she swallowed hard, eyes darting off-camera, “—chills you to the bone. We’re calling it...” She made frantic air quotes, clearly hating the phrase, “The Murk.”

Before Solomon, who was glued to the screen, could scoff at the stupid moniker, the feed glitched, then abruptly cut to a shaky, handheld camera. A placard flashed: Sergeant Miller, S.P.D.

The officer was behind sandbags and wrecked patrol cars. His face was hidden behind a black full-face respirator, his voice mechanical and choppy.

“We’ve secured a perimeter around Pioneer Square—” Gunfire ripped through the background. He ducked instinctively. “Correction: we’re trying to secure it! The infected—the Murks—they’re overwhelming our resources. They don’t stop... they never stop coming, no matter how many times we shoot them.”

The camera jolted, catching a glimpse of hundreds of Murks moving in a disjointed, lurching way toward the barricades.

“Fall back! FALL BACK!” someone screamed off-camera.

The feed cut again—this time to a hospital corridor. A placard read: PRE-RECORDED INTERVIEW: Dr. Evelyn Reed.

The woman on screen was disheveled, with tired eyes, a stained lab coat, and trembling hands. She gripped the podium in front of her for support.

“Initially, the symptoms were classic—fever, delirium—but then...” She paused, staring blankly for a moment, as if struggling to find the right words. “...then came the loss of voluntary control. Victims—Murks—move with instinct. No higher brain function. No pain response.” She shuddered visibly. “They’re... relentless. Standard weapons might slow them down—sometimes—but don’t stop them. Head trauma seems... the most effective.”

A crash interrupted her—a gurney tipping over behind her—before the footage abruptly cut back to Sarah Chen.

The barricades behind her were falling apart. You could see Murks—maybe dozens—pushing against the police lines, clawing and jerking like broken marionettes. The soldiers and cops were panicking, some firing wildly into the crowd.

Sarah Chen was yelling into her microphone now, barely audible over the chaos.

“The CDC—they’ve issued a Level Five Biohazard Alert! I repeat, Level Five!” Her voice cracked. “This is—this is no longer contained! Officials are urging everyone to shelter in place, avoid all contact, and—” Gunfire exploded behind her. Chen spun, screaming, and nearly

dropped her microphone. A Murk slammed into a soldier, dragging him down in a tangle of limbs. Screams tore through the air. Sarah's voice rose in a shriek: "They're through the barricades! THEY'RE THROUGH!"

The live feed jittered violently—then froze.

A loud, jarring noise blared through the TV speakers and Solomon's cellphone: the Emergency Alert System siren—that bone-deep howl that made Solomon's skin crawl.

A black screen appeared, with red, flashing text:

EMERGENCY BROADCAST SYSTEM

THIS IS NOT A TEST

Solomon's jaw hit the floor. He sat frozen, heart pounding. The virus—or whatever it was—had finally hit a major city. He had anticipated this day... but prayed it would never come. Now it was here. Now it was real.

"Murks? What a stupid name..." he muttered finally, but the words sounded hollow in his ears.

His phone rang again twenty minutes later. It was the general.

"Hello?" he answered.

"Sorry, I had to hang up earlier—the President was calling," the general said. "I also called and spoke with the Florida governor. He wants you to call him."

"What for?" Solomon asked.

"He is establishing roadblocks throughout the state. Since Highway 98 runs right in front of your shipyard, he wants to send you troops and supplies to establish a roadblock nearby. He would like to offer you a position with the Florida National Guard at your old rank of Major."

Checkpoint MaxPhilco

Highway 98, Gulf Coast – Dusk

The sun hung low, a burning coin bleeding orange across the mangroves as Company C rolled into position. Four armored personnel carriers rumbled down Highway 98, their diesel growls echoing off the rusting hulls of derelict shrimp boats scattered near the MaxPhilco shipyard. The sea air stank of salt, decay, and something newer—something wrong.

Captain Elias Monroe dismounted first. Dust clung to his boots as he surveyed the shipyard: a sprawl of steel skeletons and cranes sticking high above the high-concrete walls, the tops of warehouses and buildings just visible. He next noticed the armed sentries looking back at him from the tops of the walls.

"Secure a 300-meter perimeter along the road," Monroe barked. "Bunker the APCs here and here—choke point and fallback. I want sandbags, wire, and rifles in place before we lose the light." Soldiers fanned out. The unit's sharp discipline was clear in their actions. Staff Sergeant Ochoa directed the engineers to start laying concertina wire across the shoulder. Spades hit dirt, hands clamped down machine gun tripods, and radios crackled to life.

Inside one of the APCs, Private Kaminski adjusted his helmet and glanced nervously out the viewport.

"You think they're really here? The zombies, I mean?" he asked.

His squadmate, Rodriguez, chewed his lip.

"I haven't seen any yet in person—but I've heard stories. My cousin lives in Georgia and said Atlanta has been hit hard."

Kaminski swallowed hard.

"And now we're doing what exactly? Sitting out here exposed, guarding a highway?"

Rodriguez shrugged.

"I just go where they tell me."

Outside, dusk deepened. Fog began to roll in from the bay, thick and low. Visibility dropped fast. At the far edge of the checkpoint, Corporal Tran stood watch, scanning the shipyard wall. Then—movement.

A shape—limping, dragging. Not a vagrant. Not a protester. Something slower. Wetter. Another behind it. Then five. Then ten.

Tran's voice cracked through the radio:

"Contact—north shipyard wall! Multiple—uh—multiple... forms. Moving wrong. Zombies. Requesting backup—"

And then the static hissed.

Monroe grabbed the handset.

"All units—condition red. Lock it down. We are not alone out here."

The checkpoint was established, but the night was only just beginning.

Battle Of Highway 98

Highway 98 was a traffic jam in both directions. Abandoned vehicles littered the highway. The governor had given adequate warning—martial law had been declared, and travel was greatly restricted. “There should be no unnecessary and/or unauthorized travel, period, for the safety of the citizens of Florida.”

As always, people didn’t listen. They didn’t stay home, they ignored the orders, and now the highway had been shut down completely.

Those who ignored the governor’s orders had done more than just clog the highway—they had opened a path for the nightmare to spread. In their desperation to flee or defiance of authority, they carried the infection with them. The virus, or whatever it was, once contained to a few isolated pockets, had found new hosts among the panicked travelers. Now, Highway 98 was more than a traffic jam; it was a corridor of death.

The abandoned cars told a story of chaos and terror. Doors hung open, windows were shattered, and streaks of blood trailed across the asphalt. The undead moved among the wreckage, drawn by the scent of the living. Some travelers had tried to escape on foot, only to be overwhelmed. Others never even made it out of their vehicles.

What had once been an escape route had become a feeding ground. The decision to ignore the warnings didn’t just cost lives—it condemned the entire region. Now, the virus surged southward, mile by mile, on a road paved with broken rules and broken bodies.

The radio crackled, urgent and thin through static. “Major Phillips, you’ve got a horde of zombies closing in on your position...” The drone operator, Ronald, sounded tight with fear, barely holding his composure.

Solomon had taken over command of Company C of the 3rd Battalion, 124th Everglade Infantry Regiment from Captain Monroe. It was an unusually small command for his rank, but it was all the overwhelmed Florida governor could spare.

“Ready!” Solomon bellowed, swinging the APC’s top gun around to face south down the ruined stretch of Highway 98. Through the warping shimmer of heat and smoke, he saw them—

glimmers of movement threading through the tangled graveyard of twisted metal and scorched rubber. “Wait for my order!”

The four APCs braced across the highway, forming a desperate line behind Jersey barriers and glinting razor wire—coiled and waiting like a predator. Billy scratched at his helmet, eyes wide, knuckles white as he gripped the M249 SAW (Squad Automatic Weapon).

Now they were close enough to see. Faces—sunken, gray, slack with hunger—and eyes that gleamed with the cold madness of something no longer human.

“Fire!” Solomon roared.

The world erupted.

Automatic fire exploded in a deafening, thunderous wave. The barricade transformed into a churning storm of bullets. Zombies and abandoned cars were torn apart in a fountain of gore and shrapnel. Shell casings poured down like rain. Windows burst, tires shredded, flames leapt from gas tanks, and black smoke roiled upward as one vehicle after another went up like kindling.

It felt like a war at the end of the world.

Then, silence—jarring, sudden.

“Report!” Solomon snapped into the radio.

“Just a moment...” Ronald answered, his breath ragged. “Hard to see... there’s so much smoke. Fire everywhere.”

Solomon wiped sweat from his brow with the back of his gloved hand, his fingers trembling slightly. It was hot and humid as hell. He pulled his respirator on—the air was thick with ash, soot, and something far more sinister: the smell of burning flesh.

“There are a few crawlers down low...” Ronald murmured.

Solomon keyed the mic again. “Matt, take your squad and clean up those crawlers. Sweep the wire line. Fast.”

Then came the thump of rotors. Low. Heavy. Doom in the air.

An Apache helicopter screamed overhead, streaking south like a hawk on the hunt. Solomon tracked it with his eyes—it slowed, hovered over the carnage. Then the missiles came. Hellfire. The highway lit up in a wall of fire. The shockwave and heat hit them like a sledgehammer. A column of smoke and heat blasted skyward as the Apache tilted, rolled, and veered southwest—vanishing like a ghost in the haze.

“Whew-wee! Holy shit!” Billy yelled, covering his face and blinking rapidly. “What in the name of hell was that?”

“Heading to MacDill maybe...” Solomon muttered, eyes narrowed. “Something spooked the pilot. Something bad.” He hit the comms again. “Ronald, push the drone south. I need you to get eyes on whatever that chopper lit up.”

Minutes dragged by. Then came the reply.

“There’s another horde... a fucking biblical one.” Ronald’s voice broke slightly. “There are thousands of them... where the Hellfire hit—there are bodies—everywhere. It’s... I’ve never seen anything like it.” Another pause. “They are moving in your direction. ETA ten... maybe fifteen minutes tops until you can see them yourself.”

“Dammit!” Solomon slammed a fist against the wall of the APC. He grabbed the radio.

“Matt, cancel your last. Everyone fall back! Get to the shipyard. We cannot hold this ground. We’ll be overrun in minutes. MOVE!”

The APCs roared to life, gears grinding as they peeled out onto the shoulder and looped back toward the rear line. Inside the lead vehicle, Sergeant Adams shouted, “I see them! There’s a shit ton of them!” He stared into the monitor, his face pale in the wash of the FLIR (Forward-Looking Infrared) feed.

His APC smashed into an abandoned truck, metal screaming as it shoved it aside, tearing through a makeshift gap in the barriers.

“Pop smoke!” Solomon ordered.

“On it!” Adams shouted, then relayed the command.

Thump. Thump. Thump. Smoke canisters burst from the launch tubes, flooding the air with thick, choking plumes of white and gray. Visibility dropped to zero. Now the only way to navigate was with the FLIR—the world reduced to a grainy inferno of heat signatures.

The convoy pressed on blindly, the engine growls swallowed by the fog of war. Moments stretched like hours.

Finally—clarity. They punched through the smoke.

“I think we lost them in the smoke.” Adams’ voice cracked over the radio, half in disbelief.

Solomon exhaled slowly, chest rising and falling.

“We’ll see. They can still hear us... track us by sound. I won’t breathe easy until we are behind the wall.”

Fort MaxPhilco

The shipyard had become a city—a last bastion in a now crumbling and dying world. The MaxPhilco Shipyard had been renamed Fort MaxPhilco after National Guard troops arrived and worked to establish a secure base of operations there under Solomon’s leadership.

Rows of canvas tents flapped in the salty breeze, stitched together like patchwork hope. Shipping containers stood in stacked grids, their metal walls reinforced—repurposed into everything from bunkhouses to makeshift clinics and command centers.

The shipyard’s massive warehouses were full to bursting—stocked with everything from food to fuel to first aid.

Solomon had prepared for this. Deep down, he had always known that this day would come. He remembered a story from the Bible, something his father had read to him during childhood—how Joseph had interpreted Pharaoh’s dream and been granted the authority to store up seven years’ worth of grain before the famine came.

Egypt had survived because one man had the vision to act before it was too late.

Solomon had done the same—heeded the warning—and prepared.

He had sunk untold millions into the place, filling the warehouses here and on Turtle Bay Island—not just with supplies, but with a grim kind of hope.

He used to dream about the day when General Brickston would call, tell him they had stopped the spread, eliminated it, that it was finally over, and that he could open his warehouses and send the surplus off to charities.

Instead, the world had fallen.

Now, there was a constant hum of activity behind the shipyard’s reinforced walls. Hundreds of people had made their way here—fleeing the hell that had consumed Highway 98 and the surrounding towns. They were the lucky ones.

Refugees waited in snaking lines down the long driveway, where armed guards checked for bites, scratches, or other signs of infection. Stern warnings blared over loudspeakers: Report any symptoms immediately. Do not conceal injuries. Do not protect the infected. Silence could be fatal to everyone.

It had been two weeks since the influx had begun.

Somehow, against the odds, the shipyard had stabilized. It wasn’t comfortable—it wasn’t completely safe—but it worked.

America's long-standing public health issues—widespread obesity, chronic illnesses, and mental health struggles—were reflected within the shipyard and placed enormous strain on the overburdened medical teams.

Reality checks were harsh but necessary. There was no room for indulgence or avoidance. The most common prescription was blunt: Toughen up, or die.

Those with genuine medical conditions were treated with compassion and respect—but the truth was brutal: many would have to wait. There weren't enough resources to treat every illness.

They would need to hold on—hope and pray for a miracle.

Those who were healthy were given jobs. Mechanics repaired generators and kept vehicles running. Nurses ran triage centers. Plumbers rigged up makeshift systems to keep waste flowing. Hobbyists set up radios to catch faint signals in the static.

Satellite and radio communications still worked—patchy at best—but enough to help some reconnect with loved ones, or at least confirm they were still alive.

Boats had started coming in at night, slipping through the mist and docking in silence. Some brought more refugees. Others carried people away—toward the north or deeper south, where, at least for now, the dead were fewer.

Life was now without rule of law or order. Solomon had no choice but to lead. Not by vote. Not by ceremony. But by necessity. In the vacuum of command, he stepped forward. He took the chaos and bent it into order. No one had appointed him. But no one questioned him either. Because Solomon had done the one thing that mattered now—he'd been ready.

The Quest

Another horde came and pressed against the concrete walls of the shipyard—an endless, groaning mass of bodies, and a stench that was almost unbearable. They beat against the walls, clawing and moaning—a grotesque symphony of hunger and decay. But the walls held fast. For now.

As a precaution, shipping containers had been stacked along the interior of the north, south, and east sides of the wall, reinforcing it and providing elevated walkways for sentries. Armed guards stood at regular intervals, rifles scanning the crowd of undead, fingers twitching near their triggers.

Up in Solomon's office, Billy leaned on the edge of Solomon's desk, eyes tight with worry.

"What are we going to do?" he asked quietly. "Should we try to ferry everyone to the island?"

Solomon shook his head. "No. Turtle Bay Island is a last resort. It isn't large enough to support this many people indefinitely. If we move everyone there now, we'll be trapped.

We need a new safe haven—defensible—somewhere with room to grow, where these people can stretch out, live, and breathe."

He unrolled a laminated map across the desk and jabbed a finger southwest of their location.

"This island here is called Ludford. It's small—population was around a thousand before all this.

It's got a high school, a small airport, and it's connected to the mainland by a long causeway.

More importantly..." He tapped the map again. "There's space. Lots of it. Room to stretch out.

To build if we want."

Billy squinted at the map. "How far away is that? And what do we know about it? Has it been hit hard like we have?"

Solomon ran a finger over the map. "It is twenty miles to the south down Highway 98 just to reach the turn-off to the causeway. The causeway is twenty-seven miles long, so it's a forty-seven-mile trip by vehicle." He then pointed to the Gulf. "It is thirty-three miles as the crow flies in a boat—about five hours if I take mine. As for the state of the town, I don't know anything yet. That's why I'm taking the boat and heading down there to put a drone up over the town—get some intel on what we're dealing with."

Billy frowned. "You don't have to go. I can do that. I mean, if you leave, who's going to keep everyone here in line?"

"I'm going," Solomon said flatly. "I need to breathe something other than smoke, diesel, and the stench of shit and death. And I trust that you will hold things down here while I'm gone."

Billy blinked, then gave a slow nod. “Alright. You know I’ve got your back.” He hesitated, then added, “What about that horde outside the wall?”

Solomon stroked his chin, then said, “Put a half-dozen shooters on the wall during the day—not at night when everyone is trying to sleep. Have them clean them out. When you’re sure there isn’t a single zombie still moving, send out the front-end loader with an APC escort to dig a trench off-site, out where the smell won’t reach here. Then put the bodies in it and burn them.”

“Alright. That’s a great idea. I’ll admit—they were starting to make me nervous,” Billy said.

Solomon rolled up the map and tucked it under his arm. “Even though the trip should only take five hours, I’ll likely be gone a few days, depending on what we find. I’ll stay in contact with you by radio.”

“When are you leaving?”

“I’m going home to the island right now—to take a shower and eat something. I’ll be leaving first thing in the morning.” He smiled. “You know, that town might just be our saving grace.”

Aimee

Solomon's yacht wasn't flashy by any stretch—at least not in the way most billionaires flaunted their wealth. Originally a rugged North Sea fishing trawler, she had been lovingly restored and retrofitted into something quietly magnificent. The hull, still bearing the thick lines of its working days, was painted a deep navy blue, with just enough polish to catch the sun without screaming for attention.

Inside, the trawler was all clean wood finishes and functional comfort. The cabins were spacious—not because they needed to impress, but because they were designed for long hauls and rough waters. Everything had a purpose. The wide galley could feed a small crew with ease, and the engine room was immaculate—housing a pair of overhauled diesels that purred like contented cats, reliable enough to cross oceans without a second thought.

There were no marble countertops, no gold fixtures. Instead, there were stainless steel fittings, thick glass portholes, and leather seats worn soft by use. It was a vessel made for travel, not for show—a yacht that spoke to its owner's respect for craftsmanship, durability, and privacy.

To Solomon, this wasn't just a boat. It was a statement: solid, capable, and unpretentious. Just like him.

His yacht made the five-mile trip to Turtle Bay Island in just under an hour. As soon as he landed, he was inundated with questions from those who'd been lucky enough to be living on the island when everything went to hell. Life there stood in stark contrast to the chaos at Fort MaxPhilco on the mainland. If not for the presence of heavily armed guards patrolling the island's streets, one could almost imagine nothing bad had happened in the world at all.

He responded as politely as possible, emphasizing that he was busy and would be holding a meeting later in the week to give a more detailed update. It was a delicate exercise in diplomacy. Back at his home, he stripped naked as soon as he closed the front door and tossed his uniform in the washing machine. He took a long shower, changed into fresh clothes, and dumped a can of hearty chili into a bowl to microwave for lunch. As he was washing the bowl, the doorbell alarm chimed.

He went to his monitor, expecting to see Shira—or perhaps Ronald—but was surprised to see Aimee standing there. He buzzed her in.

“Are you busy?” she asked. Her Southern accent, a trace of her Tennessee roots, softened the words.

“No, come on in. Make yourself at home.” He waved a hand around.

She folded her hands together and said, “I wanted to know what’s going on.” She looked worried. “I haven’t heard from my momma and daddy since this all started. They live up near the Appalachian Mountains.”

Solomon cleared his throat. “Communications are a mess right now. I haven’t heard anything specific from that region, to be honest. I can try to reach someone by radio or satellite phone in a few days...”

“Why not now? Why not today?” she pressed, her green eyes locked on his, full of concern.

He put on a smile. “I’ve got to take a boat trip soon. I was going to leave in the morning, but I decided to leave today, and I’m not sure exactly when I’ll be back. And honestly? I’m just... spent. It’s been a long day.”

“Can I come with you?” Aimee asked abruptly. “I won’t be a burden, I promise. I just need to get away from here and do something. The worry is killing me, and to be honest, I can’t stand another moment of Rachael complaining about her husband.”

Solomon almost said no—purely out of reflex—but he paused. It was only a recon trip, and he couldn’t see what it would hurt. Besides, it might give him a chance to learn more about her. He glanced at his watch.

“We’re leaving in an hour. If you want to come, get ready and meet me at the docks.”

She looked down at her outfit: a pair of shorts, a sleeveless T-shirt, and canvas shoes. To Solomon, she looked stunning.

“I’m ready to go,” she said. “Unless you think I should change?”

“No...” he said. “You’re fine. I just thought you might have something else to take care of...” She shook her head slightly. “No... nothing else.” Then she motioned toward his kitchen. “Is it alright if I grab something to drink?”

Solomon could’ve kicked himself for not offering her something already. “Oh—please. There’s water, cola, beer... whatever you like. I should’ve offered sooner. You probably think I’m rude. It’s just—like I said—it’s been a long day.”

He offered her something to eat as well, and she settled on a cola and a few chocolate-and-cream cookies.

“So...” she said, licking the cream off one of the cookies with a sly smile. “Tell me a little bit about yourself.”

The gesture made Solomon squirm a little. He wasn’t sure if it was the sudden shift in tone, the intimacy of it, or just the fact he hadn’t let his emotional guard down in a long time.

He cleared his throat again and gave her a brief summary—not too deep or personal. After all, they didn't have much time before they'd be leaving.

She told him a bit about herself in return. She had grown up poor and had been a bit of a tomboy—hunting and fishing with her daddy and pawpaw, gardening and cooking with her momma and meemaw. There was something—and an honesty to her—that made his heart palpitate.

He had never struggled to attract love. Even before wealth amplified his allure, his towering frame and rugged good looks drew plenty of attention. Women had always vied for it. But he wasn't one for casual flings. The practical side of him found them messy and inefficient. So despite the many chances, he'd never met anyone who truly sparked and held his interest—until now.

He could see himself finally settling down with someone like her. He was honestly a little sad when it was time for them to leave.

Billy's First Day

After Solomon left, Billy steeled himself before heading into the fray outside in the shipyard. It took him some time to hand-pick the small squad of shooters who would be tasked with eliminating the horde.

He made an announcement over the loudspeakers, warning everyone that there would be a lot of gunfire and loud noise. The last thing he wanted was widespread panic when the first shots rang out.

What he hadn't expected was the anger. As he and the squad climbed the ladders on the sides of the shipping containers near the front wall, civilians hurled words like stones at them.

"Those are people out there!"

"They're sick—not monsters!"

"You can't just murder them!"

How the hell does Solomon do this? Billy thought. What would he do in this situation?

He already knew the answer: Solomon would make a decision and stick by it. Anyone in his way would be dealing with a force of nature. Billy didn't have Solomon's charisma—but he was a Green Beret Captain, dammit—and he was as tough as any that came before him.

He turned and looked at the crowd. Dirty, worn faces looked back—exhausted, frightened, desperate. He felt sorry for them—and a surge of responsibility for their welfare. He cleared his throat.

"I am Captain Billy Hawkins. We're going to clear the horde," he said loudly, his voice cutting through the ambient buzz. "So you can sleep safer tonight. Solomon... Major Phillips... is out on a mission to find a safer place—somewhere greener, more livable—for you to go. This"—he pointed at the front wall—"was his command. He told me to clear the horde. So that's what I'm doing. Anyone who has a problem with it can take it up with Major Phillips when he returns." Some nodded. Some smiled. Others scowled, shook their heads, or shouted. You can't please everyone, he thought.

He turned to the squad of shooters. "Spread out. Watch your fields of fire. Aim for the head. Don't forget to take breaks. Fire when ready."

Gunfire erupted in staggered rhythm as the shooters dropped into their preferred stances—standing, kneeling, prone. Each shot cracked like a whip, echoing against the shipyard warehouses. Heads burst. Bodies crumpled. Billy grimaced. A wave of nausea rose in his throat, but he forced it down. People were watching him—literally looking up at him.

The stink of cordite, rot, and human decay was so foul he had to slip on his respirator. One of the shooters doubled over and vomited over the side. After a few minutes, the man sipped from his canteen, pulled his mask back over his face, and gave Billy a thumbs-up.

It took time. Shooting that many of the undead wasn't fast work. The shooters took turns resting, wiping sweat from their brows.

"Clear!" one of them called.

Then another. "Clear."

And another.

Billy walked the line with binoculars, scanning the corpses. Nothing moved. Still, he was cautious. He took his time.

"Alright," he said finally. "Take a break. Hydrate. We'll start cleanup in a bit."

He climbed down and found Sergeant Adams. "Sergeant Adams—you're driving the APC. Find someone who can drive the front-end loader. Adams, I want you to lead the front-end loader to the north, past the container storage yard." He looked at the wind vane blowing nearby. "The wind's blowing northeast. I want you to dig a trench—long, wide, and deep."

He paused and added, "We've got to move fast—before the stench gets worse than it already is."

The trench was finished just as the sun dipped low on the horizon, casting long shadows over the marshy field. The earth was dark and soft, turned over like an open wound.

Back at the wall, Billy stood with the radio in hand and barked orders.

"I want two extra sentries up on the front wall—keep eyes on the perimeter at all times. You see movement, you call it in. Don't wait. Don't hesitate."

Two soldiers acknowledged and climbed into position, rifles slung, eyes scanning the horizon.

Next came the grim work.

A squad in NBC gear—heavy suits with full-face respirators and thick gloves—filed out through the opened gates like ghosts from some chemical nightmare. The stench hit them hard, even through the filters. The pile of corpses stretched across the front of the wall like a grotesque sea of limbs and twisted torsos.

"Start loading them up," Billy said, his voice flat through his own mask.

The soldiers began lifting bodies one at a time—slippery with rot, bloated and stiff—placing them in the yawning bucket of the front-end loader. Some bodies came apart in their hands. No one spoke. No one needed to.

The loader rumbled forward, hydraulic arms groaning as it tilted its cargo into the open bed of a waiting dump truck. Wet, fleshy thuds echoed as the bodies fell in. Then the loader rolled back, and the grim process repeated.

Billy watched from atop the wall, his arms crossed tightly, his jaw clenched. The radios crackled with updates—nothing hostile spotted yet—but everyone felt it in their bones: this was borrowed time.

Behind him, a group of civilians had gathered again, quiet this time. Watching. Processing. Maybe even understanding.

“We start burning them tonight,” Billy said into the mic. “As soon as the trench is full. I don’t want a single body left by morning if we can help it.”

A voice crackled back through static. “Understood.” It was Sergeant Adams.

Billy nodded to himself. One more terrible job almost done.

Storm

The wind and weather were not with Solomon as they pushed toward Ludford. There were no reliable weather reports anymore—just scattered, generic data trickling in from backup-powered weather stations and the few stubborn places still broadcasting. It had become the norm to lead with the weather and a brief news report when broadcasting.

“The water’s getting choppy, the skies are getting really dark, and I just saw lightning strikes to our west,” Shira said, eyes fixed ahead as she piloted the trawler. Ronald sat quietly on the bench beside her, watching the dark horizon through the front windscreen. Solomon and Aimee were seated at the dining table in the galley at the rear of the upper deck cabin, within earshot.

Solomon slid out of the booth and went forward to stand next to Shira. He was beyond exhausted and had been secretly relieved when she offered to take the helm. Her offer had been the only reason he had left that night instead of waiting for the next morning.

Their destination wasn’t far, but to get there from their current position, they had to navigate open, increasingly treacherous waters. There was another option: they could move closer to shore and hug the coastline, but that put them at great risk of running aground or being beached in the shallower waters.

Solomon stood in front of the ship’s navigation screen. He tapped it. “There’s an island just west of us—Sandy Point Island,” he said. “I know it. It has a sheltered cove. Maybe we head there and wait this out.” He adjusted their heading accordingly and notified Fort MaxPhilco over the radio. “We’ll probably be stuck there overnight at least,” Shira noted, glancing at the skies.

Solomon shrugged. “We are well-provisioned. No rescue is coming out here, so I made sure we were well-stocked for exactly this kind of situation.”

By the time they reached Sandy Point Island, the storm was in full fury. The boat surged high on cresting waves before crashing down with bone-jarring force.

Poor Ronald sat doubled over, cradling a trash can, seasick from the relentless motion. Solomon tapped a pill from a small tube into Ronald’s hand and handed him a bottle of water. “Take this pill—it’s for motion sickness.” Ronald downed the pill and took a pull of water. Solomon clapped a hand on his shoulder. “She’ll hold up. This boat was made to last.”

“Hold on!” Shira warned, gripping the wheel tighter. She throttled the powerful diesel engines from half to three-quarters power, pushing the boat forward into the mouth of the cove. As they slipped inside, it was like flipping a switch—suddenly the water stilled, the wind died down, and the rain fell straighter rather than sideways.

Shira eased back the throttle, carefully timing it so the boat slowed to a crawl as it reached the center of the cove.

As she maneuvered the trawler, Solomon leaned forward, squinting through the rain-slicked glass. “Over there!” he said, pointing toward the shoreline. A small vessel lay beached at an angle, its bow split and hull cracked like a broken ribcage. It had clearly been there for a while. The salt and wind had taken their toll, peeling paint and flapping tattered canvas covers in the breeze.

“Looks like a crash,” Ronald said, wiping sweat from his forehead.

“More than that.” Solomon grabbed a pair of binoculars from a nearby hook and looked through them. He saw the slow, shuffling movements of at least three figures wandering the narrow beach—staggering, dragging limbs through the sand. Oblivious to the rain. One of them stopped and turned its head unnaturally, almost as if sensing their arrival. “Zombies,” he said.

Aimee moved up close behind him and pointed. “Is that houses or something up there?” She could see the faint outline of what looked like cabins—or perhaps outbuildings.

“Not houses... cabins. That’s how I knew about this island. It used to be a huge party spot for boaters,” Solomon said. “Someone dragged out a few of those big-box lumber store sheds and fixed them up. They set up a camp, complete with a firepit and even an outhouse. Some of the guys working at Turtle Bay Island told me about it. There’s no telling who’s been out here since things fell apart.”

A hush fell over the group, the soft patter of rain on the ship now loud in the silence.

“We’ll anchor down here tonight. I want to go over and clear out those zombies before we move on,” Solomon said.

Aimee’s brow creased. “Why? Can’t we just leave in the morning?”

Solomon saw the concern in her eyes. “I see a problem. We pulled in here because of the storm. Our boat is intact, and we have a safe place to spend the night. The next people who come here might not be as lucky. What if it’s a family? Someone with kids? I’d rather handle the problem while I’m here.”

“You made your point,” Aimee said quietly.

“The storm’s not letting up anytime soon. If someone wants to make some food, I’ll take the first watch,” Shira said.

Solomon gave a slow nod. “I’ll make something. I don’t want to make a lot of noise if we can avoid it.” He then added, “I want to know what happened here—and what’s still lurking over there in those trees.”

Burning Flesh

The bodies in the pit burned fast at first, the dry, sunbaked flesh and tattered clothing catching like kindling.

Billy stood atop the wall, watching the thick, black smoke twist upward into the sky like a beacon. The trench was half-full now, the rest of the bodies stacked in long rows awaiting cremation. It was brutal work, even with the NBC-suited soldiers and machines doing the heavy lifting.

“Keep rotating shifts, guys, but don’t skimp on the decon measures,” Billy ordered through the radio. “Nobody stays in gear more than thirty minutes in this heat without trading off.”

He wiped sweat from his brow with a rag, eyes scanning the horizon through a pair of binoculars. The odor of smoke and scorched rot clung to everything now, despite the distance to the pit—a choking blend of chemical and organic stench that no respirator could fully block. Though it wasn’t that noticeable down below, shielded by the high walls, which was a blessing for the refugees and soldiers stationed there.

Then he saw them—a streak of yellow in his periphery at first. He spun and focused the binoculars. Four school buses were weaving down the highway—tires grinding against the asphalt.

“What the hell...” he muttered, zooming in.

The highway had become impassable, and the buses ground to a halt—one backfired with a loud pop.

The doors flung open. People poured out. Men, women, children—dozens—hundreds. Someone had a white cloth attached to a pole and waved it in the direction of the shipyard. The crowd hesitated, unsure where to go, before starting down the highway on foot. Many wore fluorescent shirts with crosses on them—likely from one of the countless southern churches dotting the region.

“Adams,” he barked into the radio. “We’ve got incoming refugees—four buses, looks like a church group. They’re on foot now, moving in from the southeast.”

As he spoke, more movement caught his eye—farther down the road and in the treeline flanking it. Staggering shapes followed the same path. Slower. But persistent. A lot of them.

“And they brought a tail,” Billy added. “Zombies incoming on their six.”

“Understood,” Adams replied. “You want us to escort ’em to Fort MaxPhilco?”

“Yes. Drop everything else! Provide cover and get them inside.”

He yelled down to the workers still standing outside the wall, where the bodies had been removed. They'd been spraying a bleach mixture around the base to help with the smell.

“Get inside now! Zombies are coming!”

Billy ran down the wall to the front gates—massive, reinforced with steel plates. There was a foyer inside, then another set of high gates to allow checks before entry into the shipyard. He slapped the green button that opened the outer gates.

The soldiers outside sat down their sprayers and moved inside the first gate.

“Cover the gate! We have civilians coming!” Billy shouted, pointing.

The soldiers had left their firearms inside the foyer while working with bleach, as firearms and bleach don't generally mix.

They grabbed their weapons and took up firing stances.

Then the APC Adams was driving rumbled into view, trailing the running civilians. Gunfire rang out as sentries on the wall began shooting at the undead following close behind.

Billy raised his own rifle. He aimed carefully as the first of the undead appeared in his sight—limping, slack-jawed. He didn't hesitate. He squeezed the trigger and fired, dropping the lead zombie with a clean shot to the skull.

More followed.

“Keep moving!” he shouted. Some of the civilians were slowing, not up to the task.

“Move it or get left outside!” he screamed, waving his hand frantically toward the gates.

The APC's gun lit up then, chewing through the now-massive swarm of zombies that had been lured by the buses.

A mother stumbled and dropped to her knees, dragging two small children down with her. Her skirt was blood-soaked, tears streaming down her face. One of the cleanup soldiers broke ranks and sprinted out, hauling them upright and dragging them to safety.

There were screams as the undead caught those who couldn't keep up. Billy couldn't fire—there was too much risk of hitting civilians.

The infected were going to breach unless he made a hard choice.

“Thirty seconds! Move it or get left outside!” Billy looked down at the second hand on his watch, keeping one eye on the chaos.

When thirty seconds passed, he slapped the red button to close the gate. By the time it shut, there were bodies on both sides—some infected, some civilian. Moaning rose outside, fists pounding weakly against the steel.

Billy turned to the people now crammed into the foyer between gates, their faces soaked with sweat, fear, and exhaustion.

“You brought them here,” he muttered under his breath.

But louder, he said, “They all need to be checked for infection and processed.”

He raised his radio. “Adams... eliminate everything outside the gates.”

Adams’ voice came back. “There are civilians out here...”

Billy closed his eyes. “Everything and everyone outside the gates right now is hostile. I repeat—everything and everyone.”

A long pause.

Then: “Copy that...”

The APC’s gun swiveled and opened fire, cutting down everything between the gate and the highway. Alive or dead.

Billy turned and watched as the smoke from the pit kept rising—thick, black, and endless. The relative peace and stability of Fort MaxPhilco had just come to an end.

The icing on top—the sky turned dark—lightning bolts zig-zagged to the west. The clouds opened, and heavy rain came down.

Sandy Point Island

Solomon slept fitfully after receiving an update from Billy about the new arrivals at the shipyard. He had relieved Shira around two o'clock in the morning and decided not to try to go back to sleep. He paced the deck of the boat, the morning air crisp, tinged with the smell of fish and something else he couldn't identify.

The sky was clear and full of stars. He could hear insects chittering on the island—and an unsettling groaning sound.

“You're up already?” Aimee said. He turned and looked at her. In the light of the full moon, her tired eyes shimmered, and her hair was mussed.

“Yes. I don't sleep much these days.” He smiled. “There's coffee made in the galley... would you like me to make you a cup?”

“No... how about I make you one? How do you take it?” she said, returning his smile.

“Any way I can get it usually, but black this morning.”

She left and returned with two steaming mugs of black coffee and handed him one.

“So, when are we going to shore?” she asked. “It'll be light soon.”

“I'm going alone...” he stated. “You and Ronald will wait here with Shira.”

“Wait... you're going by yourself?” Aimee's eyes widened. “What if something happens to you?”

He held her gaze, thoughtful and honest. “Then it happens to me. But I'll do everything in my power to make sure it doesn't.”

An hour and a half later, Shira leaned against the rail with her rifle. She looked well-rested and put together, despite their circumstances.

“I count six zombies... at least,” she said. “They all look like teenagers, by their stature and the way they're dressed.”

Solomon shuddered at the thought. “Take them out when you're ready,” he replied, already turning toward the cabin. “I'm going below to change.”

Shira's rifle was silent—still making just enough noise for Solomon to pick up down below as he stripped from his clothes, folding them neatly and laying them on his bunk. He pulled on a wetsuit and diving belt. In a dry bag, he packed a radio, rubber shoes, a first-aid kit, an MP5 with suppressor, spare magazines, and a few items he might need—energy bars, a steel bottle of water. He threw a pair of flippers over his shoulder and put on a mask, which he pushed up on his head. Just as he was about to leave, he remembered—he went back to his locker and retrieved a full-tang tanto knife with sheath, which he attached to his diving belt.

By the time he returned to the deck, Shira had already dispatched the six visible targets.

“I’ll keep overwatch from here,” she said, scanning the treeline with her scope. “Are you sure you don’t want me to come with you?”

He shook his head. “No, I’m good. Keep your radio nearby.” He sat down on a wooden box, put on his flippers, shouldered the dry bag, pulled down his mask, checked them, then stepped up on the box, over the rail, and dropped into the water, arms crossed over his chest.

The swim was brisk and invigorating. By the time he reached the shore, his heart was pounding. He shed the flippers and mask, stashed them behind a log, quickly slipped on the rubber shoes, and withdrew the MP5 from the bag. With deliberate caution, he advanced toward the wreckage of the boat.

He passed each of the fallen zombies that Shira had dispatched, keeping the muzzle trained on them. No twitching. No movement. Shira’s aim had been perfect.

The crashed boat was a total loss—its hull split open, the interior swamped, torn gear and broken seats scattered across the sand. Skeletal remains lay half-buried in the surf, picked clean. He guessed the infected—or crabs—had gotten to them. Or both. There was nothing to salvage.

“What happened here?” he wondered aloud.

Solomon waved to Shira back on the boat, then turned and headed into the trees, moving toward the inner part of the island where the campground lay.

The trees thickened as Solomon pushed inland, leaves dripping from the storm the night before, the scent of wet earth and rot hanging in the air. The path was overgrown but still visible—a trampled trail winding between palmettos and pines. Somewhere in the canopy, a gull cried out—sharp and lonely.

Then he saw it. The campground emerged like a ghost town from the brush. Four small cabins stood crooked under the weight of humidity and time. Their weathered wood was darkened from the rain, windows fogged or broken. A rusted fire pit sat in the middle of the clearing. Debris scattered around it.

What a mess, he thought.

He crouched low and swept his MP5 across the campsite. He held his breath—watching—listening.

There was no movement. No sound—except for a gentle rain that had started.

He moved from the tree cover to the first cabin. The door hung open, creaking softly in the breeze. He nudged it with his foot. The hinges moaned loudly as the door opened, causing him to

flinch. He moved quickly, sweeping side to side. The interior was dark, and it took a moment for his eyes to adjust. His finger hovered near the trigger.

Inside: a tangle of blankets, empty food and beverage cans, and a blood-smearred mattress. Someone had been alive and tried to hold out here. Someone hadn't made it. There was way too much blood.

He stepped inside and saw a hose hanging from one of the windows. His interest piqued, he stepped out slowly, moved around the side, and saw the hose was sticking out from the top of a rain barrel—set up to catch water from the roof of the cabin.

He moved to the next cabin. Locked. He knocked lightly—once, then twice. Silence. The door was locked from the inside. It was a simple hook-and-eye latch, meant more for privacy than security. He slipped out his knife and worked the latch open. The door gave way with a groan. Inside: nothing but mildew and silence. A window was broken, bloodstains covered the sharp edges. Someone had left through the window.

He scratched his head and moved on.

At the third cabin, he paused. This one had fresh drag marks in the mud leading up to the door. Something—or someone—had been pulled—or maybe crawled—inside.

He raised the MP5 and pressed the door with his shoulder. It burst open.

Inside, sprawled across the floor, was what had once been a teenager. Half-eaten, spine arched in a final grimace, eyes wide and glassy. And in the far corner of the room, crouched in the dark, a zombie turned its head slowly toward Solomon. It had been feeding. It groaned—a guttural, wet staccato—then stood clumsily and lunged at him.

The MP5 barked once—twice. The silent rounds thudded into flesh. The creature dropped. Still. Damn. The kill was fresh. That meant the kid had held out... for who knew how long. If only they'd been there a few days earlier.

Solomon stood over the bodies, breath heavy, gun still raised. He shot the half-eaten teen in the forehead for good measure.

A scraping sound behind him caused him to whirl. A zombie was already inside the cramped cabin with him—close. He didn't have time to fire. He used the MP5 to brace and block the zombie's mouth as it came for him, its fingers raking at his wetsuit as he pushed its dead weight backward. His rubber soles slipped in the blood and gore. "Don't fall," he muttered. Still holding the MP5 with one hand against the zombie's chin, he reached back, drew his knife, swung it around, and drove it hard into the side of the zombie's head.

It was like hitting the off switch. The zombie collapsed.

He rushed outside, swept the area with the MP5, then checked himself. No bites. No scratches. His knife was still buried in the zombie's skull. He decided to leave it.

He spent a full five minutes catching his breath and calming his heart rate. That had been a close call. He had underestimated just how quiet they could be while stalking their prey.

The final cabin was in decent shape. A lot more work had gone into it than the others. It had bunk beds, a small dining table, even a wooden cabinet with canned food, candles, matches, a few books, and a spiral notebook with names and dates of people who had visited. The last entry was at least a year before the world fell apart. It also had a rain barrel outside and a hand pump with a filter for water. If the half-eaten kid had chosen this cabin to hide in—who knew? This one might have given him a better chance.

He sighed.

He took a piece of wet charcoal from the fire pit and drew an X on the doors of the cabins he had cleared.

As he scanned the camp one last time, something caught his eye near the outhouse—a shadow moving in the distance between the trees. When he aimed and looked through the sights... nothing. Just trees. Just rain.

He keyed his radio. “Camp is mostly cleared. I had two contacts—hostile—taken care of. Looks like a kid holed up here. We missed saving him by days. I'm going to sweep the rest of the island and return.”

“Copy that.” Shira's voice crackled. “Watch your six.”

Solomon took a deep breath, adjusted his grip on the MP5, and moved toward the outhouse, every step deliberate. He opened the door. Empty. Full of cobwebs.

He circled wide, weapon raised. The forest thinned near the far edge of the island, where land dipped into a low bluff overlooking open water.

Then he saw it—a vessel. A sleek, low-slung motor yacht sliding silently past the southern edge of the island. Matte black, angular. Not a pleasure craft.

Even without binoculars, Solomon could make out four, maybe five armed figures on deck. One wore armor plates, another held binoculars. A crudely painted flag fluttered from the stern—a blood-red skull on a white sheet.

Pirates.

He dropped to his belly in the brush, heart hammering.

Through the undergrowth, he saw them haul a naked woman on deck. Her hands and feet were tied. Her body—battered, bruised. One of the men said, “We need to find us a new piece of ass.”

Laughter. Then a rifle raised—and a shot. The woman slumped. They kicked her body overboard like trash.

Solomon stayed low. Didn't move.

The yacht drifted west.

He waited, then rose.

It was not the time for confrontation. Not alone. And the MP5 wasn't the right weapon for a long-distance fight.

He radioed Shira. "I know you heard the gunshot. Stay alert for hostiles."

Then he ran—fast, quiet, and alert.

By the time he reached the beach, Shira was still scanning from the railing. He donned his flippers and mask and swam hard for the boat.

When he climbed aboard, Shira raised an eyebrow. "You look like you saw a ghost. What's happening?"

"Not a ghost," Solomon said grimly, stripping his gear and rushing to the cabin. "A different kind of predator." He glanced back toward the open water. "We're not the only ones out here. Don't move from this position till I get back."

Respite

Billy paced the asphalt outside the shipping containers and tents that had been converted into a triage and intake center. The air inside was stifling—packed with sweaty bodies, the moans of the sick and injured mixing with whispered prayers and crying children. It was almost too much for him to take.

Cots and chairs had been lined wall-to-wall in the tents, but it wasn't enough. Half the newcomers sat on the floor or leaned against the walls.

He spotted a young corporal named Tessa Gutierrez near the entrance, clipboard in hand, her eyes sharp but weary.

“What's the count?” he asked.

She looked down at the clipboard.

“Ninety-seven women, sixty-three men, forty-two kids. So that's two hundred and two refugees. Twelve with serious injuries—gashes, burns, and possible broken bones. And we have three more in quarantine with possible exposure. They have what look like bite and scratch wounds.”

“Possible?”

“One is unconscious. The other two were running on adrenaline and claim they don't know how they were injured. No one knows for sure if they were bitten or scratched.”

Billy ran a hand through his hair.

“Keep them quarantined and strap them down. I don't care if they're up tap dancing right now.”

He leaned in. “You know what to do if they turn, right?”

She nodded, then added,

“We're running out of space—there's really no place to quarantine them right now.”

He sighed, looking around. He spotted a box truck parked next to one of the warehouses.

“That truck is empty. Do whatever you have to do to use the back for quarantine space,” he said.

“And Gutierrez, I want double guards on quarantine. No contact. No visitors at all until medical clears them.”

“I'll handle it,” Gutierrez said quietly.

Billy nodded. He raised his radio.

“I need someone to bring two of those portable ACs to intake. It's hot as hell in here.”

“Affirmative... on it,” someone replied.

Billy made his way to the front entrance, where the group's leader was waiting—a tall man in dusty slacks and a gray dress shirt. Pastor Dean Haverson. He looked haggard, lips chapped, eyes sunken from dehydration or stress—or both.

“Pastor,” Billy greeted, trying to stay civil.

“Captain,” the pastor replied, offering a tired smile. “I want to thank you, sir, for opening your gates. You saved a lot of lives today.”

Billy didn’t respond right away.

“We also lost some. At least a dozen of your people were trampled or grabbed before I closed the gates. We weren’t prepared for this...”

“We had no choice. We ran out of food. Water. Everything. We saw the smoke and thought it might lead us to safety, to other people.”

“It meant a fire,” Billy said bluntly. “It meant danger. We were cremating bodies. Now we have a lot more to cremate.”

A long silence passed between them. Then the pastor said,

“We’re willing to work. We’ll earn our place. You won’t have any trouble from us. We are God-fearing, hard-working people.”

“We’ll see,” Billy answered. Then added,

“I’m only the interim leader while the real leader, Major Phillips, is out scouting for a more suitable place for all of you to live. Until he gets back, your people will continue to be screened—everyone. Medical exams. Psychological too. We’ve had enough breakdowns around here. You’ll then be assigned work tasks. Everyone able-bodied helps with cleanup or supply rotation.”

The pastor nodded, then rejoined his group.

Billy hunted down Gutierrez.

“Get someone to start organizing rations. Cut portions down to two meals a day if necessary, but no one goes without.”

“Are we having a shortage of food?” she asked, wearing a worried expression.

“No... but it takes a long time to feed this many people, and I want everyone to eat in a timely manner.” He then added, “I also want a watch posted on the food stores.”

She looked toward the new arrivals.

“You think there are thieves in that group?”

“They’re starving, and I’m expecting desperation,” he replied. “Prioritize food, then work on the quarantine space. Get it done, okay?”

She nodded.

That night, as the refugees bedded down on thin mats, borrowed blankets, and even cardboard, and the soldiers ate silent meals under flickering lights, Billy stood alone atop the wall again—watching the smoke still rising from the trench.

The gates had held, for now. But he couldn't shake the ominous feeling that this place—this tenuous sanctuary—had just taken on more weight than it could bear.

Pirates

“We need to get ready. They’re searching the island,” Solomon said to Aimee, who followed him downstairs.

“Who?...” she asked. He began stripping naked to change clothes, and Aimee said, “Oh... I’ll wait out here...”

Solomon dressed in record time, then called Aimee and Ronald into the room. He stepped over to another, wider locker and opened it, revealing a cache of weapons. “Do either of you know how to shoot a gun?” Then he snapped his fingers and pointed at Aimee, who was several shades pinker than usual after glimpsing him naked. “You said you went hunting with your father and grandfather?”

Ronald, who was pale, interrupted, “I’ve only shot a gun in a video game...”

Aimee composed herself and cleared her throat before jutting her chin stubbornly. “Like I told you, I went hunting with my daddy and Pawpaw. I know how to shoot a shotgun or rifle. Never shot a pistol before, but I know how they work.”

“Come closer—both of you,” Solomon said. He looked at Aimee first, then reached into the locker. He took out a rifle and a banana-shaped magazine. “This is a .22 rifle.” He handed it to Aimee. “It has almost no recoil and a thirty-round magazine.”

She took the rifle and magazine from him, then slammed the magazine into the breech and checked it over like she knew what she was doing.

Next, he grabbed a shotgun and demonstrated, pressing it tight to his shoulder. “Ronald, this is a 12-gauge shotgun. Hold it tight to your shoulder like this when you shoot, because it kicks.” He handed it to Ronald. “Let me see you do it.”

Ronald mimicked him, looking uncertain.

“It’s loaded and deadly,” Solomon said. “Finger off the trigger until you are ready to kill someone with it. Squeeze the trigger to fire, pump the action, and it will load the next shell. You only get five shots, and I don’t have time for more lessons, so stay below deck. If anyone besides me, Shira, or Aimee comes down these stairs—you shoot.”

He met Ronald’s terrified eyes. “This isn’t a toy, Ronald. Remember what I said: finger off the trigger, and don’t point it at anything unless you are ready to kill it.”

Solomon quickly swapped his MP5 submachine gun for a heavily modified AR-15, slapping in a fresh magazine and loading a haversack with spares. He motioned to Aimee. “Stay in the cabin. Stay low. Shira and I will do the heavy lifting. Only shoot if you have a clear shot—don’t hesitate—and most importantly, stay alive.”

Aimee nodded, the pink now gone from her face, which had turned a few shades paler than normal. “Okay.”

Solomon and Shira crouched on the rear deck, scanning the island and the waters beyond. An eerie calm hung over the area.

“These are bad guys. We can’t let them take us alive...” he whispered to Shira, recalling what he had witnessed earlier.

Her eyes narrowed, filled with something—understanding and wrath.

Minutes ticked by as they sat, watching and listening. The sound of the gentle rain pattering, the sloshing of the water, and the waves lapping the shore filled the air. It smelled fresh—ozone-rich and electrifying.

Shira spotted it first—the yacht cutting silently across the cove entrance—sleek, fast, dangerous.

“Here we go...” she muttered through gritted teeth.

“Fire when ready...” Solomon said in an even tone.

She squeezed off a shot, and the man wearing the chest armor’s head exploded.

Shouting echoed across the water. Gunfire erupted. The enemy had been caught off guard, but they seemed disciplined. Rogue veterans—maybe law enforcement. It didn’t matter.

A bullet shattered a window inches from Solomon’s head. “Get down!” he snarled aloud—for Aimee’s benefit, as Shira was already crouched low.

Shira fired. There was a silent thump, and a pirate cartwheeled off the yacht’s deck into the water.

The enemy responded with a hail of bullets. Fully automatic—Solomon and Shira lay flat against the deck. Fiberglass and wood splintered around them.

Shira popped up and fired. “Shit... I missed,” she said.

From behind, the pop of Aimee’s .22 rang out—followed by a scream from the enemies’ vessel.

“I’m hit! Ahhh...”

The reply was furious. Bullets ripped through the railing, coming inches from them. They were outnumbered and pinned down.

“Plan B. Cover me!” Solomon shouted.

He pushed his rifle and haversack to Shira. She came up quickly with the rifle and laid down a furious barrage of gunfire, keeping the enemy’s heads down.

Solomon dropped flat, crawling to the rear of the deck. He yanked the ropes off a greasy canvas tarp and ripped it away—revealing a mounted minigun on a steel tripod, bolted to the deck. It

had been installed in case they needed to clear zombies from a landing spot in a pinch. Pirates hadn't crossed his mind when he had it installed.

Bullets hit dangerously close. Rounds sparked off a coiled chain near him. Pain flared hot across Solomon's back and shoulder—but he shoved it aside with a grimace.

He grabbed the minigun's handles and swung it toward the yacht. The barrels spun up with a whining growl. He squeezed the triggers.

A stream of lead chewed through the yacht's sleek hull. Solomon raked a figure-eight across the deck, cutting down men and equipment alike.

He drew a line down the side of the yacht, and smoke began to billow from every opening.

Boom! Then a deep whoomp! The side of the yacht exploded, the percussion cutting through the rain and water—flaming debris flying into the air. The vessel cracked in half with a shrieking moan, gurgling as water flooded inside. Within minutes, as Solomon and Shira watched in shocked awe, it disappeared beneath the water and was gone.

The cove was silent, except for the crackle of flames on the debris field and the gentle slap of waves hitting the trawler from the shock of the explosion.

Aimee rushed onto the deck, her eyes wide with horror. She pointed to Solomon. "You're shot!" she cried.

Solomon couldn't see the wound—but he could feel the heat and the blood soaking down his back. "I know... I gotta stop the bleeding," he muttered, staggering toward the cabin.

Shira remained at her post, scanning the wreckage and the shoreline, rifle ready in case any survivors dared surface and swim for the island.

Expansion Plan

“The food is secure and the quarantine area is set up and ready. Do you need anything else from me?” Corporal Gutierrez asked Billy.

Billy was in Solomon’s office. Solomon had added two cots for sleeping when the shit hit the fan. Thanks to a vast array of solar panels the shipyard offices—and the new reception area—still had air conditioning. He cracked open an iced cold cola and offered one to Gutierrez, who took it and pressed it against her forehead before opening it.

“I want to continue cleanup of the bodies outside the walls.” He said, leaning back and taking a long pull of the icy, fizzy, sugary drink. “If you want extra responsibility, then you can start working on that.”

She jotted notes, then sat with her hands in her lap. “Anything else?”

He arched a brow, “That isn’t enough?”

“I mean...I can oversee the cleanup, while doing something else.” She answered eagerly.

He exhaled and looked around the room. His eyes landed on the wall map. “If you look at that map on the wall. There is only a small part of the property that is actually walled in. Where that red line is at.”

She stood up and walked over to the map. “Yes...”

“To the north of us is the container yard, a fenced in property filled with storage containers.”

“Uh-huh...” She said, her face clearly showing she had no idea where he was going with this.

“Right now the container yard is surrounded by a wire fence. What if we started at the northern wall and began stacking storage containers, to build a wall around the container lot.”

“You want to expand the size of Fort MaxPhilco? What did Major Phillips say?” She asked.

Billy rubbed his chin. “I haven’t told him, but I think he’d like the idea. He likes it when people show initiative. And here’s the thing—It could give us, what—I don’t even know how many acres—room for us to grow. We could plant crops, raise animals...like they are doing over on Turtle Bay Island.”

She smiled. “That sounds good. I mean, how would we even start something like that?”

Billy raised his hands, “Easy. We have the lifts here that can move the containers. We use an APC to provide security. If you want to start on that, I can handle the cleanup. Unless the project is too much for you?”

She shook her head, “No...I got it. I’ll get it done.”

Billy slapped his desk. “That’s what I like to hear. Take a few of the men from the church group with you, in case you need extra hands. Time to see if they keep their word.”

After she left, he stood looking at the map. He was starting to get the hand of this leadership thing—and he was going to actually miss it when Solomon got back.

Recovery

Solomon felt dizzy and nauseous.

The shock of the battle—the pain and blood loss—made the world tilt around him. He staggered over to a long lounge bench in the now bullet-ridden cabin and sat down heavily, peeling off his blood-soaked shirt.

There were two ragged holes in the upper left side of the fabric. He grimaced as fresh waves of pain rolled through him. He squinted—the holes looked like they were caused by fragmentation, perhaps a ricochet.

Aimee was at his side in an instant. For a moment, she just stared—taking in his scarred, battle-worn body: the muscles, the old wounds. History and stories. Then she blinked and shook herself back to the present.

“What can I do to help?”

He winced. “Grab the large first-aid kit—it’s attached to the wall next to the fire extinguisher in the galley. Bring it to me...” He tried to keep his voice even, despite the agony he was in.

Aimee nodded, rushed to grab it, and moments later, she was standing in front of him. She plopped the heavy kit down on the bench next to him and unzipped it.

“What now?”

“There’s gauze and a tincture of iodine. Use the iodine to clean the wounds—just squirt it liberally and wipe them with gauze.”

She did as he said, and he remained stoic as she applied the iodine and wiped the wounds.

“How bad is it?” he asked.

“There’s a slow trickle of blood. The holes aren’t huge...” He could feel her breath on his back as she leaned in for a closer look. “But... they do look deep.”

“I need you to put on a pair of gloves from the kit. Then you’ll find tweezers sealed in plastic. Open them—you’re going to have to try and dig the pieces out of the wound.”

She winced. This wasn’t a video game. This was real—and Solomon was bleeding out right in front of her. She found the gloves, fumbling to put them on, and then located the tweezers.

She steeled herself. “Ready?”

“Yes...” he groaned.

She dug into the first hole with the tweezers, and Solomon hissed, gripping the edge of the bench until his knuckles turned white.

“Sorry!” she snapped, stopping. Her eyes were wide.

“No... no... keep going. It’s going to hurt. I’m okay,” he said, his stomach churning.

She bit the inside of her cheek as she worked. The first fragment came free after a minute of careful digging. Solomon grunted but didn't move. Sweat beaded on Aimee's forehead as she fished out another sliver.

"You're doing good," Solomon said, surprising her. His voice was ragged but calm.

After what felt like an hour—but was only minutes—she had a small pile of bloody metal shards on a piece of gauze.

"I think that's it. I don't feel any more."

"You don't have a metal detector, do you?" Solomon asked.

"A what?" she said.

"I'm joking..." he slurred.

"I need you to stitch me up now. Take out the suture kit—it has forceps and pre-threaded sutures."

Aimee wiped her hands on her pants, trying to steady them. She found and opened the suture kit, studied the contents, and with Solomon's gentle guidance, began sewing up the wounds—remembering back to when she watched her grandmother sewing a million times while quilting. Every stitch felt like it took a year.

"Pull each stitch tight," Solomon instructed. He sat rock still, only occasionally letting out a sharp breath when the needle tugged too hard.

Finally, she tied off the last knot and covered the wounds with antiseptic and clean gauze, pressing it down firmly. Then she sat back on her heels, face pale. She removed the gloves, then went and grabbed a cup of water from the galley, drank half, and brought another one for Solomon.

He took a sip of the water, then managed a faint smile.

"You did good."

Aimee shook her head, blinking back sudden tears she hadn't expected.

"You scared the hell out of me."

"Scared the hell out of me too," he said with a grim chuckle, then slumped back against the bench, utterly spent.

Aimee stayed next to him, watching him breathe—refusing to let herself cry.

Corporal Gutierrez

Corporal Gutierrez felt something inside—a pride she hadn't experienced since joining the Florida National Guard. She was doing things—real things that mattered.

Everyone at Fort MaxPhilco would reap the rewards of her efforts. She hoped that when Major Phillips returned, Captain Hawkins would let him know how useful she had been in his absence—and perhaps even give her a battlefield promotion.

She knew the rank probably wouldn't mean anything in the long run, but dammit, Sergeant Gutierrez had a nice ring to it. She smiled, imagining her mama down in Pahokee, telling everyone about her “Tessa”—a Sargento del ejército (Sergeant in the Army).

She had carefully selected five men from the church, as well as five of her fellow Guardsmen, to complete her mission.

They had started strong—bringing two heavy forklifts and an APC to the lot with the shipping containers. They wasted no time setting the first container in place, and now, after four arduous hours in the heat, they had already stacked a row of containers, end to end, down the entire north side of the property.

There had been a few zombies in the vicinity, but they had dealt with them quietly and radioed it in to Billy, who sent the front-end loader over to retrieve the bodies.

Everything was going perfectly. While everyone else was taking a well-deserved lunch break, she walked among the stacked containers. There were several small buildings on the lot made from shipping containers. She went to the first building and opened the door. A stale heat hit her in the face. It was an office.

She walked through alone. It looked to her like some sort of setup for a security guard. There was a small bathroom, and in the main room a table and chairs, as well as a kitchenette with a sink, refrigerator, microwave, and coffee pots. She opened the cabinets. There were huge cans of coffee, creamer, and a canister filled with individual packs of sugar, along with a variety of snack crackers and cookies.

“Jackpot,” she said to herself. She made a mental note to come back here and procure the stash before someone else found out about it. Food was currency right now.

She walked over and looked at the paperwork on the wall. As she suspected, there was a guard duty roster. She grew bored and decided to come back to the office later. She looked for her team, she could see them in the distance; they were still sitting in the shade, bullshitting and eating.

Something caught her eye. She turned and saw another building. It was larger than the office. She thought about the food that was in the security trailer and figured maybe that trailer would have more goodies.

She gave another look back at the others. They were fine. She shrugged and headed over to check it out. After all, she was the one in charge—and if she wanted to explore, that was her choice.

When she neared the building, a small voice inside her head whispered—Don't go in there. She stopped.

Don't go in there—it said again.

The door was ajar, and she could see an old sleeping mat lying in the bushes nearby. Had someone been sleeping there? If so, why hadn't they made themselves known to the people at Fort MaxPhilco?

She patted the holstered pistol on her side. Her finger drifted up and unbuttoned the snap. Then she adjusted her Kevlar helmet.

“Is there someone in there?” she called out.

No answer.

She let out a breath. She was just being silly. A scared little girl—not Sergeant Gutierrez. Not someone who leads others. She cleared her throat and marched forward. She grabbed the doorframe and pulled it open.

Then her eyes widened—and before she could scream, a zombie latched onto her nose with its teeth—tearing, twisting. She shoved it, but it was biting harder, and it wasn't until her nose and part of her face were ripped completely off that she was able to put distance between them. Her screams were primal—desperate shrieks.

The zombie came for her—chewing her nose like bubblegum.

Then another appeared. And another.

She was taken down and torn apart in moments.

Billy stood looking at what was left of Corporal Gutierrez.

It was a gut punch.

When she had screamed, the others came running. They killed the four zombies that had been trapped inside the shipping container—apparently homeless—who had become infected.

Despite the fact that the zombies had ravaged her body, Gutierrez was still alive—panting hard, tears flowing from her eyes.

“Mama...” she croaked.

Billy raised his rifle and shot her in the head.

The others looked on—solemn and silent.

He stood there for a few moments, saying a silent prayer. Then he keyed his radio mic.

“We have five more bodies for the pit.”

Taking Stock

Shira finally came inside the cabin. She brushed the rain off herself and took in the situation.

“How is he doing?” she asked, nodding toward Solomon.

Solomon’s eyes were closed. “I lost some blood—not too bad—but we need to stay here and rest tonight. We’ll see how things go tomorrow. In the meantime, I’ll radio Billy and give him an update.”

“I can call Billy if you want...” Shira offered, then looked around. “Where is Ronald?”

Aimee frowned. “He hasn’t come up yet...”

“Let me go check on him,” Shira said.

“He has a shotgun. Just be careful,” Solomon warned.

Ronald was physically okay—just in shock. After surrendering his shotgun to Shira, he came up to the upper cabin with the others.

“Do you need something? A glass of water, maybe?” Aimee asked him.

Ronald nodded. “What about the holes in the boat? And the broken windows?”

Solomon sat forward and opened his eyes. He pressed a hand against his head, cursing himself for not thinking of it first. “Good point, Ronald. Go outside and check the damage. Let’s see what we’re dealing with.”

“Me?” Ronald pointed to his chest. “I... I don’t even know what I’m looking for.”

Shira shook her head. “Come on, kid. I’ll show you.”

As they headed out, Aimee set Ronald’s glass of water on the galley table, then came over to Solomon. “Do we have anything to cover the broken windows?”

Solomon thought for a moment. “There are supplies onboard, down in the engine compartment—tape, plastic sheeting, scrap wood, tools.” He paused. “Let’s just wait until they give us an update.”

After a while, Shira and Ronald returned, looking grim.

“Boss,” Shira said, “we’ve got a lot of holes. Most are high up and superficial, but there are some close to the waterline. I don’t see any bubbles or signs that we’re taking on water, but if we hit rough seas again, we will be. I still need to check the dinghy, engine, and holding tanks as well.”

Solomon forced himself to stand. His shoulder throbbed, and his stomach was nauseous. He found a tube of seasickness medication and took one of the tablets, which he knew from experience would help. He went over to the galley and called out:

“Looks like we’re going to be here for a few days, at least. I’ll call in reinforcements. In the meantime, we patch what we can—at least cover the windows so the mosquitoes and no-see-ums don’t bite us all night.”

He put on some coffee—he would need it. They had a lot of work to do. While the coffee was brewing, he went to the radio and was shocked it hadn’t been damaged. The instrument panel and navigation screen had been shot many times.

He told Billy about the attack, his injuries, and the damage to the boat. Billy, in turn, brought him up to date on the situation at Fort MaxPhilco.

“You’re doing good, Billy. I told you—you’re a natural leader.”

“Thank you,” Billy replied. “I’m going to call Phillipe and see if I can get him heading in your direction.”

Later that afternoon, a large, rugged fishing boat—heavier and more robust than the trawler—appeared at the mouth of the cove and cut through the water toward them. On the bow stood Phillipe, lean, wiry, and scarred, flanked by men who looked battle-worn and hard. They moved with the casual confidence of professional soldiers. They were members of Solomon’s security team.

Solomon exhaled slowly. Backup had arrived.

Weight Of Command

Billy took a pull of beer. He looked at the empty cola can sitting on the desk—left behind earlier by Corporal Gutierrez. She was so young, he thought, and she showed so much promise. It's my fault she's dead. If I hadn't assigned her such a large task so soon, she might still be alive.

He shook his head. No... he couldn't—wouldn't—think that way. He had to keep his head screwed on tight. The stakes were way too high if he lost it.

After she died, Gutierrez's team had worked to finish putting the shipping containers into place. In this new world, taking time to grieve was a luxury. Billy had brought in a squad to check the rest of the site to make sure there were no more zombies. He kicked himself for not thinking to do that first—before he sent her over there.

Tomorrow, they would start welding, reinforcing, and joining the containers together—cutting out doors, rearranging, and setting containers to create new living quarters and other buildings. They needed room for their new arrivals, and he wanted to see if they could build some raised garden beds as well. Maybe we can call them the Corporal Gutierrez Memorial Gardens, he thought.

He also thought of Solomon, out there injured. He and Solomon had gone through a lot, and both of them were heavy-laden with scars and wounds. It still concerned him, though. Solomon had always been the more level-headed and grounded of the two. He was also quicker on his feet—by leaps and bounds. Johnny-on-the-spot, as the old saying went. If something happened to Solomon, he didn't know if he had what it took to lead the same way his old friend could. It was all well and good to fill in for a few days—people followed him, he suspected, because they knew they'd incur Solomon's wrath if they gave him any trouble. But would they follow me if Solomon wasn't around anymore? The thought disturbed him.

He swallowed down the last of the beer and tossed the bottle in the bin. One and done. He couldn't risk getting drunk and losing his senses. People relied on him. He needed to stay sober. There was a light rap on his door. He answered. Adams was there.

"Sorry to bother you, Captain, but we have some people out here saying they're really hungry. I was told by the detail guarding the food that any decisions had to come through you."

Billy sighed and scratched his chin. "I'll talk to the detail. I think we can give each person an MRE. I just want you to get on the loudspeaker and let everyone know that this is a one-off situation—because we're aware that some of the new arrivals have been starving for a while. Tomorrow, we're going back to the normal two-meal-a-day schedule that Gutierrez put into place."

Adams went to make the announcement, and Billy headed to the warehouse to authorize the release. "I sure do hope I'm making the right decision," he muttered under his breath.

Old Scars

It took hours to patch the holes in the trawler. It was difficult, precarious work, as many of the holes were hard to reach. Thankfully, the dinghy, motor, and holding tanks weren't hit.

Billy had sent more ammunition for the mini-gun, per Solomon's request, so Solomon reloaded it, covered it again with a tarp, and then helped the others as much as he could despite his injuries.

Aimee stayed close to Solomon, shadowing his every move. He could sense her unease around Phillippe and the four other men who had arrived with him.

"How do you know him? Are you sure you can trust him?" she asked in a low voice, when they were out of earshot of the others.

Solomon took her aside. "You don't have to worry. Phillippe is as solid as they come. And I won't let anyone hurt you. Not if I can help it."

Since they were going to be there for a few days waiting for the patches to set, Phillippe and the four men went ashore and explored the camp. Without prompting, they dug a mass grave on the north side of the island and hauled the bodies of the zombies there to burn—where the wind would carry the smoke out to sea.

Phillippe brought Solomon's knife back to him—cleaned and sharper than he had left it.

"I thought you'd want this back."

Solomon nodded and clapped him on the back. "Thank you."

Later that night, the nine of them gathered in the cabin, crammed around the galley table and a card table hauled over from the fishing boat. They ate a hearty meal of chicken tacos with rice and beans—washing it down with ice-cold beer.

"Mrs. Maria sent this food," Phillippe said, waving a hand over the spread. "When she heard where I was going, she said to tell you she's sorry the chicken in the tacos came from a can—but that's all she had." Everyone laughed.

"It's all good," Solomon said with a grin. "Mrs. Maria could turn a bucket of shit into a gourmet meal with her spices."

That brought on another round of laughter.

Aimee, smiling, tilted her head, curious. "Who's Mrs. Maria?"

Solomon leaned back, relaxing for the first time that day. "She and Jose have been good friends of mine for at least ten years."

"Oh... how did you meet them?" Aimee asked.

“I met Jose when I took over after my grandfather died. I’d just inherited his estate and had the idea of building a town on the island. Jose was working for one of those huge corporate farming operations. I sniped him away to set up a farming operation here. There was already a small cabin on the island, and he and Maria moved into it. When I started construction, Mrs. Maria opened a small taqueria to feed the workers. It’s been pretty lucrative for them... at least until all this happened.” He made a slow circle in the air with his finger. “I think of them as family.”

“And you?” Aimee asked, turning to Phillipe with a forced smile. “How do you know Solomon?”

Phillipe smiled broadly, his crooked white teeth flashing. “I’ve known him a long, long time. He saved my life—way back when he was just a poor gringo in the Green Berets.”

“Really? What happened?” Ronald asked around a mouthful of taco.

Phillipe glanced at Solomon for permission. Solomon shrugged. “Those secrets don’t matter anymore. Go ahead, if you want.”

“Alright...” Phillipe said, sitting up a little straighter.

“I was born in Mexico and lived there until I was a teenager. Then I left and ended up falling in with a rebel group in Colombia. Don’t ask me what the hell I was thinking.” He spread his arms. “Anyway, we did some really bad shit—kidnapping gringo tourists for ransom, robbing, stealing—you know, whatever we had to do to survive and make a little cash.” He rubbed his fingers together.

“One day, we got word that a group of tourists would be traveling through this beautiful mountain pass to reach a spectacular beach. So we set up an ambush. Sure enough, two brand-new shiny buses came rolling down the dirt road.”

“I was sitting behind this boulder, rifle ready...” Phillipe mimed holding a rifle. “When one of my guys stepped out onto the road with his weapon to stop the buses.”

He paused, shaking his head at the memory.

“What happened next—pure chaos. The buses weren’t full of gringo tourists—they were full of cartel soldiers. They came out shooting. Seems their boss had been getting heat for the stuff we’d been doing.”

“It turned into a bloodbath. I got shot. Everyone else did too, but they all died. I didn’t—lucky me. The cartel guys hit me with the butt of a rifle, then they put a hood over my head, threw me into a truck, and dragged me way up into their hideout in the mountains.” He emphasized the point with his hand.

He leaned forward, looking around, his voice dropping.

“Those bastards patched up my gunshot wound, but it got infected. I got sick. Very sick. They beat me every day, tortured me. I must’ve weighed less than a hundred pounds. They kept me in this tiny room—no, a box—with a ceiling so low I could barely stand. They chained me to the wall and barely fed me.”

“I asked them once, ‘Why don’t you just kill me?’ They told me they wanted me alive—to be an example to anyone who messes with the cartel.”

“I lost all hope. I thought I was just waiting for death.”

His eyes drifted for a moment. He took a sip of beer and cleared his throat before continuing.

“Then one night, I saw a sliver of orange light flickering under the door. Heard explosions and gunfire—far away at first, then closer. Louder. Smoke started pouring into the room. I was thinking to myself, ‘This is it. Finally.’”

“At that exact moment, the door to my cell exploded inward. Through the rolling smoke, backlit by fire, came this giant, hulk of a man dressed like a ninja, rifle in hand. He pointed it at me... then shouldered it and left. Came back with the keys and unlocked the chains.” Phillippe held up his wrists, showing the scars. “I was way too sick and weak to walk, so he threw me over his shoulder. I smelled like piss, shit, vomit, and sweat—but he didn’t care.” He jabbed a finger at Solomon. “It was him. Wasn’t even supposed to be a rescue mission—his orders were clear: no prisoners, no survivors. But he broke the rules. Saved me.” Phillippe smiled warmly.

“He carried me out, got me patched up, and smuggled me to a safe town. Paid out of his own pocket to get me back on my feet.”

“I kept in touch. And, well...” He spread his hands. “Haven’t been able to repay him or get rid of him since.”

Solomon chuckled, shaking his head. He raised his beer in the air. “I’m glad I was there, Phillippe. To old and good friends.” He toasted.

Trust In Lawlessness

After dinner, everyone except Aimee and Solomon went over to the fishing boat. Phillippe took the table back over and pulled out a deck of cards and a pack of dominoes.

“Why don’t you go have fun?” Solomon urged. He was convalescing downstairs on his bunk. He pulled up a classic western to watch on his tablet, with a cold beer and a bag of stale pretzels to snack on.

“I thought I’d sit with you, if you don’t mind,” Aimee said. She eased herself down on the floor and stole a few of his pretzels. “What are you watching?”

He smiled. “Just an old cowboy movie. It’s a bit hokey, but I like it.”

“Cool...” She sat and watched the movie with him.

After the movie ended, Solomon hobbled to the bathroom while Aimee went upstairs. He then climbed up to the galley for another beer.

Aimee was there, helping herself to a cola. “How do you know you can trust people now?” she asked him.

He frowned. “What do you mean?”

She leaned closer and looked around. “I mean, now we’re living in a world where there’s no law anymore—none at all. What’s to stop anyone from just doing whatever they want?”

Solomon cracked open his beer and sat down at the galley table. “Well, the thing is, there are a lot of scared people right now who are asking themselves the exact same question you are. They have families, and they just want to live in a place that’s safe and secure.”

He took a sip of beer.

“If people have the same goals and the same morals, they tend to gravitate toward each other, wanting to help one another. But, as you saw, there are those who see this as a golden opportunity to take from others and destroy for their own personal gain. I think we just have to hope there are more good and just people out there than bad—but stay prepared and vigilant for the worst, if that makes sense.”

She nodded. “I think so. But what about people like Phillippe, an admitted criminal? What’s keeping him honest right now?”

Solomon sighed. “The place where Phillippe grew up and thrived as a criminal isn’t much different from what we have right now. There was lawlessness, and people banded together to do whatever it took to survive. Phillippe knows that right now, he has it good—there’s plenty of food to eat, a safe place to lay his head at night, and people who care about him. He knows that being a lone wolf will only take him so far in this world.”

Solomon took another sip of his beer, glancing at Aimee. She was leaning back against the counter, her legs crossed, a thoughtful expression on her face as she stared into the distance. “You’re quiet,” he said softly, setting his beer down. “Everything alright?”

She turned and looked at him, her expression softening. “I’ve just been thinking... about everything. This world, how it’s all changed. It’s hard to keep up, you know? I thought I had a pretty good grip on things before this all happened, but now... I don’t know. I’m just trying to make sense of it—figure out how things work now.”

He nodded, understanding more than anyone the weight of what she was saying. “It’s a lot. But you’re handling it better than most. I’ve seen people crack and fall apart under a lot less pressure.”

Aimee offered a small smile, though there was a hint of sadness in her eyes. “I think I’m just trying to stay strong. For everyone. But sometimes... I wonder if I’m just faking it.”

Solomon shifted slightly and leaned forward. “You’re not faking it. Strength isn’t always about being tough, you know? Sometimes it’s just about holding it together when it feels like everything’s falling apart. And you’re doing that.”

She met his gaze for a moment, then looked away, a bit of color creeping up her neck. “Thanks. That means a lot.”

Aimee fiddled with the edge of her soda can, then glanced back at him, her voice quieter now. “You’re different, Solomon. I don’t think I’ve ever met someone like you.”

He raised an eyebrow, a teasing glint in his eyes. “How so?”

She smiled, a little more relaxed now. “You’ve seen some terrible things, but you still find a way to make it through. And you don’t let it change the person you are, in here...” She stepped forward and placed a fingertip against his chest. “You still care about the people around you, even when you’ve got every reason not to.”

Solomon felt his heart stir a little at her words. He was quiet for a beat, then said, “Maybe that’s just who I am. Or... maybe it’s because I have people in my life worth caring about.”

Aimee’s gaze softened, her lips curling into a warm smile. “Yeah, maybe.” She hesitated before looking at him again, her voice almost a whisper. She stepped closer to him. “You know, I’m glad I’m here. I wasn’t sure about all this when we first met, but... now, I think I am.”

For a moment, they simply looked at each other, the quiet between them comfortable. The tension that had lingered since the chaos of the day seemed to melt away, leaving only a gentle, shared understanding. Solomon leaned in too—their lips brushed, and then they kissed—gentle, caressing.

Solomon stepped back, his gaze lingering a little longer than he intended. Without thinking, he reached out and brushed a stray lock of hair from her face. She pressed his hand against her cheek, closing her eyes. The touch was brief but tender, and when she released his hand, he pulled it back, surprised by the warmth spreading through his chest.

Aimee didn't pull away, her eyes holding his. The moment stretched out, both of them aware of things unspoken.

"You're not alone in this," he said, his voice low.

Aimee's smile softened, and for the first time in a while, she felt something beyond the constant tension of survival. It wasn't much, but it was a beginning.

"Thank you..." she whispered.

There was a small pause before she gently nudged his shoulder. "You know, you should get some sleep..."

He nodded. "You're probably right. But I think I'm okay for a little bit longer."

Aimee couldn't help it—she stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him, careful of his wounds, and pressed her face against his chest. She felt Solomon's hand caress her back and stroke her hair gently. They stood like that for the longest time.

"You guys in there?" Ronald's voice blared.

They separated, and Solomon cleared his throat. "Yeah, Ronald. We're here in the galley."

Morale And Meat

The next morning, Billy found it difficult to get going. He drank two cups of coffee, did his morning exercises, and took a cold shower before he felt alert enough to face the day.

Gunshots alerted him that more of the undead had found their way to the shipyard overnight. At the rate things were going, the burn pit was going to be running non-stop for the foreseeable future.

He stood on the front wall and scanned the area with binoculars.

To the west was the shipyard. He looked out at the gulf beyond—expansive and serene. A few of the people from the church had asked for permission to take a boat out and fish. He could see one of them throwing a cast net into the water. The smell of salt was in the air.

To the north, the new section of the fort lay quiet in the early morning light.

To the south were other small, warehouse-based businesses positioned along the highway.

Finally, to the east were pastures dotted with clusters of trees. There were cattle out there. He didn't know who owned them, but they had been spooked by the noise of the shooting and heavy equipment and had fled to the other end of the property—small shapes grazing in the distance.

A thought came to him. A fresh steak sounded good right about now. Hell, even a glass of warm milk sounded like it would hit the spot. He looked back at the shipyard.

People were up, moving around, and getting started with their day. They were filthy and looked absolutely miserable. Children were crying; there were coughs and groans as people woke to the realization that they were about to spend another unbearably hot and humid day in overcrowded agony.

He keyed his radio. "Sergeant Jimenez, do you copy?"

"Yes, Captain?" Jimenez's voice crackled over the radio.

"Come to my position. I'm up on the front wall."

A few minutes later, the stocky sergeant had climbed up and was standing next to Billy.

"Captain?"

"I have a couple of tasks for you. They'll help a lot with morale around here."

"What do you need, Captain?"

Billy looked at him. "Are you interested in history at all?"

"A little. It wasn't my best or favorite subject, if that's what you're asking," Jimenez replied.

"You may or may not know this then, but in the old days, it was illegal for men and women to swim together on the beach—and, unfortunately, for people of different races as well. They

actually segregated the beaches, sometimes putting up these small sheds for women to change into their long swimsuits so they could swim in relative privacy.”

“I’ve actually seen photos of that online. The women had those fancy umbrellas and ruffled bathing suits,” Jimenez said, his expression bored.

“I want to set up a bathing area…” Billy made air quotes, “...on the beach, down below the docks. A place that’s private. I want to give the women and children a chance to swim and clean up in safety, with only female guards standing by. Later, the men can go down, and we’ll switch up—male guards for them. This place is starting to stink, and we don’t have enough showers for everyone. I want to keep the shower room in the main building exclusively for the soldiers.”

“Great idea,” Jimenez said. He sniffed his armpit. “I could use a shower myself. And with this heat, I think people will love the idea.”

“And the second thing…” Billy turned and pointed toward the cow pasture. “We need to find someone who knows about cattle. I want to see if there are any milk cows in that pasture—get a few, pen them up somewhere, and milk them. It also wouldn’t hurt to butcher one or two and have a big meal. Steaks, burgers, soup—I don’t care. I want to get some fresh meat in here for these people.”

Jimenez looked at the pasture, then back at Billy. “When I was heading to the pit with Adams, I saw chickens running around out there too. A lot of them. Just running around like they were feral.”

“That’s what I’m talking about, Jimenez. Fried eggs, chicken, milk, butter, steaks... we need fresh food in here as soon as possible.”

“You know, I actually own a landscaping business. That’s what I do in my civilian life,” Jimenez said. “I mean, I know quite a bit about plants. I’ve been meaning to talk to you about growing some food too. If we set up a greenhouse, for instance, we can grow a lot of stuff year-round, here in Florida.”

Billy clapped him on the shoulder. “In that area, you’re the expert. Get started on those two tasks, then come back and we’ll discuss your ideas on growing food—over a beer.”

Jimenez left to do as he was asked.

Next, Billy called Adams. “We’ve got more going to the pit today, but before that I want you to go south and check those businesses along the highway. Just make a note of what kind of businesses they were, what they sold and such. Don’t go inside any of them, don’t go too far, and keep in radio contact with us.”

The sun began to rise, and the heat and humidity settled in. Billy yawned. It was going to be another long, hot, arduous day.

Ideas

The next morning, Solomon woke around four o'clock. He made breakfast and coffee, then stood at the rear of the boat. It was nice and cool, and he could hear the chirping of insects coming from the island. He was in pain and considered taking medication, but he knew he needed to stay alert for what came next.

As he looked at the island, a thought—an idea—began to form. This island wouldn't be a bad place to set up an outpost. He imagined a fortification of some sort, with a watchtower to keep an eye on the region. Add in some solar power, a radio, and perhaps even a floating dock, and the island could be an asset—if anyone would even want to live out here in utter isolation. He thought of the cramped conditions at Fort MaxPhilco and imagined there might be more people willing than not.

“Can I have some of that coffee?” Aimee's voice startled him. He turned, and in a moment of *déjà vu*, saw her standing under the moonlight, her eyes heavy with sleep and her hair tousled. She yawned.

“Sure, I made enough for whoever wants it,” he said with a smile. “You know, you can go back to sleep for a while. Like I told you the other day, I'm just an early riser.”

She yawned again. “I had trouble getting to sleep last night, thinking about what happened with those men. I'll be okay, I think—after I get some coffee and start moving.”

“Okay. I made food too—it's on the stove in the galley.” He took a sip of his coffee.

“What are we doing today?” she asked.

“I think I'm going to have Ronald fly the drone over this island so we can get some video footage.” He then told her about his idea of building an outpost.

“That sounds like a great idea. Maybe it'll deter other people from behaving like those guys did...”

He nodded. “It'll likely deter some, but I'll definitely make sure anyone stationed here is well-armed.”

A few hours later, everyone was awake and fed. Ronald, who seemed to be a morning person, was happy to be doing something in his wheelhouse—something other than dodging bullets. He piloted the drone over Sandy Point Island, making sure the onboard camera recorded as much as possible, although much of the island's core was shielded by a thick canopy of trees.

Ludford

The next morning, they made it to Ludford slowly and carefully, not wanting to stress the patches or tempt fate. Phillipe followed in the fishing boat behind them, just in case.

When they reached the port at Ludford, Solomon sucked in a breath. The town had clearly suffered the same fate as much of the world. There were zombies everywhere.

“What do you think?” Phillipe asked Solomon as they stood on the deck of the trawler, surveying the mess that was Ludford.

The town had once been an idyllic seaside community, with quaint shops, lots of charm, and a thriving tourist trade.

Solomon studied the town through binoculars. “I think it’s about what I expected, if I’m being honest.”

“Do you still want me to put up the drone?” Ronald asked. He was fidgeting with it on the deck behind them.

“Yeah, go ahead and get it in the air. Let’s see what we’re dealing with,” Solomon replied. He glanced at Aimee, who was shielding her eyes and gazing toward the town.

The drone revealed the obvious—the town had been struck hard. As it flew over, they could see that the narrow streets of the tourist district were flooded with the undead. Solomon noted that many roads were blocked by wrecks and abandoned vehicles, as if everyone had tried to flee at once in a chaotic rush, resulting in the mess that now clogged the streets.

“Human nature at its finest,” he said. “If people had just listened to the governor, stayed home, and kept their doors locked...”

“That just shows how much faith people had in the government,” Phillipe countered.

Solomon didn’t reply. What Phillipe said was obvious.

What they could see of the residential areas looked apocalyptic. Everyone stood in silence, their expressions solemn as they watched the footage on the tiny screen.

“Wait! What was that?” Aimee said suddenly. “Was that a school?”

“Yeah, a high school,” Solomon answered.

“Take the drone back over there,” she said to Ronald.

Ronald turned and looked at her, his face filled with uncertainty. Solomon nodded. “Go ahead.”

Ronald redirected the drone back over the high school.

“Look! Those are gardens out there on the football field,” Aimee exclaimed.

Solomon squinted at the small screen. “Ronald, circle around and come in from a different angle.” Ronald did as he was asked.

“People!” Aimee said.

“Take the drone low so they can hear it. See if they look up!” Solomon said hurriedly.

Ronald followed the order, and sure enough, the buzz of the drone caused several haggard but living faces to turn skyward.

“Looks like a couple of adults and a bunch of kids.”

Below, the people began raising their hands toward the drone, jumping up and down in an effort to get its attention.

“What are we doing now?” Ronald asked, turning to Solomon for guidance.

“Bring it back in... we’ll rig up a handheld radio and deliver it to them so we can make contact,” Solomon said.

Phillipe leaned toward Aimee, who seemed anxiety-ridden by the situation. “Take it from me—there’s no way we’re going to abandon those kids.”

Ronald spent the next hour recharging the drone and figuring out how to attach the radio to it.

Eventually, he settled on using a cable underneath, securing it with a carabiner, and then attaching a small drawstring bag with the radio inside using another carabiner.

Phillipe double-checked the battery in the radio, then did a signal check. “Radio’s good. Hopefully, it’ll get the job done.”

The drone lifted slowly, heavy with its cargo. Ronald took it easy, not wanting it to crash before reaching its destination, as the bag would swing like a pendulum if he wasn’t careful.

Solomon stood nearby—holding his breath, watching the screen. When the drone returned to the high school stadium, there was something new: signs made from poster board, held by children, written in marker—Help! Save Us!

They were waving towels and shirts; others simply stared up, hope and desperation etched on their faces.

“All right,” Solomon said. “Let’s get it over the field and lower the drone down gently—there you go.”

Ronald brought the drone down and landed it on the turf. A gray-haired, weary-looking man in filthy, wrinkled business attire stepped forward. He studied the drone, saw the bag, and motioned for the others to stay back. He unclipped it, opened it, and retrieved the radio from inside—none of which Solomon and his group could see because they were out of view on the drone’s camera.

The man pressed the button and spoke. “Hello... hello? Can you hear me?” He waited, his face grim.

“I hear you. This is Major Solomon Phillips of the Florida National Guard. We’re on a boat offshore. Who am I speaking to?”

There was cheering, sobbing, and screaming in the background. Though they couldn’t see it, it was clear that emotions were running high.

“My name is Caleb Jones... the principal of the high school. I am here with a group of twenty-five kids and six adults. We’ve been here a long time—since the whole thing started.”

There was a pause. “There were more—the coach, a few more teachers—but they didn’t make it. It’s just us now.”

Solomon looked at the others. “How are you alive right now? How did you survive?”

“The high school was the designated civil defense shelter. The school has a fortified basement stocked with folding cots and supplies in case of a disaster. It started here on a weekend. The kids were here for extracurriculars—sports, music—and some of the little ones came from a daycare nearby that evacuated just in time,” Mr. Jones said. “We made it work. We barricaded the school. The fence around the school and stadium has kept those things out. We raided the agriculture building to grow vegetables. We collect rainwater. We’ve had a few close calls—it hasn’t been easy.”

“You’ve done well, Caleb. That’s no small thing.”

“We need medical supplies. We have a teenager who’s pregnant...” Then, perhaps realizing how suspect that might sound, he clarified, “She was already pregnant before this... and she’s due at any time now.” His voice cracked. “We need help... we’re trapped, and it’s just a matter of time before...”

“Listen to me, Caleb,” Solomon said. “We’re going to get you out of there. It is going to take time to do it safely. We are not equipped at the moment for that sort of operation. So I need to go and make a plan and get reinforcements. We are not leaving you behind. Do you understand me?”

“...Yeah. Yeah, I hear you.” Caleb sounded defeated.

The kids around him erupted into cautious cheers. One girl stepped into view of the drone’s camera, tears streaming down her face.

“Keep the radio with you,” Solomon said. “We’ll check in soon with more info. For now, keep your heads down—and take comfort in the fact that help is coming.”

As the drone began its return flight, the feed caught one last glimpse of the stadium—dozens of young faces staring up with something dangerously close to hope.

The Ludford Gambit

Solomon returned to Fort MaxPhilco, the battered trawler limping into dock for more permanent repairs. But it wasn't just the boat that needed patching up—Solomon had a plan forming, one that might save the people still trapped in Ludford, especially the kids holed up at the high school.

In the dimly lit conference room, a crude map of Ludford covered the table—nine printer pages taped together, the handiwork of Ronald, who'd enlarged it from drone footage. Billy stood over it, brow furrowed.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” he asked. “I mean, I know those kids need to be rescued, but maybe we just launch a straight-up assault—grab them and get the hell out.”

He pressed a finger to the map. “Ronald's AI program analyzed the drone feed. It picked up at least eight hundred zombies on the ground. That's a lot, man.”

At the head of the room, Solomon stood silent for a moment, then spoke. “You ever wonder—if they've made it this long, how many others are still out there? People holed up in houses, eking out a life any way they can. Beating the odds.”

He moved to Billy's side and placed a hand on the map, just next to his.

“You didn't see those kids' faces,” he said softly. “They looked like old war photos—shell-shocked soldiers in teenage bodies. They don't need to go from one prison to another. What kind of life is that? Growing up in this overcrowded hellhole?”

Billy nodded. He understood more than he wanted to.

“I've been thinking...” Solomon began, tracing a line along the map with his finger. “We use the ferry. Load up a front-end loader, an APC, a couple of drums of diesel, and say—a dozen shooters. We hug the shoreline and send a second boat or two as escort. Hit the town hard, right here.” He stabbed the map near the pier. “Beachhead. Then we unload the loader to clear a path for the APC.”

He tapped another section. “The causeway. We need to decide—blow it, block it, or leave it alone. Twenty-seven miles long, seven of those crossing marsh before it hits the Gulf.”

“What if you just block the mainland side?” a voice asked from the back. Aimee. She'd been silent until now. “It would stop more zombies from crossing.”

Solomon turned to her with a grim smile. “It's twenty miles down Highway 98 through zombie wreckage just to reach the turnoff. Then another twenty miles on the causeway before you hit the right spot to block it. It's a long haul.”

Phillipe stepped forward. “We should block it,” he said firmly. He gestured at the map. “We drive the loader straight through town, east down the main street, then use it to barricade the island side of the causeway. We can post guards at the barrier later.”

“Eight hundred zombies,” Billy repeated. “That’s what we’re dealing with.”

Phillipe didn’t blink. “What if we lure some out onto the causeway? Then push them off.”

Solomon was already thinking ahead. General Brickston had sent him a care package during the early days of the outbreak—an untraceable shipment of ammunition, weapons, and ordnance. It was a thank-you for protecting the general’s wife and daughter. Solomon hadn’t asked questions. He just accepted the trucks and said thank you.

“I’ve got an idea,” he said. “But I need to take inventory of our explosives.”

Ronald, ever the skeptic, pushed his glasses up his nose. “If you push them off the bridge, couldn’t they just walk along the bottom to the island?”

Solomon shook his head. “Deep channel. Strong current. It’ll sweep them into the Gulf. I don’t remember exactly, but it’ll pull them north or south, not toward the island.”

The room fell quiet.

Phillipe broke the silence, pointing again to the map. “I know this marsh area. I’ve fished there. There’s a way through to the shore. We could bring fencing and poles—set up a barricade across the road. No houses out there. No people. No zombies.”

He paused, then added, “Then we lure them onto the causeway and pick them off from the boat.”

There was another silence. This one different.

“I like that,” Solomon said finally. “Gives us the option to use the causeway in the future.”

“Do you think your boat can get you there?” Aimee asked. “Or do you need something with a shallower draft? There’s a pontoon boat here—used to belong to a dolphin tour company.”

Phillipe scratched his chin. “I’ll take the fishing boat. We can use the dinghy to get supplies ashore.”

Solomon gave a slow nod. “It’s up to you.”

Consequences

Phillipe and the four men traveling with him decided to leave ahead of time to get the bridge blocked and other preps for their plan.

Solomon was informed that the work on his trawler would take at least two more days to finish, so he let Phillipe know that he might want to wait for the rest of the raiding party before heading to the island. Phillipe was adamant about leaving, saying that sitting around waiting would drive him crazy.

Solomon had no doubt about Phillipe's abilities. Since the first time they met, Phillipe had gone on to accomplish great things—things that were often shady as hell, but to each their own.

Phillipe was a go-getter, and although Solomon wanted to be there just in case, he knew better than to try and squash Phillipe's ambition and drive.

After Phillipe left, Solomon was left with the mundane.

Billy filled him in on the project he had assigned to Sergeant Jimenez, who was doing an excellent job. Jimenez had found a farmer among the church group and, along with several church members and a couple of soldiers, they had gone out with Adam's in an APC to round up some cattle and chickens.

Jimenez had also set up privacy barriers and a watch down below the docks so people in Fort MaxPhilco could take turns bathing.

The new section of the Fort was under full construction, and because of how many leftover containers they had, it had been extended further to create a large corral area, where they could house any animals they wrangled.

He had also received complaints about garbage was piling up, and he assigned some civilians to pick through the garbage and separate it into piles. Compostable—recyclable—incinerator—everything else. The things in the everything else pile would have to be hauled somewhere away from the Fort and dumped.

There was a sharp rap on his office door. It was Jimenez. "We have a problem." He shifted his stance, "I was just told that one of the men tried to... anyway, he grabbed a little girl. Her mother and a couple of men got the girl away from him. We're holding the man right outside in the hall." He hooked a thumb behind him.

A shrill man's voice—"I wasn't going to hurt her, I swear!"

Solomon went out into the hall and stopped about five feet from the man. The man was short, balding, overweight, unkempt, and soft. A man who didn't have it all together, even before the shit hit the fan. "What is your name?" Solomon demanded.

“Rob...” The guy blubbered.

Solomon placed a firm hand on the man’s shoulder. “Rob, tell me what happened.” He said evenly.

“I...I just wanted to talk to her. Okay...”

Solomon felt heat rising up his neck and face. “Why did you want to talk to a little girl, Rob?”

“I...I have a problem. I can’t help it. I used to take medication. I wasn’t going to hurt her, I just wanted to talk...” Rob stuttered.

Solomon’s grip tightened. “Do you know how I know you are lying, Rob?” His eyes now alight with anger. “Because you didn’t just talk to her did you? What I heard is you grabbed her and tried to take her.” He then asked, “Where did you even plan to take her?”

“Just to talk...I swear...” Rob’s voice was weak. He didn’t believe what he was saying either.

Solomon turned to Jimenez. “Take him outside. Up on the front wall. I’ll be there in a minute.”

A few minutes later, Solomon came outside. All eyes were on him as he walked through the crowd toward the front wall, where Rob was now being held. He climbed the ladder and looked first at Rob—who was shaking—then over the crowd below.

“Who saw this man try to take the child?” He shouted. “Raise your hand now.”

At least a dozen people raised their hands.

He pointed at Rob, “Rob says that he just wanted to talk to her. I am asking those who raised their hands to tell me if they believe that is the case.”

No one raised their hand this time. Someone shouted, “Bullshit! He’s a pedo!”

Solomon said, “My name for those who are new, is Major Solomon Phillips.” He then walked over to Rob and said, “There will be zero tolerance for sexual crimes—especially those against children.” Then in one smooth motion, he drew his weapon and shot Rob in the forehead. The two guards holding Rob on either side flinched.

Solomon re-holstered his weapon, stepped forward, grabbed Rob’s now lifeless body, and threw it over the edge of the wall.

He stepped close to the inside edge and looked down at the shocked faces staring back at him.

Some covered their mouths, others were too stunned to react.

“Anyone—and I mean anyone—who wants to suffer the same fate, try me. This is my shipyard, and I am in charge here. If you don’t like it, you are free to leave. But know this, if you decided to stay, you better behave. We don’t have the time, resources, or frankly the energy to hold trials or lock people up. That means if you cannot follow the rules, you’ll be banned—or executed quickly and without delay. Does anyone have anything to say about that?”

No one did.

“Life is hard enough. I don’t have to tell you all that. We are trying hard everyday to make it better. To make the conditions better for you and your loved ones. Don’t make it harder for us... remember you are all guests here.”

The Path of Least Resistance

Billy noticed that the atmosphere at Fort MaxPhilco had changed. Although people were mostly just grateful to be alive after arriving, there was usually some complaining during his morning rounds.

“It’s too hot.”

“We’re uncomfortable.”

And his favorite, “When is the government going to rescue us?”

This morning, however, it was dead quiet.

Solomon’s demonstration three days earlier had all but put an end to the complaints. Even Billy had been surprised by his friend’s callous display—though he completely understood why it had been necessary. If he didn’t assert his authority, then people might try to usurp it, which would lead to chaos and infighting.

Solomon had left that morning with the attack crew, and Billy was once again left in charge.

Billy weaved his way through the camp and found Jimenez talking with Dan, the farmer he had been working with.

“Do you want Dan and his people to slaughter a couple of the cows we captured?” Jimenez asked. “I think fresh meat would go a long way toward morale.”

Billy nodded. “Do it.” They had canned meat—lots of it, in fact—and a good variety, but nothing beat a fresh steak. He could almost taste it.

He continued his rounds and ended up exiting the fort. He stopped and checked his pistol and the magazine pouch that held the spares before continuing.

The area around the fort was now heavily patrolled, per Solomon’s orders, and any zombie that strayed into their patrol zone was quickly dispatched and their bodies picked up and burned in the pit.

He saluted the six-man patrol that walked by in loose formation, their eyes alert and weapons at the ready. The highway was stained with blood and gore, intermixed with wreckage that made it difficult to pick out zombies—especially crawlers.

He stood at the highway and looked in both directions, then at the opposite side, where a cattle fence stretched for miles in either direction. They had opened the fence and built a temporary gate to allow them to round up animals. They had left the bulk of them alone—the grassy acreage beyond being the ideal spot for grazing.

An idea came to him. He radioed Jimenez and asked him to join him.

"What do you need, Captain?" Jimenez asked when he arrived. He noticed Billy looking around and followed his gaze.

"Do you know why the zombies travel down this highway?" Billy asked cryptically.

"They came from the vehicles and towns in the area... why?"

"No... I mean why don't they scatter?" Billy pointed to the fence. "I noticed the zombies spread out across the highway all the way from the fence on the opposite shoulder. They seem to be taking the path of least resistance, and when they encounter the cattle fence, it funnels them right down the highway."

He illustrated the path with a sweeping hand gesture.

"Okay... yeah, I can see that," Jimenez nodded.

"That fence goes on for miles in either direction. We've got a lot of fencing—rolls and rolls of it—in one of the warehouses. I want to go to each end of the cattle fence and pull fencing across the road, all the way to the water if possible. I believe that if we do that, the zombies might divert and go..." He gestured vaguely, "somewhere else."

"The path of least resistance..." Jimenez nodded, catching on. "That could work... I mean, it could buy us some time at least and give us more room to breathe."

Billy pointed down the highway. "There are hundreds of vehicles down there—some now in ruins—but a lot of them are still worth searching. Who knows what we'll find inside? We could siphon fuel and remove batteries, for instance." He waved a hand toward the cow pasture. "We could take what's left of them and stack them on the other side of the cow pasture somewhere. Maybe line 'em up along the far fence."

Jimenez added, "That's an idea. We could stack some of them across the highway to build a wall of sorts."

Billy clapped Jimenez on the shoulder. "That's a brilliant idea." He exhaled. "Let's deal with the cows today, and later this afternoon, if you're up for it, we can hash out a plan over a few beers."

"Sounds good," Jimenez replied.

The sound of shouting and gunfire caused them to start and turn south toward the patrol. Both men's hands traveled to their holsters.

"Got 'em!" one of the men in the patrol shouted, aiming his rifle at a threat that was out of Billy and Jimenez's sight.

"Let's get back inside," he suggested.

As they walked back to the fort, Billy felt a lot less claustrophobic. If they could block the highway... he estimated the cow pasture spanned thousands of acres—land they might eventually add to their ever-growing reclamation.

Landfall At Ludford

The ferry lurched slightly as it cut through the water, its deck was heavy with the weight of the APC and front-end loader.

The morning sun cast long shadows across the Gulf, and the silence on board was broken only by the thrum of the engines and the occasional metallic clink of gear being checked one last time.

Solomon stood at the bow, binoculars to his eyes, scanning the shoreline of Ludford. The town looked quiet from a distance—deceptively peaceful. But he knew better. They all did.

At the middle of the causeway, Phillippe secured the last of claymores, which Solomon had suggested they use. He had spent the last four days with his four compatriots installing the fence across the mainland entrance to the causeway. It hadn't gone as smoothly as he planned because they had to dig asphalt and under-layment out of the road to make holes for the fence posts. They then used bags of cement to reinforce the bottoms of the metal poles before installing the fence itself. It had been grueling work. "Explosives are in place." He radioed to Solomon.

"Copy that." Solomon replied. He turned to the assembled team—eight men and women in total—veterans, fighters, and survivors.

Each one wore a grim expression and carried weapons they knew how to use.

On Solomon's trawler, following behind the ferry, were Shira and Aimee. Aimee wore a Kevlar helmet and carried a compact submachine gun, which he had instructed her how to use.

He smiled and waved at her. He had asked before the trip, "Are you still sure about this?"

"I want to go and fight. I want to make a difference." She had replied.

He had watched her board the trawler as he had boarded the ferry. There had been no time for sentiment.

The plan was simple: land hard, clear the shore and pier, get the loader moving to shove debris and wrecked vehicles aside, then punch a clear path to the causeway. Phillippe and his team would be going to lure the undead in their direction.

Ronald and one of the soldiers Matt, took a small boat and zipped around the island toward Phillippe. They had brought the lures that Ronald had put together.

"Touchdown in two!" Solomon called out.

The ferry nosed against the shore near the dock and the ramp clattered down with a metallic crash. The front-end loader roared to life, rolling off first, its shovel raised like a battering ram.

The APC followed, its turret scanning.

The eight-person team, broke into two four-person squads and walked behind the APC, one group on the left, one on the right.

Gunfire erupted from the APC's turret as the undead began to stir and file out of buildings, from alleys and doorways, spilling into the street.

The two four-man squads opened up as well.

Shira brought the trawler alongside the pier and tied off. Then she grabbed her rifle and moved to provide support to the advancing assault team.

An M2-Browning machine gun had been mounted to a tripod on the deck of the ferry, and Solomon went to work, spraying the masses of undead as they approached.

Everyone was careful to watch their field of fire, not wanting a friendly fire incident that would be devastating under normal circumstances, but now could turn the tide against them.

They kept up the assault, but the dead kept coming, oblivious to the maelstrom of bullets chewing through them. Those in the rear stepped on and over their fallen comrades as they were mowed down.

The two four-man squads were eventually forced to climb in the rear of the APC as the undead became too numerous. Now, the front-end loader and APC were the only sounds as they plowed on through the center of town.

Everything was going according to plan.

Solomon and Shira stopped firing and watched as the dead began to surround and follow the two loud vehicles that led them, like the Pied Piper, straight through town.

Ronald handed off the lures to Phillippe, and loud noises blared through speakers placed at intervals along the causeway.

"They're through!" Phillippe's voice cracked over the radio. "The vehicles are on the causeway—and they've got company. A lot of it."

"You can touch off the claymores at your discretion," Solomon said. It was obvious—he wasn't even on the same side of the island, so it was impossible for him to make the call.

Solomon stood waiting and hoping. Then he heard it—the explosion—and the distant crack of gunfire. He spoke into his radio, "Shira, Aimee, let's move!"

He grabbed his rucksack and rifle, rushed out to meet Shira and Aimee, and then they headed in the direction of the high school.

A claymore contains C-4 and several hundred steel balls that form a wall of death when detonated. Phillippe had set up ten of them along the bridge. The bridge had been thick with the undead, from one side of the causeway to the other, when he triggered them. The zombies had

been so tightly packed together, shoulder to shoulder, that many had died on their feet, unable to fall due to lack of space. He had placed five of the claymore mines on each side of the causeway to hit the zombies from both directions. It had been instant and gruesome.

He and his men then opened fire from their boat on the zombies still outside the kill zone.

The APC and front-end loader had turned around, and they held their fire as the loader plowed into the undead, scooping them up and dropping them off the bridge. The APC sat idling behind as the front-end loader worked—scooping and dumping, scooping and dumping.

“There were at least five hundred zombies on the bridge...” Ronald said. He was sweating as he looked down at the feed from the drone he had put in the air. Small boxes filled the screen, each one a detection made by the AI program he had written, identifying people—or zombies.

“That still leaves a few hundred zombies in town—minus the ones killed during the initial landing,” Phillipe said. “You go back to Solomon’s boat, kid, where it’s safe. We’re going to hit the town from this side... Solomon’s going to need our help.”

High Ground

Solomon, Aimee, and Shira moved quickly through the town, stopping only briefly to engage the undead before pushing on.

They stayed on the larger streets and kept to the middle, so they wouldn't be ambushed from the sides.

"Wait... I need to take a breather!" Aimee said when they were within a block of the high school.

They slowed and stopped. Solomon and Shira scanned their surroundings.

"Over there!" he said, pointing to a strip mall across from the high school. A convenience store was on the closest end, but he couldn't identify the other businesses from this side. "There's a second story... we can climb up there and get a better view."

"Hold..." Shira said through gritted teeth. Thump... thump... She shot two zombies in the head as they shambled toward them.

"Clear..."

They rushed to the back of the store. A heavy fence surrounded a dumpster against the rear wall. They climbed the fence, then Solomon climbed onto the dumpster and pulled himself onto the roof. He reached down and helped Aimee and Shira up in turn.

When they turned toward the school, their mouths dropped open.

A massive number of zombies surrounded the building, likely drawn by the presence of those inside. The undead pounded on the fence, producing a non-stop, rhythmic clinking sound.

"The hell those kids must be going through," Solomon muttered.

"It's driving me crazy, and we just got here," Shira replied.

Solomon looked at the second story that protruded from the roof. There was a window within reach. He handed his pack and rifle to Aimee, then jumped and grabbed the sill. Pulling himself up, he peered inside. It was dark, but it looked like an apartment.

Grabbing a nearby gutter pipe to steady himself, he tried the window. To his relief, it slid open without resistance.

Solomon climbed in, and a wave of stale heat hit him like a blast from a furnace. He stopped and scanned the room.

He was in the living room—it was quiet and tidy, everything in its place.

He drew his sidearm and swept the room as his eyes adjusted. There was an attached kitchenette, a small bathroom with a clawfoot tub stretching across its width, and two bedrooms. All empty.

It looked as if the tenant had left one day and never returned.

“It’s clear,” he said, and handed down a small folding stepladder he found at the bottom of the hall closet. Shira and Aimee used it to climb up enough for Solomon to pull them inside.

“It’s hot in here,” Shira stated the obvious. “I’m going to open the rest of the windows.”

“I haven’t left the apartment or checked the downstairs shop yet…” he warned.

“Okay, I’ll stay up here for now,” Shira replied.

They found a window in the largest bedroom that faced the high school. Solomon switched channels on his radio.

“Caleb, this is Solomon. Do you copy?” he said. There was no reply, so he repeated the call.

“This is Caleb. It’s good to hear from you. We heard the explosions and gunfire. I told everyone to stay down here in the shelter where it’s safer.”

“That’s smart…” Solomon said. “We’re close by, but there are still a lot of zombies to deal with before we can rescue you safely. I’m just calling to tell you to hold tight and don’t try to come to us before we signal.”

“Okay. We’ll be right here,” Caleb replied.

Solomon switched channels again. “Phillipe, what’s your location?”

“We’re coming to you. There are a lot of hostiles.”

“It doesn’t get any better where we are,” Solomon said. “They’re thick around the high school. Do you have an ETA?”

“No. We’re having to clear a path as we go,” Phillipe answered.

“Okay… copy.” Solomon put his radio away and reached for his pack.

Attached to the bottom of his rifle was an M203 grenade launcher. He was carrying six rounds for it in his pack.

“I need you to draw the zombies away from that fence,” Solomon said.

Shira nodded. She set down her rifle, drew her unsilenced pistol, aimed, and shot a zombie. The undead began to turn toward the noise. She aimed and fired again. Waited. Then fired once more.

The zombies peeled away from the fence and began crossing the street toward the store.

Solomon pushed the M203 tube forward, loaded a grenade, and slid it back into place. He flipped up the launcher’s sight, aimed, and fired into the approaching horde.

The high-explosive grenade whomped out of the tube and struck the asphalt.

Zombies didn’t fly through the air—there were no Hollywood-style pyrotechnics. The grenade exploded, the ground shook, and those undead that took shrapnel to the brain dropped immediately. Others, maimed, continued to limp forward, oblivious to injuries that would have taken any living thing out of the fight for good.

He expelled the spent casing, loaded a new grenade, and fired again.

One by one—slow and steady—he thinned their numbers and drew them closer.

After using all six grenades, he switched to his rifle and began shooting every head he could find through the scope—methodical and calm. Shira, and then Aimee, joined in.

Together, they worked to hold the line.

A Force Unto Themselves

Billy heard the helicopter before he saw it. It was coming from the northeast—the general direction of Camp Blanding. It grew larger and then hovered over the shipyard before landing on the helipad.

He recognized it immediately and double-timed it out to meet it.

He saluted. “General Brickston, I wasn’t expecting you today, but it’s good to see you.”

General Brickston had lost weight, and his eyes were ringed with puffy dark circles. This time, his escort was alert and scanning their surroundings, weapons out and at the ready. He returned the salute.

“This place is quite the accomplishment,” he remarked, then asked, “Captain... where is Major Phillips?” He had to raise his voice over the sound of the helicopter winding down.

“He’s out on an operation right now,” Billy answered. “He left me in charge while he’s gone.”

The general frowned and suggested they go inside.

Once they were in Solomon’s office, the general asked, “What mission is he on?”

Billy told him about the mission in Ludford, as well as everything that had happened at Fort MaxPhilco—including the pirate attack.

“You two have been busy...” The general looked around the office. “You know, I haven’t seen another place yet that’s thriving the way you are here. And taking back territory, thinking outside the box—this gives me hope.” He exhaled. “To be honest, it’s pure hell and chaos out there.”

Billy nodded and offered the general a cold beer, which he accepted. The general pressed it against his face.

“Air conditioning... cold beer... I knew Green Berets were good, but damn, you guys have it made...” he mused. He cracked open the beer and took a pull.

“Do you want to try and reach Solomon on the radio?” Billy asked after a brief moment of silence.

“No... I can’t stay long. I’m here to deliver a bit of dire news, I’m afraid.” He took another sip of beer. “The military has taken a major hit—hell, the entire world has—and we have no support or resources left to offer you. As a matter of fact, I’m here to ask for your help.”

“How can we help you?” Billy asked.

“Camp Blanding had an outbreak. There are maybe forty soldiers left. They’ve got plenty of supplies—weapons, food, first aid—but they’re effectively trapped and separated from the bulk of their resources. We landed just long enough to refuel, and we almost didn’t make it out alive. They need to be rescued, and I’m here asking if you can help.”

He took a breath.

“I’ve been ordered to go elsewhere. I’m taking a brigade-sized convoy west to a small town in the middle of nowhere called Altavista. It’s situated at a high elevation between two mesas. That’s where I’ll be establishing a new temporary center of government for the United States—and where we’ll have the best tactical advantage. We’ll be able to see anything or anyone coming for a hundred miles.”

“What about places like Area 51? They’re in the middle of nowhere,” Billy asked.

The general shook his head. “No good... I can’t say anything more about it.”

Billy nodded. “Okay. Your wife and daughter are over on the island. I can take you to them... or have someone bring them here.”

“No...” The general hung his head. “I need to leave. I just wanted to let Solomon—and you—know that I didn’t have a choice. What I’ve been tasked with... it could mean the difference between our nation—hell, our entire race—surviving or not.”

Billy nodded. “I’ll let Solomon know.”

“Can you tell my wife, if you see her, that I love her—and Chloe? And that I’m sorry.”

Billy nodded again. “Yes, sir. I’ll relay the message.”

The general left. Billy sat in silence, numb, thinking about the reality of the situation. They hadn’t really had any support since this thing started—they had primarily relied on Solomon’s preparations and their own resourcefulness—but it still hit hard, knowing there was truly no one out there they could count on. They were well and truly alone—no more command structure—a force unto themselves.

He called Jimenez into the office and told him about the situation at Camp Blanding. He left out the rest of the details the general had shared.

“Do you want to take the APCs? If all three go, there should be enough room to squeeze everyone in,” Jimenez asked.

Billy shook his head. “I want some—or all—of those supplies. I was thinking we should see if we can clear the highway and use those church buses.”

“That’s a great idea, Captain. I’ll go find out and get back to you.” Jimenez stood and left.

Operation Exodus

The sweetest sound Solomon ever heard was the front-end loader smashing its way through vehicles before it emerged, clearing a path and crushing zombies in its wake as it rounded the strip mall and pulled into the convenience store lot.

The APC followed next, its turret activating and picking off the undead for a minute or two before the back door opened and the two four-person squads filed out, opening fire on the remaining zombies.

Below the apartment was a prom and bridal rental shop. Shira had accidentally shot a mannequin before realizing what it was as they exited the shop and joined the others outside.

“Caleb, do you copy?” Solomon said into the radio.

“I’m here, Solomon.”

“We need you to send everyone out for evacuation toward the convenience store, ten at a time. We’re going to load them into an armored vehicle and escort them to a ferry.”

“Are you sure you’re with the military?” Caleb asked, his voice now uncertain.

Solomon rolled his eyes and let out a breath. After the incident with Rob and the pirates, he understood Caleb’s reluctance.

“Yes... I am. Caleb, we can talk later. I have my people holding position outside the school fence near the convenience store. It’s been a long, hard day, and I just want to get you all out of there and somewhere safer. All of us out here just want to go home.”

Phillipe walked over. “What’s this guy’s deal, man? We’re just trying to save them.”

Solomon frowned. “He’s just being cautious. I get it.”

“Okay, we’re coming out,” Caleb said.

A member of Solomon’s team used heavy bolt cutters to cut the lock on one of the side gates so they could open it.

Surprisingly, the convenience store hadn’t been looted at all. It had steel roll-down shutters over the windows and a reinforced security door. With how fast the virus had spread, no one had gotten to it.

Solomon had noticed that most of the businesses—except those shot up during their raid—still had intact doors and windows. He wondered how many zombies were trapped inside those places.

They hooked a chain to the front-end loader and ripped the security door off the convenience store. Inside, the store was dark until the lights flickered on as Solomon stepped inside. There must have been solar panels and battery backups powering the motion-activated lights.

Like the apartment had been, it was stifling hot inside. Solomon grabbed a bottle of water from a cooler that was still cool to the touch, ripped off the cap, and downed it. He then passed out bottles of water to the others. And although he didn't smoke, he grabbed all of the cigarettes and cigars to pass out to those who did, back at Fort MaxPhilco.

The first group of children came out with Caleb. When he saw Solomon and the ragtag squad of soldiers, his expression tightened with concern, but he forced a smile. "You must be Major Phillips?"

Solomon shook his hand. "Just call me Solomon."

He glanced at the children boarding the APC—very young children, toddlers, and even a baby. He turned to Aimee. "Would you ride with the kids and make sure they get safely onto my trawler? Stay with them. I don't want anyone falling into the water or getting hurt."

She was about to object, but looked again at the children. "Okay... I will go with them," she agreed reluctantly, and climbed aboard with them.

It took four trips to get everyone from the high school to the trawler. The trawler's cabin became packed, with very little room left to spare.

"Some of you—adults and older kids who aren't helping with the little ones—can ride back on the ferry with me," Solomon told the group.

A little while later, the trawler departed with Shira at the helm. This time, Aimee chose to ride back on the ferry with Solomon, while Ronald rode with Shira.

"I was talking to the guys," Phillipe said to Solomon. "We want to stay here and get started on the cleanup. There's a lot of work to do, and a lot of zombies left to kill."

Solomon nodded. "We'll leave the APC and the front-end loader for you to use. You can take those two drums of diesel as well."

It took a bit of time to rig the front-end loader to lift the drums of diesel, but they managed to set them safely on the beach.

Solomon clapped Phillipe on the back. "Good luck. Just don't destroy too much of the town—people are going to want to live here."

"I can't believe those five want to stay here alone," Aimee said as they pulled away. The other eight soldiers who came on the ferry decided to leave with them.

"It's their choice, ultimately," Solomon said. "And I'll be coming back soon to help."

What We Still Have

When Solomon returned to Fort MaxPhilco, Billy greeted him and filled him in on General Brickston's visit and the situation with the soldiers at Camp Blanding.

"I'd like to stretch my legs for a while now," Billy said. "I know you just got back, but I'd like to take Jimenez and a squad to try and liberate those soldiers and bring back some of those supplies."

Solomon was dead tired. "Okay, just be careful—and radio with updates."

He went out into the shipyard and climbed up on the front wall—overlooking the survivors gathered in the yard. He could smell the salt and diesel in the air. He looked down at each of them—faces worn, but watching him.

"You've all earned the truth—so I'll give it to you straight. There's no more help coming. The military is done, for the most part. The government has gone dark. There will be no supply drops, no rescue teams, no cavalry riding in over the hill.

We are it.

I know that's hard to hear. I know some... or maybe a lot of you were holding on to the hope that someone else—someone bigger—was still out there fighting for us. But that fight... is ours now. And I've seen enough of you to know we are still in it.

I have seen a teacher pick up a rifle to defend children that aren't hers. I've seen teenagers drag wounded adults through infected streets. I've seen people who've never held a weapon in their lives stand shoulder to shoulder to keep this place alive.

So no—we're not waiting anymore. We are the line. We are the hope. We are the ones who are going to rebuild from the ashes.

This fort—MaxPhilco—isn't just a safe zone. It's a beginning. We've got power, water, tools, knowledge, and each other. That's more than most had when this all started. We don't need orders from above. We just need to hold on to who we are and push forward.

It's going to be hard. Some days will break your back. Some nights will break your heart. But if we stay tough, if we persevere, if we choose to stand together instead of falling apart—then we don't just survive.

We rebuild.

So take today to breathe. Hug those you love. Sharpen your blades. Rest your bones. Because tomorrow, we get to work—not for what we've lost, but for what we still have.

No one is coming to save us.

But we can save each other."

He ended his speech amid cheers and clapping. Then he returned to his office with Aimee.

“You’re becoming quite the zombie slayer,” he joked.

She smiled and gave him a playful shove. She was still dressed for battle in a borrowed uniform—sans helmet—with the SMG slung loosely around her neck.

“I don’t know what to do with the kids…” he said abruptly. “This place is overcrowded as it is…”

“Kids are resilient,” she replied. “We do the best we can.”

“Looks like I’m stuck here tonight. Billy’s going on a mission that’s going to be dangerous. I’ve got to stay in case something happens.”

Aimee walked around the desk. “You know… we could use some coffee and a shower,” she said, hooking a thumb toward the cots. “Maybe a little bit of rest.”

She moved in, sat down on his lap, wrapped her arms around him, and rested her face against his chest.

Even though their relationship hadn’t reached sexual intimacy yet, her being so close and holding him felt as intimate and true as anything he could imagine. He held her in return, stroking her hair.

“I… I like you a lot, Aimee,” he whispered. “The reason I haven’t been as receptive as I could have is because I felt like it might distract us—and that could be dangerous. But I want you… I want to be with you.”

“I want to be with you too,” she said softly.

She stood and took his hand. “Let’s go take a shower…”

Solomon smiled, stood up, pulled her close, and kissed her. “Let’s go.”

To Be Continued...

About the Author

Wayne Shepherd is a horror author inspired by the gritty, atmospheric terror of George Romero and cult classics like *Return of the Living Dead*. A lifelong fan of horror fiction and film, he blends suspense, dark humor, and the undead into stories that aim to both disturb and entertain.

When he's not writing, he enjoys solving puzzles and spending time with his wife and children in sunny Florida—where even the sunshine can't keep the shadows away.

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A Kind Request

If you enjoyed this book, I'd be truly grateful if you'd consider leaving a review on your favorite retailer or review site. Your feedback helps other readers discover my work — and it means the world to me.

Coming Soon

A new novel is on the way! While I'm not quite ready to share the title, I'm hard at work on my next story and can't wait to share it with you. Stay tuned for updates!