

[EXTRACT]

REVENANCE

By John Judge

Book ONE in
The Dead Hand Series

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John Judge

Visit my website at www.johnjudge.net

To my wife, Jennifer.

Preface:

This book began life as a series of fan fiction blog posts inspired by DayZ, a videogame in development by Bohemia Interactive.

To find out more, visit www.dayzmod.com

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Day Zero

"In the middle of our life's walk I found myself in a dark wood, for the straight road was lost." – Dante Alighieri. The Divine Comedy.

Darkness. My eyes are open but I'm blind.

The faint metallic taste of blood and sea water stings the back of my throat. I'm on my knees, bent double, retching in time with the surf behind me. The crash of waves reverberates around my skull. Sand has washed inside my clothing and is scratching against my skin. It's raining heavily. I'm so cold. *Have I just crawled out of the sea?*

What happened? How did I get here? Where am I?

Jesus, who am I?! It's like waking from the worst hangover imaginable. Images flash through my mind's eye.

I can remember a boat. People were sick. There was a fire. Then nothing. My head is empty; I feel like my brain has suffered some kind of hard reset. *I just need a minute.*

My clothes are wringing wet, heavy and constricting. I'm shivering uncontrollably.

I try to control my breathing and stand up. My legs are surprisingly steady, though my head is still spinning. I rub my eyes with the heels of my hands, but succeed only in grinding dirt into them. I tilt my head upwards and let the rain wash over my face, standing motionless for a few moments to adjust to the darkness.

In the gloaming I can make out a tree lined hill in the distance, stark against an overcast sky that flashes with intermittent lightning. The waves are rolling in high, crashing on the shoreline with ceaseless fury. The driving rain is heavy and sharp. *Is there anywhere more threatening than a beach in storm?* I begin to pat myself down, checking for injuries and anything that could kick-start my recollection of recent events and prompt me into remembering something more substantial.

Turning out my pockets I find some compression bandages and a small pillbox; there's a steel flashlight hanging from my belt. Instinctively, I reach under my collar and touch a small medal hanging around my neck. I can't distinguish the markings – I have no idea what it is - but I take comfort knowing it's there.

There's a small rucksack fastened over my shoulders. I slide it off and realise that the zip lock is wide open. I stuff my fist inside; empty.

I need to get out of this weather. My body temperature is dropping rapidly and I must find shelter from the storm. I'm starting to lose coordination in my hands as I struggle to slip the ruck sack back over my shoulders and grasp the flashlight. I'm about to flick it on, but I hesitate.

The rhodopsin molecules in my eyes have been adapting over the last few minutes to provide a rudimentary biological night vision, but will bleach if exposed to the light spectrum of the torch. *What part of my brain did that come from?*

I still can't make out anything of my immediate surroundings, so I unhook the flashlight and click the power button. The beam is narrow but strong and I flinch at the harsh change in contrast. The rain is falling in sheets, I can no longer see the hill, but at least I can get off this beach without twisting an ankle.

Fifty yards ahead I cross a railway line carefully. There's a narrow road that runs parallel to the shore. I stand for a brief second and contemplate which direction to head. With no map or compass, and in a completely unknown locale, I flip a coin in my head, turning right to walk along the shoulder, hoping to flag a passing motorist.

I walk maybe an hour. My body, although soaked through, begins to warm up from the aerobic activity. There's a complete lack of street lights. In fact, there's no evidence of any artificial light for as far as I can see. The rain is unrelenting. My feet are starting to ache when I see the outline of a reflective road sign in the middle distance. It glows white like some ghostly apparition. I approach and the read letters "Kamehka" - *is that Russian?*

I say the word out loud, my voice croaky and strained. I'm not Russian. I'm speaking in an English accent. *Is this some kind of lucid dream?*

I walk on for another hundred yards and can suddenly make out what looks to be the outskirts of a small village; rickety fences; outbuildings; single story structures. This backwater settlement looks like something out of a fairy tale, although there's more of Grimm than Andersen about this place.

The whole township is in darkness. The only light is the beam of my torch playing of the houses and shacks. There's no light in any of the windows. The power must be off. As I walk along the main thoroughfare, I see old cars overturned and burnt out; what appears to be make-shift barricades of concrete and razor wire in the street. There's evidence of small arms fire. Spent shells litter the tarmac and many of the structures are riddled with bullet holes and blood spatter. There's no bodies. No casualties to account for all this carnage. *What the hell has happened here?* The ceaseless rain dancing off the pavement is the only sound. I'm definitely dreaming. I've never had such a vivid nightmare.

A guttural groan emanating from a nearby hedgerow catches my attention. The sounds makes me jump and I spin quickly, but there's nothing there. The groan sounds again the darkness. It's only a few feet away.

I can't tell if it's human or not. If it is, then someone is seriously injured. The sound is characteristic of someone trying to breath with a crushed rib cage, maybe even punctured lungs. How would I know that?

Training the beam of the flashlight over the fence, I can make out the shape of what looks to be a man standing in the shadows. He has his back to me. He sounds like he's choking but he's motionless. I hop the fence and approach cautiously. I'm about to call out when the figure begins to turn slowly.

The harsh light of the beam reveals the extent of his injuries. Half of his face is missing; the bone and sinew is dark brown - most likely cordite burns - indicating he's been shot at close range. What flesh remains is rotten and infected, hanging off in sagging chunks that quiver as he turns. One eye is missing, the other is blackened right through to the sclera. He's looking straight at me. *How can he see me? How is he even standing?*

I shake my head and wipe the rain from my brow, more certain than ever that this cannot be reality. I've wandered into a nightmare scenario in the darkest depths of my mind. I'm asleep at home, warm in my bed, soon to awaken and quickly forget this horrific apparition.

The words stick in my throat. He stumbles forward and I think he's about to fall, reaching out to catch him. But he doesn't fall. He lunges straight at me, his clawing hands narrowly missing my face.

The groan quickly changes in pitch and volume to a high shriek, his vocal chords rattling in his throat as he staggers towards me. His mouth froths with bile and blood, which oozes between splintered teeth and hangs in slathers from his chin. The expression on what remains of his countenance is one of absolute rage. I back up against the fence in horror as he staggers forward. The ligaments in his legs are cracking and popping, recognisable signs of rigor mortis. In humans, such chemical changes commence around four hours after expiration, but from the level of metabolic decay I would estimate his time of death to be more than a few days ago - *how can I know this and not know my own name?*

One thing I do know. This man is dead. For some reason this humble reality escapes him. The cadaver suddenly lunges at me again and I fall back against the fence. I twist quickly and scramble over, the torch beam playing across the floor. The man reaches the fence and falls against it; he can't make it over. We stand eye to eye for an eternity while he reaches out for me with every ounce of his being. *Is he asking for help? Does he mean me harm? I'm not waiting to find out.*

Our gaze is finally broken by another scream close behind me. I spin quickly and glimpse a shadow hunkered low on the floor. At first I mistake it for a large dog, but the torch beam reveals a lithe young woman bounding quickly towards me on all-fours. Her legs end at the knees; frayed strips of flesh flap about on the pavement where they terminate. Her hands are also missing. She's walking on what appears to be the stumps of her wrists, propelling herself at surprising speed, exposed radial bones clicking on the tarmac. Judging by her dexterity, she is more recently deceased.

Recently deceased?! How can my mind process this information so clinically?

I drop the torch to the floor and turn to run, my heart pounding in my chest. The fight-or-flight mechanism has evolved over countless millennia, but as a stress response it can have a negative effect in certain situations. This is one of them. Auditory exclusion and tunnel vision cause me to run - very fast - into another group of walking corpses.

Once men and women, now in varying states of decay, they turn in unison, regarding me with cold black eyes, rain water running like ink from empty sockets. My body suddenly switches to autopilot and I'm a passenger, changing direction and sprinting at an angle from my pursuers and towards the nearest house.

The door is locked; the windows barred. I panic and scramble over the fence to next door. No luck. All the while I can hear the heaving breaths and shrieking of the shadows behind me. My calls for help only seem to be attracting more of these monstrous creatures. I can hear more approaching. This town is infested with horrors. In desperation I run down the side path of one the houses and leap over the back fence.

The ground is water logged and my boots are sending huge spouts of water up into my face as I sprint headlong for the fringes of a dense woodland a hundred yards away. Before I reach the tree line I risk a backwards glance and see two figures still in pursuit, their strides unrelenting. Their movements are much more graceful. Human almost. They move with a frightening speed. They may still be alive, but their blood-curdling screeches convince me that they are allied with the other residents of the town.

Once inside the confines of the woods, I switch direction immediately. My body is drained. The glucose in my system is metabolising and breaking down; lactic acid is starting to ache in my legs. I realise that I can't go on and, in a moment of utter desperation, dive headlong into the dense vegetation at my feet. I reach for the medal around my neck; grip it tightly in my fist. Someone please help me.

The sound of the rain masks my attempts to control my breathing. I can hear the rustling of bracken underfoot; pained whimpers; the crunch of broken bones.

Forty yards away. Thirty yards. Twenty.

Then silence. Silence for the longest time.

My pursuers have abandoned their search. I hear them break free of the tree line and hobble back toward the town. I dig a small hole in the ground and bury my face in it, weeping silently with a mixture of relief and sadness.

Who were those people? What happened to them? Nobody deserves such a fate. It could easily have been mine. The most pressing realisation, however, is that I'm not dreaming. I'm in physical pain. My muscles ache. I can feel blisters forming on my feet. I've never been so awake.

Finally, rolling onto my back, I open my eyes to the rain, hoping it will wash away the horrors I have just witnessed. It doesn't. I sit up and try to find my bearings. In a dense forest at night it will be impossible to maintain any kind of heading, but I have to get away from this town as quickly as possible.

The forest is on a noticeable incline, so I decide to head uphill. My hike lasts for over an hour and passes without incident, allowing me time to try and make sense of what happened in Kamehka.

It's clear that those people were once inhabitants of the town; they seemed almost territorial in their actions toward me. *But what could cause a dead person to continue to walk around? To see, to hear, to feel? Something physiological? Some kind of virus maybe?*

It's clear that their driving force was one of uncontrollable rage and destruction, but no known virus can enable a brain dead being to maintain their higher faculties? Some kind of weaponised contaminant, perhaps? Or maybe a naturally occurring toxin in the local flora and fauna? One thing is clear. Something in Kamehka is bringing the dead back to life, breathing 'elan vital' back into decaying organic matter.

I believe I've crested a ridge but the amount of foliage jostling for space under the forest canopy forces me into a dog-leg several times. I seem to be heading downhill now, as I continue to replay events over and over in my head.

How is such a contagion transmissible? Is it airborne? Waterborne? How does it take hold? Does it kill the host then reanimate the cadaver, or is it only contracted 'post mortis'?

So many questions, but not enough data at this point.

The most pressing question is one of remediation. One obvious solution is containment. Ring-fence the town, then glass it from the air with a high yield incendiary device. There's no point in trying to rescue anyone.

My mind is wandering. I need to focus on getting to the authorities and making them aware of the situation. Then I can get back to focusing on my own problems. Like what the hell my name is. I still have no idea how I got here, where I came from, or where I'm heading.

A sudden irrational fears overtakes me. *Am I one of them? Am I dead?* Maybe I was an inhabitant of Kamehka, killed as the virus rampaged, and I just don't remember. The others didn't know they were dead. They didn't show any signs of sentience.

Oh Jesus!

I kneel down and scramble to check my extremities again. No sign of injury. Certainly no sign of decomposition. My skin is icy gooseflesh, which shows I'm reacting to the inclement weather.

I look to my major arteries; wrist, throat, groin. I can't detect a pulse because my fingers are numb, but I can feel my heart thumping in my chest. Everything is made so much more difficult in the rain and the darkness. *Why did I drop that fucking flashlight?!*

Finally I gather my composure with the simplest of thoughts. I can't be one of them. *Why would they have turned on me in unison, and not on each other?* There was certainly an affinity present in the town's populace.

I must be alive. I am not exhibiting any of their aggression. I have suffered no cataclysmic injury, other than temporary memory loss which, given the circumstances, seems to be a minor miracle. I have no impulse other than to reach civilisation and escape this terrible place.

With renewed vigour I push on, reaching the edge of the woods. The rain is still lashing, but I've been relatively sheltered under the canopy so far. Dawn is approaching. In the twilight, I distinguish the outskirts of a small township one hundred yards away. The power looks to be off. I see barricades. Overturned vehicles. Then I see a light. The cone of a flashlight beam projected onto the side of a small dwelling. No. It can't be.

Kamehka.

I fall backwards, exhausted. *What now?* If this isn't a nightmare, it certainly carries all the hallmarks of one.

I need to get dry. I stifle a cough, rub my chest and try desperately to remain silent, but I can feel a fever coming on and if I stay out in the elements much longer it will only get worse. I can see the beam of the flashlight being broken every now and then as a shadow passes by. They're still walking around down there.

And then I notice it. An open door. The house straight ahead, lit up by the beam of the torch. The dwelling is in darkness but the door is definitely swinging on its hinges. I can only

hope it's uninhabited. From what I've seen of the indigenous population, they seem to prefer the outdoors. I have little choice at this point.

I get on my belly and begin to crawl. Methodically, hand over hand, I inch my way back toward town. Every fibre of my being wants to turn and run, but I have to do this. Being prone seemed to throw the others off my trail earlier, so I can only assume they are guided by sensory perceptions - sight and sound, as opposed to smell.

I crawl for what seems like an eternity, freezing every now and then at the screech of a distant shadow. I hear a faint snarl in the street. Then the town is silent again. I continue to crawl towards the door, and what I pray will be a safe haven.

I reach the front gate and hesitate for a second. I've come too far to turn back. I crawl on my belly across the rough tarmac, broken glass and spent shells cutting into my chest and hands. On my way, I grab the flashlight and train the beam into the doorway. There's no movement. No sound. I power off the flashlight stay prone all the way down the path. The looming darkness of the door swallows me whole.

I raise into a crouch and move through the tiny hallway, which opens up onto a modest living room. I take time to check corners and make sure no one is home.

There's no sound. No movement. I'm alone in the dark. I go back and close the front door quietly; grateful to see it has a latch. Then I retreat back to lock myself in the living room, crouching in the corner to allow my heart rate to lower. I fight it as hard as I can, but it's not long before exhaustion plunges me into a haunted sleep, filled with the revenants of a forgotten life, half remembered faces and the screams of a dying child.

Day One

"Innocence, Once Lost, Can never Be Regained.

Darkness, Once Gazed Upon, Can Never Be Lost" - John Milton. Paradise Lost

I awake with a start from a sleep I'd never meant to have. I cry out and silence myself just as quickly, clasping my hands around my mouth for fear of waking the dead. I'm shivering and my body is covered in a thin film of moisture. Whether its rain water or night-sweats I can't be sure. Sleep hyperhidrosis is a common side effect of chronic fatigue syndrome and anxiety which, given the events of last night, seems more likely. *There I go again.*

Any recollection of who - or what - I was dreaming about soon fade and I'm left only with visions of the inhabitants of the town of Kamehka imprinted on my psyche.

I'm lying in the corner of a sparsely furnished room. There's a large cupboard against one wall and a table and chairs so neatly arranged as to suggest the occupants left in no particular hurry. The place looks to have been turned over, but in a meticulous fashion – not ransacked. Whether the contents have been removed by the owners or someone else, it's not quite clear.

Warm sunlight is pouring through the window, bathing the room in an amber glow. I stand slowly, using the wall to balance myself. Moving cautiously to the window I peer out from behind the curtains. One of the townsfolk is wandering aimlessly in the street.

Its skin is macerated, showing clear signs of infection. *But infection from what?* Its eyes are as dead as the others; black as pitch but with a peculiar glow when the sunlight catches them. Another corpse is crawling on its chest, dragging behind a pair of desiccated legs which have been skinned to the bone by the tarmac and gravel of the road. Their moans are as chilling as I remember.

I stay low and look about the room. There's no sign of any electrical outlets; no phone line. There's a small pile of empty food tins in one corner. On the floor next to the table is an old bolt action World War II rifle. I pick it up. There's worn notches carved into the wooden stock. *This thing belongs in a museum.*

The magazine is empty and pulling the bolt reveals a spent shell in the chamber. Going by the state of the round, this hasn't been fired in a long time. Yet someone found the need to bring it out of retirement. Glancing back out of the window I can see why. I just hope they didn't trust their life to this antique.

I check the drawers of the chest against at the wall; nothing of value. My stomach is rumbling. I don't remember the last time I ate or drank, but I've a feeling I won't be doing either anytime soon. There's a small stack of books at the back of the chest. On checking the spines, it's evident that they're all written in Russian; the Cyrillic script is beyond me.

One book grabs my attention. A small hardback pocket edition: "Travels in Chernarus" by Stafford Lowe. It's a first edition: 1948. I scan the contents and find "Kamenka" listed in Chapter 7. It's spelled differently from the street sign, but the description is accurate.

So I'm in Chernarus. The name is vaguely familiar, but I can't remember why. A lot has certainly changed since the 40s but some of the text may still prove useful.

There's a large chunk of pages missing from back of the book. On checking the contents again, I see that they were topographical maps of the local regions. I guess the previous owner of this book wanted to travel light. I may still be able to glean some information from the passages to navigate, so I toss it into my bag.

I also find a small leather bound journal wrapped in a pink ribbon. A child's hand has inscribed the first dozen pages with brightly coloured text, but I can't read it. The rest of the pages are blank. There's a small marker pen tucked into the spine. I grip the pen and ready my hand to write. Nothing comes. I close the journal and squeeze it into the pocket of my fatigues, suddenly realising that I'm craving a cigarette – *I smoke?*

I move into the bedroom. I checked it last night but only superficially. Again, it's sparsely decorated; a small bed in one corner, an empty wardrobe in the other. There are some faded Polaroid's pinned to a cork board on the wall; candid pictures of flowers and wildlife and stern looking people.

The bed is caked in dried blood and there's spatter across the walls. Closer analysis reveals the ferocity of the attack; the long trails and sweeping arcs show that the blood was travelling at a high velocity, indicating blunt force trauma caused by a heavy object.

Even more disturbing is the fact that the blood pooled on the bed is relatively small. A large pool of blood would suggest the person was alive for some time after the attack; dead bodies stop bleeding quickly when the heart stops pumping. The body didn't remain here long. *Is the killer wandering around outside? Is the victim?*

I need to get out of here. My head is starting to spin. *But how can I escape?* The whole town is infested with walking corpses.

As I turn to leave the room I hear a loose floorboard under my feet. I stoop and flip it over. Underneath is a small cloth bag wrapped in string and inside that, an old Polaroid camera and a few packs of instant film. The packaging is out of date but it should still produce an image. This could come in handy. If I can document the events that have transpired in this town maybe it could help in some small way.

I'm pretty sure dead people coming back to life is a rare phenomenon. Whilst nothing can be done for the victims that have already succumbed, if it can prevent further exposure to the wider populace in neighbouring townships, it's worth a shot. I return to the living room and start to pack my things.

Looking out the window again I see that more inhabitants of the town are now wandering in the streets. There's no chance of leaving. Those creatures have pretty good eyesight in the dark; I can only surmise that their senses are heightened in natural daylight.

From the relative safety of the house I decide to test their spatial awareness. I pick up a few empty tin cans from the corner of the room – they've been licked clean but I can still

detect the faint aroma of baked beans – and open the door quietly. I peek out and see two of the townsfolk walking side by side along the road. Their backs are turned.

I launch one of the cans past them and down the street. It flies over their heads and lands a good ten yards in front of their field of view, where it continues to bounce along the tarmac. Immediately they give chase, bounding after it with a disturbing speed, unconcerned with its point of origin. They pounce on the can and scramble around it. They seem completely unaware of each other's presence; their sole attention is focused on the lifeless piece of tin.

When it stops moving they settle, but continue to stand over it, as if they expect it to move again. After a few seconds they both go their separate ways, as if they've already forgotten what brought them to that particular spot. *Mindless*.

I roll another can behind them and duck back into the house - wait a few seconds - then peek back out. This time it's the sound that has caught their attention. They follow the same routine, chasing the inanimate object like a pair of feral dogs. *Dogs?*

Canines have far less visual acuity than humans; their eyesight is six times poorer. Their genetic ancestry is inherited from the grey wolf and so they have evolved as nocturnal predators, able to hunt highly camouflaged prey. They do it through movement. The thick layer of *Tapitum Lucidum* behind the retina gives their eyes that eerie nightshine. The same shine evident in these walking corpses.

A potential problem at this point is that, even if these infected creatures have taken on aspects similar to *Canis Lupus*, they would still retain the depth perception and visual acuity of primates; the best of both worlds.

As I note these thoughts in the journal, I console myself with the fact that everything is conjecture at this point. *What can I possibly learn from tossing a few tin cans into the street?*

I've learned enough for now though; enough to convince me that the only way I can leave this house is under cover of nightfall.

I draw the curtains and retreat from the window. Clouds have rolled in and it's raining again. I decide to wait until the weather clears before I leave the safety of the house. I need to test out some more theories, but more importantly I need to get out of town. And eat.

My mind is still a complete and utter blank since the beach. Where I'm going is as much a mystery as where I've been.

I sit at the table and begin to read "Travels in Chernarus" in the fading light – maybe it will help me decide my next move.

Day Two

"We Live as we Dream – Alone"
Joseph Conrad. Heart of Darkness.

The storm has passed; despite a full moon, the sky is peppered with stars. From the window, I can make out The Big Dipper low on the horizon. Using the constellation for reference, I can pinpoint the North Star straight ahead. I'm on the south coast.

According to Stafford Lowe, Kamenka was originally founded in 1683. It was granted town status in 1770. It has been sacked many times throughout its history, the most recent being in 1944 when it was burned to the ground to cover a Nazi retreat.

Lowe visited the town four short years later and found a resilience and strength of spirit in its humble populace that warmed his heart. Something tells me that the town won't be recovering from its latest occupation. A pathogen of this ferocity doesn't need to burn houses or livestock. It has infected every resident on a cellular level, turning father against son, mother against daughter. *There's no coming back from this.*

My bag is packed; I've been sitting waiting for my opportunity to leave. I'm sure the coast is clear, so I slip out of the door and crawl on my stomach around to the back of the house. My mind is focused; slow, deliberate movements. One of the indigenous passes only a few feet from me and I freeze in silent horror, clutch at the small medal around my neck. *Proactive, pre-emptive, pragmatic.*

The words come to me in a stranger's voice. *Who taught me that mnemonic?* It doesn't matter at this point. The being has moved on, oblivious to my presence. It gives me the confidence to further test the boundaries of their awareness; but not by too much. My objective is the train tracks I crossed last night, which I know run East towards the major cities further along the coast. Lowe followed these tracks himself, favouring their isolation over the hustle and bustle of the busy road that snaked alongside. Following the tracks will offer far greater visibility. I also know from "Travels in Chernarus" that the next town over, Komarovo, is much bigger, having a port and train station. And help, hopefully.

Before I head towards the tracks, I crawl around some of the gardens of the neighbouring properties. I'm looking for food, drink; any consumables that can keep me going. I left the old rifle in the house. Bringing it would only have slowed me down and ammunition for such an antiquated weapon would be as rare as rocking horse shit. Even with some live rounds, the noise from discharging a rifle would bring every walking corpse within five hundred yards down on my position within seconds.

I find a soda can and a tin of sardines in a privy. Sitting inside the filthy outhouse, I consume the sundries greedily. The stench is unbearable, but the food and drink keep my mind off it. I scoop out the warm sardines with my fingers and wash them down with soda. It's the most disgusting meal imaginable but it tastes glorious after 24 hours of deprivation.

I sneak out of the shelter and head to the train tracks. I consider placing some stones across the road into a rudimentary SOS but think better of it. Throughout recent antiquity, the Morse Code distress signal became associated with the phrase 'Save Our Souls' but I think

it's too late for this town. The barricades will certainly prevent vehicles from entering, but there's nothing stopping the townsfolk wandering along the highway of their own volition.

I need to travel fast. I reach the train lines and, keeping the North Star on my left shoulder, begin to walk at a steady pace. It's not long before the station at Komarovo comes into view on the horizon. The place is deserted. There's a blood-stained hatchet on the platform. I wipe it clean on my shirt and place it in my rucksack before moving silently down the road and into the centre of town.

My heart sinks. I see what I'd always expected. Makeshift barricades; overturned cars; mounds of rubble. And corpses. Lots of walking corpses. This place is as dead as Kamenka. I lie in the dense roadside brush and watch them stagger aimlessly around.

I'm facing what looks to be a public house, lying face down in the dirt, when I hear a commotion across the street. The bushes part and a figure staggers out across the road. It heads towards me and kneels right in front of my face as I begin to stand. A man. He's alive!

"Help me!" he screams, as he grasps my shoulders. Warm blood drips down his arms and onto my neck.

He's looking right at me. His eyes are wide and he's hyperventilating. Blood is spurting in thick jets from his throat. Going by the huge arcs of the blood spout, his jugular vein has been severed. He's gasping for breath.

"Icarus," I whisper hoarsely, "Icarus!" *What does that even mean?*

"You," he stammers backward after regaining some of his composure. *Do I know this man?*

"Me? Me who?" As I speak the words I'm struck by their absurdity. He doesn't answer, but begins to push me away.

I'm staying remarkably composed, considering this is the first human I've come into contact with in this godforsaken region. I'm reaching for the bandages in my pocket when he suddenly rises to his feet and starts to run off.

"No. Don't go. Stay," I whisper.

He's deaf, dumb and blind, rearing off at an odd angle. He disappears behind a hedgerow and I'm about to give chase when I realise why he's running. Two shadows emerge noisily from the bushes in pursuit. I freeze in place and stay low as they run straight past me, their feet missing me by inches.

I lay motionless and try to follow his movements by the sound of his footfalls. I can hear the unfortunate soul running haplessly in the dense woodland across the street; he must have doubled-back in an effort to lose his assailants. I unhook the flashlight from my belt and click the beam on and off, hoping against hope that he sees this as a beacon and makes his way back to me. With his heart rate elevated and bleeding so profusely, he won't last long if he doesn't get pressure on that wound.

He emerges again into the street, but a shadow pounces on him out of nowhere and strikes him across the face. He falls and the corpse stands over him, lashing out with a

staggering ferocity. His screams continue throughout the onslaught. I cover my ears in desperation, trying to block out the blood chilling cries of both victim and attacker.

Finally he falls silent. His breathing stops. He's not moving. The creature's fury does not abate. It continues to pound its fists against his head and torso.

Finally, it ceases, seeming perplexed by the silence. Then, almost instinctively, it begins to lick the blood from its fingers. It kneels and starts to scoop up the dead man's blood with its hands, shovelling still warm viscera and dead flesh into its mouth. *Jesus! They eat the uninfected?*

The indigenous pay each other no mind whatsoever; they stagger aimlessly around with seemingly no purpose. But they have a murderous rage when they see a living human being; an outsider. This could have been my fate. There's no way I could fight off just one them. Getting cornered by more than one means certain death.

I lie motionless for the longest time - my eyes wide - watching the creature chewing the meat and licking the blood of the corpse. It begins to take huge bites out of the man's neck and arms. The smacking sounds as it gorges turn my stomach.

I could have saved this man. I could have done something. Instead, I lay here like a coward and watched him die. I was his only witness in the world; I'll never even know his name.

I risk capturing the scene with the Polaroid camera, then I wait until the creature has had its fill and slopes off. I crawl over to the murdered man. His carcass looks like it's been put through a shredder. His pockets are empty; he's not wearing a pack. There's no identifiable markings, save for the savage wounds dealt by his attacker.

A thought comes into my head. *What if this is how people turn? Perhaps the pathogen is transmitted through blood?* I've been in close proximity to them on several occasions over the last 24 hours and I don't feel any noticeable effects, so it can't be airborne. Bodily fluids seem the most likely route for the infectious agent to travel.

Something else doesn't feel right. This man does not look like a native. I'm pretty sure I'm no anthropologist, but this man's face just doesn't fit the ethnicity of the indigenous population. Add to that the fact that he was dressed in a similar fashion to me – fatigues, shirt – and with what appeared to be an American accent and it seems more likely that he washed up on the nearby shore. *Was he on my boat?* Did I know him in my previous life? He certainly recognised me.

Still so many questions.

It's at that moment that I begin to hear his corpse draw breath. A faint death rattle sounds in his throat. The lifeless eyes begin to twitch and roll, before finally coming to rest on me. They widen as I back away slowly.

It chills me to the bone to suddenly realise that this is now the natural order of things in this part of the world. That there is no peace in death, only a new life borne of unimaginable pain and suffering. A new existence, bereft of all humanity, all memory, all hope. I retreat slowly back into the bushes as this newly birthed abomination begins to stir.

I spy an open door across the street and decide to take refuge. Dawn is approaching and I need to get indoors and out of sight. I crawl slowly to the house and lock myself in.

There's another corpse lying face down in the living room; what looks to be another failed survivor dressed similar to me. He's carrying a water canteen on his belt. I unscrew the cap; it's filled to the brim. I sniff the liquid; swill a tiny amount in my mouth. With slight hesitation, I resign myself to establishing its potability with the only test available to me.

Jabbing a finger into my ear, I rattle it around the canal for a few seconds. I pull it out to reveal a small ball of earwax stuck to the end of my fingernail. I flick it in the canteen. Floating on the surface would indicate stagnation or traces of contaminants. I'm happy to watch the congealed lump sink to the bottom. This water is pure. I drain every last drop from the bottle, earwax and all. Its sweet coolness fills my stomach, sending shivers up my spine. I feel instantly refreshed.

I consider dragging my new bedfellow out into the street, but hesitate when I hear something stagger past the front door. The corpse is starting to smell, it's sweet, sickly aroma filling the room, but of more immediate concern is the fact that it may start moving at some point in the night. Finally I pluck up the courage to drag the body to the door and roll it out onto the road. I go back inside and lock the door behind me. I lie against the wall with the hatchet across my chest, and take "Travels in Chernarus" from my bag to read by the light of the moon shining through the window.

Day Three

"Hell is empty and all the devils are here."

-William Shakespeare

"You said we'd be safe here." Her voice is trembling.

"We are safe. This is the safest place to be right now." We're standing in dimly lit dormitory. It has the feel of a prison cell. There's a small cot in the corner; a table and chair against the wall. The air is thick with cigarette smoke.

"I don't feel safe. I feel like a prisoner. No one tells me anything." Her hair is golden brown, drawn back into a tight pony tail. Her skin shows visible signs of anaemia; that sickly grey hospital pallor. She takes a long draw on a cigarette; passes it to me.

"Trust me. These people have a plan. Soon we'll be far away from all of this." I pull her close and lean in to kiss her on the cheek, but she turns away.

The sound of bare feet slapping on concrete draw my attention to the door. A small child enters, dressed in a sleeping gown. She has tears on her cheeks.

"Daddy?" she croaks, still half asleep, caught in the clutches of a bad dream.

I crouch and stub the cigarette on the floor; waft the smoke from the air. She runs clumsily into my arms and I pick her up; *she's so light*. Her hair is just like her mothers, flowing in waves past her shoulders. I wipe her tears away with my fingers. She's still sobbing.

"What is it, baby? I thought you were sleeping."

"I heard noises. Are the bad people here?"

I look at her mother. She looks away.

"No, baby, no. There's no bad people down here."

"The bad people scared me. Make them go away." She hugs me tight, sobbing uncontrollably. She's terrified, shaking with fear.

"Yes, baby. Don't worry. Daddy's going to make them all go away."

"You promise?" She simmers down and tries to catch her breath. Then she looks right at me, her doe-eyed face tear streaked and utterly heart-breaking.

"I promise, baby. I promise."

* * *

I wake with a jolt; the harsh light of the midday sun is beaming in through the window. The heat in the room and the stillness of the air is stifling. I still have the hatchet across my chest; "Travels in Chernarus" is lying open on the floor.

I rack my brain trying to remember more about the dream. *Was it a dream or a memory relived?* More startling at this point is the realisation that the front door is open.

I shiver at the thought of how exposed I've been, lying fast asleep through whatever transpired. *Perhaps that's what saved my life.*

I think back to last night; the survivor I came across. *Icarus. What does that mean?* I say the word out loud and the next word in my mind is "Firefly". *Is that some kind of countersign? A challenge-response authentication used by the military? Was I in the armed forces? Jesus, why can't I remember anything?*

I stand up and close the door; then I notice a small pile of contraband in the corner. I must have overlooked it last night. There's a watch, a torn map and a hunting knife.

The watch is still ticking; it looks like standard military issue – a Seiko automatic with a green nylon strap. The day indicator shows 22, but since I don't know what month it is, I dial it back to 3 – it may help me keep track of my time here.

The hunting knife is definitely military issue; stainless steel with a serrated back edge and an impact resistant rubber handle. It looks to have seen some heavy use; it's flecked with blood but the blade has been kept razor sharp.

The map has seen better days. A standard ordinance survey with a Cartesian grid, but detailed enough for me to be able to pinpoint my position down the street I'm currently on. The coast runs east and then turns north, until it meets the Black Mountains of South Zagoria. The range effectively hems the land border of Chernarus. The topography shows their height; there are no roads and no obvious way over them.

Using the map scale I estimate Chernarus to be a few hundred square kilometres – not big by Russian standards, but on foot it will take me a while to navigate.

There are several annotations in the margins of the map; I can't make them out. There's also a fair few 'x' marks scrawled here and there throughout the topography, scratched in different coloured inks. Some are more faded than others. Whether these points of interest mark supply caches, safe zones, or checkpoints, it's hard to tell.

This map may have had several owners so placing my faith in some scrawled crosses doesn't seem wise at this point. But in a foreign land with no idea where I'm heading, this will be invaluable.

I remember the medal around my neck. I reach inside my collar and pull the medal over my head to study the markings.

It's a silver pendant. A relief of a saint with the words, "St Jude Pray for Us," inscribed around the edges. The lettering and the depiction are faded but still decipherable. St Jude. *The Patron Saint of lost causes; hopeless cases.* I don't believe I'm a religious person, but I can't think of a better symbol to have with me in this godforsaken country.

I sit at the table and study the map. The next town over is Balota. It looks almost identical to Komarovo, in that it also has a train station and small port, but I'm intrigued to see an airfield half a kilometre to the North. It's not mentioned in Lowe's journal; *it must have been built later in the Soviet era.*

I'm sure it's military; the hangers and other structures are placed too strategically and the town doesn't look like a tourist destination. But if there's one safe zone in this locale, it will be that airbase. Hopefully the Armed Forces were prepared enough to secure its perimeter and protect the survivors of this outbreak. *That's my new objective: extraction.*

If I can make it to the airfield and pass through any quarantine, maybe I can catch the next plane out of here. I can go home. Wherever home is.

I leave tonight.

Day Four

"As far as we can discern, the sole purpose of human existence is to kindle a light in the darkness of mere being." - Carl Jung

Balota Airstrip is just over a kilometre away. Once the sun sets I take some time to scout the surrounding houses, managing to scavenge some tinned goods and sodas. They seem the safest sustenance in terms of sterilisation – with so little information on the infection, I can't risk consuming any of the other sundries lying around. Despite an extensive chapter on edible flora and fauna in Lowe's book, I certainly won't be sampling the local fare anytime soon.

In one of the houses I find a Makarov 9mm pistol; the standard sidearm of the old Soviet Union. It's old, but it's in decent condition. There are three full clips with it. I load a magazine and charge the pistol, putting a round in the chamber. Then I lower the hammer and engage the safety before placing it in the top of my pack.

With the weapon primed, I can get to it quickly if the need arises, but carrying the pistol in my hands or waistband could prove problematic. For starters, the indigenous are mindless; they wouldn't recognise a pistol as a threat, so waving it their faces would be futile for crowd control or forced compliance. Also, if I come across any other survivors, first impressions count. I don't want to be perceived as either a danger or a high value target that has ordinance worth stealing. It's best to remain as passive as possible. Eliminate motive.

* * *

The trek to Balota passes without incident. I consider staying in the woods, as I've noticed that the indigenous stick close their point of origin - towns and settlements - and I'm yet to come across one outside of built up areas, but decide to stick with the train tracks. They've served me well up to this point and sure enough they lead me straight into the heart of town.

Balota is dead; full of walking corpses. The station and port are deserted; there's no sign of any land or sea vehicles, civilisation is long gone. I head north up the main high street. At the town limits, I can make out the hangars of the airstrip two hundred yards away. It's in darkness. It doesn't look good. I follow the road to the gates and am greeted with a scene of total carnage. Whatever checkpoint existed here didn't hold long.

Burned out military vehicles litter the airstrip, the corpses of soldiers are everywhere. Some of them are wandering around, others wriggle slowly in whatever way they still can. I head to the control tower in the hope of getting a better view of the locale.

The moon is out, covering everything in an eerie silver sheen. I climb the steps of the tower slowly, trying to reduce the noise of my boots on the concrete. In the darkness of the control room, I risk the beam of the flashlight and scan over the console. The power is off and it has sustained a lot of damage. If I could get some portion of it running, I could perhaps scan the local frequencies and see if anyone in the vicinity is still broadcasting. It would be pointless to try any repairs in the darkness, so I decide to wait around until morning.

There's a lot military ordinance in the control room. Shotguns, automatic rifles, sub machine guns. All the weapons are dry and there's no ammunition in sight, so I see no point in taking anything. I make my way back down the stairs to recon the hangars.

Heading out of the door, my heart jumps into my mouth as a shadow appears on the ground in front of me. It's moving too smooth and too quiet to be a corpse. Instinctively, I freeze. Suddenly, there's a pistol in my face; the barrel a few inches from my eye. Another survivor is standing right in front of me, looking at me down the iron sights of his sidearm.

We stand in silence. My heart is in my mouth, but I remain composed. I'm careful not to make any sudden movements. The last thing I want to do is spook this person; they seem jittery enough.

He looks me up and down, showing no sign of lowering his pistol. I can't gauge his intentions, but the longer this standoff endures, the higher my odds of survival get. I don't know what's going through his mind until he shoves me against a wall and frisks my clothing.

Finally, he holsters the pistol and pushes past me and along the hallway, disappearing into the darkness to the stairwell. Looks like my forward thinking paid off.

"Icarus," I whisper quietly as I begin to follow him.

"Leave," comes a firm response in the darkness. He sounds Russian.

"Do you know what's happening here?" I ask.

"You leave, now."

I can't leave. I don't have anywhere to go at this point. "I can fix radio console upstairs. We can call for help."

"No Radio. No Power. No Help." His response is resolute.

"I know where power is."

"You fuck off or I kill you." His voice is deep and full of menace.

"Listen, hear me out, please."

The click of the pistol's hammer signals the end of our brief conversation. I can just make out his silhouette in the stairwell as I back slowly out of the tower with my hands out in front of me, palms facing out.

I don't know how to process what has just happened. I don't know whether to be more affronted at the fact that he held a gun in my face or the fact that he rebuked my attempt to help him. For all he knows, we're the last two people left alive in this region, and yet he seems completely au fait with turning his back on me.

I make my way outside and across to the far edge of the airstrip. Crouching next to a pile of debris I watch his torch beam flickering around the control room. He must have found the ordinance. A short time later, he climbs the ladder onto the roof of the tower, a large scoped rifle slung over his shoulder. It's the Czech hunting rifle I'd contemplated taking. He's looking straight at me.

He kneels at the railings and fishes into his backpack. Then he pulls on the bolt of the rifle and I realise what is happening. He has ammunition for that weapon. *Fuck.*

He rests the barrel of the rifle on the railing and sights me through the scope. In desperation I flash my torch beam on and off to let him know that I can see him. I'm pleading silently to his better nature.

I panic and decide to make a run for it. I try to get up. But it's too late. The deafening crack of the rifle breaks the silence of the airfield. I close my eyes and cry out.

"No!"

Nothing. Nothing for the longest time, save for the echo of the gunshot reverberating around the hangars and hillside.

Wait. How did I hear that gunshot? He must be over a hundred and fifty yards away. That round would be travelling at well over 2000 feet per second, more than double to speed of sound. I should be dead. More pointless trivia from the redundant depths of my mind.

My thoughts are broken by a heavy thud behind me. I jump clear out of my skin. One of the indigenous falls a few feet from where I was crouched. Half its head has been removed by the rifle round. It lies motionless, as a cadaver should.

It was right on top of my position when my anonymous benefactor took that shot. That man in the tower saved my life. A million thoughts run through my head, the most pertinent at this point is that my new friend killed something which was already dead. *The indigenous can be killed.*

I look back up at the tower. My saviour has the rifle slung back over his shoulder but he's still staring at me. He's pulled the sidearm again. He seems spooked. At the base of the tower, a large group of indigenous are amassing in the twilight. The sound of the rifle shot must have piqued their interest. Some are moving with a staggering speed that chills me to the bone.

The survivor climbs back down the ladder and disappears back into the tower. A few seconds later, small arms fire begins lighting up the control room.

They're in the stairwell. In a moment of blind impulse and comradery I pull the Makarov from my pack and run full tilt back across the tarmac of the runway. The gunfire is ringing thick and fast as I round the corner to see a corpse catch a bullet in its mouth before dropping to the floor in a heap.

The survivor darts of the door and, for a split second, draws down on me. Thankfully his reflexes are sharp and he lowers the weapon once he identifies me, reloading with remarkable speed.

Without a word he snatches the pistol from my hands. I consider protesting but I lose my nerve. By the light of the moon I can see this guy outweighs me by a good fifty pounds and is well over six-four. He's dressed in camouflaged fatigues and is probably concealing all manner of close combat weapons. He mutters what I assume to be all manner of Russian insults under his breath as he removes the clip and thrusts the Makarov back at me. As I take it from him hesitantly, he presses his finger against the ejection port of the barrel. Clearly he knows there's still a round in the chamber.

“One bullet for you,” he says nonchalantly. “One bullet, all you need when time come.” He raises his index finger to his temple and cocks his thumb. I’m not sure at this point who I’m more afraid of.

I step through the door and survey the bloodbath on the stairwell. There are a dozen bodies strewn across the floor. My new acquaintance clearly has a military background; his shot placements were delivered with clinical precision – I could tell just from the rhythm that he was firing in controlled pairs.

There’s no centre-mass entry wounds. Every corpse has two rounds to the head – double taps. More than a few have been shot through the top lip. *The brain stem – is that the key?*

It’s all too much to take in at this point. I turn to thank my saviour, but he’s already gone. The movement of the foliage in the middle distance is the last I see of him. I’m alone again. The sky is brightening in the East.

* * *

I spend the morning scavenging the airfield hangars, coming across row upon row of body bags and large numbers of soldiers that have been killed in action. Many of them do not show any sign of head trauma, yet they have not reanimated. *If destroying the brain is the only way to prevent coming back, how have these men not turned? Were the military personnel immune?*

At the forefront of my thoughts is the constant realisation that my friend from last night risked his life to save mine. I’ll probably never see him again. I hope I get a chance to pay it forward.

Day Five

*“What is hell? Hell is oneself.
Hell is alone, the other figures in it
merely projections. There is nothing to escape from
and nothing to escape to. One is always alone.” - T.S. Eliot*

The supply situation is starting to unnerve me. I've consumed most of the tinned goods; I have one can of beans left in my backpack and a few sodas.

Fluids are a pressing concern but I still have the flask; I shouldn't have any difficulty sourcing water in this climate. It's been raining on and off since I got here and there's a lot of hills nearby which will no doubt have streams and fresh water run-off spots. But there are no calories in water. I need energy.

The human body expends around 70 calories an hour just breathing; that's over 1600 calories a day for a sedentary existence. I figure with the stress, fatigue and physical exertions, I'm burning between four and six thousand daily. The beans are giving me around 400 calories per portion. While their nutritional balance is almost perfect, my intake is woefully inadequate - I'm starting to feel the effects of malnourishment.

If I contracted an illness at this point, my days really would be numbered; I couldn't afford to lose energy through vomiting or diarrhoea. The only certainty at this point is that, if it comes down to it, my last supper will be served from the barrel of that Makarov, courtesy of my Russian friend from last night. I'm not going to end up like the indigenous. At least I'm no longer craving cigarettes.

I spend the morning trying to repair the console in the control tower. Most of the equipment is ruined; the failsafe power backup has been looted. I resort to tearing out the phone lines and using the latent 48 volt residual charge still in the cabling to power a small portion of the console's receiver.

The phone handsets have long since been looted, so I can't dial any numbers and there is no switchboard service. But even with the phone company most likely out of commission, standard operating procedures dictate that a battery bank kicks in to provide backup power and facilitate emergency services calls. Once again, I'm baffled by the amount of seemingly random information I can access in my brain.

I scan through all of the VHF frequencies, but the airwaves are dead. Next I check the medium and longwave frequencies. Still nothing discernible, although somewhere around 4625KHz the static is punctuated by a pulsing drone. It sounds like a distant foghorn, blasting on and off every few seconds, stuck on some kind of binary loop. The droning sound is punctuated every now and then by a muffled groan, as if someone is in a great deal of pain. It sounds like one of the indigenous. The sound seems familiar and I wrack my brain trying to remember where I have heard it before, until I finally give in and power down the console.

I leave the receiver dialled to 156.8MHz - VHF channel 16; the international distress frequency - and head back out to the airfield. The corpses in the stairwell of the tower are

continuing to decompose and the smell is becoming unbearable in the midday heat. But at least they aren't moving.

I've never felt so hopelessly lost and alone. The sun is has reached its zenith. It's just after 2pm. The dead are walking about the landing strip aimlessly in their trademark waddlesome sloth. I'm crouched close to the wall of the tower, completely still.

I think back the events of last night; my friend with the penchant for exploding heads. He certainly had the knack – I get the feeling if I'd pushed him any more I'd be lined up with the others in the hallway.

The brain must hold the secret; the central nervous system. That's what is still driving these cadavers. It makes perfect sense in hindsight. It explains why some of the indigenous are crawling around on their chests and propelling themselves only with their arms. A severed spinal cord would cut off the brain's access to various extremities.

That means that in theory, the infected could be immobilised by beheading; severing the medulla oblongata and cutting off the brains access to the rest of the host. That basic rule of anatomy applies to all cephalized members of the animal kingdom.

The difference with the indigenous is that decapitation would still leave a snarling, screeching head capable of inflicting bite wounds or spreading communicable infection. The brain must be destroyed. Ergo, that's where the infection must reside. Whether it enters the body through the respiratory system or is limited to physical contact between hosts is still unknown.

My guess would be that the contagion enters through an orifice or an open wound. It would explain how my friend from last night was able to go toe-to-toe with the indigenous and walk away unscathed, and how I'm still walking around with no noticeable symptoms.

In the silence, I hear the patter of small cloven feet on the tarmac behind me. A wild sheep is padding across the strip. For some reason it is not picked up by the indigenous; they pay it no mind. It senses me and stops in its tracks. Then, without any encouragement, it strolls directly towards me.

The ewe doesn't show any signs of fear. I kneel down and scratch it under the jaw, as you would a dog. Judging by its demeanour, it's showing no signs of infection - there's no discolouration in the lymph glands in the cheeks. As a livestock animal with such a deeply entrenched place in human pastoral culture, it's probably just as confused with current events as I am. It's a social beast, no doubt striving for acceptance with the only other living creature it can identify.

Inevitably, the realisation dawns on me. Aside from the can of beans in my pack, I don't know where my next meal is coming from. Facing the prospect of an agonising death from starvation, I have no choice. This animal has survived for God knows how long by avoiding the indigenous. The irony isn't lost on me. But if I'm going to do this, I must do it now. *I can't hesitate.*

I stand and grip the ewe around the snout. I'm determined to do this right and cause the least amount of stress. It starts to struggle as I reach for the hatchet at my back.

"I'm sorry," I mutter meekly.

I bring the hatchet down hard, just in front of the shoulders; the medulla oblongata. The animal kicks limply as it drops and I scan the airfield to see if any of the indigenous have picked up on the hubbub. The surroundings remain tranquil.

I lay the animal gently on its side and remove the hunting knife from my belt. Opening the throat, I let the blood drain from the carcass, raising the hind legs. I hesitate at the smell and wonder if the locals may be drawn to it, waiting for the longest time before proceeding.

I slice through the hide, taking care not to cut into the stomach or internal organs, rolling back the flesh in a neat spool – it may come in handy for clothing or insulation the next time the weather turns.

My hands suddenly take over and become independent of my will, moving with a speed and skill beyond my own comprehension. They make precise incisions between the tenth and eleventh rib. Within a few minutes I have five neatly cut steaks piled next to the carcass. I'm about to slice into the forequarter, when the radio in the control tower sputters into life.

The noise startles me and I almost run the blade across my own fingers. I grab some weeds sprouting from a crack in the tarmac and wipe the blood from my hands as I dart back inside and up the stairwell.

"Mayday, Mayday... Chernov? I repeat, is there anyone in Chernov?"

The signal is saturated in background noise and I fiddle with the squelch and volume controls to drown out some of the interference.

"I repeat, is anyone reading me from Chernov?"

The static hum of the receiver continues in the background. The same voice hails again.

"Is there anyone in Chernov? We require urgent medical assistance and evac."

Chernov. I unfold the map on the floor and check for any mention of that name. There's a town 2 kilometres East called Chernogorsk; one of two major cities on the South coast.

Suddenly, a much louder voice calls out over the interference. The change in pitch and volume startles me. The responder is much more au fait with radio etiquette, efficient and direct.

"Unidentified party, this is Chernov reading you five-by-five. What's the situation, come-back?"

"My friend. He has a broken leg. He's hurt pretty bad. I think he's going into shock. We need medical assistance."

"Ten-four, what is your current location, come-back?"

"We're on the outskirts of Electro. We barely made it out. You have to help us."

"Ten-four, Electro. Please stand by."

Electro. Electrozavodsk? The next major city over from Chernogorsk, six kilometres further up the coast away. That would explain why the signal is so faint. The operator takes charge of the conversation again.

“Electro, this is Chernobyl, come-back.”

“Yes, hello. This is Electro.”

“Electro, be advised. We have available food, shelter and medical supplies, come-back.”

“Thank God. Thank you so much. My friend.”

“Can you reach Chernobyl? Are you able to walk? Come-back.”

“Yes, I can make it.”

“Proceed directly to Chernobyl docks, assistance will meet you en route and escort you in.”

“I’ll be there in one hour.”

“Ten-four Electro, fifteen-hundred hours. This is Chernobyl, out.”

“Okay, I’m on my way.”

So am I.

Throughout the conversation I had contemplated hailing the other survivors but hadn’t wanted to interrupt an emergency distress call. I gather my belongings and make my way back out of the tower. I wrap the meat in some large leaves from the nearby trees and stack them neatly in my pack. *Time is of the essence.*

Egressing in broad daylight will be extremely dangerous, but I have little choice at this point. The risk is as great as the reward. The other survivors will be meeting shortly. There’ll be safety in numbers. *I have to get to the docks.*

I check the map again and plot the safest route. One kilometre North East, there looks to be a small substation atop a tree covered hill. Two sets of power lines run South-East directly into the city. I can stay sheltered in the woods for most of the trip and keep my bearings under the forest canopy. *There’s no time to lose.*

Day Five (continued)

"Abandon hope, all ye who enter here" - Dante Alighieri, The Divine Comedy

I'm at the edge of the forest, near a dead-end tower that terminates the overhead power lines; they must continue underground into the city from this point. Beyond the anchor pylon, the urban sprawl of Chernogorsk sits mute and abandoned, exuding an eerie sense of tranquillity.

To see such a huge city devoid of life is unnerving; there's not even any sign of the indigenous. Until this point the serenity of the pine and birch trees had lulled me into a false sense of security, but now the reality of my endeavour is hitting home.

I'm heading into the heart of a city that has clearly been evacuated, with the hope of putting faces to voices heard only in passing on a redundant radio frequency. I don't know their identity or their true intentions. The exchange certainly sounded genuine but now that I'm here, doubt has begun to take hold.

I can make out the smokestacks of factories in the industrial district. Beyond them, some high rise buildings shimmer in the late afternoon sun. There's smoke billowing from what look to be some out of control fires in a few of the suburbs. I crouch and remove the map from my bag, squinting at the topography of the city.

The realisation hits me like a freight train. The markings made by the previous owners. At first glance, I had taken them to be meaningless 'x' marks dotted arbitrarily, but on closer inspection I realise that they're actually a lot more illustrative.

I count four large 'x's strewn across the town. But until now my orientation had been wrong. They're actually + signs; and two of them are red. Hospitals. Elsewhere, two thick black crucifixes mark what can only be churches, their vertical tails purposely distended.

Hospitals and churches are historically the two main places of refuge in any catastrophe. People inevitably turn to God or science, depending on their own proclivities.

Those precious little marks may house small communities of survivors, well stocked with medical provisions, food and water. My spirits are lifted as I briefly contemplate the resilience of the human soul to endure such hardships. And just as quick, I'm brought back down to Earth with a crash.

Contact - middle distance, behind the buildings. Automatic rifle fire in three round bursts, punctuated by an unsuppressed 50 calibre. The shots are emanating from the heart of the city. I count seven shots from the big bore, interspersed with more small arms fire, possibly an SMG. Then silence. The whole exchange lasts less than 15 seconds. I check my watch. 3:30PM

Three shooters. But who, or what, were they shooting at? The indigenous? Other survivors? Were they part of the same unit? Were they firing at each other? Too many dynamics at this point.

I'm certain that at least one person is now dead or dying. The fire fight also signals that the pre-arranged meeting must have went south pretty quickly. *Did someone bring a friend or was there someone else apart from me listening to the exchange earlier?*

My heart is racing as I fold the map and slip the daysack from my shoulders. I stash my belongings behind a tree, laughing quietly to myself at the absurdity of my actions. I might be heading into certain death, but no one is laying claim to those steaks.

Armed only with the axe clipped to my belt – slim pickings for any would-be bandit – I make my way cautiously down the hill and towards the city.

The silence is deafening. The streets are deserted. The stillness of the city is almost unbearable. My footsteps echo loudly off the buildings as I tiptoe along the pavement. I approach a supermarket and I'm about to climb the steps when I'm startled by the sound of church bells ringing nearby. It seems almost alien to me.

I bypass the store and cut through the heavy undergrowth between the buildings to mask my footfalls. The church doors are open. Peeking inside I see that it's deserted. The bells must have been replaced with an automated PA system running on a backup generator. The almighty is out of office; please leave a message. I grip the medal at my throat, breathe deeply and move on.

The docks are occupied by the indigenous. They're strolling about aimlessly, no doubt drawn by the auditory fireworks of the encounter between the two radio hams. Surveying the dockside, I can see that a large wharf juts out and turns at a right angle, forming the quay into a tight u-shape.

There are no ships in the harbour, but dotted along its perimeter are several cranes offering an elevated position and allowing better surveillance of the locale. I cautiously climb the ladders to one of the gantries and instantly notice two bodies on the jetty a few hundred yards away. Their clothes and the pools of blood surrounding them indicate fresh kills. Two fatalities; neither show any signs of reanimating.

But where's the last man? I heard three separate weapon discharges. Rules of conflict and deductive logic would dictate that there should be at least one survivor. So, where the hell is he? My guess is that the two cadavers are clutching automatic weapons, meaning Mr 50 Cal is sitting pretty in an entrenched position somewhere in the high rise buildings, impervious to retaliatory fire. He may still be watching.

Urban environments always favour the sniper. Reconnaissance, manoeuvrability and tactical pursuit are all degraded. If this is a 'come-on' I'm walking straight into the kill box by approaching those two corpses on the jetty. On the flip side, there may be lifesaving assets on those bodies.

Of course, that's assuming Florence Nightingale actually had the medial supplies he claimed. In hindsight, he did seem rather disconnected throughout the whole exchange. If there really is a poor unfortunate soul with a broken leg in the neighbouring city, I just hope he has the means to end things cleanly and on his own terms.

There's also the sheer number of shots to consider. Expending seven rounds seem excessive. Either the shooter was drawing down on multiple targets I haven't seen yet, or he just isn't very good.

Daylight is wasting but fortune favours the bold. Unfortunately, so do the indigenous. I climb down from the crane and make my way quickly along the wharf. I'm crouched and moving much quicker than I'm comfortable with. Twice I have to go to ground and avoid aggressing some preoccupied corpses strolling idly across my path. I crawl the last few feet to the two bodies on the concrete jetty.

They're practically lying on top of one another. An MP5 and M4A1 are strewn at their feet; sophisticated hardware for civilians. I position myself between the bodies and the water, noticing the huge high-rise building in the middle distance overlooking my position. I stay on my stomach and unzip the backpack of the first casualty. Blood transfusion bags, adrenaline pens, morphine injectors. He was telling the truth.

I leave the medical supplies in the bag and lean in to check the next fatality. That's when it happens. The explosive snap of a high velocity round on the tarmac next to me almost shatters my ear drums. The blast of the impact is so close, it feels like sand being thrown in my face.

The cracking of the road surface is quickly followed by the reverberating whip of a rifle's muzzle echoing in the distance. Instinctively, I drop the supplies and barrel roll to my right, wincing as another round ricochets even closer.

Suddenly I'm in freefall for what seems an eternity; weightless, powerless, my limbs flailing impotently in space. I still can't remember my own name, but I'm certain that this sensation isn't new to me. *Is this what death feels like?*

The icy water of the marina breaks my fall. The shock to my system brings me back into the moment. I swallow a mouth full of rancid water and panic when some ends up in my lungs.

I right myself and burst back to the surface, coughing and sputtering, trying to grip the concrete sides of the jetty. The indigenous have stirred, their moans are filling the docks. I can hear their frantic footsteps beating on the tarmac overhead, trying to determine the cause of the commotion. One of them falls from the dock above me, disappearing into the depths like a stone.

I kick myself at my own stupidity. Of course the shooter was still watching. That's what snipers do. A trained marksman will remain motionless for days, lying immobile in their own bodily secretions, just waiting for an opportunity to present itself. And along I came. On the flip side, a sniper's motto is "one shot, one kill". *This guy still has a way to go.*

More gunfire signals to me that he's started to pick off the indigenous on the walkway above. It sounds like he's trying to clear a path to the dock. It's ironic that the only things protecting me at this point are the very things that have been terrorising me since I arrived.

It's getting dark; I'm getting fatigued. The water is clear but I can no longer see the bottom of the marina. I'm pretty sure the reanimants don't swim, but if there are any walking around down in the depths, the dock may be shallow enough for them to reach up and grab hold of my boots.

I start to swim as smoothly as I can, paddling my way gently along the concrete wall. Above me, the rifle reports continue to sound in the twilight. I get the feeling he's just taking pot-shots now.

I swim for a further thirty minutes, eventually making it out of the marina and along the beach at the outskirts of the city. The whole time my heart is racing, through a combination of fear and exertion. By the time I reach the shore, the firing has stopped.

I crawl out of the surf and collapse onto the sand. I'm completely exhausted. As I lie face down in the wet dirt, heavy with sea water and exhaustion, I contemplate the events leading up my current circumstances and realise the hopelessness of my situation.

I'm about to rise to my knees when an icy hand grips the exposed skin just above my ankle. I shudder violently and roll over, but it's too late.

The grotesque countenance of a corpse is staring straight at me. Bloated, blistered and dark green, the soft parts of the face look to have been eaten away by sea life. Water oozes from every orifice. It must have followed me out of the marina. Before I can react, it sinks its teeth deep into the flesh of my calf, groaning deeply. I cry out and, without thinking, yank the hatchet from my belt and bury the blade into the back of the creature's skull. Its spinal cord severs; its jaw goes limp immediately. One last death rattle sounds in its throat as the tide rises up and carries it away.

I begin frantically washing the wound in the surf. It's bleeding heavily. I pull a bandage from my pocket and wring the sea water from it, then wrap it tightly around my leg. No, no, please, no.

I stand and breathe a sigh of relief; it can still take my weight. But I'm soaking wet and shivering violently. I need to find shelter fast.

As I stagger back along the shoreline in the darkness I can distinguish the outline of a small settlement. Single story ramshackle houses. I hop the nearest fence and cross the lawn. Then suddenly I pick up the distinct aroma of gasoline.

There's a steel oil drum in the middle of the overgrown garden. It's filled to the brim with wooden logs, which smell like they've been doused in some kind of accelerant. Hanging by a small chain on the rim of the barrel is a sliver of flint. I strike the quartz along the inside of the barrel. Sparks jump wildly, instantly igniting the wooden blocks. In a flash, the barrel is ablaze, the flames leaping up at me.

And with the flames come everything else. A lifetime of memories are suddenly unlocked in my mind, instigated by that single trigger. The fire burns away the fugue and the fog clears in a split second. A torrent of emotion envelopes me in the same way the marina did.

I breakdown completely, falling to my knees, wailing like a child. I press my hands against my mouth in an attempt to stifle my cries and rock back and forth inconsolably. I hear the shrieks and screams of the indigenous. Then I realise these unholy sounds are emanating from within me.

Like a light switch being flicked, suddenly I remember everything. There are no mysteries left for me in this world.

I know who I am.

I know why I'm here.

Thanks for making it this far.

If you enjoyed this extract, you can read the rest of Revenance over on the Kindle Marketplace.

Stay tuned for Book 2 in the Dead Hand Series, coming soon.

Stay Safe,

John. Judge

About the Author:

John Judge lives with his wife Jennifer on the Isle of Man, a British Crown Dependency in the Irish Sea - the perfect place to survive the impending apocalypse.

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