

YEAR OF THE ZOMBIE

THE DIARIES OF BECKA

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The Diaries of Becka are one of the few insights we have to the early 21st Century apocalypse that wiped out roughly 96% of human life on the planet Earth. The cause of the devastation is well known, if somewhat unbelievable. Apparently, the dead returned to life and attacked the living. As ludicrous as it sounds, the massive pile of evidence cannot be contradicted.

Records from that time are fragmentary at best, with most people too busy try to survive to keep track of any kind of record of events, however, the Diaries of Becka are possibly the best resource a scholar can find for those day.

One of the major problems with the diaries, is that they are spread out over 30-40 small notebooks, and it appears that the young woman may have written about events long after the fact, confusing the apparent order. With her seeming inability to place dates, location, or even seasons in her enteries, scholars and historians have been driven to distraction attempting to put the scattered notes and discussion of the day to day events of surviving that time into a coherent, easily studied order.

Many scholars and historians have questioned how the Diaries came to be found, and many scoff at the answer. Apparently, at one point, an Sylvia Rebecca Mathews scanned the various Diaries into computer memory with a crude visual scanner, transferred the document to laser storage media, and distributed the video images, trapped on laser media, throughout vehicles the could reach. We assume, by the last entry, that this was either the grand-daughter or great grand-daughter of Becka. The wide distribution of this laser media ensured that the record survived until civilization was once again built.

*Historical Editor in Charge
New United Nations Library, 75 PR.*

It all happened so fast. Classes were cancelled in the middle of the day, and we were told to go home to our dorm rooms or houses. The news stations were talking about a "Heightened Terror Alert" and a few were babbling something about a terrorist strike. I did not notice at the time, but a lot of those reporters looked nervous, and there were no field reports.

Like a lot of my sorority sisters, I thought it was nothing more than a joke, or over-reacting to some Arabs talking in a chat room somewhere, so some friends and I went to the mall. Why should my day be interrupted just because a few Arabic guys in a chat room somewhere were bitching about America?

Bad mistake. We were there a few hours, when a woman attacked one of my friends, biting her badly on the arm. I had trained in Karate for years, and I was able to put her down with a roundhouse kick. At the time, I thought I'd only knocked her down. It was a sloppy kick, and had I lost my balance half-way through it. The toe of my shoe caught her right behind her right eye, and she went down with a crack.

I know now that I had killed her.

We ran, then, out into the street. It was a complete catastrophe. Apparently, something had happened, and people were attacking one another. One person lunged out from beside a car, his face

THE DIARIES OF BECKA

a bloody mess, reached out, and bit Diana. I pulled Steffy and Gabby back into the mall, the others followed, and we ran. They were freaking out badly, but I was calm. To this day I do not understand why I remained calm, when so many others panicked. My thoughts were coherent, and I was clicking through my options rapidly. It was almost like my brain was highlighting targets and pinpointing options.

I pulled them into the sports equipment store. I'd seen movies, hell, everyone has. I used Ace bandages and maxi-pads to stop my friend's bleeding, then loaded everyone up with football, hockey and paintball pads. I put on cleats. Anything to give my feet more stopping power was welcome, and I actually thought about ankle weights, but passed. As we left, we saw the absent manager. He was being devoured by a woman wearing one of those popular "power-suits" that business people liked to wear to impress people. You know the ones, the ones that scream: "I'm a self-centered asshole! Worship my Versachi! WORSHIP IT!" She was pulling parts out of his stomach and shoving them in her mouth greedily. She had two bullet holes in her suit, in the middle of her chest, and craters the size of my palm in her back were visible through tears in the cloth.

She was dead, but she walked. She was dead, but she ate. She was dead, but she killed.

Out of the eight girls that I left the mall with that day, only I remain. Only I could take human life when I had to.

I put down each of them personally when they rose again, out of love for who they had been.

The streets were an absolute mad-house as we ran from the mall. People were fleeing the mall carrying everything they could lay their hands on. Radios, MP3 players, televisions, clothing, jewelry, whatever they could grab. It was complete panic inside, with people being attacked by other people, security guards firing wildly at people, muggings, and a panic at the doors.

Outside, cars were crashing into one another, and I saw a woman get dragged from her car by two men, who began eating her. Not raping her, not beating on her, not car jacking or mugging her, but literally biting and tearing at her.

Cops were fighting with looters and rioters both. The people were attacking everyone in sight. I saw a looter get shot by a store owner up ahead, and as we approached, the man struggled up to his feet, his chest blown open by a shotgun. He stumbled back into the store, and the shotgun roared again as we passed. Steffy squealed as a pellet hit her in the butt, but she kept up.

I thought about mugging one looter, who ran by with an armload of rifles he had just taken from a pawn shop, but dismissed the thought. My thoughts were still clear and concise, concerned with where we would go, and how we would survive this.

Cops were killing the looters, who were getting up and killing cops and anyone else they spotted. We saw looters stealing everything from jewelry to firearms to furniture, and the look in their eyes was more like confused cattle than the sharp eyed, predatory stare depicted in movies.

Still, the death toll from the looting did not help the problem, and it seemed, in that chaotic hour it took to reach a friend's house, that we had seen hundreds of looters killed, and dozens of police officers.

It came as no surprise to hear that the National Guard was being mobilized to deal with the looters.

I think they should have been mobilized to deal with the Risers. .

"..The disturbances are attributed to a recent chemical spill in the Tacoma area. Due to the presence of toxic fumes and the danger of contamination, all citizens are urged to remain in their houses or places of residence. Do not answer the door except for an identified police officer or fire fighter."-Standard story handed to all news agencies, with orders to replace Tacoma with other

nearby cities. CNN, FOX News and other coast to coast stations were ordered not to report on the disturbances.

That rash of bullshit probably killed more people than the ICBM detonations over the cities. Those family members who were killed away from home, who were desperately trying to get home before they died, went home. The families opened the doors with joy, and the screams began.

I had seen it in Olympia. When we had hidden at Steffy's parent's house, and her father came home, his chest torn up and part of his face eaten away. Steffy had run forward, sobbing in relief after our horrifying run to her house, realizing what her eyes were showing her too late.

Her father embraced her, and his kiss tore her top lip off in a spray of blood. As Steffy pulled away, her father sucked it down like a noodle, and pulled her in for another tearing bite.

I can remember her mother screaming as I stepped forward and struck his neck, breaking it with a dry snap like a branch breaking. The shock ran up my arm as he fell away. Steffy's mother began screaming that I had killed him, and ran into the back room while I tried to calm Steffy down, to fix her blood gushing mouth.

I almost had the bleeding under control when Steffy's mother stepped out of the hallway with a shotgun and blew Jenny nearly in half, the edge of the blast erasing Steffy's little brother's face and throwing him against the couch, where he began screaming a bubbly scream and kicking his little feet in agony.

I pushed Steffy at her mother and ran out into the street.

Where Hell had come to visit.

The street outside Steffy's house was a scene from Dante's Inferno, a creation from the diseased mind of a mad god, a madhouse that had spilled over into the streets. I stood in shock, taking all of it in, and the sounds of the screaming inside of Steffy's house receding into the background of my mind.

A woman in front of me was shrieking in hysterical fear, as three men, pulled at her, biting at her. A small baby was torn from her grasp in front of my eyes, and the child's wail was abruptly cut short as the man pushed his face into the blanket. Crimson spread across the blanket as he made growling, feral sounds.

A car swerved to miss two men fighting in the middle of the street, struggling over the remains of a small child, and plowed into a wall. The inside of the windshield went red at the same time as it spiderwebbed. A policeman was on his knees, his pistol dropped to the pavement next to him. His hands were holding his throat, trying to stem the flow of blood from a bad bite on his throat.

Helicopters filled the air, and the sounds of automatic weapons fire chattered from points around the city. Somebody jumped from a fourth floor apartment across the street, screaming before they hit the pavement. Two women ran forward and began scooping chunks of still quivering flesh into their mouths.

I could only stand there, and stare, at everything around me. My mind overloaded by the carnage and death that had come all at once, seemingly from nowhere.

I witnessed SWAT doing the best they could, trying to protect everyone from the massive amounts of Risers that swarmed over Olympia, devouring everyone they could catch, making more Risers, who in turn, sought to devour others.

They pulled up in their black vans, with S.W.A.T. painted on the side, and burst out the back, wearing body armor, carrying submachineguns, and ready to kick ass and take names against the "rioters who had turned to murder." They fired as they advanced, a few throwing concussion or tear gas grenades as they headed toward the wave of "rioters" that moved down the street.

They looked alien in their gas masks, and I knew what was going to happen. Bullets didn't stop them, tear gas wouldn't even slow them down. Those poor brave men charged into them in a wedge, as had worked so many times before against rioters. Following tried and true tactics. Brave, efficient, and noble in their charge against a mob of thousands of Risers.

Their screams chased my friends and I down the streets as we headed toward the pawnshop my brother worked at.

"CDC reports that this is no more than a rumor and panic filled gossip. Reiterating, these people are merely victims of some kind of chemical or biological exposure. They are not the dead returning to life. Police and military are rapidly gaining control of the situation. These people can be identified by their trancelike state and inability to communicate. If seen, you should lock your doors. The earlier statements that these are the dead returning to life have been repudiated, as the CDC reports..." WMN news kept running that in a bar beneath the image of the studio reporters.

"No field agents." The voice startled me, and I screamed, my foot coming around in a spinning back kick. My heel hit the metal middle part of a rifle, and the person holding it shoved, throwing me off balance. Jesus, bitch, take it easy. If I was one of them, I would have bitten you on the ass instead of admired it."

The guy was wearing a gas mask, and dressed like the soldiers I had seen on the news. A helmet, an armored vest, camouflage clothing, combat boots, a weird carrying system on his chest, some kind of radio microphone in front of his mask's mouthpiece, and of course, his rifle made him look like something out of the nightly news or an action movie. He nodded at the television again and continued as if I had not just tried to take his head off.

"Notice there aren't any field reporters." He laughed again, bitterly, the sound filling the small, dark pawn shop where my brother worked. Had worked. He was dead, in the back room. Well, dead again. I had seen to that.

"I hadn't." I admitted. "So what?" I was trying to calm down. Four more soldiers were entering the pawn shop, being careful to quietly close the door behind them. My sorority sisters began sobbing in relief that the Army was here to save them.

"Reporters don't risk their precious skins if they don't have to. It's a goddamn war zone out there, and they are hiding in their fucking studios. Bitches." The man was practically snarling. "Civvies attacking us, zombies attacking us, police attacking everyone, and orders to hold our fire unless we feel threatened. What bullshit."

He took off his mask, and looked at me, his face deadly serious in the dim light of the pawn shop.

"My name is Staff Sergeant Greg Matthews, and I hate to tell you this, but Olympia is hereby under martial law." He told me.

"What does that mean to us?" Cathy asked, nervously looking at the soldiers. One of them was checking the bandage on a second's wrist.

"It means, that your pawn shop is hereby designated Relief Station Alpha Tango Four. Sorry, lady, but it, and everything in it, is now property of the US Army." He said. He looked tired as he said it, and I could see one of his men step back to cover my sorority sisters with his rifle.

"Will it help?" I asked. God, my voice sounded like a little girls.

"I don't know, ma'am, I really don't."

"Roger, Tango Charlie Seven Five out." The soldier, Matthew's or whatever it was, said into the radio that another soldier was carrying. He clipped the microphone back onto the backpack carried radio and turned to the others, who had finished tossing my brother's pawnshop for anything usable.

Surprisingly, they had not chosen to go after chainsaws and the like. The most they had done was grab BMX facemasks and leather jackets.

"We've got an element of the National Guard getting the living shit kicked out of them down the street. We've been ordered to assist them." The man told them, sliding a handle on the back of the rifle and looking inside the area that opened up when he did so. I could see a gold glint inside of it right before he released the handle and the little area closed with a snap. I know now that it was the bolt, and he was checking the chamber, but then, I didn't know anything.

"What's the plan, Sarge?" one of the men asked, standing up from where he was bandaging his knee.

"We doubletime down there, save their asses, and leave. That's what command wants." The man, Greg, told the others.

"What's your plan?" another man asked.

"We save who we can, take their vehicles, and head back to the hospital. This is a goddamn war zone, and we're almost through our basic load." Greg replied, peering out the window. Outside several zombies ran by, heading toward the center of town. "Christ, what a cluster-fuck."

"What about us?" I asked, walking toward him and getting up into his face. "You come in here, start throwing around orders, rob the place, and then think you're going to leave us?"

"Nope. You're coming with us. Congratulations, you are hereby Army National Guard." He grinned. I didn't protest, my mind considered ammunition, weapons, supplies, and most importantly, people who could fight. My sorority sisters were too shocked to protest, they just nodded numbly.

"I'll do what I can for you, ladies, but right now, it's Hell on Earth out there." Greg told us, walking toward the door and nodding at the other men. "Follow us, stay tight, and welcome to the National Guard."

"Hooah." One of the other men murmured.

They were running in a tight pack, nine of them, heading straight for us. The soldiers dropped to one knee and fired, shooting controlled bursts. The shots knocked them sprawling, and six of them flipped up to their feet, while another one began pulling itself forward by its arms. For some reason my eyes focused on the fingernails peeling off against the pavement.

"Head shots, gentlemen, head-shots." Greg stated calmly, as if ordering pizza over the phone. He turned to my sorority sisters and I, who were staring at the zombies, and his eyes widened. "GET DOWN!" I dropped immediately, and so did they, but barely in time. Greg cut loose, snapping off quick bursts and shifting aim as fast as possible. I rolled over onto my back in time to see one of the zombies heading toward me, her head lowered, mouth open, and hands reaching for me.

I went calm again, that eerie, creepy, inhuman calm, pushed off with hands into a partial handstand, and kicked. It was like watching someone else snap out a kick into her chin, twisting the head around and breaking the neck with a crack. The zombie hit the ground and went into convulsions, and I saw myself kick again after I landed on my feet, the cleats crushing the skull.

Greg was still firing, dragging my sisters up with one hand as he fired with the other. "GET UP, YOU BITCHES! MOVE MOVE MOVE!" For an insane moment, he reminded me of one of those military trainer guys on the movies, rough voice that demanded instant, unthinking obedience. The rate of fire was picking up, and as I got up, still feeling strangely detached, a zombie burst out from a doorway and charged one of the soldiers, who was reloading his weapon.

I can remember his look of resignation and fear as the zombie came in at him, and then his eyes widening as my foot passed within an inch of his face as I spun and brought my foot up and into the zombie's face. There was a crunch of bone, and a spray of blood as the cleats bit deep, and the forehead crumbled under my foot.

"Jesus, lady." The guy softly intoned.

"Hurry up, we don't have all day." I replied, my voice calm. My sisters were crying, running with the others, and I jogged to catch up, the guy I saved keeping pace with me. I knew my face was calm, and serene.

Inside, I was screaming.

A group of Risers swarmed into the intersection ahead of us, dozens peeling toward us where we were climbing aboard the hummers that the National Guardsmen had nearly lost to the crowd of Risers that had pinned them down inside the building.

Matthews ordered two of his men to use the big guns mounted on the roof of two of the vehicles against the oncoming Risers, tossed me a rifle, and began ordering people to open fire. The guns roared, and Risers dropped, but there were still more to take their place.

"STAND AND DELIVER!" Greg shouted over the din as they got within a few paces, standing up and still firing, the weapon tight to his cheek. My weapon ran out, and I threw it aside and kicked the first Riser in the face hard enough that the shock of breaking bone jarred my hip.

Behind me, one of the National Guardsman dropped his weapon and fled, as did three of the civilians that they had fought so hard to rescue. Matthews shot the fleeing soldier once, in the back on the neck, and yelled for everyone to hold the line or he would kill them before the Risers could.

I held. It was fight or die, and I refused to die. The Risers screamed, moaned and snarled as we cut them down, killed them face to face at times. Men and women threw grenades into the crowd of flesh, blowing severed limbs into the air, and splattering me twice with near-liquid flesh.

Hold or die.

Never think that things can't get worse.

When we got back to the Aid Station, all two humvees and twelve people, Greg was immediately reassigned to Olympia General Hospital. He quickly informed the company commander that my sorority sisters and I had been drafted, as per the War Powers Act and Martial Law regulations, and had agreed to serve in the US Military in exchange for food, shelter, weaponry, and ammunition.

While I stayed with the National Guard, Greg and the remainder of his team went back to Active Duty service. I noticed a strange division in our own armed services. National Guard was guarding aid stations, power plants and the like. Active Duty was being put in the hardest positions.

Active Duty were the ones who were often forced to fire on civilians. There was a reason for this, and Greg was kind enough to explain it to me over a cup of really crappy hot chocolate.

"These other guys, the Guard troops, they live with these guys, and if this settles down, they have to live here. That means looking the people whose parents, children, and family they killed, in the eye, every damn day. Guilt, possible suicide or revenge motivated murder, all of them will take their toll. Top it off that there could be a split second hesitation when a best friend attacks one of these No-Go's, and the liabilities are just too much." He told me, sipping on his coffee. I had noticed that his rifle was always touching him, and was doing my best to pick up the habit. "Me? They'll just ship me out to some shit-hole when this is all over, and I'll go back to living in South Dakota when I get out. I don't know these people, I do know my fellow troops. I'll kill the civilians without hesitation."

Ruthless, cruel, but understandable.

My hands won't stop shaking, and I can't stop crying. I know I'm safe, I know I should get some sleep, but I just can't. Images keep flashing through my head, of my sorority sisters sickening, dying, and then Rising. Is it going to happen to me? I close my eyes, and see them open their eyes and struggle against their restraints.

I wish I was mad.

I followed Sam in, the shotgun heavy and unfamiliar in my hands. Despite being assigned to a National Guard Unit by that Matthews guy, I was happy working with this Deputy Sheriff. He was a good guy, not a chicken shit like so many of the shit-talkers were turning out to be.

Sam fired carefully as he entered, spacing his shots, and Greg followed me in as I was lining up a shot. I had seen Sam fire before, and even Greg was impressed by the Deputy's marksmanship and skill with his pistols. Seven shots from the pistol, seven corpses returned to death.

Sweep and clear. My sixth day of doing it. My sorority sisters were all dead. It turns out that the bites from a zombie are invariably fatal within a day and a half. Despite doctors' and medics' best efforts, anyone who was bitten died. Then they rose again, and had to be put down. We had taken to calling them Risers. This mission had sucked from the get go. A nightmare of city streets full of looters, rioters, and Risers.

One of my shots missed, and blew a huge hole in the coffin that the Riser was in front off. Stuffing flew out the back side, and before I could correct, Sam and Greg both shot the Riser in the head.

This promised to be a bitch. This was the largest privately owned mortuary in Tumwater, and we had to clear it. The faster we cleared it, the faster we could get this shit under control. .

I've become afraid of the dark. I know, it sounds silly to you, diary, but trust me, it is not. The darkness doesn't bother the Risers, but it does blind me. I know, that when it becomes dark, there is one nearby, one that has just waited until the lights go out to grab me.

So I sleep with NVG's on.

"Trouble sleeping?" the Army guy, Matthews, asked me when I walked into what had been the doctor's break room. He was stirring a cup of coffee with one of those red straws, and his rifle was laying across his lap as he looked at me curiously.

"Yeah. You?" I asked him. His eyes were intent, and for some reason made me feel comfortable. Green eyes that seem so sensitive.

"I don't sleep much anymore. I haven't since all of this started last week." He told me. I nodded slowly, walking over and making myself a cup of coffee. When I turned around, his eyes were closed, but when I took a single step, they snapped open and locked right onto me.

"Learn to sleep when you can, college girl." He told me as I left the break room. Another skill I need to learn if I plan on surviving what is going on around me. For some reason, I'll bet he's sleeping right now.

Greg will stay awake for days at end. I often wonder if it's military training, or a sign of something deeper. Insomnia can be dangerous, and the last thing I want is for him to not be at his best.

"What's wrong with him?" I asked.

"Battle fatigue." Matthew's answered. "He's past the red line. Right now, he's basically useless."

"There's got to be some way to help him." The other soldier stated. I just stared at the man in question, who was sitting in front of us, rocking back and forth and crying that we were all going to die.

"Normally, we could send him back to the rear." Matthew's answered, bending down next to the soldier and taking the pistol and rifle away. He handed them to me as he stood back up. The other man had not even noticed that Matthew's had disarmed him.

"But now." I stated. Outside, I could hear hundreds of Risers moaning, and knew that there was no rear, no safe area, nobody to take care of him, and no place he would be able to destress.

"Right. Sorry, but we have to leave him." Matthew's stated, looking at me. The other three soldiers nodded, and moved out of the room, going back to keeping the hallway, and our path back to the helicopter clear.

"I understand. There is no way we can make it through that crowd in front of the elevators, much less the group on the roof, dragging him." I answered. Matthew's looked grateful for the understanding. "Go ahead, I'll be along in a moment, I just want to try and make him understand."

Matthew's nodded and left the room, and I turned back to the man rocking back and forth. I knew him. He was one of the few that had been in the pawnshop with me. (I wish I could remember his name as I write this) I had even saved his life twice. Now, he had reverted to childhood.

I bent down, taking his chin and the back of his head in my hands, and I kissed him softly before I did what I had to do. It was quick, and he didn't even know I had done it.

Fuck you. It was mercy. The Risers would have eaten him alive. .

That County Sheriff, Sam, jerks when he is almost asleep. One moment, he will be perfectly still, the next, he jerks awake, grabbing for a handhold, even when sleeping on the ground instead of the cot that the military has provided us here in the refugee station.

Isn't that weird?

I had accompanied Sheriff to a "Relief Station" that was no longer answering radio calls. We'd taken one of the military hummers (correction, hummvees, or humv's or whatever. They're a lot different than the civilian models, more rugged and wider) to go and check it out. When we cruised by, we could see Risers moving around in the entrance of the building, they were crowded in the street, and two were sitting by a window shoving at one another while they both gnawed on man's thigh. I wept as they pounded on the humvee, and tried to rock it. The radio crackled to life as we were leaving, and I could hear Greg's voice.

"All units, repeat, all units. This is a general push. All units within receipt of this radio message, by order of the Department of Defense, all units are to revert to local command. We are abandoning the Olympia General Hospital. All units attempt to seek shelter and evacuate Olympia. According to the Department of Defense, Olympia and Seattle will undergo nuclear sterilization at zero hundred hours tonight."

I wept as we drove, heading south. We had all agreed to meet at a small store at a place called Little Rock, roughly twelve miles south of Olympia.

We were all laying on the floor, with Sam counting down the seconds. When he reached two, Greg suddenly reached out and kissed me, hard and urgent. The light was bright enough to slice through the covers on the windows and push through my closed eyelids. As we kissed, unsure on whether or not this would be the last living contact we would have with another human, the ground

rumbled and our ears popped. The light faded, and we broke the kiss, opening our eyes and looking around.

Olympia was gone.

For two days Olympia burned, the stench of burning meat and smoke from synthetics drifting in from the city to the north. We moved on the first day, heading south, to a two story house that eerily reminded me of too many movies. We spent time fortifying, and Sam and Greg argued constantly about whether or not the Risers from the ruins of Olympia were gone, or whether or not they'd come South.

Greg was wrong. They've begun gathering outside, and shooting them only drew more.

The television suddenly came on. I think Donavon stepped on the remote while he was trying to push the coffee table against the suddenly broken window. The sound of an announcer's voice blasted through the room, over-riding the low, hungry moans of the zombies outside.

"There is a martial law state in effect in the United States of America as of this morning. Citizens must understand the dire consequences of this phenomenon, should the government be unable to check the spread of this situation. Because of the emotional attitude of the citizens toward the victims of this phenomenon, and the issues of the morality regarding the disposition of the deceased, it is the order of the Federal Emergency Management Agency; by command of the Federal Government and the President of the United States, citizens may no longer occupy private residences, no matter how safely protected or well stocked. Citizens will be moved into central areas of their resident or nearest, city. The bodies of the dead are to be delivered over to specially equipped squads of the Army National Guard for organized disposal." World News Network was broadcasting that steadily, with the Emergency Broadcast System logo behind the scrolling banner. I felt my blood run cold as I stared at the television screens in shock, my weapon forgotten in my hands at the thought of how big this might be. "These victims of this phenomenon are dangerous when encountered in large numbers."

"Gee, think they might be serious?" Sam yelled, putting his shoulder's against the door and pushing with all of his power. His hands were free to load his shotgun as he held the door shut. Gabby was hacking at arms with a machete, not to cause to pain but to sever, she was sobbing and smiling at the same time as she hacked, and blood splattered. Outside, at least six of them were moaning in dreadful hunger, clutching at each other and the door.

"Citizens may no longer occupy private residences, no matter how safely protected or well stocked." The television continued. Sam swore at it as he finished loading the shotgun. He looked at Greg, who nodded, then at Robert, who nodded. This wasn't an isolated incident. This was not something that was going to go away. The earlier reports that this was a limited outbreak of a biological terrorism nature were a lie. If we were going to survive, we had to do it ourselves. If the amount of living dead we could see outside the bar was any hint, the military and the police had their hands full. It was up to us.

"Open the door, we'll go for my squad car and Robert's ambulance." Sam growled. "Becka; you, first, then Darren, then us. We're getting the fuck out of here."

THIS IS A MESSAGE FROM THE EMERGENCY BROADCAST SYSTEM-Do not remain in your homes, no matter how well stocked, or well defended, move immediately to the following designated shelters: Olympia General Hospital, Olympia; Tenino High School, Tenino; Lewis County General Hospital, Centralia; STAY TUNED FOR ADDITIONAL SHELTERS... Look, give it up. The shelters are gone, man. The cops are gone. We're gone, dude. Embrace the horror...-Looped

radio message that played until roughly 3 months after The Rising when it suddenly cut off. Origin unknown.

I can't help but wonder who made it. It wasn't on any radio stations that I knew of, but I assume that whomever it was created by was on the edge of insanity. You could hear that too-brittle calm in their voice, and almost feel the desperation.

There was gunfire in the background. Not automatic or burst gunfire, but from the sounds of it, shotgun and hunting rifle gunfire. It grew noticeably closer during the short recording at the end of the emergency broadcast system message, and you could hear no less than three voices screaming that unforgettable scream that tears from the throat of someone that the zombies have begun feasting on.

I wish I still had the recording of it that I made. Maybe then, those who read this could understand our actions.

Greg tried creating a relief station in Little Rock, but roughly ten Risers for every living person arrived. After Sam and him had been forced to shoot a full dozen refugees who were harboring bites, we made the decision. We would abandon it, right our way free, and regroup to the South.

We left the Relief Station and drove South, to where there was a Thurston County Sheriff's substation built adjacent to a bank. The town was called Grand Mound, and we were able to reach it by back roads. Smoke was billowing up from Interstate-5, off to our left, during the trip, and I was silent. It was dark by the time we reached it.

A man was trapped on top of a telephone pole, with eight Risers below him. We shot and killed the Risers, and the man came down. He says his name is Thomas, and he was part of Puget Gas & Electric. Apparently services here were not majorly interrupted until Olympia was nuked. All of the heavy fighting in the big cities was like an exciting movie, with very few zombies out in the countryside. Now, the Risers are leaving the cities, nuked or not, and spreading out.

He's not positive, but he thinks he saw a low flying plane dropping parachutes to the South yesterday while he was on top of that pole.

"Hurry the fuck up, Dudley Do-Right!" Greg yelled at the Deputy Sheriff, snapping off another burst from his M-4 at the pack of zombies that had shambled around the corner. I could feel the sweat pouring down my back and between my breasts as I held my brother's pistol in both hands and carefully lined up the shots like Greg had taught me.

I still disliked the feel of the weapon, hell, I hate using ANY firearm, but only a fool allows a zombie to get close enough to fight with fists and feet. We were screwed. Our pickup hadn't made it, and here we were, the second day into The Rising, on foot, low on ammunition, and frankly, in a shitload of trouble.

"I'm hurrying, I'm hurrying!" Sam yelled back, trying another key on the key-ring. The rotating lights of the two police cars and the ambulance provided a weird, stroboscopic lighting to the whole scene, and made the zombies seem covered in blood.

There were only five of us who had managed to fight our way free of the Emergency Relief Station in Little Rock, and things were getting desperate. Insanely, I could see the scrap of paper sticking out of Greg's back pocket, the scrap that read: "All Units Revert To Local Command" several times, with "God Help Us All" at the end.

That chilled me more than anything else, knowing that things had gotten so bad that the military had virtually collapsed.

"GOT IT!" Sam yelled, swinging open the door, then yelled as a zombie, dressed in the uniform of the Thurston County Sheriff's Department, came bulling out, the spastic movements marking it as either a Frenzied or a Sprinter.

"Got him!" Robert yelled, squeezing off two shots from the 9mm pistol. One round hit the doorknob, blowing it to shit, and the other hitting Greg in the leg, throwing him to the ground.

"WATCH YOUR FUCKING FIRE!" Greg hollered. Sam shoved the zombie back and drew his pistol. The sight of it took my breath away, it was so... awesome. His hand and forearm blurred, and the pistol seemed to magically sprout from his hand, pressing against the zombie's forehead. The slap of his hand against the leather merged with the retort of the pistol firing into the zombie's face.

I helped Greg to his feet, and we limped into the police substation, weapons and equipment greeting our desperate gazes. It was everything we needed, and more. The only worry was a large bald biker dude in one cell, wearing three pair of handcuffs on his huge wrists, and an Indian woman who was obviously passed out or dead.

"The door won't lock, it won't close! The handle is busted!" Darren yelled, trying to hold the door shut. Suddenly, he stepped back, letting the door burst open. In his hands, he held a chrome Uzi that practically screamed: "HI! I'm being wielded by a drug dealer!" to me.

"FUCK YOU!" he screamed, and started firing.

I barely heard Sam yell: "No! Don't!" before Darren's wild firing hit something in the police cruiser outside and the explosion seemed to engulf the world. I can vaguely remember the grill-guard hitting me in the chest and sending me flying backward into the cell bars, and the sharp pain of ribs breaking before I passed out. .

"...reports of National Guard units going rogue, mobs of bandits and looters, and victims of this terrorist

released contagion are denied by the Federal Government. These people are not the dead returning to life but rather they are the victims of an extremely well coordinated bio-terrorism attack. The following North American Cities have suffered the detonation of nuclear weapons by the same terrorist organization that released the biological weapon: Olympia Washington; Toronto Canada; Miami Florida; Dallas Texas; St Louis Missouri; Vancouver British Columbia.. Other nuclear launches have been rumored, but none have been confirmed. We here at CNN..." The television kept droning in the background as Cindy helped me move the locker in front of the door to the Thurston County Sheriff's substation. If only Sam had not had broken his key off in the lock, leaving the door unlocked to whoever wanted to turn the handle, we would not have had to barricade it.

Outside, we could hear the ambulance burn, and the crackling of the ammunition cooking off in Sam's destroyed "County-Mounty Ride" and all I could hope was that no bullets penetrated the steel door and the locker. My back was a center of agony for me from the burns I had sustained when Sam had fired his shotgun at the zombie that had been holding my hair. Damn hairspray had caught fire instantly, and my back was badly burnt. My chest was on fire, but Robert had decided my ribs were only bruised, maybe cracked, but more than likely bruised. It felt like I was being repeatedly kicked in the chest.

Bioterrorism my ass, those were fucking zombies! I'd seen enough horror movies in my life to know a damn ZOMBIE when I saw it. Unlike my friends, who were clustered in the back of the room, I was not going down like everyone in those movies did. I had recovered the tonfa that had hit Darren in the face and shattered his jaw. I knew how to use it, and a strange, eerie calm had settled over me, allowing me to push aside the pain of cracked ribs and the burns on my back so that I could concentrate on the task ahead of me.

I did not care if it was my own mother. If she came at me with fucked up blank eyes, an open mouth, and a dry hiss, she'd get the fucking beat-down of her un-freakin-life.

The huge biker's name is Buck. Bald, about six two, and weighing around two hundred fifty pounds, his arms are nearly as big as mine. That's fairly impressive, since I was a 2008 Olympics contender for female powerlifting.

He was helping with the sweep and clears in the area until last night, when he was arrested for disorderly conduct and public intoxication. Isn't that funny? Two or three weeks of fighting Risers (none of us are sure, the days and nights have blurred together in a collage of blood and gunfire) and get arrested and thrown in jail. He's made up with the American Indian woman, Cindy, since apparently a pinch on the ass caused them both to get arrested.

The Risers are starting to concentrate around us, attracted by the Risers pounding on the metal door and trying to get in here. We have no vehicles, and on foot, we'll be lunch meat. Across a large, grassy field is a volunteer fire department building. The bay doors are open, but sometime yesterday a emergency services humvee crashed into the ditch. We can see it from here, it's lights still rotating. Buck's going to make a run for it.

It was horrible. We burst out, firing at the Risers, and Buck (the big bald biker) ran across the field to the vehicle. A ricochet caught the grass on fire, and a Riser was buckled into the passenger seat of the humvee. While Buck was killing that Riser, the interior and exterior of the vehicle caught fire. I looked up in time to see the humvee, on fire, race across the field, it's engine roaring, with a grinning, flame wreathed death's head behind the wheel.

It was Buck, on fire, bringing the humvee to us. We put it out, and Robert treated his injuries as we got underway, shooting the Risers that kept charging us. Robert says he has third degree burns on his head and second degree burns on his hands and arms. At least he can still see and talk.

While we fighting, a kid caught up to us, his name is Freddy, and he's under the impression that this is just a temporary thing.

Greg refuses to enter a major hospital. You know the type, like on every TV show, or every major city. He simply won't go inside of it. We all know why, so there is no need to say anything. Some nights he dreams of it, and our steel wombs are too close quarters to keep anyone else from knowing what he is mumbling in his sleep.

Two months and he still dreams of that place.

We went through Centralia/Chehalis, looking for the Relief Stations we had heard were open. All we found were Risers. Whatever had happened, we missed it being holed up in the relief station. Greg and Sam both agreed that the County Courthouse would make an excellent place to hole up.

It took us two hours to lock the place down and clear it, and we did not lose anyone. Finally.

The populace is urged to go as quickly as possible to the below listed local rescue stations. Activation of the War Powers Act, the Patriot Act, and recently passed emergency legislation under the newly declared martial law, has made it illegal to remain in any private residence, no matter how well fortified or supplied." WMN showed that constantly, letting it stream by.

It was about two weeks in, and we were holed up in the Lewis County Courthouse. We'd busted firing ports in that glass bridge over the street, and Sam and Buck would go out and spit on the zombies when they got bored. Sylvia had followed the sounds of our weaponry until she and the three surviving members of her "team" made it to us. Greg executed one on the spot who was bit.

Well, Greg, Sam, Buck and I considered Buck knocking him down and Greg shooting him in the head an execution.

It was a bit odd, her uniform was intact and spotless, and they had way too much in the way of supplies, and had almost no experience with zombies. Greg mentioned something to me about "CoG Troops" but still hasn't explained it to me. Sylvia's a dead shot with a SAW though, and I don't understand why she wasn't carrying a SAW, but instead an M-4 with an M-203 and a silencer. None of us believe her story that she had been guarding a refugee center in the industrial district of Chehalis. We'd passed it a week before, and it was nothing but milling zombies and corpses.

Anyway, Sylvia and I were watching TV, listening to the reporters babble on about "violation of human rights" as far as shooting zombies went, and how the military was being used to suppress the people's rights, when we heard gunfire, screaming, and zombies poured onto the stage. The first bunch were those ones that run at you, silent and eerily fluid. The co-anchor went down in a spray of blood, and it got worse from there. Screaming, cursing, gunfire, the camera spinning eerily before settling back on the desk. There was nothing left but zombies stumbling about the set, no more newscast plastic heads, no more political discussion, and the weather-lady was kind of nasty, sitting on the desk with one of her boobs chewed away.

We watched for two more weeks before Greg chucked the TV off the roof to see if he could hit a zombie with it.

He missed.

We've got to know. Part of it is morbid curiosity, but we need to know what kind of shape the place is in. We're going to take the radiation equipment from the old Civil Defense fallout shelter in the basement of the courthouse and go north. We're going to see what Olympia looks like.

We stopped in Tumwater, we wanted to check out a few buildings. Looking at the city from the hills overlooking Olympia, Greg figures it was hit by no less than 8 missiles, with overlapping blast rings. Places of the city are still on fire and down by the port the craters, hundreds of feet wide, have filled with water. The background radiation isn't too bad, an effect of something called newtrawnn missiles. Right now we're holed up in a bank across the street from a fast food joint, about 500 yards from the I-5 on ramps.

Tumwater is not in too bad of shape, and tomorrow we're going to try to raid the supermarket we can see across I-5 for food.

We barricaded the door, but too many of them arrived too quickly. Scores, hundreds of them, pushing against the barrier. We went from leisurely shopping to frantically grabbing whatever we could. Sylvia, Hank and Sam tried to keep our exit clear, and it was going good until Sylvia's machine gun jammed.

Sylvia frantically yanked on the bolt of the SAW, trying to clear the machinegun, as the "deader" screeched in a chilling voice and pushed through the barrier, splinters tearing into the dead flesh of her hands. Her mouth was bloodstained and gaping wide as she screeched her hunger. Sam shoved his pistols forward and doubletapped twice, habit from long years of police training putting the four bullets into the center of the woman dressed in leathers.

She just kept coming, not even staggering, as she reached Hank and grabbed him, tearing into him with her teeth. The blood sprayed across the room from the severed jugular, and Sam put two bullets into Hank's head, and two into the woman's.

He would have joined her in moments anyway.

The worst thing about the first few weeks is the fact that I could not sleep, and suffered headaches constantly. Robert told me it was the stress of the world dying all around us, and that it was nothing to worry about.

The world dying was causing me stress? Imagine that.

Olympia was a loss. We should have known better than to try to go in there less than a month after the nuclear blasts hit. Weird thing was, we got ambushed. Yeah, ambushed, leaving Olympia, by Chinese guys. There was only four of them, and all of them were starving, bitten and low on ammunition. Sylvia wanted one taken alive, but we couldn't, they fought to hard.

Could these be the guys Thomas saw parachuting from the airplane?

Brett was an Olympia cop, a beat cop to boot. We ran into him during the first month. Well, him and his six friends. Sylvia, Cindy and I were bathing in the water at the edge of the lake. While we were all naked and rubbing soap on each others back, it was hardly a teenage jerk-off fantasy, our hair was laying on our breasts to keep it out of the way of our backs getting washed conceding most of our torso..

We were all wearing pistols on cords around our neck. Grab and one good yank, and we had our pistol. Greg had lent me his ugly Glock and I had it hanging around my neck, fully loaded, when someone gave a long, low wolf whistle from the bank. We turned slowly, to see seven men dressed in cop uniforms, packing a variety of weaponry, and wearing evil grins.

"Holy shit, Brett, lookit the bush on that red-head." One leered, nodding at Sylvia.

"Come on up out of the water, ladies. Don't try no trouble." The one that had been called "Brett" said, motioning with a shotgun. Sylvia nodded meekly, and started forward, kicking my ankle as she did so. I fell backwards into the water, windmilling my arms, and when I surfaced, Sylvia had one hand on my breast, her hand sliding toward the middle.

"Hey, bring some of that up here!" one of them said, and Sylvia smiled at me as I reached toward her breasts.

"Let's give them some, honey." She told me. Her fingers found what they sought at the same time as mine.

By the time Greg, Sam and Buck arrived, the seven rogue cops were leaking blood onto the sand of the beach, all of them with surprised expressions on their faces. We finished bathing as Sam stripped away their badges, and then, in an uncharacteristic fit of rage, stamped their faces into unrecognizable ruin.

God did not make men and women equal. Colonels Smith & Wesson did.

We cut around Little Rock and Grand Mound, moving toward the coast, and heading toward a place called Mossyrock. According to Greg and Sylvia, there was a fairly good sized National Guard Unit out there, and Greg said that they had never managed to report in for duty.

We found a crashed helicopter, and while searching it, I found a sheaf of documents. I don't dare let anyone read them, or translate them, but according to what I could read, Greg was going to pulled from the unit he was with and arrested for War Crimes. Some kind of problem on the Syrian border. The event happened the same day he was sent to Fort Lewis, apparently he was supposed to be jailed at Fort Lewis, but instead, somehow, was placed in the fighting.

War Crimes. Civilian casualties. Greg, what did you do?

"FUCK YEAAA!" Buck exclaimed, shining his flashlight around the interior bay of the motor-pool. The armory had been deserted, and more or less stripped, but Buck had told us that he 'had a feeling' about the fact that the motor pool doors were chained shut.

Inside sat a big, ugly thing, tracks, guns, it looked heavy and deadly to me. It had brown paint on it, a ramp that was lowered in the back, and two open hatches, and as it sat there, I felt a shiver. It had five stencils of tanks on the upper part, which I'd later learn was the turret. Buck told me that those were kill marks, and Bradleys were fully capable of taking on a Russian tank at two to one odds and killing both tanks.

"What is it?" I asked. I'd seen them on the television during the Iraq War, but never learned what they were, or why Buck looked so excited as he moved in.

"It's a Bradley Armored Fighting Vehicle, dear heart." Greg told me, moving by silently, turning on his NVG's. I've ridden in them, but don't know how to drive them."

"I do, I drove one in 'The Storm' before I left the Army." Buck said, checking in the hatch real quick, then slithering inside quickly despite his bulk. "A deader will have a tough time getting at us in here."

"Ever see that sour bastard so happy? He looks like he just invented fucking." Greg grinned at me as I stared at the massive vehicle.

Which would eventually become my home.

Out of the blue, Buck punched Darrel in the mouth and screamed at him to grow the fuck up. Darrel lay on his back while Buck screamed that Darrel was fresh meat if he didn't shape up, and one day, he, Sam, Robert or Greg wouldn't be there to save him.

At the end of the lecture, he told Darrel: "So tie your goddamn boot!" As if he could hear himself, but got a strange look on his face, then reached down to help Darrel to his feet.

"Sorry man, punching you was out of line. I'm sorry, Darrel. Just tie your boot." Buck told the younger man. Darrel nodded and quickly tied his boot.

While we were searching the armory, we found a Chinese paratrooper tied to a chair. He was half starved and nearly dead from dehydration, but he has been welcomed into our small group. Apparently, after the order to revert to local command came down and the various governments began to collapse, Russian and Chinese troops invaded the US and the EU. Imagine that? The guy, Lo Ming, had been a paratrooper, and the Risers had feasted on most of his unit. He'd been captured by National Guardsman, who had then fought a bunch of Russian paratroopers. The weapons fire had attracted the Risers, who ate both sides.

Ming's lucky. They may have knocked out his front teeth, but he's still lucky.

"Found something." Sylvia radioed back to the rest of the convoy. I checked the load in the ringmount SAW as Sylvia dropped her speed down from 30 MPH to about 10. The roads were going to shit pretty quickly. Two months with no maintenance, no DOT, and more than one explosion as flammables in cars spontaneously combusted, the tank caught fire, and the sun heated fuel ignited, fighting between invading militaries and the American military, all combined to make the roads pretty shitty.

"Roger. Support?" Greg, as verbose as usual. He forgot to switch off the mic when he yelled into the back "Ming! Wake up Buck. We might have contact!" I giggled to myself, and scanned the building in front of us.

A high school, surrounded by Risers who were just starting to take notice of us. The sign read "EMGENY STATION" in those switchable letters common on large signboards, where normally it

would announce the next football game or cheerleader orgy. I dropped a couple of bursts into a group of Sprinters, sending them sprawling, and took the time to drop single shots into their heads while they got up.

I was getting pretty good at this.

"Better bring up the firepower, boys. Looks like a party." Sylvia answered, turning the humm-vee and running parallel to the parking lot. I'd ridden with her a few times, and knew the drill. On our second pass of the parking lot, the Risers were among the cars, and I strafed the line as we went by. Cars exploded, rending the zombies apart, and catching others on fire.

When the two Bradleys arrived, we made short work of the rest that we could see, and climbed out. Broken glass, half devoured corpses. Rotted zombies who still lay where they had been felled by a shot to the head. The parking lot reeked, and I wanted to gag or puke. Many of the former zombies had been kids, teenagers, with a smattering of adults.

We passed the barrier, keeping ready as we entered the gymnasium. Inside was absolute chaos. Sam, Sylvia, Greg and Buck quickly killed the few zombies still inside the gym, their training making the difference in reaction and lethality. The few shots that Darren and Thomas popped off mostly hit the zombies in non-lethal areas, and didn't do much. I heard Greg mumble something about "Firing Range 101" to Buck, who laughed harshly, his burn scarred head looking like a bust of an ancient war god in the light of the gym.

"We'll keep watch, the rest of you, grab anything useful. I want to get out of here before the zombies pin us down and swarm us under." Buck growled, reaching into a pocket and pulling out a cigar.

I began quickly scavenging through the racks and boxes in the curtained areas, pulling myself into that pool of calm as I had been trained to do, to keep my awareness high, but not lose focus on the task. Drugs, medical instruments, medical supplies. I shoved them all together into a large bag with a red cross on the side, slinging the bag over one shoulder.

Darren handed a SAW to Buck, who glanced at it real quick and nodded. Darren slung it over one shoulder, grunting at the weight of the weapon that dangled at the end of its sling. We hurried as best as we could, stripping anything easily recoverable.

While depressing and full of death, the aid stations that had been over-run and devoured were still useful, and in a strange way, were still fulfilling their purpose of providing emergency supplies and services to survivors.

I'm still glad Greg drafted my sorority sisters and myself in the pawn shop all those years ago. Otherwise, I would have gone to an aid station, and just been another corpse that nobody would have even had the time or energy to wonder about.

Freddy crawled from the wreck of the hummer, dazed and bleeding. Charlie was obviously dead, his head smashed open by the metal dashboard, and twitching with dying nerve spasms rather than the frenzied seizures of a brain damaged zombie.

We yelled at him to run, Buck, Sam and Greg trying to see the four children that had veered from running at us to plunge into the field's tall grass at the sound of the humm-vee crashing. Freddy got to his feet and shook his head, obviously concussed, his helmet gone and his tac-com missing. He reached down for his pistol, but found only an empty holster.

Eyes wide with fear, he began to run toward us as quickly as possible, tripping once on some unseen debris in the field. Greg fired at some movement in the field, muffled snapping sounds coming from his silenced M-4 carbine. We could no longer hear the children, and knew that they were moving in for the kill. Silent. Deadly. Ruthless. Merciless.

And hungry.

They were on Freddy before he could get across the field. We couldn't even see them, since the grass was higher than their heads. Two hit him low, at the knees, while 2 others hit him at the waist. Before he knew what was happening, they had him on the ground, and were tearing at him. We could hear him screaming, and hear them feeding over his screaming.

I love Greg, but I've noticed something strange over the course of the last few months. While he's been this way since I've known him, I still love him deeply. He loves mixing it up with the zombies, loves combat with Raiders, and is massively aroused when the combat is over.

Buck and Sam have mentioned something called a "combat high" and I'm beginning to think that Greg likes it a bit too much. For some reason, it reminds me of my uncle's drinking problem.

Sam was leaned back in the ringmount of the Deuce and Half cargo truck, his helmet pushed back, and staring at the sky as he started singing. At first, just low and to himself, but he got progressively louder and more obnoxious about it.

"Ooooooh... Who'll pay the butcher's bill...."

"When Mr. Hungry comes to town?"

"Who'll pay the butcher's bill..." I joined in. I loved this ditty! Zhakov was providing the background "URRR!" at the correct parts and Ming was giggling, covering his mouth with his hands.

"When Mr. Hungry comes around?"

"Why you and I, my frightened friend..."

"We'll all be him before the end..."

"We'll pay the butcher's bill...." Greg joined in at about this point. Greg sings about as musically as a washer machine full of gravel and metal, on an unbalanced spin cycle.

"When Mr. Hungry comes to town."

"He comes along, and bites your ass,"

"His kids like to hide in tall green grass." Sylvia joined in here, her voice actually melodious as she sang joyously, her voice full of mirth. I could hear Cindy and Thomas stifling giggles over their tac-coms.

"When you think he's gone, SURPRISE, he's back..."

Just looking for another snack."

"Who'll pay the butcher's bill..."

"When Mr. Hungry..."

"Shut the fuck up, all of you!" Buck yelled over tac. Sam jerked, surprised. He had gotten in the habit of making up little ditties as we went along about a month ago. Sylvia figured it was to bleed off the stress that made us all want to just snap at times.

I don't know why it irritated Buck so much. I thought it was funny, and Cindy had that song stuck in her head for almost a week.

We had to tie Greg down, he was delirious from pain and the head wound. He was damn lucky that he was not dead. Sam was genuinely sorry about what had happened, but we all knew that it was not Sam's fault, it can be very hard to control a Humm-vee when someone shoots out the front end, and none of us could blame him for skidding out of control and slamming the side of the armored humm-vee into Greg..

Greg called out for support, for fire for effect, ordered snipers up, and many other things. The worst for us was listening to his long, rambling monologue about what happened at Olympia General Hospital. How the soldiers there had been forced to fire on the crowds of panicked people. The slow

collapse to anarchy, and how Greg eventually led a mere eighteen people out of over 200 soldiers out of the hospital, packed into a Blackhawk helicopter that was low on fuel, keeping what few civilians had survived back at gunpoint. The commanding officer had killed himself on the second day, and attrition had handled the rest. While he cried over the survivors he had left behind, the desperation in his voice was backed up by the fact he had left behind six healthy soldiers and as much ammunition as they could carry. He asked their spirits for forgiveness as he screamed his rage and anger at God himself for opening the gates of Hell.

Even Sylvia was crying, and Buck's face looked like stone when they listened to Greg admit that he had ordered men to shoot women, children and others. We understood the reasoning. That had been a large factor of the collapse after the Rising. Panic and the refusal to listen to authority, civilians killing soldiers for no other reason than to strike out at the government that had failed them, soldiers shooting civilians out of frustration and fear, police abandoning their posts and far, far worse. We did not blame Greg for what he had done. He didn't make the world; he had only been trying to survive in it.

Still, hearing it; hearing Greg give orders for the men to work in teams of two, one reloading the empty M-249 SAW, the other firing it... that was hard. Listening to him give orders that he later reported led to the deaths of 30 men when they vainly tried to reach desperately needed supplies.

"We have to have that ammunition. Take the helicopters from the roof, clear a landing spot, hover in place, and retrieve the ammunition from those trucks. Kill everyone that you have to." He ordered. A few moments later ordering men to fire on the zombies trying to climb onto the helicopters.

He wept as he mumbled how three of the four helicopters crashed, and the crews aboard were torn apart and eaten. He alternately wept and raged at the officers who had abandoned over 200 men and women, and left him in charge.

We never told him that we knew what he had done in those dark days.

Robert's prognosis is grim. The broken piece of skull is pressing on Greg's brain, and he's going to die. We only have one choice: Hit a hospital with a surgical bay, fight our way in, hold the surgical bay while Robert performs a delicate operation, then fight our way clear. Piece of cake, right?

We did it. If it had not been for the remains of a Russian Special Forces team hearing the gunfire and coming to our assistance, the Risers would have had us. Out of 20 of them that came to our rescue, only 8 made it. No, not Risers. Children. They were fast, brutal, and wielded meat cleavers and butcher knives. Two or three would tackle an adult, and another two or three would stab them with thin boning knives, twisting the blade and breaking it off inside the body. Once the person couldn't fight back, they'd hack him apart, stuffing the meat into satchels hung around the child's neck.

They killed 12 combat blooded Russian SF, invaded the hospital as Robert was stitching Greg's scalp back together, and it took everything we all had to get out of there.

Strange. We had all seen it, but Darrel has no recollection of it. He had been cut off by the largest Wolf Pack we had ever seen, and herded up six flights of stairs. Finally, trapped between windows and the Wolf Pack, he had put his last two bullets into the windows and leapt through them.

He fell almost a hundred feet to the ground, crashing into the large hedges that surrounded the building, and staggered out. He was bruised a little, but he did not break or sprain a single thing. Robert says luck saved him, Darrel claims it must have been skill, Buck and Greg agree it was stupidity that saved him.

He doesn't remember doing it, nor does he remember Ivan, one of the Spetznaz, running across the parking lot to save him. We've asked, and he just plain doesn't believe it happened.

I wonder what I have forgotten?

I always feel better after admitting what has happened to you, diary.

I'm pregnant. Dear God, Greg got me pregnant. You've got to be wondering why I didn't use birth control, but, uhhhh, I was a virgin. It was hurried, enjoyable, but hurried, but I know I'm pregnant. I don't want to tell the others. I know Robert could abort it. I know it's wrong to bring a child into this world. I want to keep it. I almost lost Greg, I'd like to have some piece of him if I do lose him.

Before all of this happened, I used to sleep nine to ten hours a night, uninterrupted, and I never dreamed, not a single time. I would lay down, and BAM, I was waking up with no sense of disruption or confusion and it was morning, just like I had blinked my eyes.

Now, however, when I close my eyes, I see and hear people screaming and being torn to pieces by gunfire or zombies. Sometimes I see things which have happened, mostly to strangers. Those aren't so bad. Some times, however, the people dying are my friends, or Emma. On those nights, I wake up screaming and clawing at the hull of the Bradley, and it takes Greg or one of the others a long time to calm me down.

It's worse when I'm pregnant, and I dream that the baby is clawing it's way out of my belly.

"You know, this happened before." Sylvia's revelation startled us all. Myself most of all.

"Where?" Buck asked. He was honestly curious, it seemed like to me.

"I don't know where it was. It was in 1990. Tom Savini made a documentary on it, but the Feds stepped on his neck until he released it as a fictional movie." Sylvia said.

"Yeah, right." Greg laughed. "And the Roswell Autopsy really happened."

"Don't be so quick to dismiss it." Buck stated. "I'd heard rumors about it too. Real hush hush stuff one night, from a couple of head-stampers in the back of the NCO-Club. Apparently, these outbreaks happened now and then. They were talking about some outbreak in North Dakota."

"That too. This apparently was a containable situation that happened now and then across the globe. Some people suspect that's what the whole Gropa-Toada, or however you say it, was about." Sylvia said, reaching forward to stir the fire. The sparks crackled into the night sky, and I watched them dance.

"So this could all just stop?" I asked hopefully. That would be just wonderful.

"No, they don't just turn off, Becka. They keep going until they are killed. But they stop rising, and they are usually limited to one location." Sylvia sighed, "This time, even if they were to stop, I think it's the end."

"Think it? I know it." Buck stated. He pulled back the charging handle on his M-4 and caught the round in mid-air. "Meet the must have accessory of the new world." He stood up and held it up like it was on display. "You might not know me, that's why I carry this wherever I go. Assault rifle from BlastemHard. Get one today."

Sylvia's laughter was like the chiming of silver bells as she laughed at Buck's parody of the old credit-card commercial.

There is almost 20 of us now. We have 4 Bradley Armored Fighting Vehicles, four humvees, and enough firepower to kill any dumbass rednecks that fuck with us. Twice they've tried to ambush us,

and twice we've handed them their asses. Sheet metal welded to the outside of a trailer house may keep some poor slob with a hunting rifle from hitting we, but we hit back with TOW-II's.

Fuck you and your hillbilly tactics.

We decided to go back to Olympia. We need ammunition for the Bradley's. Between zombies and rednecks, it seems like everyone is shooting at us. The fear of radiation made me tell everyone that I'm pregnant, diary. We fought, we argued, but it's settled. The baby will be born. I've decided to name her Emma if she's a girl, after my mother, and Steve if it's a boy, after that poor boy whose neck I broke in the hospital so long ago.

The radiation isn't bad, but we're taking it slow. Sylvia says it's about the equivalent of standing next to a microwave while you're heating up a burrito. Far less harmless than the food itself.

Buck was chewing on the end of his cigar, the sun gleaming off of his bald head as he stared at the hospital through his binoculars. The shiny burn scarring made his head look like the icon of some medieval war god. I could see it, as could the rest of us, but Greg, Buck, Sam, the Russians and Ming were responsible for figuring out our plan of attack.

Sam lowered the binoculars and spit on the grass, grumbling to himself, then looking at Greg. "You're sure we're going to find 20mm ammunition in the building?"

"We left it behind, too heavy to carry, the crash-hawk didn't have much fuel." Greg answered, scanning the roof with a grim expression on his face. I could make out a couple dozen small figures milling around the roof, where two burnt out helicopters lay mournfully. I wondered if I really wanted to know what had gone on there. I had been lucky, I had been assigned somewhere else when the end had come for the hospital.

I knew it had gotten brutal, and dirty, and only our previous planning to rendezvous at the Thurston County Sheriff substation had ensured we'd be able to find one another again.

"Where is it?" Buck asked, removing the cigar from his mouth and scanning the parking lot. "What about those six five-ton trucks?"

"There's some ammunition on the 5-tons, but it's mostly refugee supplies like blankets and first aid kits. The 20mm is in the parking garage, down by the Bradleys. We lost the garage, so there is also about five or six Bradleys down therein pristine condition. I know that some of the guys were going to make a run for them, they didn't want to risk the chopper flight. They should have, they never got out."

"Medicine. We need medicines, the portable X-ray machine, drugs and other stuff out of there." Robert said, trying to scratch under the lip of his cast with the barrel of his assault rifle.

"Tampons, breast pads and menstrual pads." I reminded them, "And prenatal vitamins, and an ultrasound machine so I can check the baby now and then." I placed my hand on my slightly rounded stomach.

Greg nodded, staring down at the hospital with a grim expression.

"Be careful, honey, there's a lot of them down there, and without Robert, Sylvia and I to go with you, you're going to be running hard." I said, fighting back tears. Ever since I had gotten pregnant, my emotions had been rollercoasting. I was suddenly furious at him for risking his life like this.

"There's a lot of wreckage. Any plans?" Sylvia asked, coughing a deep, tearing cough, and wiping blood off of her mouth.

"We're going to use a Humm-vee, smash through the barricades at the garage entrance, and try to take the Bradleys." Greg answered. "I'm pretty sure they should have full tanks. They did when we left them there a couple of months back."

"Come back safe, guys." I begged, starting to cry. The hospital was more choked with Risers than anyplace I'd seen in a long time, and I didn't want the baby to grow up without a father.

It staggered forward, two small holes leaking dark red blood down its shirt. Sam cursed and fired again, doubletap with his right hand, doubletap with his left hand. Each of the pistols put two bullets into the zombies' faces, spraying blood and brains across the hallway of the hospital. The two men dropped like their strings had been cut. I finished reloading, and looked over my shoulder to where Robert was working on the lock to the pharmacy.

"Hurry the fuck up, we're drawing a crowd here!" I yelled. Greg snarled and flung Robert away from the door.

"Taking too long, Robert." He stepped to the side and put a burst into the plate glass window, shattering it in.

"Get in, get what we need. Hospitals are fucking magnets for these bastards." Buck shouted, handing Sylvia the other SAW, now reloaded. "Fresh!" Sylvia nodded and fired off the rest of her box of ammunition, rolling from the old weapon to the one that Buck had just laid down. Buck scooped up the empty weapon and began reloading it, his fingers clumsy from the bandages covering the burns on his hands and arms.

It was going to be tight, but we wanted the medical supplies. It's not like the zombies wanted them.

They wanted us

One thing, that I cannot place in these pages, so that any of you that come after me, and might even be capable of reading this, will understand, is the sheer, crushing horror of these times. Friends and lovers die, sometimes horribly, only to rise up again, so that they must be killed.

The massive amounts of children who died, or were murdered, or worse, during the beginning, and sadly, even later in the Rising. Worse, the children who banded together, and reverted to savagery. The bandits, the fields of death, the empty cities, and the rusting lines of tombs that stretched off into the distance.

The sounds of the dead around you grate on your nerves, eroding on your sanity, as night after night, the low, mournful sounds that the Risers make drift into your shelter from where they are outside.

Waiting.

Some people cannot handle the situation, and their minds break. They retreat into the depths of their minds, or their perception of reality changes. Sometimes they pause too long, the horror of a situation overwhelming them, and they are drug down and killed in their moment of terror.

We have to run for it. The boys are waiting in the basement of the hospital, the Bradley's loaded up with medical supplies and equipment, as well as ammunition. Sylvia is trapped outside, in the cab of one of the five-tons. We're going to make a break for it, but there's literally hundreds of Risers, most of them covered with burns.

The noise was deafening as the damaged Bradley rattled down the empty street, the engines roaring and tracks clattering. We climbed out of the hole in the turret, squinting our eyes against the 60 MPH wind that tried to tug us off of the armored vehicle's hull. Darren waved at us, as did Tens, motioning for us to jump to the back of the humm-vee that Sylvia had pulled next to us. She had lost control once, and the grinding treads of the Bradley had torn the armor off of the bed

off the humm-vee, one shard of it slicing Tens' face to the bone. He ignored the injury, however, catching Cindy when she leapt from the deck of the vehicle and into his waiting arms.

"THE BRIDGE!" Darren shouted, pointing as Robert leapt from the deck and into the back of the humm-vee. I looked over, and my blood ran cold. The bridge was rapidly approaching, and I knew, with a cold certainty, that the Bradley was NOT going to make it. Sam jumped, just as Sylvia plowed through the front of a wrecked car, the ass end of the humm-vee slewing into the side of the Bradley. Darren grabbed his outstretched hands, and swung him around so that he slammed into the cab of the humm-vee.

I couldn't jump, the humm-vee was swinging around, the bed twisted, and the opposite side hit the treads, ripping the armor plating off of the smaller vehicle. I ducked under the armor that shattered across everyone, throwing Tens to the bed with a large chunk sticking out of his cheek.

"GREG!" I screamed, and then jumped.

I still wake up in a cold sweat, remembering the knowledge that I wasn't going to make it, that I had jumped too soon. I would hit the roof of the humm-vee and slide across, to slam into the pavement and die.

Sylvia gunned the engine, forcing the battered and tortured vehicle away from the humm-vee, standing half up in her seat, reaching from the cab. She grabbed my outstretched hand and pulled me through the doorway, across her lap.

"Hold on, Becka, this is going to hurt." Sylvia growled, patting me on the butt real quick as I scrambled across her. We were on the bridge, spinning out of control, ricocheting off the guardrails. Sylvia alternated between the gas and the brakes, swearing sulphurously each time one of the tires blew. In a shower of sparks, we slowly ground to a stop, the armor, doors and tires missing from Sylvia's poor humm-vee.

"Everyone out. Ride's over." Sylvia said, climbing out of the ruined vehicle.

One of the things that annoys the piss out of me about Darrel, is the fact that he doesn't seem to realize just how bad this is. He seems to think that he is playing a video game, still dresses like a drug dealer, and pouts for hours if you try to tell him that he's being a fool.

Buck says it's because he's stupid. Greg says it's because he's just a kid. Robert has told me that he is afraid it may be something deeper.

Sylvia used that laptop of hers, the one with the Defense Intelligence Agency logo on the outside, with the armored case and the thumbprint locks on it, to print out a map. Apparently there is a "Continuity of Government" supply depot nearby, on the way to Portland.

How the fuck does she have this information? Who the hell is she?

Buck sprayed with his M-4, tight, controlled bursts, just like he'd been trained in the Big Red One to do with his M-16. He fired at a high ready, weapon butted safely against the shoulder, and he was down on one knee, exactly as his drill instructors had pounded into his head.

Each three round burst blew apart a zombie's skull in a flare of blood, hair and rotted flesh. He and Greg were back to back, their heels touching as they laid down withering bursts of fire. Sam stood, his feet on other side of their bent legs, double-tapping with his pistols, the rounds blowing chunks of brain matter out of the mob that slowly closed in on them.

Sylvia was laying down, and I stood above her, she was running the SAW, and I provided cover whenever she swapped boxes. The flaring of the muzzles, the echoing thunder of the weapons, and the smell of blood and rotted flesh swamped the air. The Russians and Ming were professionals, laying down the bursts from their weapons in tightly controlled snaps, each trigger pull putting down

a zombie, firing in a staggered order so at least 2 of them were shooting every time someone reloaded.

Everything was going fine until Barry panicked and fired the M-240 on the BAFV. He was only supposed to keep zombies from climbing up and into the turret with his pistol, not use that general purpose heavy machine gun. Not fire it. Definitely not fire it where he did.

The bullets raked out, one out of every 4 a tracer round, the gun getting out of control of his novice skills almost instantly. I watched in horror as they raked the line of Spetznaz. The men who had been with us since the first month, who had trusted us despite what they had learned all of their lives, the doctrine that had been pounded into them at the end of the Cold War, and who had risen above the hatred that had been poured into their minds. Men who meant more to me than anyone pre-Rising had.

Blood sprayed, and they screamed, their voices a common language in pain and horror. The tracers kept going, wobbling as Barry desperately tried to gain control of the machinegun. I watched as the tracers reached out and touched our goal.

The fuel tanks.

The 16 of us, out of thirty that went in, buried Barry after Buck gave him a third eye above his brow line. Of course, the burst from Sylvia's SAW had nearly cut him half. With one panicked burst, Barry had killed a full third of our military personnel assets. Killed more than the zombies had in months.

I hope they dug the bastard up and used his empty head for a three way skullfuck.

And I hope he felt it. .

God damn Barry. The explosion has warped the door tracks, and we can't close them. We have to abandon a two level facility, complete with kitchen, showers, medical labs, it's own nuclear power reactor, because we can't shut the fucking door. I wish there weren't so many Risers around, I'd go out there and piss on his grave.

The baby kicked today. Hard. Right in the bladder, and I pissed myself. The boys laughed, but strangely enough, it was Zhukov who told me not to worry, that it is not uncommon for that to happen.

Ming came running out of the room, firing one handed behind him as he ran. He wasn't interested in killing or destroying any of the creatures chasing him, merely hoping to knock down the leaders and entangle those who were behind. The thunder of his pistol echoed off of the empty walls and counters of the shopping mall and threw grotesque shadows around. He had dropped his IR flashlight, but his NVGs still let him navigate the tangled chairs.

"RUN! This was used as a temporary MORGUE!" he yelled, not caring that his other pistol fell out of his unsecured holster. It was probably empty anyway. Behind him, dozens, maybe even hundreds, of the dead spilled out into the main thoroughfare of the mall. Their moaning was blood chilling, so many of them moaning in hunger and the chilling sound echoing through the empty mall. So many dead, why hadn't they taken proper precautions?

A morgue? Who in their right mind had used a fucking MALL to store dead bodies in? We had not seen any uniforms, no scientists, nothing to suggest why. Ming had just discovered more zombies than we had seen in one place since Portland, with no suggestions on how they had gotten there. They just kept pouring out, and even when Sylvia brought the SAW off of her back, and dropped to the floor, she could not stem the tide with her accurate fire that sent brass casing skittering across the floor as she rapidly began laying bursts into the crowd.

"Buck, we're in trouble and need an emergency evac!" Greg said, keying his tac-cam. I could hear Buck reply faintly, but my tac-cam was down around my neck. There was the sound of the BAFV firing up, and then the roar of the powerful diesel engine as Buck smashed through the doors of the mall with the armored fighting vehicle, glass shattering everywhere as the doors were destroyed by the bow of the Bradley. Behind him, I could see dozens of the living dead pressing into the now empty space..

Zombies inside and out. The Bradley Armored Fighting Vehicles nearly out of gas, and everyone low on ammo. Half of us were wounded, and Greg was still hampered by a broken arm, his firing arm of all things. Sylvia yelling that she needed another box of ammo. This promised to be fun.

The Longview mall was a bust. We've decided not to fuck with Portland, so we're going to head west, toward the ocean. According to the maps, there should be three or four bridges on the way. The boys want to go for Astoria.

Not everyone had the same experiences we did. A party of eight that we encountered, and later tried to jack us, had never run into any military personnel. No rogue cops, no Spetznaz, no rogue Marine Corps National Guard. They told chilling tales of horrible creatures lunging from shadows, strange, inhuman creatures.

They also swore that they had been attacked by vampires twice. While most of my friends shook their heads in disbelief, I saw Buck, Sylvia and Greg exchange glances, and then look at Sam, who nodded back and mouthed the word "Shadow" at the others.

We listened to their tales, of magic, creatures from the Outer Limits and psionics. We had never encountered anything like that, but then, they had never stood toe to toe with an armored security robot outside of a hardened bunker.

Perhaps Sam's whisper at times of "Reality is breaking down," when things get bad, is more true than any of us want to believe.

Everything was fine. We were all staring at the fire, our stomach full, our skin warm, and secure in the knowledge that the tripwires on the Claymore Land Mines we had scattered around would be effective in warning us of Risers or raiders.

Emma was asleep next to me, wrapped up in Greg's Interceptor vest, sucking on her tiny thumb, and I was slowly dozing off. Greg was staring at the stars, his arm around my waist and gently squeezing my breast. We'd discovered that morning that he wouldn't have to worry about getting me pregnant. I was.

"I'M BURNING!" Buck suddenly screamed, his hands thrust out in front of him as if holding onto something. His lips were pulled back in a grimace, and he stomped his right foot onto the ground as hard as he could. His eyes were blank and staring, focused on something only he could see, focused on the past.

Sylvia reached out and rubbed his hip, looking up at the massively built biker with her wide eyes set in a death's head face.

"It's OK. It's over now, Buck." She said. Her voice was soft and mellow, and I was surprised to discover that I had drawn my pistol. Embarrassed, I holstered the pistol as Sylvia kept rubbing Buck's hip and speaking to him in low, soothing tones, words of comfort, words to remind him where he was.

Buck suddenly shook like he was freezing to death, then stomped over to Bradley-One, climbing in and slamming the hatch shut viciously.

I knew what it was. For a split second, the fire had gone from being in the firepit, to being all around him as he drove a burning hummvee through a field to rescue the rest of us, the fire greedily devouring his flesh as he drove to our aid. "Flashback" was what Greg called it.

He isn't the only one who has them. .

Sam ducked as I placed both hands on the counter and leapt, vaulting over it and kicking out the way I had been trained since I could barely walk. The heel of my cleat hit the woman in the side of the head, knocking her away from Sam with the crunch of bone. Two more quick kicks, and the zombie was thrown back into the pack of them, flying through the air to tangle the others and bring them to the ground.

Sam fired from the ground, between my legs and into the back of the store, each shot taking a zombie in the face. Greg leapt up on the counter to avoid the bullets, back flipping over the zombie child that had burst from the pile of cans that had collapsed on her, firing rapidly with both of his pistols. Behind me, Buck lifted the half collapsed roof off of Sylvia, who was only bruised from the fallen debris that had buried her and her attackers. The zombies were dead, but she was only scuffed, tossing her hair back out of her face as she stood up.

Outside, Freddy was firing the Bushmaster chaingun on the Bradley at a steady rate, blowing apart the mobbed zombies approaching, cars exploding on the street as the tracer rounds intersected with them.

"Having some fun, babe?" Greg asked, shoving back a zombie and shooting it in the forehead. "Better than waking up?" I nodded and he turned toward me. "Never want to wake up?"

I screamed and lunged up, the warped and tattered dream of being near superheroes shattering as my screams rebounded off the inside of the Bradley's hull. It stank of fear, blood, sweat and diesel.

Fucking dreams.

We make about 5-10 miles a day. The roads are shit, and we have to be careful. BAFV's are HEAVY, and we have to go slow. Twice the roadway has slid out from under one of the armored vehicles, but so far, we've been able to recover the vehicle and nobody has been injured. The Satsop Nuclear Plant is about thirty miles off. We should be there in 2 or 3 days.

The area was dead. Sylvia had gone forward in her humm-vee by herself, taking the only radiation suit and Geiger counter we had. We had traded two M-16A2s and 360 556mm rounds for them at a small settlement a few weeks before. The place was deserted, but Sylvia had told us that despite urban legend, the place would not glow brightly if it had suffered a rupture of a containment unit this long after a breach, unless it was a serious breach that would have showed us other signs..

I bit my nails something serious, gnawing them down to bleeding before she came back, driving slowly and weaving erratically. She got out of the vehicle, and we could see that she was screaming inside the suit. Sam tackled her and held her down, although Buck and Greg both had to help him hold her down. Robert sedated her and we got out of there quickly.

We could see them approaching. Dozens of them. With odd burning patterns and liquid looking skin. We did not bother with using the weapons.

Honestly? We weren't sure what they would do. Too many of us had seen too many nuclear holocaust movies in the '80s. If they wanted to wander around the reactor, it was all theirs.

"How bad is she, Robert?" I asked, holding onto Sylvia's hand as Robert cut away her clothing and handed it to Yuri. Yuri would check it for valuables, check the valuables with the dosimeter, and throw everything contaminated and the clothing out of the back of the Bradley. He ended up throwing everything away, even her small Saint Christopher's Medal which had actually burned its image between her breasts, a scar she will probably carry her entire life.

"I don't know. She's got radiation burns across her abdomen, breasts, thighs, arms and calves. I think her suit was faulty." Robert answered. "For burns to show up this quickly, and this badly, it had to have failed where it was folded. It may have even been deliberately created like this. I've never seen anything like this, and I think she might not make it. Notice how the radiation burns are thin, and go in straight lines. It doesn't look like normal exposure, we need to check the other suits for possible sabotage."

"I got the radiation meters on all the vehicles working." Thomas said, ducking to enter the back of the Bradley. "We'll have better warning now if we come across something like that again. I went through the TMs (Greg told me that night, while we laid next to each other, that TM stood for Technical Manual) and found out how to get them working and deployed for use." He looked at Sylvia, and shook his head. "Too late for her though."

I felt myself crying, for Sylvia, for us, for my children yet unborn. The little life stirring inside of me, and the baby sleeping in her makeshift armored crib welded inside of the Bradley, all them I had tears for.

The Rising was bad enough, but the zombies had to cause nuclear core breaches too?

We got ambushed. They let Sylvia cruise by, not falling for it, and hit the convoy itself. I was half outside the turret, manning the 240, when the first rounds hit. Three of them, right into my Interceptor vest that I had stretched over my massively distended belly.

The impacts put me into labor, my water bursting and showering poor Robert, who was sleeping below me. I screamed through the contractions and fired the weapon as the baby came. I couldn't stop, I couldn't let go, it was coming then, and nothing in the world could stop it.

Greg went berserk, and charged after them, and even the sight of a bullet striking him in the side of the head couldn't stop Emma from coming. Even my relief at seeing him get back was screamed out as another contraction came.

Emma was coming and nothing was going to stop her.

Greg had completely lost it. The bullet from the Raider had caught him right on the plate that Robert had installed, and put pressure on his brain. Combined with the fact I had gone into labor from a burst hitting my Interceptor, he went completely crazy according to Sylvia and the boys. They won't tell me what he did, but I do know he is strapped down on the gurney, alternating between childhood regression and raging monologues that confirm the fact that if it had not been for The Rising, he would have been tried for War Crimes.

Robert is convinced it will work, but I'm still terrified. They're going to drill a hole in his head, Robert's reasoning is to let the pressure off of his bruised brain, Cindy's reasoning is so that she can draw the evil spirit that has took possession of him.

Either way, I just want it to work. There's enough names on the back of Buck's arms without adding my husband's name to them.

It took threats, pleading, and finally, a reminder that the government had left HER to die, but Sylvia sequestered herself with her laptop and brought back a list. About twenty miles into the woods, up a few logging roads, there's a FEMA bunker that we might be able to use.

The sounds of our footsteps and our breathing echoed through the empty halls of the FEMA shelter we had found and entered. The place was deserted, yes, but it showed signs of life, as if survivors had fled here, and then vanished.

The humming of the environmental systems seemed to chuckle and mock our ignorance of what had gone on, and each closed door promised death or worse to any who dared to open them. We had found chicken bones scattered about, and all of us had bunched back together after Buck found a small nest of blankets with toys hidden inside.

Something is in here with us.

Robert operated on Greg again. The plate wasn't completely healed into the skull, and had shifted, once again putting pressure on his brain. We stood guard carefully, worried that those kids were out there. What had happened to them, to make them band together like that and view adults as prey rather than protection. It took hours, and I spent the time sleeping and crying, holding Emma, whose appetite is voracious, close to me. I was so afraid she would never get to meet Greg, but he pulled through. He's awake, groggy but aware. He held the baby for a little while, and she slept on his chest after he dozed off. Someone stole Emma's blanket, and I think we may want to leave.

Soon.

I've seen Sylvia tell someone that she doesn't have a cigarette because she doesn't smoke while she has one in her mouth. She often reacts with sudden and shocking violence at the slightest provocation in order to keep herself and the rest of us safe, and has no remorse for anything she has done beyond breaking her oath to protect America.

She's snapped, there is no doubt about it, but honestly, I'm glad she is with us, rather than against us.

"What do you think?" I asked, looking through my binoculars. They were nice ones, they might have been Delta Force issue, or something like that. Switchable night-vision, infra-red, laser range-finder thingamajigs, all the bells and whistles.

We took them from around the neck of a Riser in urban combat BDUs.

"Worth a shot. Not too many of them around, nothing the Bradleys can't handle. We back up to the end of the dock, side by side, that way they have to get through the chain-guns to get at those of us who get out. We storm that Coast Guard cutter, kill any Risers we find, and haul off the loot." Sam said. I turned to him, and saw a rare smile.

"It's doubtful any are left onboard, most of them probably wandered off." Cindy said, shading her eyes and staring at the crowd of Risers slowly approaching over the bridge. Greg was bouncing a radio detonator in his hand. As soon as the Risers got close enough, he'd press the button and the dufflebag packed with almost 200 lbs of C-4 would explode. If the boys were right, it would drop the bridge into the water.

"It's a nice island, do you think there are any survivors?" Cathy wondered, looking around.

"Doesn't matter. We need the fuel and heavy equipment at the docks to fix Bradley-Four." Buck granted. I nodded in agreement. The RPG hits had badly damaged the vehicle's hull, eliminating its amphibious ability, and we needed to get it back. Bridges were unreliable at best.

"How's it look down there, Thomas?" Buck asked into his tac-com, examining the charred wreckage of the Naval vessel's sensitive equipment. I was wandering around the bridge, stepping

carefully to compensate for my adjusted center of gravity as well as the slant of the deck of the beached ship.

"Her engines are seized up, and there's a lot of damage down here. It looks like the fighting spread down here too. From the amount of dead Marines, I'd say the Jarheads made their last stand down here, and did a damn good job of it." Thomas replied, his voice nearly masked by static despite the repeaters we had dropped behind us as we had moved through the carcass of this ship.

"Sam, how's the armory?" Buck questioned, staring out the windows at the slightly tilted landscape outside. We could see Greg, Cindy and Sylvia checking the deck guns for anything salvageable out in the rain. Sylvia looked shit-ass miserable out there, and as I watched, she turned and vomited onto the deck plates, the rain and the tilt of the deck washing the vomit away from her.

She was dying, I knew it, I could feel it.

"Locked down, but I've almost got it open." Sam answered, "I'm almost through the door, and there wasn't any commotion on the other side, so we should be good."

It was eerie. A ship that probably had a crew of hundreds, dead silent except for the hull settling as the waves pushed it further and further onto the beach, and our movement. Rats stripping the carcass of the once proud vessel for anything we could use before it tipped over and the waves smashed it to shit.

A sad end for the U.S.S. Long Beach.

Sylvia burst into tears today. She has a bad habit of tugging on her bangs, and when she did it today, a huge hunk of her hair came out, leaving a reddish patch that was oozing a clear liquid. It was the first time I'd seen her show very much emotion in all the time I have known her.

Every time she tugs on her hair, it comes loose, but for some reason, she just keeps doing. She's going to be bald within a few days if she keeps it up.

"What have you got?" I asked. Sylvia was supposed to be manning the radio, but I could hear her puking again behind me. I kept helping her adjust her hair when clumps fell out so that the bald spots were hidden. She'd been menstruating steadily since the day after she'd checked out the nuclear power plant. We had found afterwards that the sensory equipment had been damaged, and didn't work.

Robert figured she had probably taken a serious amount of radiation. There had been enough that in the two hours it had taken us to go back and recover the humm-vee, it was radioactive. We even left her personal effects in it.

"A whole shitload of people waiting for planes that aren't coming." Buck laughed. "Luckily, they're in the terminal, so we might be able to make a run at that C-5 Galaxy."

"It's open, and I can see a Bradley and a hummer. The Bradley's inside the Galaxy, and the hummer is outside." Greg added. Behind me, Sylvia finished puking in the chemical toilet we'd bolted to the frame. I heard her stagger up and sit next to me. I could smell the blood and bile from her. Six months ago, I would have probably puked, instead, I hugged her close.

"Let's go for it. We need the extra vehicles, and there might be medicine aboard." Sam said. Sylvia managed to buckle herself in, but then fell asleep.

I hoped we could find something to help her soon. .

"We're in luck, Buck." Came Greg's voice over the tac-com system. It was staticy, but clear enough to understand. I could see Sylvia laying down on the loading ramp of the huge military cargo jet, firing tight bursts from her SAW at the Risers, taking time to hit the Sprinters first.

"What?" Buck asked, triggering a short burst from the M-249 into a group of Sprinters that came out of the terminal at top speed, that eerie, fluid run that was so effortless looking, so tireless, like a machine. The heavy rounds from the mounted machinegun knocked them sprawling, but even though it didn't kill them, they weren't moving too fast with dinner plate sized holes in them from exit wounds.

"Bradleys, four of them, fully loaded too. Someone disregarded SOP and loaded them on here with a full combat load. They're fueled and ready to go. Two humm-vees too, both locked and loaded. Got one with a SAW on the ringmount, the other is a TOW-II wagon." Greg answered. There was a short burst of automatic weapons fire that over-rode Sam's reply.

I heard the back door clang open, and I set down the quilt I was making and drug one of the extra Kevlar vests over Emma. She was sleeping soundly, not even twitching when Sam, Darren, Robert and the Russians began laying down fire as they headed into the big cargo plane. It was sad that the sound of automatic weapons fire was so common that it did not wake a sleeping 7 month old infant up. The child inside my stomach woke up with a start however, kicked me right in the bladder, and made me wet my pants. I shrugged to myself, it wasn't the first time, and it undoubtedly wouldn't be the last, since Greg seems to be able to get me pregnant by just walking by me.

I checked the load in my rifle, and Ming nodded to me, his brittle smile looking strange with the missing teeth that the rogue National Guardsmen had knocked out. We could use the Bradleys, armored vehicles were the SUV of this dark future.

"Let me go in, I'm dying anyway." Sylvia said, coughing again. The radiation was eating her alive, she was throwing up blood now, and I had helped her clean up after she had shit her pants full of blood. Robert was figuring her chances at roughly 20 to one at her surviving. Nothing we had recovered from the hospital was helping her.

"No. I won't sacrifice you." Buck seemed adamant about it. There wasn't that many of us left after that wolf-pack of kids had gotten into the train we kept riding around on. The kids had slaughtered almost half of us, but thankfully I'd killed the leader, who had been following us since the Montesano Army National Guard station.

"It's too late, Buck. I'm gonna die, you might as well let me do something good." Sylvia said, then lifted the barrel of the SAW to cover us as she started backing up toward her Humm-vee. "Besides, you'll have to kill me to stop me from going, and I'm willing to kill you."

We watched, silently, as she headed onto the grounds of the storage depot. Zombies getting up from where they were lying and following the vehicle, some breaking out in a sprint to get right up on it and hammer on the windows. I was watching through binoculars when Sylvia had a coughing fit and lost control of the truck, smashing into the side of a cinderblock building.

"Shit, she's had it." Buck murmured, taking out a cigar and unwrapping it. He turned around, unwilling to watch, and I could see the long list of names on the backs of both of his thick arms. The names of people who had fought, and died, with us inked into his skin.

I watched as the zombies tore into the vehicle, one of them grabbing Sylvia's shoulder and pulling her out of the vehicle. They seemed angry, frustrated, and I watched Sylvia get to her feet.

"What the fuck?" Sam asked the question I was thinking. The baby kicked me in the bladder as Sylvia looked at the zombies surrounding her, bumping into her, and shoving against her, trying to reach the cooling humm-vee.

Sylvia shoved one of the zombies, who snarled, and shoved back. Sylvia began pushing her way through the crowd of them, until she stood outside the ring. A sprinter slammed into her, almost knocking her down, but paid no attention to Sylvia.

"They can't see her?" Cindy asked.

"Sylvia, check the armories, see what you can bring us out. You volunteered, and since they seem to like you, you get to play the mule." Greg ordered over the tac-com.

It was eerie, watching the zombies ignore Sylvia as she brought us out ammunition and weapons, as well as body armor. She'd load it up into a wheelbarrow and run it out to us, take a nap for an hour or two, then go back. The zombies completely ignored her, except when she got in their way, and they acted as if she was one of them.

Buck told me quietly that he would watch her from here on out, both for suicide and her Rising.

Sylvia was definitely dying, and there was nothing left that Robert could do for her. She had lost weight until she was little better than a skeleton, she was weak, tired, and got sick easily. Several of her teeth had fallen out, and only a few clumps of hair were left topping off her skull-like head.

"I think I can do something. I mean, before now, I would have never believed in it, but when the dead walk, why not some of the old ways actually be useful?" Cindy spoke up from a campfire we had built.

"What?" Buck asked, looking across the fire at Cindy, who was chewing her lower lip thoughtfully. Cindy jerked slightly, as if she had forgotten she had spoken, then continued.

"My grandfather, he believed in the old traditions, the old ways. He believed that songs had power, and that the Spirits would help those who sang to them." Cindy stated, looking at Sylvia, who was sleeping again. She shook her head again. "Robert can't do anything for her, and all of the home remedies I know have been useless in helping her."

"A Ghost Dance?" Greg asked. Cindy looked startled, and I suppressed a smug grin. Cindy always forgot that both Buck and Greg were highly educated men, not just idiots with muscles and guns. I'd weaseled it out of Buck that he had actually attended the University of Arizona for four years before his GI Bill ran out.

"Why not? It worked to make Geronimo bullet-proof, and honestly, I doubt it will hurt Sylvia at this stage." Buck replied, looking thoughtful. "Do you know how it is done?" Cindy nodded slowly and Buck smiled.

It was Sylvia's only chance, as far as I could tell. Besides, when the dead are returning to life to devour the living, why doubt ancient Indian rites?

There is no way I can explain it. It worked, and the sickness rose out of her pores and covered her skin with red slime that we had to wash away. She shivered, sweated, fouled herself, but Cindy claims that she has drawn the evil from her body.

Before the Rising I would have scoffed, but I can see a woman, her face chewed away and her shirt torn in places to reveal her raw ribs, outside of Humvee-Two, tugging at the door to get in.

If the dead walk, who am I to scoff?

Back before The Rising, there was a pill for everything. The advertisements bragged of pills that would stop any type of insanity, whether you had it or not. Nowadays, insanity is far more common, and much more harsh than what many considered it to be. No movies with clean starlets in this world, just minds that broke under the strain.

Insanity is dangerous, diary. Not only because lunatics can attack you, but because a hidden insanity can put everyone at risk, and sometimes you have to wonder if you are truly mad, or if the world is really like this.

And you pray you may be mad.

It was a dead place. We had known it was, in our hearts, but we still had hoped. There were multiple barricades, pulling back tighter and tighter. Abandoned armored vehicles, fire and heavy weapons damage on both the buildings and the vehicles bore mute witness to the ferocity of the fighting toward the end. Unsurprisingly to us, there were a mix of uniforms, American, Russian, Chinese, all fought and died together.

Sylvia, Sam, Greg and Buck went into the hospital together, staying in constant communication. Only a few Risers, and no Wolf-Pack kids, compared to what we had been going through, it was a cake-walk. Everyone in there was dead, for the most part. Single bullets to the brain-pan, as they lay in their beds. Someone had written on a wall in one of the mess halls: "Kill Them All Let God Sort Them Out.", someone else wrote: "God Can Suck My Dick!" underneath it.

Greg, Sylvia and Buck checked a few barracks, then decided to forget it, since the armories in some of them were stripped, and many of the barracks looked like where the housed unit made its last stand. We decided that we'd try for the ASP (Ammunition Supply Point, as Greg explained to me later) and see if there were any weapons or ammunition we could use left behind by the soldiers. Greg, Sylvia, Buck and Sam walked out in front of the vehicles, while I lay in the back. My belly was HUGE, the child ready to come soon, and the only place I could fit was in one of the troop seats, or the commander's position. When we got closer, I uncoordinatedly got into the seat and began looking through the periscope.

"Guys, hold up for a second." Buck said, holding up his hand. There were burnt out civilian vehicles everywhere, craters in the road, and damage of heavy fighting. "Check the radio for anyone alive in there."

I flipped on the radio for the first time in months, and cruised the dial. Four automated messages that I had heard over and over again, and static. That was it. I let them know that there wasn't anyone broadcasting, and nobody had answered any hailing I had tried.

"I don't like this." Sylvia said, looking around, her eyes narrowed. Her hair was growing back, and I could see the fuzz on the back of her neck. "It's too goddamn quiet. Think they're all dead?"

"Maybe, but with the ammunition bunkers to pull back into, I don't see how anyone could have gotten to them." Greg replied. He turned to Buck: "What do you think? Check it out?" Buck shrugged, and Sam nodded slowly, looking intently at the trees that hid the ASP from view.

We threw the vehicles into gear, and slowly rolled past the destroyed cars. The radio made several buzzing noises, but nothing I could identify, still, it was unusual, so I alerted the Sylvia and the boys. Sam and Buck moved off to one side, while Sylvia and Greg took cover.

Paranoia isn't insanity when everyone really is out to get you.

We heard it first. A steady slamming noise, and the whine of heavy-duty servos. It sounded like a robot, incredibly, and I heaved myself out of the command couch and climbed up into the turret. I had my doubts at the time that it was a robot, I figured it for a modified vehicle.

I was wrong. It was our first encounter with an armored sentry robot. Huge, lumbering, armored, packing twin chain-guns, a rocket launcher, a grenade launcher, and a flame thrower. It took four Bradleys, working together, firing armor piercing rounds, to bring the big bastard down.

It was our first encounter with robotics, and it wasn't our last. Many military bases had left behind implacable mechanical guardians behind to guard what the dead had spent their lives to defend.

I hate them. They're almost impossible to kill, and I saw one hammer a Bradley into junk with its metal fists, our weapon's fire bouncing off its armored hide as we tried desperately to stop it from tearing us to shreds.

Steve was an OK guy, just had a bad habit of wandering around when he was supposed to be sleeping. His wife told us that he always was a sleepwalker, and that he would often wander around the house for up to an hour, bumping into stuff.

He did it once with us. He got up from his sleeping bag, wandered out, and hit the tripline for a Claymore land mine, and blew his sleepwalking ass all over the landscape.

I was riding with Sylvia, when they came off the onramp of I-5, their lights whirling and hitting their sirens of all things. Rogue State Patrol hitting what they thought was a single humm-vee, not a vanguard for an armored column.

"Hang on." Sylvia told me, and whipped a 180 in the middle of I-5, the humm-vee shuddering as the tires spun on the grass median between the north-bound and south-bound lanes. Sylvia held her hand out, the thick muscles that were so strange to see on another woman bunching as I handed her the SAW that she had been packing.

The Staters were probably surprised when Sylvia stuck the barrel of the SAW out of the window, the handgrip tight against the steering wheel, and fired, heading straight at them. The shell-casings bounced off the mesh we had welded over the window, and flew back against Sylvia, who just drew her lips back in a snarl. It was strange, seeing the missing teeth from her near-fatal brush with radiation poisoning.

Windshields starred and shattered on the two State Patrol cars in front of us, and the driver's side window burst out in a spray of broken glass and blood. Sylvia jinked the wheel, and headed straight at the last State Patrol car, a grin affixed to her face.

"Uh, Sylvia..." I started.

"They'll move. They don't have the balls." She laughed, still firing into the grill of the police car. Steam was rushing out of the grill, and the hood flew off in a ball of fire.

"SYLVIA!" I screamed, my hands going to protect the baby in my stomach, who was kicking the shit out of my ribs in anger at being woken up by the firing of the SAW.

"Fine." She grunted, weaving away from the oncoming patrol car, passing it, and flipping another 180. She idled forward, until we were about 100 feet from the State Patrol cars.

"I think we're going to get a ticket." Sylvia told me, turning to me and grinning.

The radiation poisoning had eaten the fat from her face, making her smile look like she was a grinning skull with patchy brown hair.

We caught a young girl, it took three of us to grab her and hold her down. She stabbed me pretty good in the biceps, but I managed to grab her wrist before she could twist the knife and cut the muscle away. These kids were good with knives. I had personally seen them completely strip a human of all the meat, leaving behind only bone and offal, in under two minutes. Just four of them.

She was older than the others, and carried a meat cleaver in one hand, and a thin bladed boning knife in the other. Her mouth was twisted from a barely healed cut. When we cut off her clothing so that Robert could examine her, she flew into an absolute frenzy, screaming and thrashing against her restraints, her eyes wild, and literally foaming at the mouth. I saw and heard her wrists break from struggling against the plastic zip-restraints that Sam had pulled from his pocket and put on her. We ended up loading her up full of morphine before Robert could examine her.

She was in good health, well fed, but bore marks from having been sexually mutilated and gang raped. Her teeth were filed into points and her bare feet had thick calluses on them. She stared at us through eyes slitted with hate, as we sat and discussed what we should do with her. She had enough anesthetic in her to drop an adult, and still she was awake, and staring at us.

Buck did it. Greg was going to, so nobody else had to live with it, but Buck over-rode him, telling him that there might be other people who wouldn't be able to live with him doing it. They argued about it, with scathing accusations going from one man to the other, including accusations of "butcher" and "War criminal" clashing with "Thug" and "Biker fuck!" Finally, when I thought they would shoot each other, Buck jerked his pistol out and fired a shot into her head. As everyone stared, he holstered his smoking pistol, reached out and snatched the bottle of whiskey out of Greg's hand with a snarl. He pointedly ignored Greg's own drawn pistol, and stormed into his Bradley, locking himself in.

A single shot, and it was over. We'd killed a Wolf Pack Den Mother. The victory was very hollow.

Thomas woke everyone up again, screaming in his sleep and fighting his way to consciousness. The fourth night in a row he had done that. Sylvia held him while he cried and shook, confused as to how he had gotten there, when he had just been trapped on top of a telephone pole with several zombies below him, and no weapon.

He dreamed that same dream, every night, since we found him. That he was up on top of the telephone pole, thirsty, hungry and sunburnt, with more and more zombies slowly arriving, waiting for him to sleep, to fall, so that they could feast.

In his dreams, we never arrive, and eventually, they fall. Or we do arrive, and when he joins with us, we fall on him and devour him. Or a wolf-pack arrives, climbs up the pole and eats him. Or his worse one, where the zombies grow so numerous that they are able to climb up one another to get at him.

If we were somewhere safe, we could sedate him, so he could get a decent night's sleep.

But we aren't, and he'll just have to deal with it.

"I don't like this. I think it's wrong." I stated, glaring at Greg, who stared back at me with his grey eyes as cold as a glacier. "This is monstrous."

"So what? So are what those little fucks did to Ralph and the Russians and Ming's friends. They are holed up there, we want the fucking train, and we have what we need to take it without any risk." Greg answered, his voice steady and cold. For a split second, he wasn't the Greg I had made love to, who had been my first, but instead, was something sinister, something alien.

"Greg, using chemical weapons on children?" I asked, pleading with him to see my side. To see how inhuman what he proposed to do actually was.

"Using pesticide on insects." Greg answered. "We need that equipment, and that train is our best chance to get the fuck out of here. There's three trains ready to go, we can be gone before the Risers can mob us and pull us down. Those kids are deadly, sweet heart, you saw, the same as I did, that they were eating those Russians even while they were hacking them to death. Those aren't kids, honey, they're animals, they are predators, and we have to do it this way. Either that or choose half of us and shoot them, because that will be quicker than letting the Wolf Pack make Subway out of them."

I nodded slowly. Using VX on children, Wolf-Pack or not, still did not sit easy with me, but he was right, we needed that equipment more than they did, and the nerve agent was the only sure, safe way to get at it. They were too fast, too good, and it was their home ground. He was right,

half of us would die, and if he refused to use the nerve agent because of my feelings, I might as well shoot half of us right now, because either way, their deaths would be my fault.

The loss of my cherry was not the loss of my innocence. Helping the guys load the VX shells into the mortars was the end of my innocence. We are all alike now. I'm no different from Greg, or Buck, or any of our little grouping of the damned. After the third shell I dropped into the 42 inch tubes, I no longer cried, and it became a job. Inside, I was glad that I did not have to face a dozen or so of those kids. I had been ashamed of that fear, and that is what made me protest. Fear did not make me unfit. Fear enabled me to survive.

I am fit. I will survive. Innocence is over-rated in this savage new world. .

Buck strained for a moment and the metal coffin lid pulled free with a pop, almost dropping him into the coffin and onto the occupant. We couldn't take the chance of there being dead bodies inside more than fifty coffins loaded onto a car when the train pulled out, and so we had to search each of the coffins to make sure those inside were really dead, and had not Risen.

"Jesus H. Christ on the Cross!" Buck exclaimed, stumbling back and raising his crowbar. Inside was a corpse, with a pair of NVG's stapled over her eyes, her jaw wired shut with metal brackets, and a metal plate riveted to her head. The plate read "463-A9" on it, and dried blood was caked around the plate. A collar with two LED's on it was around her neck, the red light lit up. She was wearing a set of woodland BDU's with a Day-Glo orange circle on the front and the back of the blouse.

"What in the fuck?" Greg asked, leaning over to look at the woman. Brushing off my hands, he reached forward with the crowbar and popped the NVG's off of the woman's face, exposing her eyes. The eyelids were cut away, but she still looked at Greg.

"Why isn't she lunging for your throat?" Cindy broke the silence, and I realized that I had been holding my breath. Sam leaned forward and looked at the dead woman.

"Burns on her lips, nose and neck, probably other, hidden burns on her body. Those are electrical burns, I'd say electrical shock was used." The ex-Sheriff stated slowly.

"Why?" I asked, my voice small and child-like in the now cavernous box-car.

"Training. Negative reinforcement. Someone trained it to be a killer. Since it does not get agitated at us, I'd say they were trying to teach it to kill other zombies." Sam replied, placing his pistol against the woman's forehead. "Or, she can't move because her little neck box is keeping her from moving somehow."

The gunshot was strangely muffled.

On the train, we found fifty zombies that had been artificially augmented with mechanical prosthetics. "Cybernetic" Robert called them. This augmentations allowed the Risers to see perfectly in the dark, allowed their "handlers" to deliver a thunderous electrical shock, or shut down the Risers nervous system completely through spinal cutouts.

Another time, while raiding a set of bunkers in Arizona, we were assaulted by Risers wearing Force XXI armor (Sylvia called it Objective Force Land Warrior armor) according to Buck. These guys were tremendously strong, nearly bulletproof, and only the Mark-19 saved our asses that time.

Finally, while sweeping through the bunkers hidden below the supposedly decommissioned Fort Ord, in California, we were aggressed by robotic minions of a fledgling AI that did their best to kill us off.

The world was stranger than I want to believe, and even dead, it contains nifty stuff in it's pockets. .

"Heads up, people." I said, checking the power to the 20mm Bushmaster cannon. The Bradley that the cannon was mounted on was slowly approaching the outskirts of a city. I heard each person check in, and got ready. This would more than likely be a cast-iron motherfucker, since the huge diesel engines would have alerted anyone not dumber than a brain-shot Riser that we were coming.

The town drew steadily closer, and I hoped that the tie-down chains would be able to take the recoil from the cannon if I was forced to fire it. We had tried several times, but our only chance was going through Grant's Pass. None of the other railroad tracks were intact enough, and we were loath to abandon the train that had become our home.

It was a rolling community. Thirty people, supplies, apartments, a medical car, armored engines to keep us on the move that could be remote controlled from any of five places. One hundred cars, guarded by Claymore Landmines, guards, or welded shut on the sides, with any hand-holds cut away.

It was ours, it was ugly.

It was home. .

Just south of Grant's Pass we had to abandon the train. The tracks just ended, and we knew from two days of exploration that this was our only hope, but at least we're past that city. Oh, yeah, and I'm pregnant again.

Buck refuses to leave the safety of Bradley-One, to the point of drawing a weapon on those trying to coax him out. I understand it, even though I'm a little uncomfortable with the extant he has taken it to. He's safe inside the Bradley. The Risers can't get to him, and no matter what happens to the outside world, he is safe.

You wouldn't understand, probably, you who are reading this. It was safe inside.

"Where are you from?" Buck asked bluntly, his hard, implacable gaze boring into the naked people who were just now putting back on their clothing. True to form, we hadn't fucked around, ordering them to lay down their weapons and strip naked before we'd even unmask or show ourselves. I sat in the turret of Bradley-Three, ready to hose them down with the 20mm if they even farted wrong.

Yreka. We finally left about three weeks ago when we ran out of food. We managed to get a semi out past the deaders. We ran out of food and water, we didn't have no choice." A guy told us, pulling his shirt on over his head. I noticed that his clothing was his first worry, his hunting rifle still laid in the dirt where he'd dropped it. Idiot. He was meat for the grinder unless he learned to worry about his weapon first. Out of habit, my fingers searched out the butt of my pistol, as if to reassure themselves it was there.

"How bad is it?" Buck questioned, standing up in the vehicle commander's hatch of Bradley-One. His hands were on the M-249, but it was not aimed anywhere in particular, but I knew he could swing it into the small group of people in less time than it would take them to scream.

"There's no food, no water, and deaders everywhere." A woman said. "We're really hungry. Do you have any food?"

"None we can spare." Buck lied. Bradley-Five carried only a driver, co-driver, gunner, and shitload of MRE cases. Bradley-Seven was loaded with what Greg and Buck called "A-Rats", metal sealed meals that only needed to be dropped into boiling water to heat. Below me, Zhakov hushed Emily, putting the pacifier into her mouth to stop her crying in frustration that she could not get her foot into her mouth.

"I'll suck you off for some food." Another woman said, hunger and desperation plain in her voice.

"Forget it, lady. We don't have enough to share." Buck answered. Then his mumbled voice came over the tac-com. "Probably drink me dry just to fill her stomach." I heard Sam's harsh laugh, and I couldn't help but smile. Buck went back to speaking to the crowd: "That's why we asked about Yreka. If it's as bad as you say, then we'll have to bypass it."

"All of those vehicles, and you don't have enough food to share? You're soldiers, you're supposed to protect us!" one young man shouted. Hunger had not managed to take the softness out of his face, and I realized with a surprise that he was about my age. Chronologically, perhaps, but not in mileage. This was a face that had never fought to survive, to improve a situation. It was a face that others had protected, and that had hidden from the Risers. I hated that face the moment I saw it.

"Who the fuck said we were soldiers, idiot? In case you didn't notice, the military got eaten on order from his Holiness the President as he ran off into a hole. If we were soldiers, why would we protect the same people who shot at us a few months ago?" Buck asked. He dropped back into the hatch. "We have enough room to take you with us, if you want. You can hook up with us, fight with us, and share what we have with us, but we don't have enough to give away."

"And the deaders?" One woman asked.

"We kill them." Buck answered simply. "Are you with us or not?"

"Aw, shit, I'm in." The woman who had offered oral sex for food said, holding her hands out to her side and walking toward the Bradley Buck was on. Buck popped back out of the hatch and pointed them at Bradley-Two rather than his.

"It's murder, Card. You know what the news said, killing the deaders is still murder." Another man said, as he turned to Buck. "You have to share with us, we're people."

Buck watched roughly half of the twelve people climb into the back of Bradley-Two, reacting to Sam opening the dismount hatch and waving to them. One woman burst into tears at the sight of safety, weaponry, and stacked ammunition.

Buck almost grinned, the burn scars turning his face into a sneer. "We've got to do two things, buddy, Jack and shit, and in case you hadn't noticed, Jack left town, got dead, and got back up, so he can go to hell, too. You ain't gettin' nothing from us for free. Bradley-One to all vehicles, let's pull out." He ordered, and the vehicles lurched forward. The rest of them began cursing us, and there was a dull clunk as a rock struck the back of the vehicle I was in.

We never saw them again, once we turned the corner and left them behind.

"Where are you from?" Sam asked the young woman, who was greedily licking the inside of the foil container that her beef stew had come in.

"I was in L.A. when all this started, but managed to get out about six days ago." She replied, tearing open a packet of crackers. She ate like an animal, hunger over-riding manners. I noticed she kept watching around her, eating on instinct more than worrying about looking at her food.

"How the hell did you survive in L.A. for almost a year?" I asked. I could picture in my mind the mobs sweeping through the streets, thousands of Risers attacking everything in sight.

"I lived in a large building, thirty floors. One of the guys suggested we cut the elevator cables on all the elevators but one, jam that one's doors open, and tear out the stairs at the second and third floors." She answered from a mouthful of crackers. She looked inside the brown plastic bag and seemed disappointed. "Can I have any more?"

"No, you'll get sick. That was about 3,000 calories." Sam answered. "You held out in a skyscraper? What about food, and water?"

"We filled up the bathtubs in all the apartments, filled every container we could. Tupperware, milk jugs, glass jars, beer bottles, whatever. Food was not too bad, most people were out of town or not

in the building when it happened, so there was plenty of food to go around." She answered, staring sadly at the opened foil packages she had licked clean.

"Why did you leave?" Sam asked her, "Did the food run out?"

"No. What they were putting in the community stew won't run out anytime soon." The woman said, then began to cry. I kept my eyes on the others in the vehicle, let Sam pay attention to her crying, I was going to make sure it wasn't a distraction. "When I found out, me, and some others, snuck down to the parking garage, and left. We ran out of gas about four days ago, and have been walking since."

Sam nodded at me, and we both knew what had been in the stew.

Risers.

Buck held Yuri down as the Russian screamed continually. The blood covering Yuri smeared onto Buck's hands and cuffs, and Yuri did not even recognize Cindy when she stepped up to stand over him. As Cindy withdrew a carefully crafted bead rattle painted with an intricate design, Yuri's struggles got more and more desperate and his screaming somehow became even louder.

Cindy began chanting, waving and shaking the rattle as those of us not pulling guard duty watched out of hope and curiosity. As we watched, she used the powders and oils she had put in cloth bags tied to her belt to draw symbols on Yuri.

Two red lines above each eye, following the curve of the man's eyebrows. A blue triangle on each cheek. A handprint over his heart. Yuri's struggles grew more and more desperate, until, with a scream that nearly drowned out Cindy's chanting, a sickly brown mist poured from Yuri's nostrils to hang in the air above his head.

Yuri collapsed, covered in sweat, his pulse beating hard in his throat, and the mist gave a small, high pitch wail as it tattered and dissipated. We all stepped back, Mikhail making the sign of the Cross as he did so.

"The evil spirit no longer dwells within him." Cindy proclaimed. I noticed that she had grey hair at her temples.

Before she had started, her hair was raven black.

"Strip." Sylvia's voice was hard, and I nodded, standing in the ring-mount of the humm-vee and scanning around, my hands ready on the SAN. The men began protesting, the women even louder.

"I said: Strip." Sylvia ordered. I racked a bullet into the SAN to emphasize our seriousness. Cursing, the men began to strip. I watched them, I watched the woods, and I watched the air. Since we'd been hit by that black helicopter a few weeks back, nothing was to be taken for granted.

"MASK!" Sylvia's voice was strident, and I did so reflexively, my hands seeming to move of their own volition, while my brain was still processing that single, frightening syllable. I had missed it, Sylvia had not. The large, swollen nodules at the armpits and groin, the sores around the mouth.

Bubonic Plague? Weaponized Anthrax? Something known only to soulless technicians in white coats who coaxed it to unholy life? Who cares, it was one of our greatest fears. Before my mind had sorted through all of the available data, Sylvia had thrown the humm-vee in reverse, and I was firing the SAN, chopping into men, women and the listless children that stood there, holding a person's hand, not even trying to run as I put a burst into the little bodies that shattered like porcelain dolls thrown to the floor in a tantrum.

I kept firing as long as I could see them, sweat running coldly down my back and between my breasts, the tiny life inside me kicking at my cervix and bladder with anger at the vibration and retort of the weapon. I promptly pissed myself when the baby kicked my bladder..

Please, God, if you still care, let me have masked in time. Was my only thought. To this day, it does not bother me that I cared more for Greg and my baby than those children whose arms or legs flew off in gouts of bright red blood on that June morning.

They were already dead.

The raider made the mistake of exposing his leg, just the knee, from behind the rock he had taken cover behind. Separated from his beloved Bradley, Buck was not unarmed and helpless, and the skill he had acquired with the M-24 sniper rifle in Africa served him well as he shot the raider in the knee.

Buck fared better than the raider, his massive tattooed arms (there are nearly 2 dozen names there now) absorbing the punishing recoil easily. The raider, on the other hand, had the unpleasant experience of having his leg amputated at the knee without the benefit of painkillers.

The shot blew his leg clean off, and when he rolled out, screaming and clawing at his leg, Buck shot him again through his open mouth.

Veronica began suddenly pulling at her shirt, bursting into tears and crying that she "had to get out of here" as she lurched to her feet and stumbled toward the back hatch of the Bradley. She bumped the baby's carrier hard enough to wake Emma up as she kept claiming that she "couldn't breathe" inside the vehicle.

I warned her twice not to open the door. I didn't wait for her to open it. While she screamed that she had to get out, that she couldn't breathe, that she was having a heart attack, and scrambled at the locking mechanism, I shot her in the back of the head.

Being crazy is OK. Endangering other people that I care about is not.

"Promise you won't shoot me?" The slaver was hiding inside the ice cream truck, holding a young girl as a shield with his pistol against her head. The little girl's face was resigned and emotionless, and we could see bite marks and bruises on her naked body.

"Promise. Put the girl down, and we'll let you go." Sylvia promised. She smiled at the slaver, her luminous eyes wide and guileless as the slaver gulped convulsively several times, then nodded and dropped the girl.

Sylvia shot him twice in the crotch, walked over and kicked his skull in with the steel toe of her desert combat boot, that smile and innocent look never leaving her face. When the guy was dead, she turned to the little girl, blood splattered all over the both of them and smiled.

"Kick him a few times, honey, you'll feel better." Sylvia told her in a reasonable voice. I knew Sylvia, and I knew better to interfere as she urged the child on. She had each of the four children point out those slavers who had raped them, and encouraged them and instructed them to kick the bodies, or hack on them with Buck's machete, or to shoot them with her own pistol. We stood silently and watched as Sylvia led those children on their orgy of violent retribution on the dead and dying slavers.

When each child began to cry, I was there, or Buck, or Robert, to comfort them, and hold them, and carry them into the Bradleys where they would be safe. When it was over, Sylvia smiled at me, her shins and boots soaked in blood.

"Nothing wrong with some cathartic violence." Her eyes sparkled as if she had just given me the secret of life, and her face, which was still devoid of fat from her struggle against radiation sickness, looked like a gleeful skull.

For all of her gentle appearance, there was less humanity left inside of Sylvia than in the Risers at times.

What's sad, is while I cannot encourage a child to mutilate the body of someone who had raped and beaten them, I admire Sylvia for doing it.-From the Diary of Becka.

"Shit." Buck cursed, dumping out the water, and the little paper strip that had turned bright crimson. "Goddamn factories." He stood up and kicked a rock into the slow moving river.

"What?" I asked, honestly confused. I was watching out for him, Sylvia and Greg as they took samples and followed long ingrained training to check the water for chemical contamination.

"The tanks are rusting through, leaking, or just pumping shit into this river. We drink any of this, and we'll be dead in hours." Buck grumbled, walking up to me and picking up his M-24 sniper rifle from the ground. He checked the breach and the barrel, then slung it over his shoulder.

"Back to bottled water?" I asked. I hated the taste of it.

"Worse. We'll have to avoid the city, if those tanks are leaking, Lord knows how bad the air is." Sylvia stated, sitting down weakly on a rock. She was shakey, but recovering. We had thought she was going to die from the bad dose of rads she got. It's faint, but detectable within minutes of every breeze." She held up the chemical agent detector with one hand, then lowered it quickly. She fatigued fast.

"All right, we'll swing around Merced then. Damn." Buck decided. "We'll try Castle Air Force Base, they used to station heavy bombers out there, maybe we can find an old storage locker. Hmm," Buck looked thoughtful for a moment (a look I still find disconcerting. It's so hard to remember he's university educated.), "Fresno has, or had anyway, National Guard stations there. Those might be easier to hit than an active duty Air Force base, at the moment."

I nodded as I accompanied them back to the Bradleys.

The world just kept getting more and more fucked up.

Whatever possessed Kenneth to do it, I'll never know. He knew that if he stuck his finger into the barrel of the GIE minigun we had mounted on Bradley-Four's turret he'd probably lose it, but for some reason, while we were checking it to make sure that it was functioning properly after that Wolf Pack brat shoved a knife into it, he shoved his hand in between the barrels.

It did more than take his fingers off, it snatched his whole damn arm off. Sam put a pistol round into the bridge of his nose before the arm flew free of the rotating barrels.

"We're down to a quarter tank, how's it look for you guys?" Buck grumbled into his tac-com. That was his one constant complaint, how much fuel the BAFV's sucked down.

"Bradley One, 50%." Greg, as verbose as usual.

"Bradley Three, I'm on two-thirds, but we refueled off of our onboard reserve." Sam was humming again when he activated the tac, that ditty he'd made up that we called Mr. Hungry and annoyed Buck to no end. Even though Sam was nowhere near a Pre-Rising quality professional singer, he had a nice voice (even if it is a little rough from inhaling all the gunsmoke and tear gas we've used over the years) for singing, and his imagination had allowed him to come up with many songs that fit our brave new world. Buck had asked him more than once if he thought he was the Post Rising Weird Al. Usually, Sam just replied by giving him the finger and continuing to sing.

"There's a gas station up here. I haven't seen anything important." Sylvia reported back. No vehicle designation. No need to let anyone listening know that we had three humm-vee's out on roving.

"Alpha-four, I'm at a quarter." Ming, in his humm-vee.

"Alpha six, three quarters." Zhakov, about two miles behind us. That had saved us more than once, having Zhakov and Peter in the TOW wagon. Nothing broke up a slaver attack or some smart-ass who thought he was hot shit with a pickup truck and a bolt action rifle like a TOW-II missile.

It took us about 5 minutes to reach where Sylvia was, an old Exxon station/general store. She was walking around, kicking at glass and cans, her SAW held in one hand. Her hair had grown back in recent weeks, and she had put on enough weight where her weapon didn't exhaust her just firing it.

We sat inside the vehicles while Sylvia, Greg and Sam scouted, looking for any threats. The gas station was a dead place. Broken boards over the windows and doors, gnawed skeletons covered with rags of desiccated flesh of inanimate zombies strewn about the place. Most of the soot from the fire was long gone. Whatever had happened here had happened a long time ago.

Still, we dismounted from the vehicles, Greg keeping watch with Sylvia, and we searched the ruins, hoping for survivors somewhere. There wasn't any, everyone had died. As far as we could tell, they had died within the first week. We found one firearm, intact. It was empty, and torn apart bodies that had been gnawed until they were nothing but flinders of bone.

I wonder what happened here. Did it take long? Did they die quickly, or slowly? Was it internal friction, or just the unending tide of dead flesh? Why would have they have stayed?

The questions were never answered. We refilled the vehicles from the diesel tanks, and drove on. Whatever secrets happened there, secrets they would remain.

She insists that we call her Nelly. Her name is Carol, or at least, it was for the last three weeks she has been with us since we picked her up outside of Yfeka. Now, she insists that her name is Nelly, and she grew up on a farm in Kansas.

Her memories are a hodgepodge of television shows and movies, usually bucolic memories, or happy memories. Robert just shrugs when I ask if she will ever go back to normal, and Buck likes Nelly better because Nelly is a hella accurate shot with an M-4 and a 9mm pistol.

If she keeps claiming that Greg is her husband, I'm going to shoot the bitch.

"Hurry it up, Thomas, we're running out of appetizers!" Sam yelled over the steady hammering of the automatic weapons. My mind boggled at the amount of zombies clustered around these simple metal doors. What in the world had attracted all the zombies to two large OD green painted doors in the middle of the fucking woods? For Christ's sake, there wasn't even a fucking Forest Ranger Tower within view.

"You do it then, dickhead!" Thomas yelled, "These ass-clowns built the circuit board on some kind of plastic explosive, and it's wired tighter than a virgin on prom night!" I glanced backwards, to where Thomas was crouched down next to the keypad, doing his best to hotwire the military security system. The Department of Defense logo mocked us from where he had tossed aside the Lexan cover moments before.

"OUT!" Sylvia yelled, popping her sling and tossing the empty SAW away. She drew her pistols, the first time in recent memory I had seen her holding them, and began firing carefully and steadily. It surprised me that she was as accurate with her pistols as the SAW. I'd seen her fire a M-4 before, and frankly, she sucked..

"OUT!" Greg yelled, dropping his M-4 from his bodysling and bringing around his Mossberg.

"Almost got it, almost got it!" Thomas yelled, "GOT IT!"

Our triumph turned instantly bitter, as the alarms started blaring inside the complex, and we saw only a deep cavern with another door. Trucks were parked haphazardly inside, crates scattered around, papers littering the floor, spent shell casings glinting, and worst of all, we saw figures begin to struggle to their feet.

"COVER ME!" Thomas yelled, grabbing up his toolkit from the ground and charging into the room. From utility department lineman to wannabe Navy SEAL in less than a year. He drew his machete from his thigh holster as Greg and Sam ran after him, firing on the run.

Thomas knelt down next to the next door, as the drivers threw the massive BAFV's into gear. The gunfire was as loud as the footsteps of an angry god as we rolled inside, a zombie going under the tread of the BAFV I was riding. I could see the blood spray as the tread crushed her.

"How the fuck do I shut it?" Sylvia yelled, kicked a zombie away and shot a second. When she wasn't answered, she reached out and pulled a red bar marked with white stripes. The door started closing, and Carter concentrated the fire from the 20mm chaingun on the shrinking gap, running through his entire remaining ammunition in only seconds, but giving the doors time to close.

The zombie caught between the massive doors squirted like an over ripe tomato.

"GOT IT!" Thomas cried out over the sirens, and the inner doors began to rumble.

If Greg had not been as fast as he was, and Sam as quick on the trigger as he was, the crowd of zombies on the other side of the door would have devoured him in seconds. .

It was weird, when Cathy went to sleep last night, she remembered everything about herself. This morning, she cannot remember anything about herself. She knows how to fire a rifle, knows that Risers and children are dangerous, but remembers nothing else, not even her own name. She knows she has forgotten something, but cannot remember what.

She is happy, however. It must be nice for her, the bitch.

It felt weird, not being pregnant. I felt thin, lithe, even though I had never been a small framed girl in my entire life. Still, not packing 20 pounds of water and an eleven pound kid in my gut made a big difference in my center of balance and the way I moved. True, my breasts were full and painful, and leaked milk quite often, but still, it was a startling difference from the way I had felt 3 days ago.

Greg came up behind me and put his arm around me, staring at the valley below us as the water poured from the sluices and floodgates, and crashed to the ground. The water level had only been about thirty feet below the lip of the dam, and while we had opened the gates in an emergency procedure, it was still a hell of a lot better than what would have happened if the dam had given.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, staring at the glittering water.

"Tired. I'm exhausted." I answered. I snuggled up against him, holding onto his wrist so I didn't touch the remote detonator in his hand.

"I'd be tired too if I crapped a cantaloupe." Greg said, and I could hear the smile in his voice.

"Water level's about right, go ahead." Came Sam's voice. He was watching the water level behind the dam. We planned on preventing the possibility of a catastrophic spring flood.

"Roger that. Fire in the hole." Greg replied, and I felt his wrist flex as he pressed the detonation button.

I watched the dam crumble, leaving behind only a small bottom section. Buck cheered Thomas' demolition skills, the water being a mere 5 feet below the new height. From a six-hundred foot dam, to a fifty foot dam that would erode away fairly quickly.

It was very impressive, and ensured that the area where we captured our FEMA site would not end up being pounded by the water from a collapsed dam.

We stay moving. If you stay in one place too long, they get enough numbers to haul you down, and you eventually run out of supplies. How long will this last? I don't know, I wish I did. So we stay moving. We haven't seen another living person besides each other in six months. The Bradleys

smell like us, and the smell will not come out. It reeks of blood, sweat, urine, vomit, cordite, diesel, zombies, and feces. We don't notice it any more.

We do notice the cities. We needed fuel and ammunition, and decided to go for it in Portland. Our reconnaissance showed that vast sections of it had burned, but the industrial sections down by the river were semi-intact, and we used the Bradleys to ford the river, running them in amphibious mode. Poor Greg and Zhakov were bailing out Bradley Three the whole way, because it kept leaking where those slavers had pegged it with a LAW rocket a few months back.

The roar of the diesel engines was the only noise for awhile, and we didn't see any zombies for at least thirty minutes. The stench though, it was absolutely horrid. Greg figured it smelled like living inside a rotting elephant's ass would smell.

Soon, we could hear the moaning of them. Not a low moaning, but a wailing noise from the depths of Hell itself. Buck called out to Zhakov, on top of the gantry, asking how many were coming.

"Ummm, all of them?" was Zhakov's answer. Despite the need to search for ammunition in the city, we knew we would have to settle for just the fuel we had taken from the storage tanks. As Zhakov hurried down the tower, doing a submariner's drop, Sylvia had to provide cover for him with her SAW, burning precious ammunition as she did so.

The sheer weight of them pushed aside the fence like it was made of tissue paper, and they poured onto the tarmac of the semi-truck storage area like a flood of dead flesh. Their cries of hunger were loud enough that the noise from the engines was devoured by sounds of Hell on Earth.

They followed us into the water, clumsily following us, until the water was covered with them, and the ones on the bank were trying to climb across those in the water. We held our fire, and Buck turned Bradley One upstream, fighting the current and letting the Columbia River sweep them away from us.

For three hours they kept coming, rank after rank stumbling into the river in a vain attempt to reach us. The whole bank was full of them, and we knew that they would just keep coming and coming. Buck drove back and forth in the current, luring more and more into the water, but eventually, the tank began running low, and the amusement value had long since died.

We turned and left Portland.

It was theirs, a place of The Risen, not of the living.

Sylvia crawled back to where I was, moving slow and steady, and keeping real low to the ground. Her silenced M-4 was held in her hands in such a way that she could rapidly bring it into play from a prone position. It was an interesting way to move, something Greg had called "High Crawl."

"It's there, relay it back." Sylvia whispered, "No claymore land mines, but I think there are two auto-turrets that are live. Tell Buck to bring up some AT-4's." I nodded and relayed the message.

"He's on the way." I replied. Silently, Greg, Sam and the Russians moved next to me.

"What is this place, Comrade?" Mihkeal asked. "We have found a helicopter pad, and some metal plates that air moves through."

"Really? Going out or in?" Greg asked, his face lighting up.

"Two out, one in, Comrade." Zhakov answered.

"Really?" Greg looked interested.

"Forget it, Greg. The filters will handle anything we have, and even if you dumped that 50-gallon drum of concentrated VX-2 down there, the most you would do is cause the facility to use a different intake vent." Sylvia said, shaking her head. She looked at Mihkeal. "It's a Continuity of Government bunker, somewhere our glorious leaders could run away to like little bitches, let everyone else die, the threat go away, then come back and claim to rule what was left."

"Why do we give a shit? Revenge?" Cathy asked. She had gained weight and muscle mass in the last month, a far cry from the woman who had offered to suck Buck off for food. She looked thoughtful for a moment, her middle finger moving to caress her wedding ring next to it. "Actually, revenge sounds nice."

"Think, just for a minute. How do you think they'll enforce the fact that they still run the show? What do you think they're going to live off of? Megalomaniac fantasies? That bunker has food, water, shower facilities, medical facilities, and whatever else they decided to cram into it." Sylvia answered. "Trust me, this one has serious blast doors, ones that could probably take a nuclear weapon head on. Shame we'll have to kill the turrets."

"Won't they let us in?" John said hopefully. A month with us, and he was still an idealist. Sylvia shook her head and waved vaguely at the bushes that separated us from the doors, her motion causing water to shiver off of the bush she was lying under.

"There's about fifty dead people out there, shot to shit by the turrets." Sylvia replied matter-of-factly. "There's Buck. Greg, you take one of the AT-4's, we'll kill the turrets. We'll have Thomas jack the doors, he's done it before."

Greg nodded, checking the anti-tank rocket as Sylvia quickly told Buck what was about to go down. Buck nodded grimly, and began crawling back to the Bradleys. I followed him, aware of the new life inside of my stomach. The new life that was waiting to join its brother and its sister who were strapped into car seats that had been attached to the frames of the BAFVs.

They left us to die, and killed those they were supposed to care for. I agreed with Sylvia's plan to bring Death to them.

Survival of the fittest, jack, and I'm pretty fucking fit. .

Sylvia began swearing as she threw the SAW aside, yelling out "Pop and no kick!" at the top of her lungs. She drew her pistols and began firing at the security troops who used the cessation of the machinegun fire to brave the corridor. I grabbed the hot machine gun, pulled the asbestos glove and the tools from the assistant gunners bag, and swapped the barrel out, dropping the searingly hot barrel into the hallway and handing back the weapon to Sylvia. With a bullet lodged in the barrel, the part was dangerous, and we didn't have the tools to fix it.

The security forces of Site-Tango Three made the mistake of thinking that Sylvia was out of ammunition, and ran right into a full box of ammo from a repaired machine gun.

"I hate you all. You lied to us, there were really monsters, and they look like you. You did naughty things to us. Cordilia took us in, taught us to fight against you, lying mummies and daddies all of you. Mommy came home and bit Daddy, and ate part of his tummy before he got up. Mommy seemed sad, and Mommy and Daddy attacked my brother, and Johnny screamed as I ran away.

"A man found me, and let me get in his car. He drove past all of the grownups attacking and eating each other. He took me to a park, and tore my dress, and did grownup things to me, and hurt me. Cordilia and Max showed up, and Cordilia stuck a knife up his butt, and we all ran away. Every adult we met wanted to eat us, or make babies on us. Grownups don't love you, and dollies are so you get in their car and they can pretend you're a girl if you are a boy, or hurt you if you're a girl. Cordilia is our mommy now, and you are here, where we lair, and you're grownups.

"Grownups eat each other, and want to eat us, and make babies on us. Cordilia showed us that we can eat you, and stick knives into your peepees.

"My pack will come for me, and I'll eat your guts, bitch." The young girl snarled, her filed teeth flashing in the lights.

"Aw shit." Buck said, looking around slowly as he tightened his grip on his M-4. "This place is their lair?" He turned on his tac-com: "Everyone check in and mount up. This place is a fucking Wolf Pack den."

Greg drew his pistol and fired once, his bullet taking the little girl in the face and shattering her skull. Brains splattered against the wall as Greg reholstered his pistol. I could hear everyone checking in over the tac-coms, and on the floor below us, I could hear one of the Bradleys fire up. The heavy diesel engine's thumping made slight tremors run through the floor.

"Let's get the fuck out of here." Buck said, heading for the door.

Good enough for me. -Interview with a Wolf Pack Child (deceased); From the Diaries of Becka

One thing that all of us have noticed, is that Wolf Pack kids don't talk to one another. Maybe pidgin or a kind of sign language, but for the most part, they do not speak.

We do know it takes torture to get them to speak to us.

Poor Robert. From EMT to Dr. Catchall inside of a year. Not only has he helped me deliver three children inside these mechanized leviathans, operated on nearly all of my dear friends and family (one time putting a plate in Greg's skull while the rest of us fought off a very determined Wolf Pack), he also provides our little family with the roll of priest-confessor slash therapist. While Sam may be a confessor figure, Robert is the one you go to with the serious problems.

He may not have gone to school, but hell, he cured Candy's bed-wetting problem before Buck shot her, so he's good enough for this world. .

It had been months since we had seen any civilization, but the bunker walls were closing in on us. Sure, we had everything 500 people could want for 500 years, but Greg had run those corridors every day for three years. I had given birth three times in those silent steel halls. We had all explored the entire facility, and discovered something. Without at least 100 people, sooner or later, everyone got on your nerves.

We had tried the radios, the emergency systems, everything we could think of to reach someone else. The one time we got a voice on the "CoG Complex Communication System" it was a low moaning that got agitated at the sound of our voices.

I cried for days when Greg reached over and shut off the radio, telling me that there was nobody within range. No more repeater towers and more than likely, any survivors were out of our range. The thought that we might be the sole survivors of humanity filled me with a crushing grief. I could close my eyes and see the children playing in playgrounds where now the living dead stumbled mindlessly. Children that would never get a chance to be anything more than the feral animals who had attacked us in Medford, more interested in us as a food source than companions. David had been hacked down, dressed, and sectioned into snacks within minutes by those kids.

The idea was Carter's, and we all quickly leaped at the idea. We had gasoline, we had ammunition, and Greg, Sylvia and Buck had gone over the BAFVs with a fine toothed comb. We needed to get out, so we geared up, and got ready. Mihkeal would stay in the bunker with the children, since having lost both legs, he would be a hindrance on a mission like this. Besides he loved the kids, they loved him, and I had his shopping list and knew what he wanted..

The outside cameras showed the doorways were clear. The last zombies had gotten bored and wandered away over five months before, obviously looking for easier prey to get to than those hiding behind 75 ton vanadium/titanium alloy doors that could probably take a nuke head on.

The first thing we noticed is the smell was gone. The last time we had rolled through a city, we had to activate the NBC protection systems, and Sylvia had worn her mask while driving her

hummm-vee. She had later burned her uniform due to the stench of rotting flesh that had coated her clothing.

Buck thinks it was the clanking of the BAFV's that drew them as we entered the city. We were about eight blocks in when the moaning got loud enough for us to hear over the roar of the big turbo charged engines. It sounded like the wailing of all the damned souls in hell, itself. Hundreds, thousands of them were staggering toward us, moaning in a dreadful hunger as they stumbled toward us as quickly as they could. None of them even had the illusion of life about them any more, none of them ran with that fluid, eerie predatory lope that had become so fearsome through the years.

The noise was horrible. Not only their wailing, but the sounds they made as the tracks crushed them beneath unforgiving steel as we drove back to the shelter, stopping every few miles to use the SAW's to clear away the faster ones, or ones that had stumbled out of the woods and onto the dirt access road.

It's been a month, and there are still hundreds outside the doors. We can hear them, dully, in the night, hammering on the doors.

I hate the sound.

Nine hours of hard work, taking turns shooting any Riser we saw. We had figured we'd burn the ammunition for the Mark-19 40mm automatic grenade launcher while we were building the wall. We needed that wall, so we could take the time to repair the Bradleys after our knock-down drag out fight with that military security robot we had tangled with at the National Guard base we located. We should have known that if it was not listed on any map we had found it would probably be either empty or guarded like mad. The Mark-19 did wonders in blowing the Risers back to hell. If Hell was full, then Satan could stack the bastards like cordwood outside the doors instead of being so damn lazy and just letting them wander off.

Buck could drive anything, I swear to God. He'd load the car into the crusher, smash it flat, then stack it on the wall. We had decided to go eight cars high, and since they were crushed to about two feet high of compressed, hardened steel, it made a good wall. When we were done with the first layer, we added a second just in case. Raiders were starting to pop up with anti-tank weaponry, and we didn't want to take the chance of them being able to breach the wall before we could send them packing.

The heavy-duty tools, normally used for tearing apart cars and getting any salvage off of the wrecks that the mechanics could, were the most important thing. Even more important than the jury-rigged shower, even more important than being able to sleep in something besides the Bradleys.

The parts, the tools, and the ability to refit the hummm-vees and Bradleys would be the difference between life and death.

We had worked for about a week to finish fortifying the junk yard. We needed time to refit the Bradleys, time to repair and reload them, check them for problems. PMCS them, as Buck put it, whatever that meant. I was standing on top of several wrecked cars, ignoring the risers down below me who pushed at the wrecked cars that made up the wall.

I could see them coming, in beat up pickups, vans, and cars with chicken-wire welded to them. They looked like refugees from a bad 1980's movie, complete with Day-Glo hair and heavy metal music blaring from the speakers.

I'd seen this scene before, in a movie. Only the defenders of the wall weren't armed like our group was.

The lead vehicle, a bus, pulled up, and a guy climbed out of a hatch on the roof and raised a megaphone to his mouth. He was wearing the remnants of a police uniform like it made him special, or gave him some kind of authority.

There hadn't been a police force in over a year.

"You guys find something that you oughta be sharing with us?" the man with the megaphone called out. His voice was sneering, arrogant, and full of dark humor. I didn't answer, just reached one hand under the tarp and felt for what had sadly become so familiar in the last year. "ANSWER ME, BITCH!"

With my other hand, I pulled the tarpaulin off of the twin-mounted M242 fifty caliber machineguns, and stepped on the bar that fired it, throwing the tarp to the floor and grabbing the machinegun handles with both hands. The recoil was bone jarring, making my whole body shudder as I swung the line of tracers into the bus, the incendiary rounds linked one to four exploding when they hit the home-made armor.

The bus exploded when the rounds, a mix of armor piercing, normal, tracers and incendiary, touched off the gas tank, but I kept swinging the arc into the other cars. A few shots were fired my way, but the fifty kept anyone's interest in poking their heads up to aim at me pretty secondary to not getting shot in the ass.

I raked the cars several times, ignoring the ones that fled, and ignoring the people who managed to stumble out.

The Risers would take care of them.

Greg parried the knife with the barrel of his M-4, and smashed the buttstock into his attacker's face, filed teeth spraying from the mouth like little triangles. He quickly followed through by ramming the bayonet into her chest and yanking the trigger back, blowing her clean off the bayonet to land in a crumpled heap on the floor. It was strange, seeing the exact same reflexes in both Greg and Buck being used in combat. Back to back, they were tough to get close to, ingrained reflexes, pounded into them by hard eyed drill instructors, making them move identically.

It took everything I had, all of my training, to keep away from the knives of my attackers. Butcher knives, meat cleavers, and flensing knives wove a glittering steel cage around me as I fought, and they tried for vulnerable points. Not to kill me, but to cut tendons, slash muscles, and render me helpless.

Sylvia grabbed one of her attackers, ignoring the stab into her forearm, and slung him against a support pillar by his arms, the shoulders giving with a loud pop as her assailant hit the corner of the cement fixture back first, the spine snapping loudly. Her assailant went down, bent the wrong way, and was quickly covered by 4 of his comrades, their knives flashing as they stripped away his still living flesh.

"FALL BACK!" Buck shouted, heaving his attacker away with one hand. She landed agilely and scuttled forward quickly, her knives bright and gleaming in the dim light of the underground parking garage. Sam finished reloading and began firing again, each round taking one of the mob attacking us in the chest, flinging them to the ground to die in a puddle of blood. Headshots were too risky, and too many of them wore Kevlar helmets to protect their brains.

We ran, using tight, controlled bursts, and for the first time in months, I used my brother's pistols, the legacy he had left me beneath the seat of his car. They dropped from overhead pipes, scurried from beneath parked cars, and leapt from shadows with mouths open and a fearsome hunger that still gives me cold sweats.

We reached the Bradley, and began piling in. Before I entered, I looked behind us, and saw her. The leader of the pack. Standing in a pool of light like an opera singer during a solo.

She wore a Spetznaz urban combat battle dress blouse with the sleeves cut away, cinched at her waist by the strap of a gas mask carrier, the hem of the blouse nearly to her knees. Her hair was raggedly cut, probably by the boning knife clutched in one hand. In the other, she held a meat cleaver that she pointed at us. Her knees were scabbed, and her tennis shoes were mismatched. Crazily, I noticed she was wearing a dirty pair of Hello Kitty socks. Her eyes were bright, electric blue, and bored into mine with a fury and hunger that I can still feel as I pen this miles away.

"We get you! When we do, we eat your heart!" she screamed, in savage triumph. Behind her, her followers barked and howled like a pack of wild dogs. "Metal beast have to eat sometime!" Buck snapped a burst from the M-240 at her, but she skittered away into the darkness.

We had lost 3 people in the attempt to find diesel fuel for the Bradleys, and done nothing but make an enemy who I still tremble at night to think about.

A 9 year old girl.

We found the old guy at a rest stop in Eastern Oregon, on our way to Nebraska. He had taken up residence in a modular home that was still resting on its trailers. It was painted bright and cheery. Dirt had been carried out to the blacktop and used to cover it, then planted with grass and flowers. A white picket fence surrounded the house, and a mailbox sat on a post beside the gate.

The old guy was sitting on a rocking chair, on the porch that had been created by pulling a flatbed pickup truck in front of the modular home. He was smoking a pipe, and drinking Coors beer, enjoying the afternoon sunshine in his boxers and a tank top shirt. Both of them were stained and filthy, gray instead of their original white.

"Kee-Rist, check out the old guy." Buck said, whistling into the tac. He looked bizarre, and something about the way he looked made me think of someone who had escaped from an insane asylum. His eyes were wide, and had a strange sparkle to them.

"Check out his wife." Sylvia replied, squinting through the periscope. I shifted my view, to see the woman he was holding hands with.

She was dressed in a flower print dress, wearing a sun-hat, sandals, and jewelry. Her smile was wide and honest, and her eyes were closed as she sat in the shadows of the porch.

She was also at least 6 months dead.

"Keep going. I don't want to mess with this." Buck said.

I agreed. Let the man and his dead wife have their fantasy.

Johanna is a survivor we picked up outside of Salem, and honestly, I don't like the bitch. She constantly whines about how ugly or fat she is (She's scrawny) and how nobody likes her. She can't seem to understand the basics of not going off by herself, not just jumping out of the back of the humvee that Buck assigned her too, or even worse, just laying back and taking a nap when she should be keeping watch. When you try to talk to her about it, she gets pissed off, and went as far as slapping me today for yelling at her to quit reading a book she had found and keep watch.

When Sam threatened to leave her behind, she went as far as threatening to shoot herself and THEN the rest of us if we tried to. Personally, I've had it. The next time she pulls an attitude, I'm shooting her in the face.

Candy claimed to have been a Wolf Pack Den Mother before they cast her out, a prostitute on the LA streets, a SWAT sniper, a banker, and a lot of other things. As soon as people's attention wavered off of her, or she felt that one of our group was getting more attention than she was, she inevitably did something stupid or embarrassing in order to get everyone to focus on her.

Last night, she volunteered to go with Sylvia on a recon, and rather than waiting for Sylvia to give the all clear signal to her while she waited in the hummvee, she jumped out and ran into the building by herself. It didn't take too long for her to come staggering out, and Sylvia put her down right as we were pulling up.

Myself? I prefer boredom.

People used to classify paranoia as a mental disorder, but in this brave new world, everyone really is out to get you. Paranoia isn't a disease, but a requirement for survival.

The girl's name is Jaqueline, as least as far as she confides to us. She mopes around, sighing exaggeratedly or always staring at the ground. We got her from a slaver convoy, she was still alive, buried under the corpses of the others that had been in the back of the semi truck, despite the slavers throwing molotov cocktails inside.

Robert says that she will either get better, or someone will shoot her when she endangers the rest of us through her depression and lethargy. She may not care about her life, but I care about mine.

We hit them hard, as they crossed the bridge. Sylvia ran the SAW and Mark was busy feeding her. The Russian Spetsnaz that had joined up with us hit them with the TOW-IIs we had taken from the National Guard armory in Chehalis, WA, a few weeks before.

It only took a few moments, and the slavers were all down and out. Ming using the skills the Chinese Army had taught him with the Soviet SVD sniper rifle. It was a duck shoot, but all the same, I was glad it was fast.

Slavers. They'd hit settlements, and grab who they could, to sell to whoever wanted them. They'd even grab zombies to sell here and there. Scum of the earth and rapists. Sam was furious when he noticed that about half of the slavers wore Salem S.W.A.T. uniforms. To Sam, an ex-County Sheriff, that was a betrayal of everything he held dear. He removed their badges, probably saving them for someone who deserved them. We ignored that fact that Sam kicked their skulls in with his combat boots with a grimace of rage and hatred, we all have our quirks.

We armed the living with the weapons of the dead, used the nailguns on the heads of the fallen, and moved on.

To stay mobile, was to stay alive.

Jaqueline constantly complains she is tired, and we've decided that it would not be prudent to place her on guard duty. She so damn depressed all the time, moping about, getting tired at the slightest exertion during combat, and sleeping for over 14 hours a day. If she falls asleep on guard duty again, I'm going to shoot her in the ass and see if that helps her.

Sam always wore his badge, often pinning it to his Kevlar vest. Even after he traded in his Deputy Sheriff's uniform for military Battle Dress Uniform, and his shoes for combat boots, the badge was a highly polished reminder of who he had once been.

It was strange, the effects that the star seemed to have on people. People seemed to automatically respect him, come to him to settle disputes, and parlay a surrender in good faith when they were outnumbered and outgunned.

It struck me as odd, when we pulled into the survival enclave outside of Medford, Oregon. People seemed to know who he was, calling him "Lawman", and not as a slur. He didn't have to pay for food, lodging or clean water. I know that he had several women come to his bed the nights we were there, and I even saw several people give him ammunition.

"Bless you, Lawman." Seemed to be the most common saying from the people who gave him ammunition.

I still find it strange, even though I go to him with problems of my own.

I've seen Sylvia and the boys take hits to the legs and arms and keep right on going, but to think that most people can do that is a mistake. Sylvia and the boys are highly trained, motivated, stemwinding motherfuckers. I've seen Buck get hit by a hatch from an exploding Bradley and still be able to function once he picked himself up off the pavement, Sylvia take a burst of rounds to her Interceptor and not even miss a stride, Greg get his helmet blown off him by a sniper and still move, Robert take a bullet in the leg and still run, and the Russians seem to made of the same stuff as the others. It's scary, in a way..

However, for mere mortals like myself, getting shot HURTS, and makes it difficult to use that limb. When a slaver shot me in the arm, I couldn't close my hand or feel my arm below that horribly throbbing wound. Most people seem to react that way to a gunshot wound or a stab wound, but for there are still people out there like Sylvia and the boys. .

Jaqueline has gone from sleeping all the time, to being a damn freak. She swings back and forth between sleeping all the time and not sleeping for days at a time. She's either grouchy or moody, and when she goes without sleep for too long, she does stupid things like engage the Risen at close range, or wait almost too long before closing the hatch. Why is it she's getting stupider?

The zombie stopped and picked up the Colt 45 that Greg had tossed aside when it was empty. As I watched, it brought it up to its face and slowly examined it. I had no choice about shooting it or not, since I was busy trying to clear the jam from my M-16A2 at the time. Sylvia saw and began swinging her SAW around as its face lit up in a grotesque parody of happiness.

Right before Sylvia put a burst into its face that nearly took its head off, it pointed the pistol at the back of Sam's head and pulled the trigger.

I could hear the dry snap of the hammer hitting an empty chamber, and see the red light of the laser sight appear on the nape of Sam's neck. That was not the worst.

"Eeeeeeye awper..." slurred from the cold lips. Die Copper. It spoke. It fucking spoke. Sometimes, at night, I hear it slur "Die Becka." And I wake screaming.

Jaqueline is getting weirder and weirder. Although I don't want to, I have a feeling I'm going to have to be the one who shoots her. She's female, and even though this group numbers nearly fourty now, there are only 8 females total. Soon, however, being female will not be able to save her. -Diaries of Becka

I stood next to Sylvia, the Hemmit idling as it kept the pressure in the compressed air tank and the nail guns that we all held in our hands. Cindy stood to the other side of me, tapping the nailgun and staring at the men kneeling in front of the three of us.

Sam was staring with eyes like fire, his uniform looking pristine and clean. Greg and Sylvia stood in their desert BDUs, pistols at their hips. I still wore my sports bra and spandex shorts, gauze protecting the burns on my back. Buck was wearing his biker leathers, spattered with blood, and chewing on a cigar. He took it from his mouth and stared.

"Start when you're ready." Buck growled. Sam was tapping his fingers on the butts of his pistols. A slow tap that I had seen before. He wanted to draw. He wanted to kill. Greg was walking back

and forth, a muscle twitching in his jaw. Robert was working as hard as he could, and we could hear the crying of the child inside the vehicle. Greg stopped, turning to face the kneeling men.

"By the powers vested in me by the Armed Forces of the United States of America, the Martial Law Executive Order, The War Powers Act, and Survival of the Fittest, you are all hereby charged with slave trading, rape of a minor, and child molestation. How do you plead?" Greg's grey eyes were like flint.

"We didn' do nuttin' you can prove, soldier boy!" One sneered.

"I wan' mah lawyer!" another cried.

"I enter a guilty plea for my clients." Buck snarled. "The defense rests."

"You can't do that!" "Hey, that ain't right!" "I ain't guilty!" "Oh lordy, these boys is gonna kill us!" all sounded out.

"Prosecutor?" Greg asked, nodding at Sam. Sam ran forward and began kicking one man in the stomach, yelling: "You did it, we know it, you did it, you fucker!" When he was out of breath, he stepped back to where he had been standing. The man he had been kicking, a man whom we had seen shoot a little girl in the head when she bit him, stayed on the ground, curled up and crying from Sam taking his boots to the scumbag.

"The prosecution rests." Sam panted.

"I find you all guilty, and sentence you to death." Greg smiled a smile that never touched his eyes. "Ladies."

They began screaming, cussing, crying and trying to pull free of their bonds. Cindy, Sylvia and I walked down the line, pressing the nailgun to the back of their heads, at the nape of the neck, and pumping three or four nails into each one.

One managed to break free, and Sam drew his pistols in that blindingly fast draw he had perfected. Two shots rang out, both of them hitting their targets. The man screamed as his knees blew onto the grass, the blood bright in the morning sunlight.

Greg drug him back by his long greasy hair, and I bent down and fired two nails into his face stapling his mouth shut. His screams and pleas muffled, I, rolled him over, and put too more into the back of his head.

They begged for mercy, and although they didn't know it, we were showing it. Sylvia, Cindy and I had wanted to shoot out their knees and elbows and leave them for the zombies.

Jaqueline has decided that she is a fruit bat. I swear to God. She is convinced that this is all a bad dream, and she is going to wake up from it. Whenever she is in serious danger, she just falls over like she went into a coma. Her eyes are open, but there's no response. She's in Bradley-Six right now, strapped down on a gurney, but I think tonight, I'll go in there and smother her with a pillow.

The woman was a weird one all right. Driving a Chevy Bronco with a winch on the front and wearing heavy brown coveralls, her eyes looked like she was looking right through you. She helped up fix the portside tread on Bradley-Four, remaining strangely silent all the time.

When she saw Emma inside of the Bradley, however, she looked at me, and at my slightly rounded belly, and apologized. She told me that the Rising was all her fault. This, of course, instantly attracted the attention of the boys, until she confessed that it was God punishing her for being such a slut while she had been in college. She apologized to all of us for not believing her father when he had told her that God would punish her if she did not quit acting like a whore, then left.

What a weirdo.

I went in and did it. When I moved up to her, she started begging me to release her, that the aliens were looking into her brain to try to steal the secret of turning people into zombies. That the aliens wanted the secret so that they could steal her army from her. She was still mumbling that fruit bat crap when I smothered her.

I've seen Sylvia tell someone that she doesn't have a cigarette because she doesn't smoke while she has one in her mouth. She often reacts with sudden and shocking violence at the slightest provocation in order to keep herself and the rest of us safe, and has no remorse for anything she has done beyond breaking her oath to protect America.

She's snapped, there is no doubt about it, but honestly, I'm glad she is with us, rather than against us.

At least once a night, one of us will wake up screaming. There are sixty of us now, and every night, at least once, and sometimes as many as half, of us wake up screaming, covered in sweat and our heart pounding in our chest.

Before the Rising, we would have been encouraged to see a doctor. Now? It's normal. You need help if you never wake up that way.

Vernica is always complaining about not being able to get enough sleep. She sleeps all night, in between her shift on a weapon or on lookout, and in between meals, and is still sleepy. She takes forever to wake up too. I wonder how long she's going to survive.

It took awhile, but I've been able to shrug off the depression I felt after going around Pheonix, Arizona, on the way to Nebraska. The knowledge that everyone inside was probably gone had hit me in time with a bout of post-partum depression after Ivan (named after our dead Spetznaz friend) had joined his two sisters and his brother in the world.

Still, I was able to do it. I think taking care of the children helped me. .

Veronica has gotten far worse. She'll often fall asleep in the middle of talking, and once just keeled over asleep while firing the SAW on Hummvee-Three, causing Roger to think we were being gassed. Robert has diagnosed her with narcolepsy and doesn't think there is anything that he can do.

I don't think she's long for this world.

They surrounded the Bradleys, chanting in their red sheets, waving torches in the night. We watched on through the viewports as a Riser took one of them to the ground. Instead of fighting, the person actually embraced the Riser, and others looked on with an obscene envy.

"Surrender unto our resurrected Lord!" they chanted, as they joined hands around our little convoy. We could have left, but that would have meant abandoning Sylvia's newest humm-vee, and we did not really see a reason to leave behind a pristine vehicle with a full tank of gas just for some freaks.

"Give unto them your flesh, so that the world may become pure again!" came the calls.

"Are these guys for fucking real?" Sam's voice was clear over the inter-vehicle tac-com we all stayed plugged into when we were inside.

"Let's find out." Greg laughed. "Jose, give them a taste of the flame-thrower."

"Roger." Came back Jose's terse reply. We'd replaced the damaged 20mm Bushmaster Chain gun with a flamethrower over a week ago, but had never bothered to use it. It was easier to ignore the Risers unless they mobbed us too bad, or someone got annoyed. It's not like they could reach through 20 tons of armor and grab you.

The turret swiveled, and the singing and chanting grew louder. Strangely, my mind focused on the back rank, where there were now two Risers, both of them standing up, and as I watched, both of them took down a victim. How in the world had these people survived so long?

With a heady whoosh that filled the world full of the stench of burnt flesh and gasoline, the pressurized stream of fire devoured several of the cultists around us, going from singing to dead in a second. Those on the outside of the swath of destruction burst into flame. The rest screamed and began running away.

What is it about disaster that makes people worship the stupidest things?

Carol always waits to see what I'm doing before doing something for herself. I even tested it out today. While everyone else was firing at the Risers clustered around the vehicles, I took apart my rifle, licked the bolt a few times, then put it back together. She did the same thing.

I guess that one little mistake she made broke her confidence.

"We were fools to believe that the government could handle this. World governments were only barely capable during times of peace and normalcy. How could we be lead from our homes, to where we could be slaughtered? Our government lied to us, from places of safety that could even withstand a nuclear war. So we went out in droves to die, and became more of them. God help us, there must be thousands outside. We are out of ammunition, and nearly out of food. To any who can hear this, do not, for the love of God, enter this city. We are gone, and they are waiting."-Radio transmission from inside Cleveland, Ohio that ran for roughly 4 months, as far as I know. Buck was able to pick it up on the shortwave radio we had scavenged and put in Bradley-One.

There was no way for us to save them. We were sitting outside of N.O.R.A.D. while we debated on whether or not to try to enter it. Sylvia argued against it the hardest, at one time giving Buck a good shot in the grill with a right hook when he called her a coward. Greg agreed with Sylvia, but finally, we did access the place, following Sylvia's instructions on how to get in, and nearly confirming some of my suspicions about Sylvia's mysterious past.

Inside was worse than we feared. The entire place was dead, either walking dead or dropped dead. The zombies quickly congregated on us, and we were forced to make a fighting retreat back the way we came. Zhkov, one of the Spetz we picked up along the way, helped Greg, Buck and Sylvia drop the access port we used, rather than have what might have been thousands of zombies follow us outside.

I cry, often, at night, remembering the feeling that came over us all as we realized that the most heavily guarded, heavily protected, most important hardened installation in North America was nothing more than a nest of zombies waiting for some poor sucker to open the main doors decades down the road.

It was our worst moment.

It was the knowledge that it was over. The old world was dead. We had lost.

It was hopeless.

"You've got to be high, there's nothing out here." Sam stated, looking around. "It's a goddamn field in the middle of Asshole, Nebraska! There's not even Risers for Christ-sake!"

"Ummm, Sam..." Greg said, stepping forward and reaching out a hand. Sam was walking backwards, waving his arms and still bitching.

"We drove all the fucking way out here for what? Corn? Wheat? I don't see any goddamn nuclear silos, just wheat and corn silos! I hate the goddamn..." and with that, he tripped on something and fell backwards, his Kevlar helmet hitting with a dull, metallic thunk.

"The emergency entry hatch is behind you." Greg finished, grinning as he walked forward. He activated his tac-com, switching on the signal booster. "Bravo-One, this is Delta Tango Three, have located the target. Bring in the gear."

"Roger that." Buck said, and I could hear the Bradleys fire up in the distance. In the last two months, we had acquired quite a convoy, and now had close to sixty people, as well as supplies, construction tools, and plenty of ammunition.

"And we're trying to crack open a nuclear silo, why?" Paul asked, tapping the steel door set flush into the ground with his toe. "What are we going to do with an ICBM?"

Sylvia sighed, looking up from where she was inspecting the edge of the door. "Look, Paul, it's fairly simple. These places were designed to withstand World War-III, have armories, living quarters, the whole kit and caboodle. We didn't see any big gaps in the cornfield, so more than likely, the weapons weren't fired." She turned to me. "Becka, I don't think it's locked down too hard, but there might be radiation in there. When Bradley-Five gets here, I want you inside and in a rad-suit." She looked pointedly at my protruding belly. I was barely able to wrap my (Well, one Buck's size) Kevlar vest around it, and the baby definitely did not like the compression that the vest caused. The baby usually showed it's displeasure by kicking my bladder hard enough to make me piss myself.

"What if there are people still in there?" Paul asked.

"Simple. They can join us, or they can die." Greg stated flatly.

I knew what he meant. The time for loyalties to a government that had ran off and left us all to die was past, and they deserved just as much loyalty as they had showed us.

None.

Another thing we have noticed about Wolf Pack Kids, is they have a tendency to bark at one another. Quick, rapid barks that might be some communication. They also bark when excited, hunting, scared, or slightly injured.

Is it a sign of a shared insanity, or a learned response from the dogs that keep constant company with them?

A goddamn loading ramp. That's what killed Ming. A fucking loading ramp. Not zombies, not the feral kids, not even the rogue military units we ran into now and then. A huge chunk of steel falling on his legs crushed his femoral arteries and he bled out right before one of those kids slit his throat when they attacked us after springing their trap.

It's still hard to believe. With everything going on, a fucking accident killed him. Not kids, not Risers, but a simple accident.

For weeks after his weapon jammed and he was almost killed by the Wolf Pack, Zhakov would hand load every one of his weapons, eat by himself and rapidly shove his food in his mouth, his eyes constantly watching everything. He would check his room inside the train car a dozen times before laying down. His routine never varied the entire time it took those deep wounds to turn to thick scars.

But he'd survived.

We weren't even sure when it happened, but we first noticed it after those kids managed to worm their way through the ventilation of the FEMA site. We had collected about a hundred survivors, and knew something was wrong when the screaming came over the intercom.

It took us 2 days, but we flushed them out. It wasn't until Buck found Harry's corpse where he had been dead for about 3 days that we realized something had changed. Initially, Buck almost put a bullet into Harry's head, but I stopped him. We searched closely, finding 2 children that had crawled off and died of their wounds, and were still lying where they had died, still and cold.

I laid my forehead on my folded hands that night, kneeling beside Greg's and my bed, and thanked a God who finally showed mercy upon us. Fifteen years of destroying the brain of the fallen. Thousands of funeral pyres full of twitching and moaning corpses. The death of a friend meant a needed killing of an approaching foe.

I cried in release, remembering the baby who had died of SIDS in this very bunker, and squalled a hunger for something other than breast milk. I remembered our friends who had died, and we had been forced to shoot.

I could hear Greg, Sam, Thomas, Mikheal, Zhakov and Buck singing loudly as they drank, rejoicing in the end of the risings.

Still, as I pen this morning after our euphoria, I have to remember why I sit beside the door of the morgue freezer while I write in these diaries.

It happened before, it may happen again.

I stood with Greg, Buck, Robert, Sylvia, Sam, Cindy and Zhakov at the entrance to the CoG site that we had fought hard and bitterly to take. The others respected our unspoken desire for privacy as we all held hands and watched the sun come up. It didn't matter to me that Sylvia and the boys reeked of whiskey or that their eyes were red with hangover. It didn't matter to any of us that the girls had sagging breasts and grey hair, or the boys were no longer the iron muscles greek gods they had once been, with wrinkles, baldness and grey hair.

What mattered is that we had made it.

The sun came over the horizon with an almost audible burst of silver, and we stood there as the world woke around us. We knew that the Risers would not magically fall over and drop dead. Mr. Hungry that we kept locked in one of the site's cells was still moaning mournfully and writing on the wall with a crayon, but none of the dead from the Wolf Pack attacking had returned.

It was over, finally, after 30 years, the Rising was over. We had lost so many friends, the human race had been devastated, our children were having children, but at least the children of those would grow up in a world where people no longer rose from the dead to kill.

The sun was searingly bright when it rose over the horizon, and made my eyes water behind my spectacles, but it was beautiful.