

Those Left Behind: Norman Land

The offices and laboratories at *Biozem Laboratories* were housed around the circumference of a very large building. Each floor of the eight storey expanse wound around the building in a giant ring. The center was empty so that a person standing in the center of the lobby could look up and see right through the skylight installed at the top of the building. It was a modern miracle of architecture, resembling New York's Guggenheim Museum in many ways yet having a space age quality that the museum had lost over time. Giant glass windows framed the entire building so that you could look out as you traveled around. Though some of the clerical offices held cubicles, all of the senior staff could look out to the parking lot or the countryside beyond and simply lose themselves in the view.

Biozem employed thirty one maintenance personnel. They worked a variety of shifts, the bulk of them serving the hours between 5 am and 11 pm. Their schedules tended to fluctuate, though there were a couple who had stipulated upon being hired that they needed to maintain regular work hours because of personal responsibilities. Most of these responsibilities involved child care or a second job. One of the people who had regular hours was Norman Land. Eighteen years before, Norman had been responsible for getting his daughter to and from school and so had insisted on working the overnight shift. Now grown up and living elsewhere, Sadie Land was not the reason for any of his personal responsibilities. In fact, he had few if any personal responsibilities. He was divorced, without parents or siblings, and on tenuous speaking terms with Sadie who blamed him for both the failing health of her mother and her name, which she hated despite the fact that she had been named for Norman's mother.

Norman stood about five feet ten inches tall. In his youth he'd had had thick sandy hair over which the girls had whispered and giggled in their infatuation. At an early age, his face had transformed from childish to masculine, rugged even. He'd been a very handsome man. Now in his upper fifties, though, Norman's sandy thick hair was darker in some spots and grey in others. He was clean shaven, but had sideburns that stretched beneath his ears. They were the gateway to the beard he had always wanted to grow but never did. His rugged masculine face had slackened with age. He was a tired man whose eyes had sunken into his head. And yet, he was content. Certainly there were aspects of his life that he regretted and wished he could change. He missed his family desperately. The divorce had been his fault completely. Worse than not being able to handle the effects of his own aging, he couldn't stand it that his wife couldn't maintain the look of a twenty two year old. His petty resentment had driven a rift between them and she had left him. He'd been on his own for almost fifteen years. Early on, he'd done his best to spend time with his daughter, kept up with his responsibilities as a father. But his wife had pushed him further and further away. She had turned Sadie against him.

His job was a different matter entirely. When first taking the job, he had been resentful of that as well. For a long time, he thought he was too good to clean floors. Now, though, he realized that the work was cathartic. Every morning when the doctors and staff of *Biozem* walked through the doors and into the lobby, the floor sparkled. Their office bins were empty and the tables in the lounge were wiped clean. If they wanted, they could eat off of the toilet seats. This gave Norman a sense of pride. The visible results of his work allowed him to remember that he was capable of accomplishing something meaningful on a daily basis.

It was late March and the weather was still a bit cold. Especially at night. Norman's work day started at 10 pm and ended at 6:30 the next morning. When he came in, there were usually people on the lower floors working late. There were always scientists whose projects consumed their lives for a brief time. They would stay until midnight or later, sometimes even sleeping in the lounge, which was equipped with cots and showers. It would last for a week or so and then, like the ignition of a rocket, it would burn out and the scientist would take a couple of days off. Because of the people, Norman liked to start at the top of the building. Most of the specimens, both living and dead, were kept on the upper floors. Those specimens were locked up tight at 8 pm sharp so there was no one up there. In fact, Norman was the only one in the building with a key at that time of night. Being alone and uninterrupted made his job a lot easier. He could have probably done his job in four hours or so, but he liked to take his time up top. That way, by the time he got down to the administrative offices on five, everyone would be gone. If there was anyone in the labs on three by the time he reached them that usually meant they were pulling an all nighter.

On the sixth floor there was one lab. It belonged to Jean-Claude DeMarco. DeMarco was a strange one, even by Norman's standards. He liked to work over night a lot so the two of them had become acquaintances. Though DeMarco seemed to prefer his own company over everyone else's, he would occasionally join Norman for a cup of coffee during the night. Often, DeMarco would spend those times rambling about the importance of his work. Lately, though, he had been subdued. In fact, Norman had hardly seen him at all so he was surprised when he discovered him just standing outside in the hallway. He was leaning over the wall and staring down into the lobby six floors below.

"Jean-Claude?" Norman said, approaching cautiously.

DeMarco was taller than Norman, although not by much, and younger by about ten years. He was, as always, immaculately groomed. When he looked at Norman, the expression on his face changed from one of solemn contemplation to one of euphoric understanding.

"Norman!" he cried. "It's so good to see you."

"Um...thanks, Jean-Claude. Haven't seen you in a while and I was beginning to wonder if you were all right."

"I was just standing here trying to decide whether or not I needed any companionship in the world, and whether or not I owed the human race anything at all."

To Norman, who was not a stupid man, these contemplations seemed to border on lunacy. They were the categorical determination that separates a scientist from a mad scientist.

"Jean-Claude, I..."

"No time for coffee tonight, my friend," DeMarco said, gripping Norman by the shoulders. "I have a lot to do and not much time in which to do it."

He stepped past the janitor and headed into his lab, closing the door behind him. Norman considered going after him and then dismissed it. Jean-Claude DeMarco was not his responsibility.

It wasn't until three weeks later that he saw his friend again. This time, DeMarco came searching for him. He looked different. He usually kept his hair a bit long but under strict control. It had gotten unruly, extending to his shoulders and flaring out in places. His goatee, normally well groomed, had gotten a bit shaggy as well. There was stubble on the rest of his face. When he saw Norman, he came to him quickly and grabbed him about the arm.

“Come with me.”

It was early in Norman's shift, about 9:45pm. Norman lingered only to make sure his supplies were secure and then hurried after the impatient DeMarco.

“What is it?”

“I've finished,” said DeMarco. “And just in time, too. By tomorrow night it'll be too late.”

They reached the laboratory and DeMarco pulled him inside.

“Too late for what?” Norman asked as the scientist shut the door behind him.

DeMarco never answered the question.

The lab was in a shambles. Norman hadn't been in to clean it in two weeks. It was on his regular rounds, but DeMarco had changed the lock so that Norman's key didn't fit. If it had been any other person in the building, he'd have reported it. But DeMarco was his friend. Despite his manic contemplations of companionship and humanity, Norman was willing to respect his privacy. Now he could see what that respect had wrought.

“What have you been doing in here?”

“Roll up your sleeve,” said DeMarco. He was preparing a syringe.

“What?! What for?”

DeMarco looked at him coldly. “Norman, I need to take a blood sample. I need to see if you're infected so that I can test the serum.”

“Infected?” Norman asked. It occurred to him that he was rolling up his sleeve.

DeMarco came over and took the blood sample without a word. In the back of his mind, Norman wondered if he was becoming one of the mad doctor's test subjects. Then, all at once, their brief conversation from three weeks before came back to him. Did DeMarco need

companionship? Did he owe anything to the human race? Norman put these two questions together with the word infection and discovered a horrible conclusion.

“Is it a plague?” Norman asked. “Jean-Claude, did you make a plague?”

DeMarco smiled. “Like nothing you’ve ever seen before.”

“Why? Why would you do that?”

DeMarco waved him away as he studied the blood sample under a microscope. “It was purely unintentional, I assure you.” He paused. “Aha! Just as I suspected. You, my friend, are fully infected.”

“What?!” Norman yanked down his sleeve and headed for the door.

“Wait, Norman. Where are you going?”

The smaller man turned on him, rage flooding his face. “You gave me some plague and you don’t know where I’m going? I have to get to a hospital.”

DeMarco laughed. “Norman, calm down. They can’t help you. By tomorrow night, the parasite will be active and everyone will start dying.”

Norman felt the bottom of his stomach drop away. Then a gush of lava fired up through the hole and he barely found a slop sink before throwing up his guts.

“Norman, please. You’ll be fine.” DeMarco went to a cabinet and pulled out a phial. It had a cap on it with a cork top through which you would stick and fill a needle. “I’ve developed a serum for you.”

Wiping his mouth with a paper towel, Norman looked up at him. “A serum? You mean a cure? We should take it to the authorities.”

DeMarco shook his head. “When I say it’s for you, Norman, I mean it’s for you alone. I developed it using a sample of your DNA. It will destroy the parasite inside of you and render you immune to further infection, but it will not work for anyone else.”

Norman stood there in DeMarco’s lab, trembling. He was facing a plague that would destroy the world. He, himself, was infected. But his friend the mad scientist had created for him a serum to protect him against the contagion. What should he do? Was it all madness?

“Quickly, roll up your sleeve.”

Norman did so and watched as DeMarco grabbed a second needle and filled it with the serum inside. He then injected it directly into Norman’s arm.

“Keep your fingers crossed,” he said, turning away and throwing out the needle.

Norman slowly lowered his sleeve. “Is everyone going to die?”

“Probably not,” DeMarco said. “There will be a small percentage of the population whose bodies are strong enough to fight off the parasite.”

Norman eyed the serum. “And you couldn’t make something that would help everyone?”

DeMarco shrugged. “Perhaps I could have. I only discovered it three weeks ago, but it’s been spreading for a year. A team of the world’s best scientists might have had time to find a solution.”

“But you don’t feel that you owe that to humanity,” Norman echoed.

“Exactly.”

“I’m going to go, then, Jean-Claude.”

“Hmm?” DeMarco was already working on something else. “Where are you going?”

Norman’s hand slid across the counter until it found the phial of serum. “I’d like to just go out and look at the world.”

DeMarco chuckled. “All right, Norman. You should come back tomorrow night, though. We can have coffee while the world dies.”

Norman made a small sound in his throat, pocketed the phial and left.

The first thing he did was head down to the third floor. Moving into Dr. Baker’s laboratory, he rummaged around until he found some clean syringes and pocketed those. Then he left the building without telling anyone where he was going.

It was about an hour’s drive to where his daughter and his ex-wife lived. He was taking an awful risk in what he was about to do, but he didn’t see that he had any other choice. If the serum DeMarco had developed had been based on Norman’s DNA, then it might also work for Sadie. Of course, he would first have to convince Sadie that it wasn’t a hoax, a task that promised to be incredibly difficult. There wasn’t exactly a strong bond of trust between them. Even if she did believe him, she’d wonder why he didn’t have a cure for her mother. These and other thoughts crowded his mind as he drove nervously through the night.

It was after eleven when he pulled up in front of the two bedroom townhouse where his ex and his daughter lived. It took him five minutes to work up the courage to get out of the car and go up to the front door. He was standing there, contemplating forgetting the whole thing when Jean, his ex-wife, opened the door. She was wearing a pair of flannel pajamas that were way too heavy for the season. She was always cold. He noticed she’d put on weight.

“Jesus, Norman, I almost called the cops.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, wringing his hands. “I came to see Sadie.”

The warning bells went off in Jean’s head and she looked at him suspiciously. “Now? Shouldn’t you be at work?”

“I took the night off,” he said a bit too quickly.

She almost accused him of getting fired, but then realized that that was ridiculous. In the first place, he’d had his job for a long time and did it well. In the second place, he wouldn’t need to hide that from her because he no longer paid child support anyway.

“What’s it all about, Norman?”

“It’s private,” he said. “Look, if you won’t tell her I’m here, I’ll just call her cell phone.”

Jean laughed. “You should have done that in the first place. But, you’re right. She’s an adult and it’s none of my business. Come on in and I’ll go get her.”

She stepped away from the door, leaving it open so that he could enter. He hesitated a moment, still unsure of the whole business. Then he went inside and closed the door behind him. He was past the point of no return.

Norman had spent exactly six months living in this house. His marriage had already been in trouble when they’d bought it. They’d been under the misconception that they were just bumping into each other in the small apartment and that more space would do them good. For a brief time, that seemed to be the case, but the truth was always hovering just outside of their peripheral vision. The place didn’t feel like home to Norman. At this point, it only barely resembled the house they’d bought together all of those years ago. Some things were falling apart. Others were brand new. The colors were different. The furniture was different. Even most of the pictures that hung on the walls had changed over the years. In the living room, there was a new couch with reclining ends. There was a tall glass of iced tea on an end table and the television was on. Jean had been relaxing. Norman made it a point not to touch anything as he sat down on the other end of the couch. Almost as soon as he touched the cushion, Sadie came down the steps with her mother behind her.

At twenty two, Sadie had grown into the kind of woman of which Norman could be proud. She wasn’t beautiful like her mother had been. But she was attractive and athletic. Her face had too many of his features, giving her a hard look that he felt didn’t belong on a woman. Though she had never done well in school, she was smart. She worked as an assistant for an investment firm. Norman didn’t know a lot about her job, but he knew that she was making a lot more now than when she had started eighteen months ago.

“What do you want, Dad?” she asked, looking as tired as her mother.

He looked at Jean, then toward the kitchen. “Can we talk privately?”

Sadie looked put out, but nodded.

“You two kids have fun,” Jean called sarcastically as she went back to the sofa and took a long pull of her iced tea.

In the small kitchen, Norman found that the dishes hadn’t been done. They remained stacked in the sink. Sadie sat down at the tiny table and Norman sat across from her.

“You’re going to think I’m crazy,” he said. “But I couldn’t leave it.”

“Okay,” she said, dragging out the last syllable in annoyance.

There was no more delaying. He just came out with it. “There’s a scientist at my job who told me he created a plague that was going to kill everyone tomorrow night. He and I are friends and so he gave me this.” He took the phial of serum out of his pocket with shaking hands. “He said it would kill the infection, but it would only work for me because he made it using a sample of my DNA.”

She looked at the phial and then she looked at her father. “Do you believe him?”

It was the question he had never really even asked himself. But now he knew. “I do.”

“Do you think that stuff will work on me?”

“I don’t know. You and I share some of the same DNA so I thought it might. I had to try.”

Sadie was wearing a t-shirt and sweat pants. It was her form of pajamas. She extended one arm toward him. “You brought a needle, I assume?”

He was surprised. “Uh...yeah.”

“Let’s do it, then.”

Unable to believe his luck, Norman fumbled into his pocket and brought out the syringe he’d liberated from Dr. Baker’s lab. His hands were shaking again. This time, he was irritated by it.

“Give it to me,” Sadie said. “I’ll do it.”

“No, no,” Norman started, then acquiesced. He would never be able to manage it.

“What about mom?” Sadie asked as she expertly filled the needle and jabbed it into her vein. Norman didn’t want to know where she’d learned to do that.

“She...um...Jean-Claude said it wouldn’t work on anyone but me.”

“And me,” Sadie said.

“Right,” Norman quickly corrected himself.

Sadie withdrew the hypodermic and dropped it on the table. As she got up to grab a tissue, Norman quickly put the cap back onto it and pocketed it and the phial.

“What’s our plan?” she asked him.

“What?” Norman asked. “What do you mean?”

She laughed at him. It hurt because she was really laughing at him. “Dad, you’re so stupid. You come here to tell me that everyone’s going to die tomorrow night and you don’t have a plan? How are we going to survive?”

He considered that for a moment, then shook his head. “I hadn’t thought about it,” he said.

“Well, you better think about it. And keep in touch.”

She was throwing him out. The whole thing struck him as extremely odd. She was taking this much better than he had anticipated. Just the fact that she believed him was a miracle. Why wasn’t she insisting on telling Jean? Why wasn’t she going to the authorities? Why was she so accepting of the fact that they were going to survive the apocalypse?

Because she was his daughter. That’s why.

Getting up from the table, Norman made sure that the needle and phial were secure in his pocket and then left the kitchen. On his way to the door, he said, *Goodbye, Jean* in a way that he’d never said it before.

Norman considered going back to work after that, but decided against it. Sadie was right about him being stupid. He had no plan whatsoever. In less than twenty four hours, the entire population of Earth would be dead or dying. They would lose power and phone service. They would lose running water. All of the conveniences to which they’d become so accustomed would be gone. Norman didn’t know how to grow food or raise cattle. He didn’t know how to build a house or even sew. He was extremely ill-equipped to survive in the wilderness that the world was about to become. Would the pathogen affect animals as well? If not, dogs would go feral in a very short time. He would have to learn to fight. Perhaps he should try to find some guns.

He did not try to find some guns. Instead, he found an all night fast food restaurant and had a meal that he would likely never have again. He went to a twenty four hour department store and spent two thousand dollars on clothing and bottled water and canned food.

“Something I should know about?” the cashier asked jokingly.

Norman looked at him and saw a dead man. He shook his head.

It was tough to fit everything inside of his car, but he managed it. It was starting to brighten up when he finished unloading at his apartment. He looked around at his home and wondered where he would be living tomorrow. The apartment wouldn't do. Not for him and Sadie. He figured he'd probably just move back into the house or take one of the houses on the block. He could take any one he wanted. Hell, Sadie could take one, too. There was no reason for her to stay in her own house if she decided she liked another one better. At any rate, Norman would need a truck to move all of his stuff. For some reason, it didn't occur to him that he could just take one of those, too. No, he was determined to buy one. But as he began to get ready to go out again, he grew very sleepy. It had been a long and troubling night. A nap would do him good. So he lay down in his bed and slept a dreamless sleep.

Norman was used to going to sleep with the rising sun. It was a better option than sleeping later and trying to wake up for work. Normally, he would get to bed around seven or seven thirty and sleep until three or four. That would give him six or seven hours until his shift began. There was something surreal about having a schedule that didn't coincide with the rest of the world. As he was just getting out of the house, most people were thinking about the ends of their work days. They were thinking about the commute home and dinner and nightly television. Norman had none of those things on his mind. His commute was against traffic. His dinner was usually eaten before most people had their breakfasts and his breakfast was before most people's dinners. Prime time television was for children and the elderly. Norman had no use for it.

In a way, Norman's lifestyle had uniquely prepared him for what was to come. Unlike DeMarco, he did not shy away from human contact. He missed being part of a family. And yet, it had been so long since he'd been able to maintain any kind of personal relationship that he had just grown accustomed to it. So he didn't look forward to the future with any sort of fear. The isolation would be good for him.

He slept a long time. It was a good sleep, the kind of sleep he had not experienced in years. Perhaps it was the work his body was doing to purge itself of the infection. Perhaps it was the emotional strain. Whatever it was, Norman slept almost fourteen hours. The light had gone from the sky and, though it wasn't quite evident yet, it had begun to fade from the world.

The clock read almost nine. He rolled over and switched on the television. There was a newscaster giving the weather. The other channels were showing their regularly scheduled programs. Had it all been the demented illusion of a mad scientist? But no. The weatherman wasn't himself. His speech was a bit slurred. He made a couple of mistakes with the giant screen behind him.

Starting to feel apprehensive, Norman went in for a quick shower and then checked his phone. There was a missed call from Sadie. He called her right back. Jean was sick. Sadie was worried. Norman told her to keep calm, comfort her mother, and he would be there as soon as he could. He needed to go to *Biozem* and see DeMarco.

Coming out of the apartment, Norman saw his neighbor. Waxman was an elderly black man who had grown up in New York. Though Norman didn't know a lot about Waxman, including his first name, he'd heard the man talk about his days as a gang warrior and drug runner. It all seemed out of place with Waxman's persona, which was generally soft spoken and good natured.

"Evening, Norm," Waxman greeted. He was leaning on his cane, but didn't seem at all sick.

"Hey," Norman responded. Then an idea occurred to him. "Waxman, do you think I could borrow your truck?"

Waxman eyed him queerly. It was an odd request from someone who couldn't really be considered a close friend.

"I need to move some stuff. I'll have it back after work, around seven. You can have my car in case of emergencies."

Waxman shrugged and went inside. A moment later, he came back out. They exchanged keys and, with a word of thanks, Norman headed down the stairs and out the door.

The streets were empty. While it was late for a lot of people to be out, he had never seen it so quiet. He thought it must have meant that people were sick everywhere. Just like Jean.

As he pulled into the lot at *Biozem*, he noticed that there were only a few cars there. He pulled the truck up to the front, turned it off, and got out. The front door was locked, but he had a key. As he entered the great lobby, he recognized that it felt emptier than ever.

"Who's that?" came a voice from above. Looking up, Norman saw Dr. Eddings leaning over the third floor wall. "What are you doing here, Norman?"

Norman swallowed hard. "I'm due in at ten."

"Sure, but... Aren't you sick?"

Norman couldn't see Eddings' face from three stories down, but he could hear the confusion in his voice.

"No," Norman answered. "Are you?"

"No. I'm... Maybe it's not as bad as I thought." He turned away from the wall and retreated back toward the labs.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Norman made for the elevators. He tapped his foot nervously, not wanting to run into anyone else before he got to see DeMarco. He was grateful when the elevator door opened up to an empty car. Stepping inside, he pushed the button for six. Normally, he would stop at the second floor for his cart and then head up to eight to start his work. Not today. Not ever again.

The elevator went straight up without stopping. More good luck on this, the last day of civilization. The floor was dark under the nighttime lights. Norman went straight to DeMarco's lab and knocked.

There was no answer.

Wouldn't that be the icing on the cake? Here was Norman Land, cured of this plague that was just beginning to take its toll on the human race, waiting to see his savior, the man that had instructed him to come, and he'd been stood up.

There was a noise from behind the door.

Confused, Norman knocked again. "Jean-Claude?"

The noise grew louder, but no one came to the door. Sucking in his lips, Norman reached for the keys on his belt. He sifted through them until he found the master for the labs. Then he remembered that DeMarco had had the lock changed so that his didn't match any of the others in the building. Frustrated, Norman gripped the handle and turned it. DeMarco had left it unlocked.

As the door swung open, Norman was struck by two things. The first was the foul odor that emanated from somewhere inside. Once, when Norman had been a boy, he'd unearthed a litter of dead kittens. They'd been strays. The mother must have been killed and they'd starved to death. They had been young Norman's first real experience with death. The kittens had given off an odor that he would never forget. This was that odor.

The second thing was much heavier, and solid. It took him from the side, pushing him away from the door and into the room. The door swung shut. So confounded by the event was Norman that he didn't even realize he was being attacked until he felt the pain in his shoulder. It felt like something was taking a bite out of him. He couldn't imagine what it was. He had a fleeting concern for DeMarco's safety before he was forced to defend himself.

Shoving at the snarling and hissing thing, he managed to extricate himself. He finally put some distance between himself and his attacker but it wasn't enough. The thing was relentless. Still, he had just enough time to see that his attacker was, in fact, DeMarco. His friend looked but a shadow of himself. The difference between today and yesterday was startling. DeMarco's hair, which had grown long, was now tousled and dirty. His carefully groomed goatee was uncombed and showed bits of detritus through the strands. More than anything, though, it was the eyes that Norman noticed. It would have been one thing to classify DeMarco as a lunatic, but the eyes told a different story. The manic and ravenous thing charging Norman at that very minute was hardly the result of dementia. DeMarco was dead.

And still coming.

As Norman raised his arms in defense, his left shoulder protested. Whatever damage DeMarco had done with his bite had just torn open a bit wider. The blood soaked the wound and began to

drip. With his good right arm, Norman pushed back. DeMarco was strong but not coordinated. Norman was fighting to keep him at bay while scanning the lab for a weapon. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of a fire extinguisher. It wasn't the ideal weapon for fighting what could only be classified as a zombie, but it would have to do. With a great heave, he pushed himself away from DeMarco and lunged for it. It was heavier than he imagined and he wound up dropping it, but there, hidden away, was a fire axe. Grabbing it off of the track, he swung it with all of his strength. The blade plunged into his friend's neck, practically separating the arm at the shoulder. DeMarco reeled backward, blood belching from the wound.

Huffing and puffing, Norman fell back against one of the lab benches. The thing that had been Jean-Claude DeMarco struggled to right itself so that it could once again attack.

"What have you become?" Norman muttered to himself. He didn't know what to do. Outside that room, the world was sick with a plague that was supposed to have made its creator invincible. But the creator was dead. Worse than that, he was undead. Norman considered the frightening thought that this was going to happen to everyone who had contracted the plague. Instead of just dying, they were going to become these savage creatures, bent on devouring the world, one survivor at a time. Surely not, though. DeMarco's plague had been engineered using his own DNA. However it affected him was likely to be vastly different from the way it affected the rest of the victims. No. Of course, all of corpses resulting from the day would be the standard inert kind.

The DeMarco thing lifted its wounded arm and Norman could see that the wound had partially repaired itself. That was just what he needed. A vicious dead thing that healed itself in a matter of seconds. Before it could gather its strength, Norman raised the axe and charged.

His first swing finished the job on the arm, albeit messily. The appendage fell to the floor with a sickening sound, a small sliver of it still attached to the shoulder. DeMarco didn't seem to notice. He continued his advance, swinging at the remaining arm, the right one, in a vertical arc. Norman didn't see that there was any real danger. Now that he had recovered from the initial shock of being attacked by a dead man, he found that there was little chance of him coming to any more harm. His shoulder throbbed, but the wound wasn't anything a few stitches couldn't take care of. Of course, in a few hours time, where would he get stitches?

As DeMarco came in for another attack, Norman swung the axe again. This time, the blade sliced into the zombie's pelvis, leaving a deep gouge. He, it... whatever... stumbled to the side, unable to regain the modicum of coordination it had been displaying. DeMarco didn't seem to feel any pain, though. The whole thing was unnerving.

Capitalizing on his advantage, Norman stepped in and swung the axe again. The blade found the opening, cutting deeper into DeMarco's body. He fell over, unable to move. The axe had cut through his spine, but he was still thrashing about with his good arm. He was still spitting and hissing like an angry cat. Panting, Norman finished the job, cutting clean through the remaining tissue. The doctor's top half slipped away from his bottom half.

And, still, it lived.

Norman couldn't believe what was happening. While the legs were motionless, the top half of DeMarco turned itself over and continued its advance. For a few moments, Norman just watched as this thing made its way toward him, fingers gripping the floor in an effort to drag it forward half an inch at a time.

Then he couldn't take it anymore. He chopped off the other arm. When the torso continued flopping around, he hefted the axe high in the air and brought it down with all of his strength. In one clean motion, it severed the head at the neck and all was quiet.

Alone now, Norman had a chance to check his own wound. Stitches were out, as they would require a medical professional's skilled hand. It wasn't that terrible of a wound, though. Stripping off his shirt, he poured a generous amount of rubbing alcohol over his shoulder and affixed a gauze patch.

He didn't know what to do now. The room was a gory mess. It looked like the well used set of a slasher movie. Taking out his phone, Norman dialed Sadie on her cell. She answered in a huff, wanting to know when he was going to arrive. He gave the room another long look. It was going to be a while.

Sadie was still all right, but Jean's condition was worsening. Once again, Norman considered the possibility of all of the sick becoming undead horrors like DeMarco. He told Sadie what had happened. Again he was surprised at her complete lack of doubt. He warned her that the same thing might be in store for her mother. Sadie took the news with a calm acceptance and asked her father to hurry up.

Norman put the phone away and began rummaging around the lab for medical supplies. He packed what he could find into plastic boxes. As he did so, he discovered DeMarco's notebooks. You would think that a genius such as the mad doctor would have kept all of his notes digitally, but no. Everything was written in his careful hand into marble notebooks. It only added to the mad scientist impression.

It wasn't that Norman had any notion that he might understand DeMarco's notes, rather he was more curious to find out whether or not the doctor had written anything that wasn't technical. He had. In fact, most of what he had written over the last three weeks, the three weeks since Norman had discovered him hovering outside of his lab, had been non-technical ramblings. In fact, he had rambled on so much that he had filled four notebooks with material. Norman was both horrified and inspired by what he read. Much of the first book spoke about him. DeMarco went on and on about the possibility of customizing the parasite so that it would grant another the same invulnerabilities it gave him. As the minutes and then the hours passed, Norman read with growing terror, wondering what had been done to him and, by extension, to Sadie.

In the second notebook, DeMarco's language changed drastically. His early notes, even those that did not illustrate some sort of medical experiment, were easy to comprehend. Now, though, Norman was finding that the tone of the text was almost prophetic in nature. DeMarco often likened himself to a god and eventually started referring to himself as such. The second

notebook contained little text concerning Norman, which was frustrating. He was still hungry for more information.

By the end of the second book, DeMarco had acknowledged the likelihood of survivors. He suggested that the immune systems of some people might be strong enough to purge the dormant parasite from the body. Once activated, the organism would no longer be communicable like a virus. It would take a fluid connection to move. He wrote about the parasite in its various stages of development which he labeled, dormant, active, juvenile, mature, and venerable. There were all sorts of notes about each stage, but they were scattered throughout the pages. Even if he'd had the education to understand them, Norman wasn't sure he'd be able to piece them all together. Intermittently, there would be some further mention of Norman and the serum DeMarco had been developing. But his orations regarding his godhood grew longer and more decisive. He began to start referring to the potential survivors as his flock. There were pages and pages of permutations regarding the percentage of the population that could successfully battle off the parasite in its various stages. Of course, at the mature stage it would be too big to move to another body. Its need for food would be so great that it would start devouring the host. A venerable parasite might only last days.

In the fourth book, DeMarco's handwriting began to deteriorate. Sometimes Norman would agonize for long minutes over a word or sentence thinking it was important enough for him to take the time to decipher it. Sometimes it was. Otherwise it was more nonsensical ramblings.

Finally, toward the end, Norman discovered what he'd been looking for. The dates of the entries had long since been absent but there was evidence that DeMarco had been living in the lab. There were more and more pages about DeMarco and the Word of DeMarco. Norman was given frequent mentions, first as a prophet. Soon he came to be labeled the Bishop. It happened so abruptly that Norman didn't even realize that the passages were referring to him. Only when DeMarco found his way back around to the serum did he put the two together.

"The Bishop must be immune to the parasite in all of its stages. He cannot grow ill lest he be unable to deliver the Word. He cannot grow powerful lest he think to overthrow Me."

Norman experienced a brief resentment. It seemed clear that DeMarco could have engineered a symbiote for him and had chosen not to. He apparently had high hopes of keeping Norman at his side as some kind of servant.

Fat chance of that, Norman thought as he looked at the dismembered body on the floor. DeMarco's plan of immortality had gone straight to hell. It seemed that the Bishop and his daughter were going to inherit the Earth. Maybe the survivors would flock to them.

But even as he was thinking that, he noticed something. DeMarco's head, sliced cleanly at the neck, was moving. The eyes were still glazed and dead, but the nostrils were flaring. The mouth was moving. Norman stood carefully from the desk and approached. He winced as he moved his left arm. The gauze patch was brown with dried blood. A quick look at the clock showed that it was almost three in the morning. He had been reading DeMarco's notebooks for hours.

Refocusing, he knelt beside the head and leaned in close. It seemed to sense him and the muscles began to tense and flex, especially those around the mouth.

"Jean-Claude?" Norman whispered.

The mouth snapped open and shut, uttering this horrible choking sound. Norman reeled back despite himself. Without the rest of the body, DeMarco's head was hardly dangerous. Then, as if it just occurred to him, Norman took a quick look at the remaining body parts. He'd half expected them to be alive and making their deadly way toward him. But, no. That would be ridiculous. They were dead pieces of a dead man.

Or were they?

The ringing of his phone startled him out of his reverie. He looked at it and saw that it was Sadie. He quickly answered.

"Where the hell are you?" she snapped at him.

"What?" he asked.

"You'd better not run out on me. Have you watched the news?"

"No. I wouldn't do that, Sadie."

She breathed. "Everyone's sick everywhere. Mom's really bad. She can't even speak anymore."

"I'm sorry, Sadie," he said and felt tears coming.

"Sorry? What are you sorry about? You saved my life. Just get over here so we can figure out what the plan is."

Norman looked around the room and remembered what he had been doing when he'd discovered the notebooks. "Okay. Give me about an hour."

"An hour? To do what?"

"I need to get some stuff from work. It's important."

She huffed at him, not sure what could be so important when, in a few hours, they'd be able to do whatever they wanted. Still, Norman was beginning to recover from his high of being named Bishop and starting to face the reality of the situation. Survivors would not flock to him. In the end he would just be Norman Land, an upper middle aged janitor who had no survival skills to speak of.

Hanging up the phone, he left the office and headed to the wall to look out at the lobby. Everything was dark. He locked up DeMarco's lab with a key he found in the scientist's pants

pocket and went to the elevator. It came quickly and took him to the second floor. He grabbed his cart from the maintenance closet and headed back upstairs.

As expected the lab was undisturbed. For all he knew he was alone in the building. Dr. Eddings, even if he hadn't gotten sick, had probably headed out as soon as he realized what was going on. Still, just as a precaution, he pushed his cart inside and closed and locked the door behind him.

The two legs and pelvis were too big to fit in one of the garbage bags. Even the industrial strength black bags weren't large enough. Using the axe, Norman chopped the right leg off. Rigor had set in, making it tough to bend the legs at the knees, but he managed it. He didn't feel like having to cut all of the parts up. Near as he could tell, the fewer parts there were the better. According to what he had managed to understand from the ramblings therein, there might yet have been some hope for the mad doctor.

It took him another twenty minutes to bag up all of DeMarco's parts and load them onto his cart. Then he put the boxes of medical supplies on, grabbed the books, and got on his way.

The cart was difficult to push. It was not built for the weight Norman had loaded onto it. He wove back and forth as he steered it to the elevator. Ultimately, though, he managed it down to the ground floor and out the front door. He heard a noise behind him as he exited the building and looked up to see Eddings on the third floor. The doctor was calling him, but he didn't respond. He hurried out to the lot, locking the glass doors behind him.

He felt a little bad about using Waxman's pickup truck to move a dead body. Of course Waxman himself was probably either dead or dying. He pictured the old man suffering in his bed and felt a little bad for him. He suddenly felt a little bad for everyone who was going to be dead in a few hours. He felt guilty, not so much for surviving, but because he knew that he should have been one of the victims. If not for DeMarco's divine intervention...

Maybe DeMarco was a god...of sorts.

He had just about finished loading the truck when he was startled by a car pulling into the lot. Hurrying, he began loading the parts into the pickup. The car parked in a spot and he heard someone get out.

"Hello?" a voice called.

Norman peaked up over the side of the truck. The caller, Dr. Matt Baker jumped back.

"Norm," Baker breathed after a moment. "You scared the crap out of me."

"Sorry, Dr. Baker. Are you all right?"

Baker ran a hand through his hair and circled around to absently stroke his goatee. "Yeah, fine. You okay?"

"I'm not sick," Norman said, sounding a bit too guilty in his own ears.

"What are you doing here?"

"You'll have to call Dr. Eddings to get inside," Norman said. "There's no security staff so the door is locked."

"Can't you let me in?"

"I've got to go to my daughter." Norman slipped into the truck and started it up. Baker took a step forward but didn't seem to have anything to say. He just stood and watched as Norman pulled the truck out of the spot and then picked up speed as he exited the lot.

The road seemed more desolate than ever. Bouncing around in Waxman's truck, Norman felt as if he was the only healthy person on a dying planet. The feeling was eerie and surreal. Somehow, his knowledge of the creation of the plague that was, at that very moment, consuming the world, made him feel unique, even among the potential survivors. The way he felt about everything had changed. Everyone is the protagonist in the story of his own life, but now Norman felt as if he was a protagonist in everyone's life. He had transcended this life and taken his place at the top of the world.

No, he corrected himself. Jean-Claude has granted me my place.

Once again, he was thinking of DeMarco as something divine.

A bus rolled past him. He saw a serious faced black man at the wheel. Sitting in the very first passenger seat was a young woman with a flat topped cap. She, too, looked serious. Neither of them was sick.

Arriving at the house, Norman stopped the truck and got out. He sniffed at the air. It smelled different. There were lights on in some of the houses, but most were dark. People had probably gone to sleep feeling ill and hoping they'd be well enough for work in the morning. Norman wondered whether they would awaken to the pain of the illness or sleep right through it, passing peacefully into death.

"Where the hell have you been?" Sadie was standing at the door with her arms folded across her chest. She had a stern look on her face that reminded Norman too much of Jean.

"Let's go inside," he replied, suddenly feeling cold.

Once in the house, they sat at the kitchen table and drank coffee while Norman filled his daughter in on the events at *Biozem*. As he talked he watched Sadie for any signs of fear or concern. She continued to amaze him with her acceptance and quick thinking. She responded to his story with questions and suggestions. It took almost as long to tell the story as it had to read the journal. By the time Norman was finished, the sun had just been reborn into the sky.

Other things had been reborn as well.

"Did you hear that?" Norman asked.

Sadie was just taking a muffin out of the toaster. She stopped and listened. It sounded like someone was walking around upstairs.

"Do you think your mom got out of bed?" Norman asked.

Sadie shook her head, doubtful of her own senses. "She was pretty sick when you showed up. I'd have thought she'd be dead by now."

Norman paused, looking at his daughter. It had been a long time since he'd felt anything for Jean beyond ambivalence or resentment, but to hear Sadie speak so coldly of her death was like a slap in the face. For a moment, he was afraid of her.

"What?" Sadie asked when he wouldn't stop staring at her.

He shook it off. "Let's have a look."

Together, they went up the stairs. They didn't try to be careful. They weren't worried about the possibility that Jean had pulled through. In fact, Norman was beginning to hope that it was all going to blow over. Maybe everyone was getting better and their lives would return to normal. Glancing behind him, he looked through the window on the top of the front door. Halfway up the stairs, his angle gave him a modest view of the street. Sure enough, someone was walking around outside.

"You know," he began, turning back to Sadie. She had reached the top of the stairs and was calling out for her mother. Norman never got to finish his question as Jean came stumbling out of the bedroom and attacked Sadie. All at once, he understood that what he had experienced with DeMarco had not been isolated to the plague's creator. It was going to happen to everyone. A giant percentage of the world's population was going to die and come back. And they would all be these aggressive and ravenous creatures.

"Help me!" Sadie cried out, though not in fear. Her plea was mostly an admonishment of her father for being so useless in the face of her danger. Meanwhile, it didn't seem like she really needed any help. Though Jean had managed to scratch and nip her daughter in a couple of places, she was mostly inept as a predator. Sadie had managed to get her at arms length and was delivering some really expert punches to her mother's face. Still, Norman came up to the top of the stairs and helped push Jean back until she was in the bedroom again. Then they slammed the door shut against her angry hisses and snarls.

When it was over, the two of them stood panting in the hallway. Norman began to think about what it had been like fighting with DeMarco. He compared that to their struggle with Jean and then related it to the person he had seen walking in the street and, ultimately, all of the people who had gotten sick and died.

"Oh, my God," he whispered.

Running back down the stairs, he flung open the front door and looked out onto the street. It was well populated. People were simply wandering about in their pajamas. Their arms hung loosely at their sides and they dragged their feet across the ground as if they were perpetual sleepwalkers. Some of them he recognized as neighbors from long ago. Others were just faces in the crowd that turned to look at him looking at them.

"No," he moaned. "Why would you do this?"

A few of them were sniffing at the truck, poking through the bags in back. They seemed very interested in what was inside. They were interested in DeMarco's pieces.

Without a conscious thought, Norman stepped out onto the front step and began shouting for them to get away and leave his things alone. Though they had no interest in his words, they certainly took an interest in him. Many of them began moving toward the house at a much quicker rate.

"Come back inside," Sadie shouted over the pounding from the bedroom upstairs.

Norman hesitated, not fully understanding what was happening. There were so many of them and they were all coming toward him. Yet, they had no interest in each other.

"Get away!" he cried. "Why won't you listen to me?"

Sadie came charging down the stairs and out the door. Grabbing her father by his arm, she yanked him back into the house and slammed the front door shut just as the first of the dead was mounting the bottom step. In two seconds, there was banging.

"What are we going to do?" Norman asked.

"We've got to get out of here," said Sadie.

The front window broke.

Norman looked over at it briefly, noted the arms that pushed through. They didn't seem to feel pain. Despite the jagged glass shards and the trails of blood that appeared against their flesh, they just kept coming.

"Come on," Sadie said, tugging on his arm.

"Where are we going to go?" he asked. "We can't live like this."

Arms had been joined by legs. The entire front display was in a shambles. Jean had never liked it anyway. She had always wanted a bay window.

"Daddy, please," Sadie said and Norman was moved. She hadn't called him daddy in so long. In fact, he had forgotten what it meant to be a father. The role he had been playing for years and

years was almost as an understudy to a parent. He remembered wanting children. He remembered the joy he had felt at Sadie's birth and the honor he had done her with his mother's name.

He turned away from the window as the first of the spitting monstrosities stepped through. He followed Sadie past the kitchen and to the back door. There was a small table with a drawer there and Sadie paused just long enough to open the drawer and pull out a tiny six shooter.

"What is that?" Norman shouted. "Where did you get that?"

"Relax, Dad," she said as she grabbed up a box of bullets and put it in her pocket. "It's Mom's gun. I didn't even know it was here."

One way or other, who owned the gun was irrelevant. It was Sadie's now and Norman had the feeling he was going to be glad that she had it.

Leading him out the back door, she checked every side for signs of life. Next door, there was a rustling in the yard. Shielded by the fence, it could have been a stray cat or dog or it could have been her next door neighbor. Sadie didn't care to check and Norman didn't argue. She led him around the narrow side, moving carefully and, he noted, silently. The dead would be swarming inside the house by now. They hadn't had much time.

"Have you got your keys?" Sadie whispered as they reached the edge of the wall.

It was a fine time to ask, but Norman let it go, simply nodding.

Peeking around the side, they could see that the crowd had thinned out a bit. A lot of the dead were up by the door and scrambling through the remains of the front window. Still, there were three of them rummaging around in the back of the truck. Next to one of the tires was one of the black bags Norman had used to gather up the pieces of DeMarco. It was shredded. The leg that had been in there, the one with most of his waist still attached, was laying in the street a few feet away. There were three dead people huddled around it. They were poking at it with what appeared to be confusion, but Norman felt that that was just his own interpretation. These creatures, whatever they had become since giving over the human parts of themselves to death, didn't seem to have enough of a capacity for thought to allow any room for something like confusion.

"Ugh," said Sadie. "Why on Earth did you bring his...parts?"

"I don't know," Norman answered, seeing DeMarco's dead face on everyone in the area.

"Well we're not stopping to pick up the pieces."

"I thought we might be able to help him."

She ignored him, instead ordering him to follow her lead. Without hesitation, she moved quickly into the street and headed straight for the truck. Norman scrambled to keep up. The street was by no means clear, but it wasn't as congested as it had been before. Much of the crowd had gone to visit them inside. It would be up to Jean to entertain them.

Fumbling the keys out of his pocket, Norman hit the button to unlock the truck. The light in the cabin came on, attracting the attention of the nearest dead people. They moved around to investigate, finally noticing the approaching Lands.

Norman wondered how they could tell the difference between the living and the dead. Was it the way they moved or the way they smelled? Did the dead have some extra sense of which the living couldn't even conceive?

Sadie fired off two rounds in an attempt to clear the doors. She was a terrible shot. Her first bullet hit the one by Norman's door in the shoulder. The man didn't even seem to notice. Her other shot went wide, pinging off of the door itself. Both Norman and Sadie had to shove the dead people away in order to get inside. Though the creatures were clumsy, it was clear right away that anyone would be utterly consumed if caught inside a mob.

When Norman started the engine, the people at the house all turned and began scrambling back. Others came falling through the broken window. One, a middle aged man in a dirty white t-shirt and Cookie Monster pajama pants, came forward with such vigor that he set himself apart from the rest. He was waving his arms and salivating grotesquely. He pushed through his brethren, knocking them over and stomping on them to get through. Norman didn't wait to see just how fast he could reach the truck. He put it in gear and skidded away from the curb. Sadie turned to look back as they drove away.

"Goodbye, Mom," she said under her breath. To Norman, it sounded a little sad.

They drove for a while in silence. Norman didn't really know where he was going. He had left all of the things he'd bought back at his apartment but was now afraid to go back there. To be honest, he was afraid to go anywhere. It was one thing to prepare for solitude in the wake of the dying Earth. It was quite another to have to worry about defending oneself against the hostile dead.

It was Sadie who finally said, "We should look for some other survivors."

Norman shook his head. "We can't do that. We're responsible for this."

"How are we responsible? So we knew it was coming a day early? No one's going to know that. Your crazy friend DeMarco made the damned thing. He's responsible."

Norman opened his mouth to argue further, but Sadie cut him off. "Let's head to the city."

"The city will be crawling with those...things," Norman argued.

"Well...we won't go downtown. We'll hit the areas around it, see if we can figure out where people might be holed up."

"What makes you think they'll want extra people with them?"

"It's now or never, Dad. If we wait until people are settled in and rationing their food, we'll be stuck on our own."

"Maybe that's for the best." What Norman wasn't saying was that he was sure that there was more to their role in this disaster than what was visible on the surface. Despite his fear of the dead and utter shock at the extent of what was transpiring, he hadn't forgotten what he had read in DeMarco's journal. More and more he was beginning to think of those words as teachings and more and more he was beginning to think of himself as the Bishop.

But he did as Sadie suggested. Though the serum given to them by DeMarco had made them something more than human, it had not granted them immortality. Norman's shoulder ached and his belly was beginning to grumble. He had to go to the bathroom.

It was getting close to nine o'clock when they got off the highway and started moving through the ring of suburbs and apartment complexes.

"What is that, a roadblock?" Norman said out loud.

Coming up at the end of the street there was a line of cars parked across the expanse so that he could not get through. They were not police cars and there didn't seem to be any rhyme or reason to their arrangement. There were, however, several bodies lying on the ground. Norman noted that they had all been killed violently. Most were in their pajamas. Every single one of them had a vicious head wound.

Sadie was putting more bullets into the gun.

"What are you doing?" Norman asked her.

"Not dying."

"I should just..." He was about to say go back when two more cars pulled up behind them, blocking their path. Two people got out of the cars and two more came out of the shadows in front. They were young. Only one of them could have possibly been out of his teens. They each had a brand on their arms. The symbol looked like a top hat with three legs. Norman had seen it on the news. The area gang members wore it. One of the kids, a skinny boy who couldn't have been more than fifteen, had one that looked very fresh.

"Get out of the truck," the oldest one ordered them. He was tall and well built with dark, dark skin and wide, bright eyes. There was a malevolence there that frightened Norman more than the horde of undead that had swarmed them at the house. He told Sadie to stay where she was as he

reached over with one trembling hand and opened the door. He stepped out with his arms raised high.

"I don't want any trouble," Norman said to the man.

All the gang kids laughed at him.

"Course you don't." The man had a gun in his hand. Norman didn't know anything about guns, but he could tell that it was much more powerful than the small caliber six shooter Sadie had scavenged from the house. It had a thick grip that held a magazine. Norman didn't know how many bullets it held, but one would probably be enough.

"We don't have any money," Norman told them and was answered once again by a chorus of laughter.

"Dude, are you stupid?" the man berated him. "What the hell am I gonna do with money in this world? I see you got bags of stuff in your pickup and one fine thing in the front."

It took a moment for Norman to realize that the man was referring to Sadie. He was appalled.

"I don't think you'll want what's in those bags," Norman said.

With a slight jerk of his head, the man commanded one of his child soldiers to check it out. Norman fidgeted nervously while the latin youth with raven black hair climbed into the back of the pickup and began rooting around. In a moment he was leaning over the side throwing up his guts.

Norman was embarrassed.

The man with the gun was confused for a moment but regained his composure quickly. "What you got in there, man?"

Norman swallowed hard. "Parts."

"Parts?" the man parroted in annoyance. "What the hell does that mean? What kind of parts? Car parts? Computer parts?"

"Body parts," the youth in the truck choked.

The man looked toward his companion and then back at Norman again. He began to laugh. While that was going on, Sadie got out of the truck and positioned herself behind the open door. The man had just the barest of opportunities to shift his gaze toward her before she raised her six shooter and squeezed off a shot.

Sadie was a quick study. What she had learned about shooting from firing at the zombies was fresh in her mind. The bullet ripped into his right shoulder. She'd been aiming for his head.

This man, though, was no stranger to gunplay. He'd been shot four times in his young life. Each time, some quack that operated out of a basement in an apartment building had stitched him up. That dude was dead now, but there were probably plenty of other quacks that had survived the bug. Lord Brawn would take care of it.

Sadie's second shot hit him in the chest. He fell back against his own car and slipped to the ground. Norman stood stunned as she adjusted her aim and fired at the boy in the truck. This time her aim was true. The bullet went in through his eye and did just enough damage to make him forget who and what he was. It also stole his consciousness. He toppled to the pavement. Later, while still disoriented, he would be beset upon by a throng of zombies that would messily devour him.

The third gang member, who had done nothing up until that moment, moved forward. He was brandishing a piece of pipe and confident in his ability to use it, even against a gun wielding girl.

Sadie shot and missed.

Realizing what was going to ultimately occur, Norman charged forward. The boy with the pipe turned to meet him. He swung the pipe, which exploded against Norman's wounded shoulder. The pain was worse than anything he'd ever experienced. If it hadn't been for his forward momentum, he'd have dropped to the ground in tears. But physics was his friend today. Despite the pain, he slammed into the boy and the two of them went sprawling. Norman's shirt sleeve was wet from shoulder to elbow and his arm was numb, but the adrenaline coursing through his veins was fueling him better than any training could have. With his good right arm, he pounded on the boy's face. His numb left hand flailed about, but not uselessly. The gang warrior couldn't bring his pipe to bear again.

"Off! Get off of him!" someone was shouting. It took a couple of minutes for Norman to realize that it was Sadie. She was standing right above them. He rolled away and she fired her two last bullets into the boy, killing him.

Norman got to his feet while Sadie looked around for other assailants. There were none. The very young boy must have taken off, which probably meant that he'd be back with reinforcements. Of course, there might not be any reinforcements. Four kids and a gun was hardly the proper way to go about hijacking weary travelers. Norman supposed the plague had taken its toll on the gangs, too. They would be attempting to steal what they could and recruit whoever they could. Except, he figured, middle aged janitors.

"Check the cars," Sadie said running back to the truck. "And get his gun."

As Norman bent to take the gun from the young man, he noticed that he was still breathing.

"He's still alive," Norman called over to Sadie.

"That's his problem," she replied. She was reloading the gun as quickly as she could.

Norman took the handgun and hefted it. It felt awkward in his hands, but he supposed he would have to get used to it. Until he could assemble his congregation, he would need to be able to defend himself.

There was some ammunition in one of the cars. He was about to call out to Sadie, but she was busy moving the ones that were blocking their path. She didn't seem to care about where she put the cars so long as they were out of the way. Norman was wondering if they shouldn't trade the truck for something with more gas in it. He was starting to check the gang cars when he saw movement on the street. Instinctively, he raised the gun in case he had to defend himself, but realized how futile it would be. The person approaching was not a gang member, nor was he even alive. Neither was he alone.

For a brief moment, Norman thought about the world as it existed now. Maybe humans didn't have a right to it anymore. Perhaps in his quest to transform himself into a more superior creature, DeMarco had transformed everyone else. After all, the dead were living. The *dead* were *living*. And the living were simply dying and joining the ranks of the dead. Perhaps evolution, though aided by science, had taken an ironic twist.

Sadie, in a black sedan, hit the horn. There were dead people approaching from all sides. She wasn't about to get out of the car and go back to the truck. Norman started for her, then remembered DeMarco. Parts of him were still in Waxman's truck. He wanted to save those parts.

"What are you doing?" Sadie shouted at him through her window.

"I can't leave him."

With a cry of frustration, she threw the car into reverse and headed back toward him. Popping the trunk, she told him to grab one bag and hurry or she was leaving.

He grabbed the head.

The dead were really close as he slammed the trunk closed and went around to the passenger side of the car. In proximity of so many of them, he could smell the odor that they carried. It wasn't rot, per se. Maybe they were too fresh. It was more of a sour smell, like milk or yogurt that's been left out of the refrigerator for too long. He also noticed that a number of them were not in their pajamas. A lot of them were in clothing but had deep and bloody wounds as if they'd been attacked by the ravenous monsters. But Norman didn't have time to process that thought. Sadie was leaning on the horn now.

He got into the car and slammed the door shut.

"I don't know how we're going to get through this," Sadie mumbled.

She shifted the car into gear and hit the gas. The zombies had no interest in avoiding the car. They were not frightened, nor were they cautious. Sadie tried to avoid hitting any of them

directly. She didn't care about them. If she could have, she'd have melted them all where they stood. But she couldn't risk damaging the car. If the car wouldn't run then they would have to try to make it on foot. She didn't like their chances.

Weaving through the crowd, she sideswiped as many of them as possible. She was able to knock one into others and form a domino chain, but it wasn't enough. The gang roadblock, though partially cleared, had left them only a narrow opening which was now clogged with the dead. Sadie ran at it at top speed, then slammed on the brakes. The car skidded to a halt, slamming into the front line of zombies and sending them sprawling backwards. Shifting into reverse, she put as much distance between herself and the crowd as possible before running into what she thought of as the rear guard. Then she shot forward again. And again. And again.

Norman didn't watch the scene out the gore splattered windshield. He was far more interested in this young girl who had loved rainbows and princesses and had sung songs to mommy and daddy at the age of two. Now, twenty years later, her jaw was set, her determination was unmatched. There was a hard look in her eye that belied fear. The corners of her mouth were turned up in a slight smirk. She was enjoying this. The little girl was gone. She had been squashed long ago by anger and pain. This was why Sadie hadn't questioned the serum. This was why she had given up her mother so easily. It had nothing to do with what she believed. It was all about what she wanted, what her father had offered her.

Norman swelled with pride. His daughter, the high priestess.

Something caught under the car's chassis. It was probably a body. The front wheels were lifted off the ground and spun. Sadie let out a curse as she hit the gas harder and harder, but to no avail. They were stuck.

"Damn you!" she cried, turning to Norman. Spittle flew from her lips. "It's just a dead body!"

He didn't even realize that she was admonishing him for taking the time to grab DeMarco's head. He thought for sure she was directing her rage at the thing caught beneath their wheels.

All at once there was a crash and a flame erupted in front of the car. The zombies surrounding them caught fire quickly. Just twenty four hours before, these were regular people living their regular lives. Now they were flaming bits of animal flesh that pressed on and on.

"Let's go," Sadie breathed, reaching for the door.

Norman didn't understand what had happened. As Sadie got out of the car and began beating back the last few zombies that could still put up a fight, Norman leaned over and popped the trunk. He wasn't leaving without DeMarco's head.

There was another puff of flame and the rear guard went up. Toting the black garbage bag over his shoulder, Norman followed Sadie through the thickening smoke.

"This way," a voice floated through the smoke. They followed it, more wary of the living than the dead. Sadie had her pistol at her side. The way she was holding it demonstrated a willingness to use it that Norman would never be able to emulate. He suddenly realized that he had the handgun he had taken off of the gang man still clutched in his left hand. There were two magazines in his back pocket. He didn't know how to load them. He'd seen people do it in the movies. Pop the spent cartridge and slap in the new one. Easy, right? He supposed he'd be able to figure it out.

In a minute's time, they found their way through the smoke and joined the source of the voice. The man who had saved them was tall and well built. He had dark brown hair which, while not long, looked like it desperately needed to be cut. One lens of his glasses had a crack in it. The frames looked like they had been twisted and then twisted back. In his hand was a brown bottle with a piece of cloth sticking out of the top. Inside, they could just make out some indeterminate liquid sloshing around. It was tough to look at, but Norman thought it smelled like gasoline.

"This way," the man said to them and then began walking away.

After about a block, the smoke had cleared entirely. They moved through the streets on foot with the day getting older and brighter by the minute. As they moved, the man kept a watchful eye on the street. He clutched the bottle tightly in his left hand. In his right there was a cheap cigarette lighter. Norman was a little disappointed that it had taken him so long to recognize the bottle for what it was. A molotov cocktail.

A small group of people appeared about a block away. Their guide gave them a glance and then turned the other way.

"Don't worry," he said. "At this distance, they won't be able to differentiate between us and other zombies."

"How do you know that?" Sadie asked him dubiously.

"I've been doing research all morning. Keep your voice down."

They moved further away. Along their route, they ran into several groups of the dead. On a couple of occasions, the man ignited the lighter, but never lit the cocktail. He stopped at a crossroads, then made a left. He led them down an alley between some stores to where there was a row of service entrances. They all looked sealed up tight.

"Here," he said, pulling the heavy handle on one of the metal doors. It pulled silently open and he ushered them inside.

Norman and Sadie went a few feet and then waited as he pulled the door shut. It was dark.

"The power's out finally," he said. Still, despite the dark, he strode right past them and into the shop.

They were in a small pharmacy. It was privately run, rather than being part of a large chain. There was a gate on the front, but it wasn't completely solid. The noontime light filtered through. As Norman and Sadie came in, they were struck by the state of the store. Shelves had been toppled and goods scattered. There was a lot of debris in front of the window which both prevented them from having a good view of the street and prevented anyone on the street from being able to see inside. It was clear that the destruction had been intentional.

Practically ignoring them, the man began rooting through some of the items on the floor. He didn't seem to be looking for anything specific, just looking.

"Who are you?" Sadie demanded.

The man looked up at her with his cracked glasses. "Wes," he said.

"Well that explains it."

"Sadie, please," Norman said to her. "This man saved our lives."

The man looked at Norman. "Your shoulder looks bad. You'd better find something to put on it."

Norman looked at the chaos, not knowing where to begin.

"I guess I can find something for you," Wes said and began looking in a different area. "Is it a bite wound?"

"As a matter of fact it is."

"Oh," Wes said with a smirk. "Never mind then."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Sadie shouted at him..

"Keep your voice down," he told her. "There are worse things than dead people out there."

"Just answer my question," she told him, but she lowered her voice.

He nodded, chuckling oddly to himself. Then he checked the time using the wristwatch on his left arm. "The bite is infectious."

"But we're immune," Norman said.

Wes chuckled some more. It was irritating. Sadie found herself wishing that he would just give up the charade and laugh already. "We were immune. Now it's changed. I've seen it. If you get bitten, you get sick soon after. Then you die. Then you undie."

Sadie looked at Norman with a frightened and accusing expression. "You don't understand," Norman said to Wes calmly. "My daughter and I are immune. This wound is more than twelve hours old."

Wes stepped back to the wall and leaned against it. His hand went into his pocket. Sadie reacted by raising her gun. Wes looked at it once but paid it no further mind.

"You're lying," he said. When Norman didn't react like a liar, he studied the man more closely. "What's in the bag?"

The black bag was sitting on the floor at Norman's feet. In the dim light, the crumpled plastic rippled as whatever was inside of it moved about.

"That's the man who bit me."

Wes leaped forward. Sadie's hand tightened around the grip of the gun, but her father warned her. Wes reached the bag and yanked it open. With clearly no regard for his own safety, he reached inside and pulled out DeMarco's head. The eyes were still glazed over, but the mouth continued to move. The throat, too, just above the straight axe cut that had severed it from its body, was moving up and down in an undulating motion. Wes looked at it reverently for a few moments before placing it gently back inside the bag.

"He blessed you," Wes said to Norman.

Norman nodded.

Sadie thought they were both crazy.

Wes scrambled back to the debris and came up with a tube of antibiotic ointment. "I've been studying the creatures all day. I know more about this world than anyone. I offer you my knowledge, Holy One."

Sadie looked from Wes to Norman and back again. That Wes was clearly out of his mind didn't bother her. The apocalypse is enough to drive anyone over the edge. What concerned her, though, was her father's reaction to the madman's rantings. He had this clerical smile on his face. Then he said something that made her shiver.

"You may call me Bishop."

Wes thought a moment, then nodded. "Yes. That is fitting." Springing past the two of them, he went to the back door. "I'll go get food. Is there anything else you need?"

Norman shook his head.

Sadie just stared, dumbfounded. She had the good sense to wait until she heard the back door click before saying, "What the hell is up with you?"

Norman found himself a semi comfortable spot and sat down. "What do you mean?"

She laughed mirthlessly. "Come down from the heavens, Bishop. That guy's stark raving mad. Boy, he wasn't kidding when he said there are worse things than the dead."

"I wouldn't be so quick to judge," Norman told her.

She looked at him incredulously for a few moments. "Dad, are you actually buying into this whole crazy religious stuff? Do you really think you're blessed?"

"We are blessed," he corrected her unashamedly. "I'm not saying that DeMarco was a god or that there is a higher power than science involved, but you and I have been put into a very fortunate situation. With the end of civilization comes religion. It will be twisted in all manner of ways. Wes, I think, will not be unique in his beliefs."

"How is any of this supposed to be comforting?"

Norman was disappointed in his daughter's lack of foresight. He had believed that she was a smart, intuitive child. Still, she had proven herself strong and, to a certain extent, ruthless. Those were skills that he himself did not possess.

"Sadie, we can lead or we can follow."

She frowned. "Lead these fanatics? Lead them where? Dad, every religion comes with a promise. What's our promise? We can't make them all immune. We couldn't even save mom." That last came out with some hesitation, betraying some latent emotion.

"The promise isn't important," he said reverently. "The flock will decide what it is they need from us."

Sadie was skeptical. She wanted to run from him but was as much afraid of what roamed the streets as she was of her father right then. She wasn't sure if he was being clever or insane. Perhaps the two were meant to walk hand in hand.

She had run out of things to say. There were no more arguments. This was a moment of peace and with it came a turmoil greater than any she had yet faced. At least when she'd been waiting for her father and watching her mother die, she had been at home. There was something to the comfort of home even in the wake of catastrophic destruction. She found herself longing for that tiny townhouse now. It was certainly a far better place than this ransacked drug store. But, of course, it had been overrun with the resurrected abominations of her neighbors. Sadie no longer had a home. The way ahead was murky and dangerous. And she felt very alone.

After a few hours, Wes returned. His face was covered in some sort of blackish substance that she assumed was the result of an explosion. He was carrying a sack with canned goods in it. They ate them cold and they ate in silence. Wes looked at Norman often and at Sadie less often.

She glowered at him with menace in her eyes but she doubted that he was afraid of her. She doubted that he was afraid of anything.

They spent the next several days in the pharmacy under the care and guidance of Wes. He wasn't very forthcoming about who he was and where he'd come from, but Sadie managed to learn a few things about him. His last name was Trentin. With an "i", he told her. Not like the city in New Jersey. She couldn't have cared less. He was a chemist. She asked him what kind of work he'd done, but he didn't volunteer that information.

Meanwhile, the streets outside grew much worse. They only saw a handful of gang warriors. They wore the same colors as the ones who'd attacked them and all had the same brands. The streets, though, were dominated by the dead. With nothing else to do, Sadie would sit for hours in the shadows and just watch as the crowds collected and dispersed. That's what they did. By the dozens, dead people would wander into an area until there were just too many. Then, after bumping into one another for a while, they'd start to peel off the edges of the crowd until it was thin enough for them to start wandering in again. She tried to remember faces but it was impossible. There were so many of them.

We always took our breathing room for granted, she thought. Schedules and habits kept our streets clear and the circulation of the population flowing. Now, though, there are no schedules. The dead don't have any habits.

In many ways, it was all so peaceful. They were aggressive when there was food around, but when there was none, they acted very much like the lost souls they appeared to be.

One evening, Wes returned with a gift for Norman. Every time he went out, Sadie wished that he wouldn't return at all, but he was too good at what he did. His expertise with fire made him a formidable opponent for both the living and the dead. She supposed she should be grateful for his presence. At any rate, when she saw the gift, all objectivity fled. Wes had brought her father vestments.

Already, Norman had begun to let his beard grow in. It wasn't as if he couldn't have kept clean shaven. There were plenty of products available. In fact, he spent a long time keeping the blooming bushel of hair immaculately groomed. They couldn't shower and had to sneak into the alley to take care of their waste, but the Bishop's beard looked damned good.

When Wes pulled out the black priest's coat and the hat, Sadie was angered. When she took in her father's reaction to the gift, she was appalled. Whatever he had said about taking advantage of their immunity and the world around them had been a rationalization that he had clearly forsaken. The light that burned in his eyes whenever he looked upon his worshipper was even more terrifying than the world's current dominating species.

That night, Sadie snuck away. Her fear of the streets had been overshadowed by her disgust at Norman's behavior. It was time for her to make her own way. In truth, she had been thinking about it for quite some time. There had to be other survivors. All around the city, there were probably numerous tiny groups just like her own. She wasn't interested in them, though. She

was much more interested in linking up with a burgeoning community. There was safety in numbers. She began to try and think of the most defensible locations. A large group couldn't hide the same way that she and Norman and Wes had. They would have to be able to fight when necessary. They would also need more supplies. They would have to be concerned with hygiene and medical needs. She wanted to find those people and join them.

That it was dark didn't worry her. She chose a night with a bright moon and carried a flashlight and batteries just in case. She thought about taking a car, but decided against it. The noise would bring every hazard the streets had to offer right to her. A swarm of the dead could very well halt a normal car. Besides, she didn't imagine she had far to go. Despite a high concentration of the dead, she didn't feel a need to get out of the city. The resources there were too abundant and convenient for her to abandon it.

She wandered for several hours. Gradually, as she grew accustomed to the dark and the streets, her fear began to ease. There was no sign of any human life. As long as she was careful not to walk right into a crowd, the dead were pretty easy to avoid. Even those that became aware of her were too slow to keep up as she stole away. That is, until Freddy.

She didn't call him Freddy as he tried to maul her. No, when he caught her in the alley and had her pinned to the ground, she called him every last profane word she could remember. Only later, when she was safe and trying to reconcile the trauma in her mind did she start referring to him as Fast Freddy.

Freddy must have had a job at an all night convenience store. He was pretty badly damaged so she was either not his first fight or he'd been turned by one of the dead who'd contracted the initial plague. His jeans were shredded down one leg. The tatters were black and stiffened from blood that had come from deep rents. His shirt was nothing more than a t-shirt. It was badly ripped aside from the collar, but it was so filthy with dried blood that Sadie couldn't make out the name of the band on the front.

She missed music.

Freddy came out of nowhere, charging her at a speed she had not yet seen displayed by one of the dead. He barreled into her and sent her flying into the gutter. Confused by his missing prey, Freddy stood on the sidewalk looking around for her. It would have made the perfect opportunity to get away except Sadie was too dazed to do so. Before she could regain her senses, Freddy had found her and thrown himself upon her.

It was all she could do to keep him from tearing her throat out. He didn't really have the cognitive ability to pin her arms, but he was so strong and she couldn't get any leverage. Dipping his head, he found her neck and bit into the flesh thereon. Crying out in panic, Sadie began to flail wildly about. She knew that he was going to kill her and eat her remains. She was horrified by the concept yet powerless to stop it. Though she fought with all of her strength, she knew that she would eventually falter and Freddy would have his meal.

When the man was ripping Freddy off of her, he held on as if she was the last best meal he was ever going to get. She caught sight of the barrel of a nasty looking carbine but imagined that whoever was on the other end of it had chosen not to use it either because of the noise or because she was in the way.

Coughing and gagging because of both the fear and the stench, Sadie pulled herself to her feet and leaned against a building. She couldn't seem to lift her gaze. Freddy was on the ground a short distance away, his story ended. There was a giant wound to his head. It was oozing something that was both red and white without actually ever becoming pink. It looked like some kind of disgusting liquid candy cane.

"The fast ones get you every time," said a deep voice.

Looking up, Sadie found her rescuer to be tall, dark, and handsome. He had a squarish brown face with heavy eyebrows and hair cut into a tight military box on his head. He wore a leather jacket that looked as if it had seen better days over a white t-shirt and dark blue jeans. There was a sheath belted to his right thigh. The protruding handle of the knife promised a wicked blade. In his hand, held down, was the carbine.

The man was not alone. He had another man and a woman with him. The other man was small and wore round spectacled glasses. Aside from the fire axe held ready in both of his hands, he reminded Sadie of a much smaller Wes Trentin. The woman reminded her of herself. She had shaved her head down to stubble, presumably to avoid the health and parasite hazards that came with hair in the post apocalyptic nightmare in which they were living. More prominent even than her hair, though, was the gun she was pointing at Sadie.

"What did you say to me?" Sadie said to the man while eyeing the woman.

"The fast ones," he repeated. "You expect them all to be slow and stupid. Then one of these pissers gets your scent and it's all over."

She narrowed her eyes. "Well, then I guess I owe you some thanks."

He shook his head sadly. "I'm not sure I did you any favors," he said.

"What's that supposed to mean," Sadie asked and pointed at the woman. "Why is she pointing a gun at me?" She was already trying to figure out whether or not she could draw her weapon and shoot the woman before being shot herself. She knew that she couldn't. Even if, by some miracle, she was able to hit the woman, the man would probably blast her with the carbine an instant later.

The man shrugged. "It's however you want it," he said. "A bullet's quicker than the axe."

She finally understood without really understanding. "You're going to kill me? Why hell did you save my life then?"

"We didn't realize he'd bitten you."

"What?" Reaching up, Sadie found the wound on her neck. It wasn't bad. She'd actually been really lucky. "Don't worry about this. I'm immune."

The man with the axe snorted.

The leader gave him a look. "We were all immune to the plague but the bites are different."

"You don't understand..."

"I think you don't understand."

"Listen... What's your name?"

"Cam Frost," he said.

Sadie gave him hers. "Cam, I'm immune to the bites, too. I was bitten a lot on the first day."

He narrowed his eyes, trying to gauge whether or not she was telling the truth or at least telling him something that she herself believed.

"Can you tell her to put down that gun?" It sounded like a request, but it was really more of a demand. When Cam Frost remained still, Sadie hardened her tone. "Tell her to put the gun down."

"Nobody's immune," he said, but gave a nod to the woman. She lowered the gun.

"Whatever," Sadie said dismissively. "Thanks for your help." Straightening her pack, she turned away from them and started walking.

"Wait," said Cam Frost. "Are you on your own?"

Against her better judgment, she stopped and turned back to him. "I'm not really interested in shacking up with a bunch of drifters."

He smiled thinly and without humor. "I wasn't going to make that offer. I know a place where there are some good people. They have a doctor."

"I told you I'm immune," she said a little too defensively.

"Yes," he said. "You did tell me that."

"How do I know you're for real," Sadie asked. After all, a community is exactly what she was looking for.

He shrugged. "I'm for real. I plan to trade you and your immunity for some supplies."

She took a step back. There was enough distance between them that she could break and run, but that was dangerous. The woman was pointing her gun again.

"I can trade you with a wounded leg or without one. I think we'd both prefer you unharmed."

Sadie swallowed, showed a little bit of fear. She wasn't afraid, though. Not really. She was giving a lot of thought to how and when she would be able to kill one or all of them and get away.

"Don't worry," Cam Frost said. "They're good people. They've set up in a church about ten blocks from here. It'll take us about twenty or thirty minutes to get there at the careful pace I set. By that time, you'll either be sick or valuable."

He didn't give her an opportunity for further discussion. This time he turned from her and started walking. The man followed, but the woman kept her handgun trained on Sadie.

"Don't try to get away," said Cam Frost. "You'll be better off in so many ways."

Sadie didn't move at first. She just waited and watched while Cam Frost and his axe man wandered down the street and around the corner. Even after they were gone, the woman with the gun didn't move. They had been left alone presumably to determine whether or not Sadie was bold enough to try and flee. Well, she certainly had no shortage on boldness, but that didn't make her stupid. Starting forward, she leveled an obscene gesture at the woman as she passed. Cam Frost and the axe man were waiting just around the corner. The little Wes Trentin clone looked amused by her appearance. The boss at least had the decency to withhold any expression.

The trip through the streets with the three drifters was extremely educational for Sadie. She observed the way the two men worked while the woman was left to guard the prisoner. They moved slowly, checking every alley and storefront. They encountered a few straggling dead, but no mobs. Though Cam Frost always brought his carbine to a ready position, he never fired it. The man with the axe, who Sadie learned was named Drew, was always there to quietly split a skull. It was only when they encountered living people that they chose to hide.

A small group of kids wearing gang colors and sporting painful looking new brands wandered by. They were making a lot of noise, which was a great way to attract the dead. Sadie thought they were out either looking for a good place to scavenge or for recruits.

She was later unnerved when they spotted another group of people walking brazenly out in the streets. They appeared to be four men but it was tough to tell because they were all wearing what looked like dark clerical robes. Their faces were hidden in shadows and their hands were enfolded within their sleeves. The drifters' reactions to them were very different than their reactions to the gang members. Though they had hidden from the group of kids, there had been no fear. Cam Frost had simply felt it wise to avoid a noisy and pointless confrontation. With the robed men, it was different. The carbine immediately came up and they doubled back and came

around three blocks out of their way in order to circumvent the group. When they were clear, Sadie began to question them, but she was quickly hushed.

It was a completely different world than the one she had left before. No one walked the streets but the crazy and the dead. There were others, she knew, but they never saw them. Perhaps groups of drifters were hiding like they were. She could feel the eyes of the frightened in the windows of the buildings and the shops. The streets were starting to fill up with litter. She wondered where it all came from. They passed a burned out car. There was a skeleton inside and the smell was only a day or two old. She wondered if it was the work of Wes Trentin. She felt somewhat bad for leaving her father alone with that pyromaniacal sociopath, but then realized that she more regretted her current circumstances than the actions which had led her to them.

At length, the buildings fell away. They were still in the city, but they had come to a portion where three story brownstones surrounded a field of park land. They entered a large open square. Across the area on the diagonal, Sadie could see a church.

The building stood as quietly as all the others in the area. The windows were dark and the door was locked tight. But there were a few things about it that stood out, even to Sadie's untrained eye. For one, the door was closed. This might not seem like much. Most of the houses and buildings had closed doors, behind which were probably undead creatures waiting for something living to rouse them. But a church's doors should be opened. Sadie didn't know much about religion, especially the Christian religion. She'd been born to two Jewish people who'd parted ways with the Lord early in their youths. Still, she thought that survivors would have flocked to a church for comfort and maybe some answers.

The windows on the ground floor were boarded up as well. She only noticed this because one of the stained glass murals had been smashed and she could see the wood through the gap. It prompted her to check the others. It was hard to tell until they got closer, but they were definitely blocked off as well. There wasn't an unblocked window on the ground. There was more. The fence around the church, a simple wrought iron affair through which anyone could easily slip, had been reinforced with chain links. The grass on the sides had been ripped up and, if she didn't know better, Sadie would swear that the soil beneath had been tilled. It all seemed so obvious and yet these were all things that would go completely unnoticed by the dead.

"How do you feel?" Cam Frost asked her.

She looked at him as if he was crazy. "How am I supposed to feel, you jackass?"

"I mean, are you sick?"

"No, I'm not sick," she huffed. "I'm immune. I told you that already."

As they came up to the fence, the church door opened and two men came out. The leader stood at average height, maybe five foot seven or eight. He had straight brown hair and a serious look on his face. The man behind him was taller and broader. His features were narrow. Sadie knew

he'd been a cop by the sparkle in his eyes and the badge he still wore on his belt. He carried a shotgun cradled in his arms and there was no doubt about whether or not he was adept at using it.

"New recruit?" the lead man asked Cam Frost, nodding toward Sadie.

The dark drifter shook his head. "Property. We're looking to trade her."

The man seemed surprised. "People aren't property, Mr. Frost."

For the first time Cam Frost laughed out loud. "Everything is property and Drew really likes those canned peaches you scored on Tuesday."

The leader raised an eyebrow, once again looking at Sadie. His companion nudged him with the shotgun and whispered, "Alex, are you kidding me? This joker wants to trade us a mouth to feed for some of our food?"

"Mr. Jones," Cam Frost began but the cop cut him off.

"Don't talk to me, Frost. Don't you ever talk to me."

Alex put himself physically and existentially between them. "That's enough. If you two want to meet after school that's your own business. Frost, just tell us what this is all about."

So Cam Frost explained, in quick and brief sentences, how he had come to find and rescue Sadie Land, finishing with the fact that she had a bite wound on her neck and no sign of the plague thirty minutes later.

"Go get Matt, please," Alex said to Jones.

Jones looked at him incredulously. "Are you actually buying into this crap?"

"Please, Antonio," Alex said.

"Fine." Jones disappeared into the church.

In the silence that followed, Alex studied Sadie. She was impressed with his confidence. This man, she thought, was a natural leader. Cam Frost stood quietly by as his companions scanned the surrounding area for any sign of danger.

"What were you doing out on the streets alone?" Alex asked her finally. "Have you been wandering this whole time?"

She shook her head. As much as she didn't trust Cam Frost and didn't particularly care for Antonio Jones, she felt at ease with Alex. His confidence was almost inspirational.

"I was holed up in a pharmacy with my father and some lunatic with a book of matches. I left them when it got too be too much."

"You just left your father?"

There was something in the way the question was asked that made Sadie look at Alex a little bit differently. He was charming and confident, for sure. He was a born leader as she had surmised. But there was something else there, perhaps something from his distant past, barely a week old.

Jones returned with another man, presumably Matt. Matt was tall, with brown hair and a pair of glasses. He gave a quick and distasteful glance to Cam Frost before having a look at Sadie.

"Well, that wound's going to get infected if you don't get something on it. How old is it?"

"About thirty minutes," said Cam Frost.

Matt looked impressed.

Making up his mind, Alex said, "Matt, why don't you take her downstairs and treat the wound. See if there's anything you can learn from her."

"I'll do my best," Matt grumbled. "I wish Eddings was here."

Sadie gave one look back as she was led inside the church, but the look was not for Cam Frost or any of his people. Instead she looked at Alex, who had impressed her in a way that no one else ever had.

The chapel didn't look like the chapel of any church Sadie had ever seen. Most of the pews were gone, their wood having been used to shore up the entrances. In the middle of the large room were tables and chairs. There were people there, some eating, others going through supplies or weapons. They weren't a huge crowd but they were enough. The sight and sound and even smell of them gave Sadie a feeling of relief. She was surprised by it despite the fact that the need for that very feeling was what had drawn her away from the pharmacy. She had never been an outgoing person. She found most people insufferable and they found her the same.

Matt nodded to a couple of the people as they moved through the chapel. They nodded back. Everyone called him by his first name except a young boy who referred to him as Dr. Baker. The two walked to the front of the chapel and off through the wings where there was a series of offices. A glance inside showed that they had been converted into bedrooms. Two, three, and in one case four beds had been squeezed in. There were no desks or bookshelves, all probably broken down and used for fortification. Matt led her past these to where there was a back door. It had been left untouched, presumably as a method of escape, but there was a guard there. She looked tough and alert. She was tall with long blonde hair that had been tied into a ponytail. Sadie immediately noticed a change in Matt's demeanor when the woman smiled at him.

"New recruit?" she asked, shifting the weight of her machine gun.

Matt shrugged uncomfortably.

"Usual battery of tests?"

"And then some," Matt said. "It would be better if..."

"Eddings were here," the woman finished. "He's gone, sweetie. We all leave things behind."

Sadie shuddered. She had left everything behind. Her mother. Her father. Her home. Had it all meant so little to her?

Matt nodded at the woman and then turned into a tiny alcove where a set of stairs led down into a basement. Sadie followed him, buoyed by the idea of being a new recruit as opposed to being a piece of property traded for a handful of canned peaches.

"I think she's sweet on you, Matt," Sadie said.

"Shut up."

She was surprised but not really ruffled by his rebuke. When it came to women, men tended to get really weird.

In the basement, he led her down a hallway to what had been a classroom before the ApocalypZe. Now it was a lab. He'd seemed to amass a decent amount of equipment in the short time since society's fall. As they entered, he flipped a switch and she heard the hum of a generator start. It was accompanied a number of fluorescent lights coming to life.

"Nice setup," she said. "You the only doc?"

He nodded, straightening his glasses and running his fingers over his forehead and through his hair.

"What happened to Eddings?"

He looked up at her sharply. "He got left behind."

She tried continuously to talk to him while he took some blood and inspected her wounds. She wanted very much to be his friend, but didn't know how to go about doing it. The combination of her nature and his standoffishness made for a messy start to a friendship.

A while later, Alex showed up at the lab and Sadie was instantly relieved. He called her by name and told her that Cam Frost and his people had departed.

"What did you end up trading for me?" Sadie asked.

"I don't trade for people," Alex answered simply. In fact everything about Alex seemed simple. His last name, he told her, was Bloom. He had discovered this church, full of people after the ApocalypZe by accident. At that moment, something inside of him had just awakened and he'd taken over. He found that running the church and leading the people was easy. From anyone else, it would have sounded pretentious, but Alex only said it was easy because, for him, it actually was easy.

They talked for a long time. He showed her around the church and introduced her to some of the people. The church had an upstairs that only housed a couple of rooms. They made good "situation rooms", Alex told her. They were also in close proximity to the stairs that led up to the bell tower where someone stood guard at all times.

"You make it hard for me to feel like a prisoner," she said to him over dinner in the chapel.

"You're not a prisoner," he answered with a smile. "We can't afford to feed prisoners."

"So I can go then?"

Alex looked like a wounded puppy. "You can go if you want. I was hoping you wouldn't."

A comment like that was tough to gauge. It was possible that he was only interested in her uncanny immunity, but there was something so genuine about him that she didn't really want to believe it. If that was the case, he needn't have spent the whole afternoon with her. He could have pawned her off on some underling.

"Tell me about your father," he said unexpectedly.

She tapped her fork on the table in contemplation. Discussing him was going to be difficult for a number of reasons. He was the reason she was immune. He had given her a story that seemed complete, but could have been missing important details. She was also afraid to tell even what she knew. In knowing about the plague more than a day before it struck, how much responsibility did she take for its effectiveness. Though she had no regrets, she was guarded about the information. Others might see her as a criminal. So she stuck to her life before the ApocalypZe. It was safe and it was genuine. When Alex pressed her on what had happened afterward, she hesitated.

"He saved me," she whispered. "He really saved me." It was something about which she hadn't given any thought. But it was true. In a much more meaningful way than Wes had saved them, Norman Land had rescued her from a fate for which she had been predestined. The serum he had stolen for her protected her from something against which her body could not.

"Was it hard to leave him?" asked Alex. "I mean, I know the circumstances must have been..."

"He went over the edge," she told him. "When we found out that the bites gave you the plague and that we were immune even to that... He thinks he was chosen." Even as she said it, she wished she hadn't. It was too much information.

But Alex didn't seem to try and read anything into it. He just smiled warmly. "A lot of people here went through similar feelings. We even lost a few who went out, thinking that they were safe because they had survived."

They stopped talking for a while after that. Then Sadie looked up and said, "Enough about me. Let's talk about you for a while."

And so they did.

Alex was a truly fascinating man. Over the next several days, Sadie found herself more and more drawn to him. She felt that he, too, was attracted to her. When he wasn't busy running the community, he found her. They talked for long stretches. During the safest times, they would take short walks through the park. You'd almost believe that the world wasn't a place suddenly filled with hungry predators. But it was.

On her third night there, she was awakened by an alarm. Quickly dressing, she ran out of the room she shared with two other women, one of which was the formidable blonde she had met on the first day. There was a lot of activity. At least three people told her to go back to her room, but she refused. Heading out into the cathedral, she saw several armed people moving through the front doors.

Sadie wasn't dumb enough to go outside and get involved in the fight. She would be of little use and probably more of a distraction to Alex than he needed. Still, in the boards over the windows, peepholes had been drilled. Through one of these, she was able to see the action.

Sadie had expected to see an onslaught of the dead. She often had dreams of them swarming the church or the pharmacy or even her house. She was haunted by the memory of her last few minutes at home. The dead had been streaming in through the window and the doors while her mother had been frantically trying to beat her way out of the upstairs bedroom. It seemed only logical now that these creatures would swarm whenever they got a sniff of human flesh.

But there were no dead.

Instead, Sadie saw the men in robes. They were the same as the ones Cam Frost had avoided on the streets. They were a disorganized lot, attacking individually and without any sort of strategy. They were strong, though, driven by some sort of fanatical rage that Sadie just couldn't understand. Despite baseball bats, crowbars, and knives, they threw themselves at the civilians protecting the church. Sadie was repulsed by them.

"Stand together!" Alex was shouting from somewhere out of view. "Don't let them get between you."

It seemed to work, that plan. Where the people kept together, watching out for one another, they seemed to draw strength from each other. They fought both offensively and defensively at the same time, taking down these fanatics as they charged. Then came the report from the shotgun and two of the robed men went down at once. Another blast took out two more. Antonio Jones

came into view, reloading the weapon as he did so. He was shouting something obscene as a number of fanatics turned their attention toward him.

"Come on!" he cried. "My grandma's tougher than you." He fired two more times and took out four more fanatics. Three others came at him as he tried to reload again. Out of time, he dropped the shells to the ground and began beating back the men, using the gun as a club. When those that could run finally did so, he stood where he was, fingers clenched around the weapon, muscles corded in his neck and screamed after them.

As the fighting ended, the people moved quickly to gather up the wounded. On her left, Sadie saw Matt Baker rush across the chapel and to the doors. He was trailed by three people. Sadie had seen them before, two young girls and an older man, but she didn't know their names. They were carrying packs and began unloading medical supplies from them as the wounded were brought inside.

Another commotion outside drew her attention back to the peephole. Several of the civilians were carrying the bodies away from the church and across the park. They were flanked by others, all armed. Alex had come into view and was embroiled in a shouting match with Antonio Jones. She watched for a while, aware of just how intimidating a powerful man like Jones could be. But Alex didn't pay any attention to that. Whatever their argument, Alex was asserting his overarching authority. In the end, Jones backed down and walked away grumbling.

When Alex came back inside the church, he glanced over and saw Sadie standing there. He flashed her a smile and then went to check on the wounded. She wanted to go and be with him, but resisted the urge. Though they had grown close over the past few days, their relationship had not been well received by everyone there. Antonio Jones especially had many things to say. There had been a moment where Alex had had to step between them.

There was little for her to do. She had no skills and no one had yet tried to teach her to do anything. Instead, she observed. She watched as the healthy tended to the wounded. She watched as the strong dragged the dead bodies of the cultists away from the church. The battle would attract the dead. If they encountered the fresh bodies of the cultists, there would be little reason for them to come any closer. By morning, they would have forgotten about the noise and, hopefully, moved on.

The light came quickly. No one slept and no one complained as their time for particular shifts came. Such was the way of the world. When Alex seemed to have a moment to breathe, Sadie went and asked him for a job.

Nodding, he said, "I've been talking to Nadya and Antonio. I think you should work with them. Antonio can teach you to shoot and Nadya can teach you to fight."

This kind of offer was a way of showing Sadie some real respect. Jones was in charge of the group's protection. He didn't have time to train someone, but Alex would enforce it. Sadie felt both a bit awkward and a bit vindicated. She and Jones didn't like each other at all. Being paired up with him was a good way to learn and torture him at the same time.

Nadya was a different story. She was the woman Sadie had met when she'd arrived. She had been guarding the back door. The two of them got along all right. Sadie didn't care for her, but let it lie. She had a thing against tall beautiful blonde women who could have been supermodels and still kick your ass. What was worse was that Alex had put Sadie in with Nadya at night. She was sure that was no accident. Trust was a valuable commodity and, no matter how close they seemed to be getting, Alex's first loyalty was to the church.

It was because of that very characteristic that Sadie was surprised when he came to her a week later and asked if she wanted to lead Jones and a small group of rescuers to her father. She didn't know what to say to him about that. She had stopped thinking about Norman for the most part.

When she didn't answer, Alex asked, "Do you think he's still alive?"

She laughed. "He's definitely still alive. He's immune to the bites, like me. He's with some guy who...he knew how to survive this thing on the first day."

"Then what's the problem?"

"I ran away from him, Alex. He's crazy."

Alex nodded. "Have you met Dr. Li?"

Sadie shook her head even though she knew who he was. There was only one Chinese guy in the group and she had seen him a bunch of times. He was a small guy with a perpetually tired look on his face that she suspected had been there before the ApocalypZe. She'd noticed that he tended to steer clear of Antonio Jones.

"Adam's a psychiatrist. He worked for the police department. Sadie, everyone here has had to talk to him. He's been invaluable when it comes to keeping this place together. I have to wonder, sometimes, who's counseling him. Anyway, I'm sure he can help your father."

Sadie chewed on her lower lip and told him she'd think about it. There was a real conflict within her when it came to Norman Land. Now that Alex had brought him up, she found herself actually worried for him. It was easy to laugh and say that he was immune to the bites, but he wasn't immune to starvation or knife or gunshot wounds. He and she both were still human. Whenever she thought of him huddled in that dingy pharmacy with that lunatic Wes Trentin, she found it difficult to concentrate on anything else.

So the next day she found Alex and told him that she would like to find her father and bring him into to the church. Alex seemed pleased.

Antonio Jones did not.

"There are thirty drug stores that are closer than this one," he said pointing to the location Sadie had circled on the map. Even with the gangs and those cult freaks sharing our space, most of them are still untouched."

"But only this one has Sadie's father," Alex explained.

"It had her father there two weeks ago, Alex," Jones argued. "That's in gang territory. I'm not real happy about going in there for one crazy old man."

Sadie felt herself growing enraged. "That crazy old man is my father," she said. "If you don't want to help, I'll go myself."

The sentiment seemed noble but came from a place of defiance. Even as she said it, Sadie knew it misplaced, but she wasn't likely to back down.

Neither, though, was Antonio Jones. "That works for me, sister. We wouldn't even be having this conversation if you weren't bunking with the boss."

Sadie blushed.

"Watch it, Antonio," Alex said with only a hint of anger. "You don't know what you're talking about."

In truth, Sadie and Alex had not been romantically involved despite all the time they'd been spending together. If Jones thought they were, though, then others probably did as well. It would explain a lot of the negative vibes she had been getting from the other members of the community. That thought triggered what was Sadie's typical reaction to animosity. The hell with the rest of the community. Sadie had developed strong feelings for Alex and if they didn't like it, they could feed themselves to the dead for all she cared.

They managed to avoid a long conversation regarding this and worked out a plan of action. Jones would, of course, lead the expedition. Nadya would be his right hand and he would assemble a couple of others to back them up in case of trouble. They would travel at night to avoid the gangs and the cultists. The dead were active during all hours.

Sadie spent most of the next day preparing herself both mentally and physically for the adventure ahead. It had been almost two weeks since she had ventured more than twenty feet from the doors of the church. She was a little apprehensive. When, at about three o'clock, she was told to get some sleep, she found she had a hard time drifting off. At around eleven, Nadya came for her. She gave her a black wetsuit and a belt with a gun on it.

"Are we going diving?"

Nadya smiled sweetly. "The rubber helps to block your smell. The dead won't pay any attention to you unless you're really close."

"Wow," Sadie said, impressed. "How did you figure that out?"

Nadya shrugged. "Alex came up with it. He just seems to see this world with a clarity the rest of us don't have."

Sadie nodded. "That's because he never looks back."

"What do you mean?" Nadya asked.

"I don't know. I just think he probably wasn't a very happy person. Whatever he lost when all of this happened probably wasn't enough to miss."

Nadya thought about that while Sadie pulled on the wetsuit and adjusted to the feel of it. Finally, as if coming to some special realization, she nodded her head just once. "That's a pretty good theory. Alex doesn't ever talk about before."

Sadie agreed. He hadn't opened up to her yet either. It was something that she found strangely bothersome. More than anything else, she wanted to get to him from the inside out. She had never felt that way about anyone before.

Sadie fastened on the belt, checked the handgun, and followed Nadya out to the front of the Church. There were a few people about, but not many. Alex was there, going over some last minute details with Jones. The big cop did not look happy.

"Where's the team?" Sadie asked.

"They're waiting outside," Jones answered with a hint of mischief in his voice.

Alex looked at her. "Sadie, you have to do everything Antonio tells you to do. He's very good at going out and coming back with his whole team."

She nodded. Jones and Nadya headed out the door, but Alex reached out and grabbed Sadie by the hand before she could follow. She turned to look at him.

"I mean it," he said sternly. "I know you're smart and you're tough, but there's nothing out there that isn't dangerous."

Normally, she would have been defiant, scoffed at his worry. Now, though, because it was Alex, she smiled. Then she stepped forward and gave him a long kiss on the mouth. If he was surprised, he hid it well, kissing her back with all he had.

"See you in the morning, sweetheart," she said.

Her elation from the encounter was quickly dispelled when she saw Cam Frost and his group waiting on the church grounds with Jones and Nadya. Drew, the man with the fire axe, was gone, but the thin woman was still there. There was another man with him. This man was bigger than both Jones and Frost. He looked Mexican, but Sadie wasn't very adept at racial profiling. Jones seemed to notice her discomfort right away and smiled widely.

"You remember Cam Frost, don't you?" he asked her.

A thousand curses came to mind but she held them all. She knew that Jones didn't like Cam Frost. That had been evident on the day she'd been brought in. She also didn't think that, despite his obnoxious personality, Jones would hire Cam Frost just to spite her. That was confirmed as Nadya began to speak.

"There are a lot more dead on the streets than there were even a few days ago. So many were trapped in their houses or buildings, but the cultists have been letting them out."

"This jackass knows how to get us where we need to go and back safely," Jones added.

Sadie couldn't help herself. "I see you've changed companions," she said to Cam Frost snidely.

He seemed nonplussed. "It happens. You remember Lianne, though. And this is Ed. You'll follow our lead every step of the way." He looked at Jones. "That goes for you, too."

Jones gave him a raspberry.

They moved out after that, taking to the dark alleys instead of the open streets. Sadie was amazed at the difference in the look of the city since she'd seen it last. It was almost as if the decay of the dead was transferrable to the stone and metal. Garbage was littered in streamers here and there while shops stood either dusty and undisturbed or broken and empty. For all she could tell, a hundred years had passed since the ApocalypZe. According to Cam Frost, the population was now made up of four different classes. There were survivors, like them, who kept to themselves or their communities, almost desperately avoiding contact with the other three. Sadie was mildly offended at having been lumped in with him. After that came the gangs. They had become surprisingly strong and seemed united, at least in their general area. Their leader was a guy who went by the name of Lord Brawn. Cam Frost had never seen him and knew little about him. The gangs spent most of their time looting and thieving. They brought down communities like Alex Bloom's with no regard for what fewer humans meant in this world. The worst of the four, though, was the cult. It didn't surprise anyone that a few crazies had sprung up, looking at the ApocalypZe as a divine event. But no one ever expected them to organize under one banner. That made them dangerous. They were the terrorists of the new world and there was no government protecting the people from their lunacy. Then, of course, there were the dead. While they were, by far, the most numerous, they were probably the least dangerous. They were slow and predictable. Only when encountered in large groups did they become a real threat. Despite the ever present danger of the bite, a good solid club was more than effective against two or three.

The walk to the pharmacy took almost forty minutes. As careful as Cam Frost had been when Sadie had traveled with him as a captive, he was doubly so now. There weren't a lot of the living on the streets at night, so they didn't have to hide except for once. In a scene that both fascinated and revolted Sadie, they encountered a group of three cult fanatics in their brand new robes. They walked boldly down the street, making noise, laughing. When they attracted a group of the dead, they decided out loud that their work was done and the time had come for sacrifice.

The dead ones tore them apart.

"Seen that a bunch of times," Cam Frost commented. "You'd think we'd run out of cultists." He said it with an attitude that displayed little regard for life. What was happening around them was simple fact and he had adapted to it quickly. She supposed that was why he'd survived so long.

As they neared the pharmacy, he took Sadie aside.

"Go on in and get him," he said. "We'll wait out here."

"That's it?" she asked. "You want me to just go in there by myself?"

Cam Frost made a face. "If you think he's dangerous, why are we out here getting him?"

"It's not my dad that I'm worried about. It's that Wes lunatic he has with him."

"You think he'll try and hurt you?"

She shrugged, pulling her gun from her belt. "It doesn't matter. One way or the other, he's not making it back to the church."

Sadie had long since decided that Wes Trentin was dangerous. More than a physical threat, he reinforced Norman's belief that he was chosen to lead the new world. If she wanted her father to become healthy, Wes was an influence that desperately needed to be removed.

Heading into the alley, she kept her eyes open for any signs of movement. The place was almost exactly as she remembered it. There seemed to be a bit more rubbish around and the smell was awful, but she couldn't detect any signs of conflict. She approached the back entrance to the pharmacy with caution, remembering how Wes had made it appear that the door had been left undisturbed. Putting her hand on the handle, she turned it and pulled. The door opened easily.

The smell coming from inside was, if anything, worse than the smell in the alley. It smelled like body odor and rotting garbage.

"Dad?" she whispered into the gloom, her gun held out ahead of her. For a moment it occurred to her that she was essentially invading his home in the middle of the night. That was frightening, even in the best of times. And rude.

She repeated her call a bit louder and stepped inside. Using her flashlight, she surveyed the tiny back room. It was organized with neat piles of canned goods and snack cakes. There were cases of bottles of water lining one side, stacked neatly one on top of the other. It was a lot of stuff, more than enough for two people. It would be a good haul for the church.

At some point, someone had also organized all of the medicine. There were small boxes and pill bottles all across the top shelves.

"Dad," Sadie called a bit more loudly. "It's me. It's Sadie."

"Sadie?" came a soft voice from the other room. It was her father.

Norman shifted in his beddings. He was alone in the pharmacy. Wes liked to go foraging at night. He always came back with food and other supplies, but he also was usually covered in grease or soot. His expertise with explosives had increased exponentially over the last two weeks.

The Bishop didn't know what to think of Sadie's return. He saw her coming forward with her light ahead of her.

"Turn off the light," he said. "You'll give us away."

There was some hesitation.

"I'm alone," the Bishop said. He remembered how she felt about Wes. Still, if she was to join him, she would have to change her attitude toward him.

The light went off and she moved forward. He could see her silhouette in the doorway. Her foot nudged something and she made a disgusted sound.

"Have you been living in this the whole time?"

"I have," the Bishop said with a strong and confident voice.

"Well, I've come to take you to someplace better."

Sitting up, the Bishop rubbed his grimy beard. "I thought you had come to stand with me."

"Jesus, Dad, are you still on that chosen thing?"

"We were chosen."

She shrugged, her dark form moving slightly. "Whatever. Are you coming or not?"

Her impatience had not left her. While he had changed much in this new world, he could tell that Sadie had not. In light of that, he wasn't entirely sure what to do. There were parts of him from before that still remained, but two weeks after the ApocalypZe much of him had become something else. He was no longer a janitor. He wasn't even really Norman Land. He had been thinking of himself only as the Bishop. Still, in the last hours of the last days, he had been chosen and saved by DeMarco. In the last hours of the last days, he had chosen to save Sadie. Those choices had meaning.

He stood.

"I've got friends outside," she told him.

The bag with DeMarco's head moved and the plastic rustled. The Bishop saw Sadie stiffen and point her gun. Then she relaxed.

"You still have that thing?"

"I will leave it if it bothers you."

"Jesus, Dad, of course it bothers me. It's a god damned head in a bag."

He smiled. His daughter. He loved his daughter.

Behind Sadie, lights flooded into the store. She turned quickly, bringing up her gun, but it was only Cam Frost, Jones, and Lianne close behind. The Bishop didn't know them, but he could see that Sadie did. She started to warn them about the lights, but he hushed her.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "We're going."

"Take what you can carry," Cam Frost said to them.

The Bishop protested. "Leave some food for my friend."

Cam Frost looked at Sadie and she shrugged again. "You can't carry it all anyway."

"No," he agreed. "But we could come back for the rest."

The Bishop stiffened and Sadie put a hand on his arm. She must have been disgusted because she wrinkled her nose. His vestments had grown greasy and worn over just these past two weeks. For the first time since his ascension, he understood a need to carry himself in a manner that befitted his station.

There wasn't much more to say or to do. It tugged at his psyche to watch them ransack through his property. It didn't occur to him that Wes Trentin had gotten much of it under less than ethical circumstances. They moved out of the back room and into the alley. The Bishop's legs were stiff and his back sore. He needed more exercise. He had let Wes take care of him for too long.

They marched back through the city slowly. They had to stop several times so that the Bishop could rest. He exaggerated his condition a bit to draw sympathy from Sadie. He could see that both Cam Frost and Antonio Jones were becoming irritated with him. He pushed that irritation, wondered at its limits and the extent of the influence Sadie had over them. His evaluations were incisive, but inaccurate. He realized this when they reached the edge of the park and Cam Frost, Lianne, and Ed split off from the group and disappeared between the houses.

"Where are they going?" the Bishop asked.

"They don't live with us," Sadie said, her relief at their departure evident in her voice.

The Bishop didn't comment, simply making the observations he needed to make. They started across the park toward a large old church. He would never have thought that there was anyone living there if he had simply been passing by, but now realized what an excellent stronghold it made.

Halfway through the park, Jones stopped and raised his shotgun. The Bishop was impressed. He himself had sensed the dead one only a moment before. It took another moment for Jones to spot it coming toward them through the playground on the right. It stumbled through the swings, the chains jingling ominously in the still, dark morning.

"Don't use the gun," Nadya said, unsheathing a long knife from her hip. Moving cautiously and quietly, she crossed the distance and engaged the creature. The Bishop was impressed. Clearly she was no stranger to combat, trained in some sort of martial arts. Even more impressive, however, was that she had managed to adapt those skills for fighting the dead, which felt no pain. She danced with it awhile, testing its reflexes, judging its abilities. She didn't waste any attacks trying to wound it or slow it down. Instead, she built an opening and lunged, driving the knife deep into its brain.

When Nadya returned, the Bishop noticed that she was looking at him. He saw Jones looking at him, too.

"Did you see that?" Jones asked.

The Bishop nodded, expecting a threat to follow.

"You got any problems with it?"

The Bishop was confused at first, but then realized that Jones was asking him whether or not he thought the undead had any value.

"It was I who was chosen," he said simply. "Not them."

Jones and Nadya exchanged looks with each other, then looks with Sadie. Then they went to the church.

It was late at night but early in the morning. Though Jones wanted to wake Alex, the group's leader, Sadie insisted that they let her and her father rest. There would be time for tests and questions in the morning. The Bishop followed her through the sanctuary and into the back where offices had been converted into bedrooms. There were three beds in Sadie's room. She gave one to her father and sat in a chair. It was a very selfless act, a behavior that was not typical of his daughter.

Because of the midnight awakening and the trek across the city, the Bishop had grown tired. He slept well in the bed, never having grown accustomed to his primitive setup in the pharmacy. Though everything had changed for him now (again), he was glad of it. Wes would do fine,

even if those scavengers went back and cleaned out their remaining supplies. When he discovered the Bishop missing, he too would be done with the pharmacy.

It was late morning when he awoke. In the light, he became aware of himself as a disheveled mess. Sadie was dozing in the chair. She'd stripped off the wetsuit and put on a pair of fleece pants and a light top. It was every bit the same as the kind of outfits she'd always worn at home. For a moment, the Bishop was Norman Land again, wondering about the things he did and how he could be a better father and a better person.

Then the moment passed.

Standing up from the bed, he stretched his stiff body and went to the door.

"Dad?" Sadie said in a drowsy voice.

Pulling his hand from the knob, he turned to her.

"I'm sorry I left you," she said.

He hadn't expected this. Sadie Land apologizing? Never in his life had he witnessed such a miracle.

"I understand," he said. "I'm just glad you came back."

She nodded, stood, and stretched. "I came back because I need you, Dad. I...I love you, Dad. I want you to be healthy."

"I am healthy," he assured her.

"You're filthy," she corrected with a chuckle that faded quickly. "And you're crazy."

He was taken aback.

"Look, we'll get you cleaned up. Then they're going to want to talk to you and maybe run some tests. They want to know what makes us immune and whether or not they can copy it."

"They can't copy it."

"What?"

"I said they can't copy it."

She shrugged. "Well, their doctor's not a...well he's a brain guy, but he's pretty smart."

"Don't you remember?" the Bishop asked.

She shook her head impatiently. "What, Dad? What are you talking about?"

He stepped away from the door and took her by the shoulders. She could smell him, but still didn't pull away. Instead, she stared into his eyes defiantly.

"We're chosen."

"Dad..."

He shook his head. "Sadie, Jean Claude made a serum just for me, using my DNA. It worked for you because you're my daughter. It will not work for anyone else. It cannot be copied. We are chosen."

Sadie didn't have a reply. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she did remember her father telling her that. He had told her everything. DeMarco had made the parasite. DeMarco had chosen to make a cure for her father. Her father had chosen to share it with her.

They really were chosen.

She jumped when there came a knock on the door. The Bishop smiled at her and turned to open it. He had never met Alex Bloom, but he could tell a leader when he saw one. He could also see other things about Alex. He could see that Alex had not always been a leader. The ApocalypZe had made a leader out of him. It seemed that he and the Bishop might have been cut from the same cloth.

But the Bishop had been chosen, and Alex Bloom had not.

"Mr. Land," Alex said, extending a hand.

"Bishop, if you please."

Alex's smile faltered for just a second, then replaced itself. "If you want. I..." He looked at Sadie and knew at once that something was wrong. The Bishop was surprised with his daughter once again. She had developed feelings for this man. He wondered if she would tell him about DeMarco. But, no. The fact that she knew about the plague almost forty eight hours before it had struck would make her look bad despite the fact that there was nothing she could have ever done to stop it.

"Sir," Alex said, clearing his throat. "Sadie has proven herself immune to the parasite that infects the dead. Our doctors haven't been able to determine why. If you wouldn't mind, we'd like it if you'd give us a blood sample."

"I'd be happy to," the Bishop said with a smile. "I would appreciate a bath and a meal first."

"Of course," said Alex.

The Bishop followed Alex out of the room with a disturbed Sadie in tow. He led the Bishop first to the showers and then pulled her aside when they were alone.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm worried," she answered vaguely. "I'm worried about him."

"Let's see what Adam can do for him."

She nodded, but didn't seem reassured.

They stood in awkward silence for a moment before Alex finally asked, "Is this..is it a bad time to ask about us?"

Surprised, Sadie looked at him and smiled. It was the first time she had seen Alex put off of his guard.

"I don't want to..." Alex began, but she jumped up and kissed him again.

"That? You don't want to do that?"

He shook his head. "That's not what I was going to say."

"What were you going to say?"

"I don't want to make things more difficult for you. I know you're dealing with a lot..."

"Who isn't?" she laughed. "Look, it's not like things are getting back to normal anytime soon." She looked up at him deeply. "And do you really want it to?"

Alex's eyes went wide for a minute. What was she saying?

"Don't get me wrong, Alex. I'm not happy that all of those people died and that so many others are suffering, but my life before sucked. What was yours like?"

He didn't answer. He didn't have to. Though he had never spoken directly about Alex Bloom before the *ApocalypZe*, Sadie was intuitive enough to figure out the theme without the details. There was a spring in his step and a gleam in his eye that spoke volumes about the things he tried to keep hidden. It was a tiny chink in Alex Bloom's shining armor.

When the Bishop was done with his shower and his meal, they took him down to see Dr. Baker. Bishop Land had last seen Matt Baker on the morning of the *ApocalypZe*. Baker had been just getting to *Biozem* when Norman had been leaving on his way to Sadie. He wondered briefly what had become of Dr. Eddings and Dr. Redden. He didn't ask.

"Glad to see that you're all right," Baker commented politely. The Bishop smiled, gave his blood, and left the lab.

For the next two days, he learned the layout of the Church. Alex, with Antonio Jones as his right hand, had done an excellent job of fortifying the place. Despite their very different attitudes, they made an excellent team. Alex was a born administrator while Jones was the kind of man who thrived on action. Alex kept him in check, but the Bishop wondered about Jones' life before. He didn't seem like the type of person who thought much about consequences.

Surprisingly, they asked little of him. He helped to serve some meals and even put his years of janitorial experience to use in keeping the place clean. In the minds of the people living there, Sadie included, it seemed to offset the fact that he insisted on being called Bishop. Certainly had Wes seen him performing menial tasks, he would have been furious. Then again, with Wes, he had been living in squalor.

Frequently, the Bishop found himself in conversation with Dr. Adam Li. Dr. Li had been a police psychiatrist before the ApocalypZe. Their conversations weren't exactly classified as sessions, but Bishop Land was definitely under the impression that they weren't nearly as spontaneous as they appeared. The Bishop liked Dr. Li. He was always willing to contribute more to their conversations than simple psychological jargon. The Bishop learned that Dr. Li had been a colleague of Antonio Jones' and that they had escaped the dead together. They had originally wanted to set up a stronghold at the south side precinct but had found it overrun. With sharing, though, came the expectation of reciprocity. The Bishop was forthcoming about a number of things. He did not hide details of his past life, even those concerning his relationship with Sadie. When asked, quite pointedly, though, why he felt that he was chosen, all he had to say was that his immunity had been granted him by the Holy One. That made him chosen.

The Bishop enjoyed walking through the park as well. Jones wanted to keep an eye on him, but Alex dismissed it. If the Bishop wanted some solitary time outside that was his business. He saw them arguing once and caught a number of comments from Jones regarding Alex's relationship with his daughter. Perhaps that relationship was working to the Bishop's advantage. When the time came, however, he was concerned about the obstacle it might present. Sadie, too, had been chosen, which meant that she, too, would need to ascend when the time was right. He supposed that part of being chosen was the necessity of also having to choose.

It was late afternoon and he was walking in the park. He traveled farther out, looking at the weeds growing through the pavers. A mere three weeks and nature was already starting to push itself through humanity's construction. At the edge of the park, he slipped off of the grounds and into the suburbs. The houses were tall and thin, some with narrow alleys in between. He wandered through them, spying the dead here and there, but unworried. Though they may accost him, they were easy to outwit.

"Bishop."

Turning, he found Wes standing at the edge of the narrow alley. He had been about to step into the backyard of some unfortunate and enjoy his lawn furniture.

"It's good to see you." Wes was wearing new glasses, but his robes were showing signs of wear and his hair had grown unruly.

"Where are your vestments?" Wes asked.

The Bishop looked down at the simple slacks and button up shirt he wore. "They were beyond repair."

"I will get you new ones."

The Bishop nodded. "And I will wear them when the time is appropriate. For now, though, I wish only to see the Holy One."

"Of course," Wes said and then said it again.

He led the Bishop through the backyard and into another. They crossed several properties until coming to a small courtyard that had once been shared by the tenants of an apartment building. A makeshift camp had been set up there. Men and women went about tending to the supplies and the laundry. They all wore robes. They had probably gotten them from a variety of stores from regular clothing outlets to costume shops. They wore the robes to show their solidarity in service of the Holy One. Their sole purpose was to cleanse the Earth of the old humanity so that it could be replaced by the new. When that purpose was fulfilled, they would throw themselves at the dead and, hopefully, join them.

The Bishop followed Wes through the camp. As he did so, he drew the stares of many of the cultists. He refused to acknowledge them. They were lunatics who didn't understand what it meant to be a living human being after the ApocalypZe. But they served him a purpose. They were his flock.

In a camping tent set up in a corner of the yard, the Bishop found what he was looking for. The Holy One, the head of Jean Claude DeMarco, rested upon a bed of pillows. He was pleasantly surprised to see a leg resting next to it. It was the leg that had most of the waist attached.

"Where did you find it?" the Bishop asked.

"It was found by two of the devout. I didn't ask where."

Nodding in satisfaction, the Bishop dismissed Wes and knelt down in front of DeMarco's head.

"My Lord," he whispered.

Suddenly the eyes fluttered open. They looked clearer than when the Bishop had seen him last. They moved around the tent, finally finding him. They seemed to focus and then some guttural noises began to issue from the throat.

"Take your time, Jean Claude."

The noises seemed to stabilize. Finally, the lips moved and the tongue pressed against the teeth. "Norman?"

The Bishop smiled. "I have good news for you. We found your leg."

The eyes of the Holy One searched the room but his range of vision was too limited. Sensing this, the Bishop picked up the heavy limb, noticing that it was still both soft and warm. He held it in front of DeMarco so that he could see it.

"We will find all of the other parts," the Bishop promised. "Then you can heal."

A small smile played on DeMarco's lips. "Thank you, Norman," he croaked. "You are a good friend, and well worthy of the gift I have bestowed upon you."

The Bishop bowed his head, hiding the satisfaction that he felt. His faith was stronger than ever.