

Chapter 1

"KEEP YOUR ATTENTION on what's in front of you." Sebridge offered a warm grin, eager to witness his captive's reaction.

Carly felt Sebridge's eyes on her and the others.

Marik clenched his fists, digging a thumbnail into the meaty part of his palm to avoid flinching as the scene played out.

Justine stood motionless, her face devoid of expression.

Carly and the others watched through one-way glass as Ramirez entered the adjacent room. In the room's center sat an elevated table. On the table, a woman lay strapped into place, unable to move.

Her face contorted in terror as Ramirez locked eyes with her. "No! No! Stay away from me!"

Ramirez approached with caution at first, then much faster. The woman screamed, shaking her head. Tears ran down her cheeks.

Marik's stomach knotted as his testicles shrank, adrenaline raging. He fought harder to remain motionless. His mind flashed with images of what came next. Marik experienced profound helplessness taking over.

Ramirez savored the moment, running his tongue along his lips. He brought his hands beside the woman's head as she struggled in vain.

"No."

The woman pleaded as a child would.

"Please... don't."

While loosening and tightening his fingers in a steady rhythm, Ramirez formed a wide grin as he grabbed the woman's head. His body shook with anticipation.

None of the spectators saw the tentacles protrude from Ramirez's fingers as he bore into the woman's skull.

"Watch him enjoy it. Revel in it." Sebridge positioned himself behind the prisoners. "Take it all in."

The woman's body convulsed, eyes rolling back in her head, drool bubbling from her mouth onto the table.

Carly's head twitched as she struggled not to look away. She could feel the woman's agony. Despite everything she had been through, this horrific scene made her tremble.

The woman continued to spasm. Saliva puddled next to her head on the table.

Marik noticed the woman's hair brushing back and forth in the puddle. His stomach knotted, causing an audible gag.

Sebridge placed a hand on Marik. "Stay strong, soldier. It's almost over."

The woman's body jerked off the table twice and then stopped moving. Her head flopped to one side as Ramirez clung to her.

A couple of minutes passed in silence. Carly's knees wobbled. She felt lightheaded and nauseated.

Ramirez released the woman's head, backing to the wall. He leaned against the bulwark for support.

As he studied the expression on Ramirez's face, Marik likened it to a junkie getting a much-needed fix. Pure ecstasy. Marik willed himself not to recoil.

"Excellent." Sebridge patted Carly and Justine on the shoulder. "You have done so well. How about we get some dinner? I'm sure you're all eager to reconnect over a tasty meal."

Sebridge moved his captives to the exit. A soldier stepped aside, and the automated door swooshed open.

Sebridge waited and motioned for Carly, Justine, and Marik to leave.

Carly and Marik made for the door. Justine hesitated, turning to smile at Sebridge. Sebridge frowned, not expecting this reaction from any of them.

Marik walked close to Carly. "The nutty man is an abomination. I knew the Colonel was using him against us. I told you."

Carly felt the toxic energy radiating from Marik. She chose not to take it on herself. "Maybe so. Maybe Ramirez cannot help himself and Sebridge is trying to set us against each other."

"He cannot help himself."

Marik spit his words.

"None of the monsters can. They just do it."

Justine walked a distance behind. She heard them talking but remained quiet. Carly did not look behind her. She felt nothing but loathing for Justine. It became a daily effort not to rip out Justine's throat over breakfast.

Carly entered the cafeteria, finding a new occupant. The woman looked familiar.

Marik barged in after Carly, moving around with his usual huff as he did when she blocked the entrance. Marik glanced at their new guest but appeared to take no interest.

"Hello, Ms. Hennington."

The woman smiled, looking at Carly. "I'm Joelle Abebe, from the facility in Belgium."

That's it! Carly nodded, remembering the last time she had seen the woman.

Justine brushed past Carly, bumping into her.

Carly forced herself not to glare at Justine, instead continuing to look at Joelle.

"Hello. Apparently, you survived whatever happened."

"Yes, I did." Joelle looked away, her face showing a hint of fear. "Somehow."

Carly retrieved her tray, sitting next to Joelle in her preferred spot, as far away from Justine as possible.

A minute later, Ramirez entered. Carly watched him move across the room.

Ramirez held a confident grin, sauntering over to get his tray. He sat in his usual spot at the middle table, between the others.

Marik held his spoon in his mouth, feeling his stomach knot. He cleared his throat, forcing himself to chew.

"Everyone's so quiet today." Ramirez put on his usual cheerful demeanor.

"The Colonel took us on a field trip," Marik said. His stomach gurgled as he resisted the urge to vomit.

"Did you?" Ramirez picked up the orange from his tray and began peeling it. "Where to?"

"To see a specimen feeding." Marik willed his stomach to settle and swallowed the food in his mouth, trying not to throw it back up.

"Oh." Ramirez paused, thinking of what to say next.

"It was you, Ramirez." Justine broke her silence. "Quite entertaining."

Ramirez looked at Justine, giving her a puzzled look. "Me?"

"Yes. You." Marik made an S shape in his soup. "Nutty man is a freak monster."

"Don't call me that." Ramirez surprised everyone in the room by sounding harsh. "Ever again."

"What are you gonna do? Feed on me?" Marik dipped his spoon in the soup, bringing it to his mouth.

"I'll ask Sebridge if I can." Ramirez shifted position to face Marik, fixing his eyes on Marik's head.

Marik shot up, turning toward Ramirez and delivering a swift blow to the side of his face.

Two soldiers appeared at the door. One shot a tranquilizer dart, hitting Marik's ribcage. He stumbled and fell to the floor.

Everyone remained still as the soldiers hauled Marik's unconscious form out of the cafeteria.

"Finish your meal. Dinner ends in five minutes." An unknown voice came over the intercom.

Joelle sat with both hands beside her tray. "Fucking hell."

Carly forced herself to finish her soup, even though she had no appetite. She ignored Joelle and the others for the rest of dinner.

Carly left in silence when the call came to return to quarters, then saw Joelle enter her periphery.

"I guess we're neighbors. You're heading my way." Joelle's voice remained timid.

"I see." Carly tried to process today's events.

Marik would undergo reconditioning on the automated waterboarding table, or worse. Carly intended to avoid experiencing that again. Even if it meant working with Ramirez on future assignments.

"Keep your head down if you want to live, Ms. Abebe." Carly didn't look at Joelle as she entered her quarters.

Chapter 2

THIS ONE MUST SUFFER defeat. It threatened the Ancient Ones.

The pickup approached with a massive wave of infected in pursuit. Vodyre touched its target's mind.

A jolting rebuff sent Vodyre to the ground in agony. The enemy's mind defended. Vodyre did not understand. This defender of the Ancient Ones had never encountered such a shield.

Vodyre stood, feeling remnants of pain radiating through its psyche. The damage would not mend during this engagement.

Cowboy felt the assault. He couldn't relate it to anything, swerving out of control before slamming his foot on the brake.

"What?" someone called out from the truck's bed. "What happened?"

"Why did we stop?" Mia asked from the passenger seat. "Are you hurt?"

Cowboy took a breath. "No. I'm fine."

He felt anything but fine. He heard voices behind him. His passengers sounded alarmed but uncertain about what to do. Cowboy listened to the steady hum emanating from behind his truck.

To the right, some fifty yards ahead and inside the tree line. A purple glow. Cowboy didn't see it with his eyes but in his mind.

Vertigo overtook him. Cowboy straightened in his seat. He knew whatever attacked him posed a severe threat, and he must act.

Cowboy stumbled out of his truck, turning to address people in the pickup's bed. "I need one of you to drive. Something's in the woods. I have to check it out."

"Without you?" Cassie rubbed the barrel of her shotgun.

"Yes, without me." Cowboy kicked his boot against the side of the truck. "Drive fast enough to keep them behind you, but not too fast you lose 'em."

"How far should we drive?" Lenard glanced toward the herd as it encircled Cowboy's truck but kept some distance.

"I was thinking Ponderay, about thirty miles from here." Cowboy looked beyond his truck. The purple glow vanished. "We gotta move. I'll catch up on foot if I can."

Cassie jumped out and headed for the driver's side. "We'll go back the long way."

"Yeah. See that you do." Cowboy backed away as Cassie closed the door.

Headsuckers had made it to the front of Cowboy's truck. Cassie floored the gas to get through the area ahead that remained open.

Cowboy waited to see the group get free, then sprinted into the woods.

Instinct told him to run into the forest. Cowboy couldn't see his adversary, but his senses told him it approached at an angle, seeking to intersect his route. It moved with swiftness.

Vertigo returned. Cowboy felt something push against his mind. His footing became unstable for a second. He adapted to the unfamiliar sensation. He had no choice. His body understood the danger.

Vodyre could not enter this one's head. Strange indeed. This had not happened before.

No matter. Other avenues of attack existed. Vodyre's body held tremendous energy. The energy that poured into its physical form.

The enemy moved fast, but Vodyre moved faster. It used stealth to take this target unaware. A sudden and overwhelming offensive should quiet this mysterious threat.

Vodyre appeared in front of its target, running straight into the man. The force knocked him back into spruce, shattering the trunk enough to send the tree toppling.

Vodyre sank fingertips in as they collided with the first thing along their trajectory.

The man screamed as Vodyre's tentacles penetrated his skin.

Rather than precious mind energy, Vodyre received a sudden, agonizing jolt. The force knocked Vodyre back, setting the man free.

Vodyre hit the ground, stunned, unable to move.

Cowboy lay on his back, losing consciousness.

A throbbing in his head brought him out of the fog. Pain shot down his spine, his ears ringing. Cowboy noticed a dull ache in his back, getting stronger by the second.

Urgency told him to move, but he couldn't. Cowboy rolled over, unaware of his actions. He vomited. The retching cleared his head.

Cowboy pushed himself to stand with effort. He staggered sideways, trying to regain balance.

Cowboy saw his attacker. It remained on the ground, shuddering. Its body appeared female, but not. Muscular and lean, with unusual, elongated arms and legs.

A purple glow, like the one Cowboy had seen before, ran along the surface of its face, rendering its features indiscernible.

Cowboy realized he could not stand straight. His back suffered an injury. He would not fight hand-to-hand. Cowboy grabbed for his knife and gun, realizing he no longer had them.

Cowboy scanned the ground for any weapons. As he did, the thing in the dirt stirred, getting to its feet in one smooth motion.

Vodyre watched the man back away as it stood, still reeling from a failed attempt to feed on its target. Unless the man neared death, continuing to fight would prove foolish.

The man looked weak. Vodyre's energy dwindled, making it impossible to determine the enemy's ability to continue.

Vodyre noticed the man looking for something, perhaps weapons. This may show weakness and an inability to engage in physical combat.

Vodyre strategized how to proceed.

The man stared at Vodyre. He stood hunched over, appearing injured. This chance might not present itself again.

Vodyre summoned a last burst of power, but not without consequence. The urge to follow its calling and cut down enemies of the Ancient Ones overwhelmed Vodyre.

Cowboy resisted the urge to grimace in pain as he faced his attacker, standing a few feet away.

This creature stood over a foot taller than him. She... It remained motionless before Cowboy, the purple glow increasing in intensity. Cowboy adjusted his footing. He could sense a strike coming.

It lashed out at him. This time seeking to rip through Cowboy's chest, the mighty creature made contact. Cowboy deflected, but the assault crippled him.

The blow knocked him off balance, pushing all the air out of his lungs. Cowboy gasped as he fell to the ground.

The creature swerved, lunging at him again. One hand swung down as it fell on him. Cowboy couldn't move fast enough to avoid sustaining a blow to the head.

As the thing's fist struck, Cowboy thrust out his elbow to meet his attacker in the center of its ribcage. This lessened the impact of the blow and sent the dangerous beast toppling to the ground.

Cowboy fought to relax his chest and regain his breathing. The creature rolled away from Cowboy, clicking like electricity snapping across a power line.

The ground beneath him heaved and wobbled. Then everything turned dark.

Vodyre knew it failed. This first engagement wouldn't end victorious.

With its body beginning to repair, Vodyre fled.

It must feed. Spending this much power demanded replenishment.

Vodyre moved toward the herd and Cowboy's truck. It would take many infected.

Then, perhaps, the humans leading them.

Chapter 3

"THEY'RE HUNGRY."

"And mean."

"Shit, yeah mean."

Luke heard the two men talking next to him as his body hung against the wall, shackled by chains. Gavin dangled beside him.

One man bent toward Luke, bringing his mouth within inches of Luke's ear. "You assholes face off against the brainers."

Luke pulled away, overwhelmed by foul whiskey-cigarette breath and body odor.

The other man knelt close to Gavin. "This one's still nappin."

"Wake him up." The man next to Luke flicked his cigarette toward Gavin.

The other captor hit Gavin. Gavin spit out his mouth, startled. "You awake, cutie pie?"

"He is now." The man next to Luke stepped away, fumbling for another cigarette. "Get 'em ready. This'll be a quickie for sure."

Gavin roused, still dazed from the beating he and Luke received from their abductors. Luke came out of the fog ahead of Gavin, aware of his surroundings. His head ached where someone clobbered him, and his ribs screamed in protest as he struggled to his feet.

The one who slapped Gavin grabbed both chains, leading Gavin and Luke into a dark hallway. Luke could hear faint groaning indicative of scramblers and people begging for help as he and Gavin passed several doors.

"Keep up, shithead." Their captor yanked Gavin's chain as Gavin stumbled to keep up in the hallway. Luke could tell Gavin struggled to stay upright. He did not know their destination. Luke felt sure it couldn't be anywhere pleasant.

"These two ain't gonna be worth it." They entered a large room at the hallway's far end.

"Shit. That's what I was sayin." The man yanked on their chains again. Gavin fell to the ground. "You worthless fucker. Get up."

Luke took hold of Gavin's shoulder, pulling him up. "Just try to walk." Luke kept his voice low, not wanting to get any feedback from the man holding their chains.

"Give'm tha sticks." The man in the larger room pointed. "Not gonna make any difference, but we gotta be fair."

Chains holding Luke and Gavin dropped to the floor. The other man gathered long wooden shafts, broken off a shovel and a rake. He turned toward Luke, throwing the handles at Luke's and Gavin's feet.

"Try not to die too quick." Both men ran out of the room.

Luke hesitated for a second, then crouched to pick up the shafts. The pointed ends looked well used, with dried blood and other unknown matter caked on the tips.

"Gavin. Get ready." Luke held out one shaft, pushing it into Gavin's chest.

"Ready for what?" Gavin coughed, unable to articulate.

A buzzer sounded before Luke could answer. The door opened at the same time.

The familiar inhuman groaning of the infected reached Gavin and Luke seconds before a handful of scramblers came rushing in, pushing each other aside to enter the room.

Luke aimed his makeshift spear at the first scambler. Gavin shook his head back and forth, clearing cobwebs, and did the same. These captives faced a fight to the death.

The first scambler hesitated for a second. Another scambler pushed it out of the way, rushing towards Luke and Gavin.

Luke swung his stick around, batting this scambler across the face as hard as he could. It staggered to his right. Gavin was ready, jabbing his spear into the scambler's mouth and out the back of its head.

As the scambler fell to the floor, Gavin couldn't retrieve his stick in time.

Another scrambler jumped over the one on the floor, pushing Gavin against the opposite wall. Gavin almost tripped, but the chains connecting him to Luke held him up long enough to hit the wall instead.

The force of Gavin driven backward spun Luke around halfway as the chain pulled tight on his leg. Two scramblers tackled Luke from the side as he turned toward Gavin. Luke tried to escape the two scramblers.

Gavin fought, slapping and pushing at the scrambler pinning him to the wall as it tried to grab his head. In a split-second decision, Gavin ducked, scooting out the side in a mad dash to retrieve his stick.

Luke rolled away from the scrambler holding him against the floor. Still, one latched onto his shirt, preventing Luke from moving away. As he let out a scream of frustration, Luke brought his elbow down on the scrambler's hand, trying to break its grip on his clothes.

Gavin's fingers searched for his stick, still stuck in the first scrambler's head. The chain pulled tight again on his leg, causing him to lunge headfirst onto the dead scrambler's stomach. He looked at the scrambler he had dodged.

Two scramblers rushed toward Gavin on the floor. They dived at him, landing below his hips on top of him. These infected fought over first dibs on Gavin without opting for their target straightaway.

Gavin adjusted his grip on the wooden pole. He thrust the pointed end toward the scramblers on his legs, trying to puncture the top of their heads. He hit shoulders and arms, but getting a solid shot on each head proved difficult because of their erratic movement.

With one leg over the second scrambler that tackled him, Luke kept the one holding his shirt pinned long enough to break free. He clutched his spear again as he rolled away.

Luke glanced toward Gavin, seeing two scramblers fighting on top of Gavin's legs as his partner jabbed at them in desperation. He used the stick to hoist himself up.