

THE INVASION

C. Carlos Camacho

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This tale is dedicated to the following people:

Mrs. Webster, my English / Social Studies teacher in middle school. Without your guidance and example all those years ago, I may never have had the confidence to continue writing. Thank you.

My parents, Tomás and Petra Camacho for instilling and encouraging my love of reading in me at an early age.

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PROLOGUE

THE DAY BEGAN normally enough; people woke up, prepared themselves for the day ahead, caught the morning news, and headed out for their daily activities. Nobody suspected what was to happen in the coming hours, for today was the day that the planet was invaded. The invasion didn't happen in the stealthy manner most modern science fiction writers preferred; on the contrary, it began much like a movie — quick, violent, and obvious.

The first craft appeared in the skies in early afternoon. Its metallic skin gleamed in the bright sunlight as it banked smoothly through the air. At first glance, it looked much like a fighter jet, except the dimensions were somehow... wrong. Others quickly joined it, seemingly appearing out of nowhere, then shot off in different directions. It didn't take long for people to notice the strange aircraft and make panicked calls to various governmental agencies.

Unlike in the movies, however, this invasion does not have a happy ending for the residents of our planet. The invaders conducted a swift and successful planetary conquest; the war lasted no more than a few days before the nations of the world surrendered to the overwhelming military might of the aliens. This, however, is not the story of the invasion; rather, it's the tale of one person and his experiences.

As we've already established, the day began normally enough...

DAY ONE

I **AWOKE AT** my usual time, the alarm clock blaring its cacophony into my ear from its comfortable perch on my nightstand. The morning rays of the sun cast long shadows on the floor of my bedroom; specks of dust floated in a shaft of sunlight. The sounds of early morning traffic intermingled with those of the birds singing their songs. Today promised to be a wonderful beginning to my retirement.

After nearly thirty years of working for the government, I'd finally decided that it was time to retire and collect my pension; today was the official start of that new life. I stretched slowly and swung my legs over the side of the bed; I could have slept in, but old habits die hard.

Walking into the living room, I turned on the television to watch the morning news then stepped into the kitchen to make myself some breakfast. The meteorologist predicted another sunny day with warm temperatures; I resolved to take a walk into town later today and enjoy the fresh spring air.

After spending a few minutes of listening to the gossipy girls on the television yammer on and on about the War and the latest casualty numbers, I grew weary of their platitudes and turned it off. As always, the same people who'd never done anything for their country except look pretty in front of the camera were acting as if they knew it all. I wouldn't consider myself very hawkish, but I still had the presence of mind to know that sometimes war could be necessary. I sighed and finished eating.

In the kitchen, I dumped my plate in the sink then started getting ready for my walk. I picked my keys up from the coffee table and headed back into the kitchen, where I paused; I slid my car keys off the ring and hung them on the key hook under the dish cabinet. *I won't need these today*, I thought.

Locking the door behind myself, I glanced down the street. Several of my neighbors were getting ready to head off for work; I smiled — I would not miss that bit of daily drudgery. A young boy sped past me, obviously in a hurry to get somewhere; *He's probably trying to get to school before he's late*, I thought to myself. The middle-aged wife of my next-door neighbor stepped out of her house and began stretching for her morning run; there truly was more activity in the morning I'd never thought existed. All those years of dutifully going to work caused me to miss out on all this fascinating flurry of activity.

I strode down the street contemplating where I should go. A certain outdoor cafe, a favorite of mine, struck me as the perfect spot to spend the morning. My decision made, I stopped at the bus stop and waited.

* * *

I SPENT THE rest of the morning at the cafe sipping a cup of tea as I reflected on my new life. A couple of hours after I sat at one of the outdoor tables, one of my old colleagues—who'd retired a year previous— appeared and I invited him to join me.

"So you finally did it," he said. "I thought you would be one of those stiffs who'd work your entire life."

I raised the cup to my mouth and took a long sip as I considered my reply. "I very nearly was. After my wife passed away, I just didn't see the point in living a retired life; frankly the thought of doing nothing frightened me."

He leaned back in his seat and asked, "So what changed your mind?"

"It's quite simple, really — I came to the realization that that was the last thing my wife would have wanted me to do. She fought so hard against the cancer so that we could live our 'golden years' together that my refusal to retire seemed to be an affront to her memory."

Taking a sip from his own cup, my colleague nodded. "She really was an amazing woman, your wife."

"She was, wasn't she?" We sat in contemplative silence for the next hour, watching people rush past.

Around noontime, the cafe began to fill with the lunch crowd seeking a temporary respite from work. I decided that this would be a nice time to take another stroll. "I'm heading over to the city park, you're welcome to join me if you want."

Taking a final sip from his now-cooled tea, he stood. "Lead the way, my old friend."

Set in the heart of the city, the park lay only a short walk from the cafe; but it may as well have been a world away. I remember a time only a decade or so ago when the park was a festering cesspool of crime. After the brutal murder of a young girl, however, the citizens demanded that something be done; in the years since, a concerted

effort resulted in the removal of scrub brush and dead trees which had provided cover to criminals looking for an easy score. Today, the park was now sunnier and more open, creating a friendlier environment for families; the police also maintained a constant presence with the new station having been built next to the park.

"How long has it been now?" he asked.

"Since when?"

"Since your wife passed on," he said.

A small child, about four years old I guessed, squealed with delight as her father tossed a ball up in the air as far as he could ("Higher, daddy! Higher!). The little girl reminded me of my own daughter when she was the same age. A wry smile crossed my face as I recalled playing with her the same way this father played with his child. *Life carries on, no matter what happens; it is ignorant of our personal tragedies*, I thought.

"It'll be nine years next month," I finally answered.

He caught me watching the man and girl. "What of your daughter? What is she doing nowadays?"

"She left for University last year, shortly after you retired. She's studying to be a doctor, and plans to help the civilians who are impacted by the War."

We passed a small pond where an elderly man sat on a wooden bench feeding bread to a flock of hungry birds. "A noble calling, truly. I remember when she was a little girl, clinging to your leg. How old is she now?"

I laughed at the memory; the day I introduced my friend to him, my daughter was just six years old and extremely shy. She refused to leave my side the entire time he was in our home, but the next time he visited she climbed all over him as if she'd known him her whole life. *Children are fickle beings*, I mused.

"She's twenty-two years old now. She spent her birthday at the University but promised to be here next month for the remembrance." Most people don't observe remembrances anymore, but my family believed it important to maintain tradition.

He nodded and said, "It's a travesty that the remembrance ceremony has fallen out of favor, if you ask me. People are too concerned about the *now* and don't pay enough respect to the dead."

"I would be honored if you could join us at the remembrance," I offered.

We paused at a stand of trees, their branches full of pink blossoms. Insects buzzed around the small flowers and drank up the sweet nectar within.

"I'll be there; do you want me to say a few words?"

I opened my mouth to answer, but the sudden crack of thunder gave me pause. Puzzled, we both gazed into the sky; it had not suddenly filled with dark clouds as I half-expected. The sky remained its normal cerulean shade and the sun shone brightly above. The source of the thunder was a mystery until I spotted a shape growing larger in the sky.

"A sonic boom," I remarked. "That pilot is bound to be grounded... they're forbidden from breaking the sound barrier over cities."

My friend squinted as he stared at the aircraft. "I don't know; there's something different about that plane. I'm not so sure it's one of ours."

A second sonic boom shook the trees as another plane appeared in the sky. I watched the first one grow closer and quickly realized he was right; the shape was wrong. I searched my memory in an attempt to figure out which country these planes belonged to, but I was certain I'd never seen any like these before. Moments later, several more sonic booms heralded the arrival of many more of the odd planes; they remained in formation for a few minutes before suddenly flying off in different directions. One flew directly toward the city.

Shit, we're in serious trouble, I suddenly realized. "I think we need to get out of here." I grabbed my friend's arm and pulled him with me as I hurried back the way we came. The old man who'd earlier been feeding the birds was slumped over on the bench, clutching his chest in obvious pain. *The sudden appearance of these mysterious planes must have induced a heart attack*, I surmised.

A young child's shout of wonderment: "Daddy, look at all the airplanes!"

I could now clearly see the plane headed our way—it approached with startling speed. Its shape was indeed strange, and seemed much too large to be able to fly; yet it undeniably was. It flew over the park with a deafening roar and banked toward downtown. I impulsively ducked to avoid being struck by the wingtip—an imagined fear, since the plane flew well above even the tallest tree, but its unusual dimensions imparted an illusion of closeness.

"We have to help him," I shouted over the din, pointing at the old man.

Silent assent answered me as my friend shifted direction and hurried over to the bench. We were too late—the old man's heart was too weak to recover from the shock—he already lay dead.

"Damn it all to hell," I cursed. "If this is some sort of military exercise, someone needs to be held respon..." A massive explosion interrupted me.

We turned our heads toward the sound and saw a huge fireball reaching into the sky. The plane banked and fired at a high-rise apartment building, which promptly vanished into a second fireball. The noise of the explosions was deafening and a scorching wind struck us. Another explosion was quickly followed by a fourth, a fifth, and a sixth as the plane continued its attack on downtown.

Screams punctuated the air as people quickly realized what was happening; a throng of panicked citizens surged into the park, currently the only haven from the firestorm the city had become. I watched in abject horror as more fireballs rose above my city. *We need to get away from here... they don't care about civilian casualties!*

I grabbed his arm again and dragged him to the heart of the park. "We have to get away from the crowd," I shouted, "they're targeting civilians!"

"Aren't we going the wrong way then? We should be going *toward* the city, toward what's already been destroyed; they won't waste time attacking what they've already destroyed!"

My instinct told me otherwise; that going toward the devastation would mean only death, not safety. "NO! They're not playing by the rules. We must go into hiding! I know of a place that should be safe."

The father pushed past us with his screaming daughter in his arms. The terror on her face made the decision for both of us. "I'm going to where I know it'll be safe," I told my friend.

"As am I, but I'm certain you're mistaken. I'm going into downtown."

"I wish you wouldn't." I watched the plane warily; more buildings exploded as its attack continued unabated.

"I don't wish to die today. Come with me," he offered. I shook my head; going toward the devastation was a death sentence. I knew this with absolute certainty. Another explosion, this time much closer. I looked toward it and saw a fireball rising from a school across the street from the park entrance.

All those children — dead, I thought with profound sorrow. The anguished screams of parents rushing from their work places to save their kids filled the air.

"I can't," I replied. I turned to hurry toward safety when he grasped my shoulder.

"Whatever may happen, know that my prayers are with you," my friend told me sadly. We both knew that this would be our final goodbye.

"And mine, with you," I intoned. His hand left my shoulder and we went our separate ways.

* * *

PANIC REIGNED THIS day; people stampeded through the park with no regard for anyone else's safety. The father who'd earlier rushed past now sat against a tree cradling a small bloodied body in his arms. His gasping sobs of grief told me everything I needed to know: that beautiful little girl must have been trampled to death.

If I don't hurry, the next one could be me, I thought as the flood of bodies rushed past me. I cut toward the tree line in an attempt to get away from the danger. My intuition was soon proven right when I stopped by a tree to catch my breath —another group of refugees joined the throng and overwhelmed the group of people I'd been in a few moments earlier. I watched helplessly as several people, both young and old, fell and were crushed beneath the feet of the mob.

The roar of the attacker's plane grew louder; My eyes wandered toward downtown, which was now completely engulfed in flames. Several small explosions went off in rapid succession, which I presumed to be the death knells of numerous cars when their gas tanks succumbed to the heat and flames. I watched the plane slow to a crawl and wheel about in midair to turn toward the park.

Strange sounds erupted from the plane —*BRRRRRRP! BRRRRRRP! BRRRRRRP!* — then dozens of people suddenly disappeared into a red mist of blood, their surviving body parts flying across the park. Finished with its mission of destroying downtown, the plane now focused on massacring everyone who'd escaped the fires. I turned and ran blindly through the trees; panic overwhelmed me as a single thought raced through my mind: *I have to reach it.*

Before the park's renovation, there had been an entrance to the subway system on the far end of the park. City officials, as part of the effort to reduce the crime rate, closed that particular entrance. I'd passed it many times since and knew it could be easily entered if I could just pull the boards off the doorway.

I reached the entryway in record time and leaned against a rotted board while gasping for breath. I suddenly became aware of agonizing pain in my side; I'd apparently developed a massive stitch that was now making its presence known. I fell to my knees and clutched my side.

BRRRRRRP! BRRRRRRP! BRRRRRRP! BRRRRRRP!

The sound grew closer and I saw people in the distance literally exploding; the park was turning into a sea of red.

Screw the pain. I'm going to die if I wait too much longer! Gritting my teeth, I stood and grabbed a board.

A quiet voice stopped me. "Mister? Can you help me please?" I turned around to see a boy in bloodstained clothes. His calm disturbed me on a level I couldn't describe. "I think my mom is dead," he said.

"Where did you come from?" I asked.

The kid pointed behind him, toward the carnage. "How in the hell did you escape?"

"I don't know... can you help me please? I don't want to die." I got a better look at him as he drew closer; the dried streaks on his face betrayed the fear beneath his calm. The poor child was beyond tears.

I turned back to the boards and began tearing at them; the terrible sounds grew closer with each passing second. After what seemed forever, I managed to free the last board from the doorway and pushed my body against the door. It refused to open.

"NO!" I shouted at it in fury, "I will not have come this far only to be defeated by a damned door!" I kicked it as hard as I could and collapsed in pain. I'd felt something in my foot snap. *Great, just great. Now I've broken my foot.*

The boy got up from where he was sitting and walked to the door. He grabbed the doorknob, twisted, and pulled the door open; the rusty hinges protested loudly. I struggled to my feet and promptly fell back down; the pain in my foot was too much to bear. I would have to crawl to safety.

I made it inside only a few seconds before the plane appeared over the trees. The *BRRRRRRP! BRRRRRRP!* sound made me scramble further in. *I hope that pilot didn't see me,* I prayed.

The roar overhead informed me that the kid and I narrowly escaped death. Soon, more explosions rocked the ground as the plane continued its attack on the rest of city. The boy darted outside before I could stop him, and returned a few moments later with a large tree branch, which he handed to me.

"You can use it as a crutch," he explained.

Grateful, I thanked him but also admonished him for going outside. We carefully made our way into the subway system, where I could hear hushed voices on the verge of panic. As long as the attackers didn't focus their attentions on the underground tunnels, we were safe. For the time being.

DAY TWO

I WOKE UP in darkness. The power went out sometime during the previous evening when a massive explosion shook everything. *That's the power plant*, I'd thought at the time. While panic, fear, death and destruction dominated yesterday, during the night panic had given way to resignation.

The resignation angered me; it told me that people were giving up and leaving their fates to the attackers, whoever they might be. And there were plenty of theories about that this morning too.

"It's the terrorists, I'm sure of it," a woman declared. "They're pissed off that we're at war with them, so they've brought the War to us. Just like they've promised to do."

Another voice, male and older by the sound of it, sounded skeptical, "I seriously doubt it's the terrorists. Have you ever seen planes like those? And all those explosions... I don't know what technology could create such large explosions with a single shot."

"Don't forget about that strange sound they make right before people explode," someone else said.

The man replied, "That one is explainable — that's the sound of hundreds of bullets being fired per second. We've had that technology for over fifty years. People tend to vaporize like that when they're hit by so many bullets so fast."

I tried standing but the pain in my foot forced me back down. I felt someone moving next to me, then the boy I'd saved outside whispered, "It's best if you don't move around too much. Your foot is broken."

I managed a wan smile, despite knowing the kid wouldn't be able to see it in the darkness. "Thanks kid."

"If it's not the terrorists, then who do *you* think it is?" the woman asked snidely.

"I have no idea, but it really could be anyone. There are a few countries that hate us enough to develop technology like that and then use it against us without warning."

"It's not just us," someone said, "I heard news reports on the radio that other countries have been attacked the same way."

"When did you hear that? My radio hasn't worked in hours... all I can get now is static."

"They've probably taken out the radio transmitters," I suggested, "If I wanted to launch a sneak attack, I'd make sure to eliminate the enemy's means of communication."

"That makes sense," the skeptical man agreed. "Slow the spread of news and you control the populace."

I shifted around in my spot to get more comfortable; sleeping on the cold concrete had left me sore in places I never thought could ache. My foot throbbed, but there wasn't anything that could be done for it now; it would have to wait until after the crisis.

"I haven't heard any explosions in hours. Do you think it's safe to go back out?" the woman wondered.

"You're more than welcome to go look, if you want," someone scoffed. "I'm staying right here where I know I'm safe!"

"Why isn't the Army or the Air Force doing something? Shouldn't they be fighting back? How can they leave us to the mercy of the attackers?" asked the woman.

"These people have no mercy! Didn't you see the massacre in city park? Hundreds of innocent people, just mown down!"

"A bunch of animals, is what they are," another person declared angrily. "Cowards. Who else would blow up a school full of children? I lost both of my kids in that attack..." his voice broke off and I heard him crying. "They were just *kids!*"

The skeptical man spoke up again, "The military *was* fighting back. We were taken by surprise, but once we were able to mobilize, we sent our best fighter pilots after the bastards."

"You're military?" a surprised voice asked.

"Yes."

"Then why the hell are you covering in the dark with us? You should be out there fighting back and taking these guys out!" the woman shouted furiously.

"We were defeated," he replied simply.

"What do you mean, 'defeated'?" I asked.

"Exactly what I said. We were defeated. Every fighter jet we sent into the air — and we sent every single one of them— was shot down within seconds of enemy contact. Our surface-to-air missiles were destroyed long before they got anywhere near the planes. Entire regiments of ground troops were wiped out in the same manner as the park victims. This all happened in only a few short hours.

"The military didn't stand a chance against this enemy; we were horribly outmatched. Whichever country is responsible for this act of war is extremely devious. Hiding this technology and this level of tactical battle training is difficult, if not nearly impossible. Somebody's been biding their time."

Radioman interrupted, "What if it's not a country?"

"There's simply no way that terrorists could have pulled this off; they struggle to get people trained in bomb building without blowing themselves up in the process."

"I'm not saying it's the terrorists; what if it's aliens? I know that's unlikely, but look at the evidence."

"Not just unlikely, but also quite impossible," I said dismissively. "The nearest star is light-years away and has no planets. It would take thousands of years for anyone to travel from their planet to ours."

"I agree," the skeptical man said, "it's much more likely that is an attack by a foreign power."

BRRRRRRP! BRRRRRRP! BRRRRRRP!

The sound echoed down the concrete tunnel; somewhere outside, people were dying. The walls shook as more explosions occurred. Inside our shelter no one screamed, but I got the sense that people were huddling together for comfort. My own charge, the boy in the bloody clothes, was clinging onto me as if I were his father. No

one dared speak for several hours, as if the mere act of speaking would bring the roof down on our heads.

* * *

"**I KNOW WHO** you are," the boy whispered. "You live on my street."

I turned my head toward him and realized that I'd seen him before; his bedraggled appearance was why I hadn't recognize him. He was the same boy who'd rushed past me yesterday morning. "What happened to you?" I asked.

Silence.

"You don't have to answer, if you don't want to. I was only wondering."

"No, it's okay," he replied; I heard his voice catch as he forced back a sob. "I was cutting school and my mom caught me. She was taking me back when it happened. The plane blew up a building and some chunks of it fell on the hood of our car. They were on fire and partly melted. We got out of the car and ran with the others into the park. I tripped over something because I was watching the plane when it was coming after us. The next thing I knew, it made that horrible noise and my mom was gone. That's when I ran into the trees. I ..."

The boy could tell me no more; he buried his face in my shirtsleeve and cried. Not knowing what else to do, I wrapped my arms around him and held him close to me. "It's okay to cry, son. Let it out." The boy's small frame shook as he sobbed in my arms.

"It's my fault mom died! If I hadn't skipped school, we wouldn't have been in the car and then in the park. She'd be at home where it was safe!"

A soft voice spoke up next to us. It was the skeptical man in the military. "Then you'd be dead in that school explosion, son. And your mother would still have died... the entire city was leveled last night. You're alive now, and that's what matters."

The boy sniffled. "She might have been able to get away. She could've gotten down here! It's my fault!"

"No, son. It's not your fault at all. You couldn't have known that we'd be attacked like that, and I'm pretty sure your mom would rather that you survived," I said gently.

I rubbed a comforting hand over the boy's knobby back. "You have us now, and we won't let anything happen to you. How would you like to do a remembrance for your mom?"

The boy's sobs slowed as he thought it over. "We don't have any candles," he said.

I smiled, "We don't need candles. The best remembrance is performed here," I touched the boy's head, "and here," then his heart. "You don't need candles, prayers, or words for a good remembrance. What matters, is that you *remember*."

He rested his head on my chest and I listened to his murmuring as he performed his own remembrance in the darkness. Slowly, the boy's mumbling gave way to soft snores; he'd fallen asleep in my arms.

The military man sat next to me and said quietly, "He's exhausted. He was up all night keeping watch over you. I didn't realize you two were practically strangers; with how protective he was over you, I thought he was your son."

"You mean grandson, don't you? You don't have to be diplomatic about it."

"Well, I didn't want to offend," he said simply.

The others began feeling their way over toward us and they sat as close as they could. "How bad is it really up there?" I asked.

"By the time I escaped the death planes—that's what we'd started calling them—not a single building remained standing anywhere in the city. At least forty other cities in the country suffered the same fate. I can't even begin to imagine how many people perished."

Radio man interjected, "The same goes for the other countries that were attacked. Before the radios went dead, the news was saying that six other countries were under attack by the ... death planes, as you call them"

"Fifteen countries, both allies and foes of ours, were under attack before I lost communications. This was a very well planned and coordinated attack by an unknown and indiscriminate enemy." the military man said.

Everyone let out an audible gasp of astonishment —or was it shock? Several people began to cry. The reality of our situation hadn't quite hit home until that bit of news. We again sat in silence.

* * *

MORE EXPLOSIONS ROCKED our underground shelter later that day; I felt dust from the ceiling fall onto me with each explosion. *What are they attacking, if the city's been destroyed?* I wondered.

The military officer must have been wondering the same. "I'll go up and take a peek at what's happening," he said. I heard his knees cracking as he stood, the result of sitting in one position for too long.

My curiosity, plus the need to get up and stretch my limbs, overwhelmed me. "I'll go with you." I gently moved the sleeping boy off me and struggled to my feet. By this time the pain in my foot had dulled to an ache, but I remained cautious not to put too much weight on it.

"I just might be a little slower than you, so don't rush." I hobbled toward him and felt his hand grasp my arm to help.

"We'll take the entrance you used, since it's closer; it'll probably be safer too."

"I think so; the death plane we escaped didn't seem to notice it."

I heard more fearful cries as another explosion shook us; they were definitely getting closer. "Let's go," I said. With his help, I limped toward the square of light streaming in from outside; I focused my eyes on the light to ensure they adjusted quickly and that I wouldn't be temporarily blinded once we were outside.

A terrible sight greeted us when we stepped into the entryway to the subway. Tinged orange from the dust raised by the attacks, the air presented an eerie sight as it filtered the light. Acrid fumes stung our eyes and noses; breathing quickly became difficult, so we used our shirts in an attempt to alleviate it. Breathing through my mouth, I tasted the metallic flavor of blood in the air. Through the haze, I could see the

ruins of the city. The roar of a death plane passed over us, quickly followed by a second; they appeared to be patrolling the sky.

"What are they attacking?" I asked, knowing my partner probably wouldn't know.

He didn't answer right away; instead, he peered through the dust. "Over there," he pointed toward the edge of the park. Black smoke rose through the dust over several barely visible large craters. A dark shape punched through the smoke and I saw two bright flashes of light shoot out from the wings toward the ground. A massive fireball rose from the point of impact; the sound of the explosion was deafening. The heat blew over us like a blast furnace and dried our eyes painfully.

"What are they doing?"

"Other than spreading fear and terror, I'm not sure." he replied.

I looked around in dismay. Surrounded by utter devastation, my mind struggled to comprehend the scale of the disaster; it seemed too surreal to believe. After several more bombing runs, I'd finally had enough; I could not take anymore of it, and turned to head back underground. My partner's face had the look of a man in defeat.

"I'm beginning to wonder if that guy's theory that this is an alien attack may be true," he said quietly. "It's difficult for me to believe that anyone from our planet would cause so much death and destruction intentionally."

Leaning on him for support as we made our way back down the steps, I looked at him skeptically. "Our own country has used nuclear weapons against cities in the past; the effects of those were more devastating in the long term than this attack. And the odds that a spacefaring civilization would travel who-knows-how-many lightyears just to launch an unprovoked attack are practically impossible. You yourself said it's more likely that this is an attack by a foreign country."

"Perhaps more foreign than we can imagine."

At the foot of the stairs, we paused; something had changed in our short absence. It took us a moment to figure it out, but once we did everything we'd witnessed the death planes doing suddenly made sense. Whereas darkness filled the tunnels less than an hour ago, we could now see shafts of dusty light entering through the ceiling in distant areas.

"They're attacking the subway!" I shouted.

"Quiet!" he hissed at me. "Do you want to cause a panic? We need to get everyone out of here, and quickly."

He's right, I thought, if they'd heard me... I couldn't finish the thought; the idea of a panic in this enclosed space sent a shudder down my spine.

We made our way past several piles of rubble and I saw the fearful faces of those I'd spent the last day with for the first time in hours in the dim light. My young friend had woken up and now sat by a woman cradling a baby in her arms. I limped over and sat next to them.

The woman whispered to me, "Shhh, don't wake her." I recognized her voice as that of the person who'd declared the attack to be the work of terrorists. I detected an undertone of profound sadness in this disheveled woman's voice and glanced down at her baby. Its open and unblinking eyes stared blankly and dully into the distance.

"It'll be okay little one," she cooed, then softly began singing a lullaby to the dead infant.

I laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. "We have to go now. It's not safe here anymore." I heard the sounds of everyone else preparing to leave as I sat with the grieving mother.

"Sleep gently, my dear baby; let dreams of happiness reign over you; soon it will be time to wake and face another day," she sang. She gently rocked the baby in her arms, apparently oblivious to me.

"She's been like this for a while now, mister," the boy said. "She hasn't talked about anything except her baby."

"We need to go," I repeated, trying to get through to her.

She turned to me, annoyed. "Shhh! Don't wake her."

I felt someone tugging my arm. The officer shook his head at me. "We can't wait for her. She's at peace right now. Don't take this from her."

I stood. "We can't just leave her! That's a death sentence for her," I objected.

An explosion above us caused chunks of concrete to rain down around us. I looked back at the woman; if she was aware of the danger, she showed no signs. She continued singing to her child and rocking it in her arms.

"It's a death sentence for us all if we don't go *now*," he replied, matter-of-factly.

"Mister, I don't want to die in here. Please!" The boy pulled on my arm.

"I'm so sorry," I said regretfully to the preoccupied woman before I turned to escape.

Several of the people with us watched her sadly; they all seemed to be in agreement that she should be left behind. The small crowd parted for me, allowing me to take the lead.

The man who'd first suggested the alien theory whispered, "You're injured and the boy is attached to you. You two should go first."

After we took our place ahead of the crowd, I leaned against the boy for support and we hurried down the tunnel. Another explosion nearly knocked me off my feet. The ceiling began to collapse in on us; I felt myself being tugged away from the danger. Dust filled the air, making it difficult to see in the already dim light. My ears rang; I heard faint screams in the distance. I turned to look and saw the crushed bodies of those caught under the fallen concrete and earth. Those who'd survived were on the other side of the cave-in; only the boy and I remained free to escape.

* * *

ABOVEGROUND, I LOOKED around to find somewhere safe to flee. The death planes circled the park, apparently on a search and destroy mission. Large craters dotted the landscape where the ground had collapsed into the tunnels below. We didn't have much time, and very little cover remained for us to hide in.

My young friend spotted the tree first. It lay in the open field between us and an unscathed stand of trees not too far from us. *It must have been knocked over by the explosions*, I surmised. Its large branches still possessed an abundance of large leaves, enough to shield us from view if we managed to reach it unnoticed.

"Run over there, quickly!" I said. The death planes were moving away from our location; but it wouldn't be long before they circled around again.

Hesitant, he asked, "But what about you?"

"Don't worry about me. Just go, now!"

He ran with the speed and agility only the young were capable of, reaching the fallen tree in under a minute. "Hide beneath the branches and don't move! I'll be there as soon as I'm able." I shrank back into the shadow of the doorway as the planes returned.

I peeked my head out and watched them warily while they once again circled the park. It would take perfect timing for me to make it to the tree safely with my broken foot.

BRRRRRRP!

I instinctively covered back into the entryway before I realized the plane wasn't firing at me; it had fired into the hole left from the tunnel collapse. Screams of pain and panic echoed from the corridors below.

BRRRRRRP!

Silence. The plane veered away and flew off, quickly becoming hidden by the dust in the air.

I didn't wait any longer; I set my jaw and hurried across the field using my crutch as little as possible. After what seemed forever, I finally rejoined the boy under the branches.

He wrapped his arms around my midsection and held onto me; I felt him trembling with fear, but I could not comfort him. I too, felt fear so palpable it may as well have been a living entity feeding on me. I pulled him in closer and held him.

No matter what happens, I cannot let anything happen to this kid, I told myself. He quietly sobbed into my shirt. I knelt before him and rested his head against my chest; we cried together.

DAY THREE

We slept fitfully under the tree, occasionally awakened by explosions in the distance. The planes had finally abandoned their murderous focus on the park by the time the sun rose through the dust and smoke.

Walking slowly and cautiously through the park, we glancing warily toward in the sky every so often. While we did spot the planes, they never came close enough to see us; at times, we even observed contrails from other death planes.

"Where are we going?" the boy asked.

Limping down the crater-strewn street, I looked with sadness at the destruction. Not a single building stood — the mercilessness of our attackers left the entire city in smoldering ruins. Corpses lay everywhere; many of them badly burnt from the fires, others torn to shreds by weapons fire. The smell of decay, while not yet very strong, began to permeate the air. Many fires still burned.

"I don't know," I replied. I honestly hadn't thought that far ahead... where *could* we go? Nothing seemed to have survived the attack; there simply existed no place in the city to go.

I stopped. We had no place *in the city* to go, but I owned a cabin near the mountains. *If we can get to my car, we might be able to get there*, I realized.

"We're going to my house," I told him. "We can take my car and go to my cabin. If we're lucky, the cabin will still be there.

"How far away is it?" he asked.

"About an hour from the city; if we hurry we can get there much quicker. I have a feeling that traffic will be light today," I joked.

The boy smiled for the first time since I'd first seen him two days earlier. "How old are you?" I asked.

"I just turned thirteen last month."

I hissed sharply as I placed too much weight on my foot and sent a sharp pain up my leg. He looked at me in alarm and moved to catch me. "I'm okay," I told him. "Thirteen, huh? Did you have a good birthday?"

His eyes brightened and a smile spread over his face. "Oh yeah! My mom let me stay home from school and we played video games all day after I opened my presents. And she let me eat whatever I wanted; we really pigged out."

"What about your father?"

"He died when I was six."

"Oh, I'm sorry," I said, certain that I'd hit a sore subject.

"Nah, it's okay. It happened a long time ago."

We made our way down a side street, climbing over piles of rubble. I quickly discovered that going back to our neighborhood was going to take much longer than I'd first thought. No landmarks remained to identify our way home, and all the collapsed buildings presented serious obstacles.

After a few hours and no signs of survivors, we finally reached what remained of our street. Like the rest of the city, none of the houses stood untouched. The street appeared as one long ruin with rubble on either side and craters everywhere. Several scorched trees still stood, defiant and strong. The burnt-out shells of cars littered the street, having been scattered and tossed around by the attack.

"Wow," said the boy.

'Wow' was right; despite the unbelievable scale of the destruction which we'd witnessed firsthand, nothing brought the reality home in such a personal way as seeing your home reduced to rubble. *It's going to an amazing stroke of luck if the car survived, I thought, even if it did, how am I going to drive it out of here?*

We walked among the ruins of our neighborhood slowly. "That's where my best friend lived," he pointed to the right. Nothing remained of the house except a crater; it must have been ground zero for one of the death plane's attacks. He suddenly took off running, shouting behind him as he ran, "I'll be right back!"

I stopped in front of what was left of my house. By some quirk of fate, it seemed to have been spared the brunt of the attackers' rage. While the house itself was little more than a pile of debris, the garage stood nearly intact, albeit with a collapsed roof. My heart raced... could the car have been protected? I hobbled with my crutch as quickly as I could up the driveway and squeezed between the garage door (which had popped open when the roof fell in) and the wall.

"YES!" I shouted. Not only was the car intact, the roof hadn't even so much as dented it. The roof rested against the floor in the back and the front of the garage at an angle, leaving the car untouched. I hurried to the car door and pulled the handle; it was locked.

No problem, I thought, and pulled my keys from my pocket. It took a couple of moments before I saw that I did not have the car keys; I groaned in defeat. My keys were currently buried somewhere underneath what remained of my home. I leaned my head against the car window and pounded my fists on the door in frustration.

"Damn it! Damn it all to hell!"

I won't need these today. I won't need these today. I won't need these today. I won't need these today. Those words now haunted me and refused to stop; it was as if I had a recording on an infinite loop inside my mind.

I slumped on the floor next to the car and put my face into my hands. I felt an emotional dam building inside me and threatening to burst. My keening grew louder with each passing minute until it became a crescendo.

"Mister," I heard a voice say. "Mister?"

Slowly, I returned to the world. The boy was kneeling in front of me, a bag at his side. The expression on his face told me I'd scared him.

"Are you okay?" he asked; I heard the fear in his voice.

"Yeah, I'm okay," I croaked. " I just kind of lost it there for a second. What's in the bag?"

"I found some snacks in my house. Well, what's left of it, anyway."

My stomach growled loudly at the mention of snacks, and I realized that I hadn't eaten in two days. Suddenly, I felt ravenous.

He reached into the bag and handed me a box of cakes. "Here, you can have this one. I have more for later."

I tore the box open and greedily stuffed one of the small cakes into my mouth whole. The sweet taste of the moist cake felt like heaven in my mouth. I downed two more cakes before I remembered the boy also hadn't eaten.

"I'm sorry. Here, have the rest," I said apologetically.

"No mister, that's your box. I already ate one."

"These are delicious but we can't survive on just cakes forever," I pointed out.

"We've got fruit and jerky at my house I can get. All the food is real easy to reach, so we can just load up the car and take it all. We'll need it at the cabin."

Reality suddenly reasserted itself... the car. "About that," I began, "we're not going to be going anywhere for a while. I left the keys in the kitchen the other day."

The boy's shoulders deflated and he looked crestfallen. "You can't start it without the key?"

I shook my head. "I don't know how to hot-wire a car, and I'm guessing you don't either."

"No," he replied.

"On the bright side, we have food and shelter. I have some sleeping bags and cots in here somewhere that we can use. We should be safe here for a while."

"Where are they?" he asked.

I pointed at some shelves, "Over there somewhere on one of those shelves. The cots are in green bags."

Luckily, the roof collapse left a large sheltered area around the car. We cleared away some of my junk and put the cots together. In the back yard, we set up a folding

table with lawn chairs; in my storage room attached to the garage, I had a grill which we also pulled out. What we were going to use it for, I didn't yet know. *It'll be good to have, just in case*, I thought.

"I'm really thirsty, do you think the water is running?" he asked, leaning back in the plastic chair.

"If they haven't damaged the water mains, I don't see why not."

My young friend got up and hurried over to the spigot and twisted it. To our delight and amazement, water began flowing; he cupped his hands under the water flow and began quaffing the cool liquid. Sated, he returned to the table a couple of minutes later.

"Much better," he grinned. I heard water sloshing faintly in his stomach as he sat.

I limped into the garage and pulled two empty plastic bottles out of the recycle bin, then filled them from the spigot. I tossed one to the boy and downed one before refilling it.

A death plane roared above us, but it was too high to see us. "When do you think we'll beat them?" he asked.

'We were defeated,' the words of the military man rose unbidden in my thoughts. While it had been too dark to see his face when he'd said that, the tremor in his voice revealed the terrible truth: we were hopelessly outmatched —we were the bugs they swatted aside.

"I don't know. I'm sure we're fighting them somewhere. We might even be beating them."

"I hope so."

Some time later, he stood and walked toward the scorched remains of my wife's prized bushes. "Don't look, I gotta pee," he instructed.

I turned my head to respect his modesty; he returned after a couple of minutes with an expression of satisfaction on his face.

"I think we're going to be here for a while," I said, "so we probably should think about making things comfortable for us."

A low rumbling sound interrupted our conversation; we both quickly ducked into the garage. I inched toward the damaged garage door and peeked outside. An immense vehicle rolled down the street, driving over cars and crushing them beneath its tracks. A helmeted person sat behind a large weapon in the vehicle's turret.

"Get underneath the car!" I whispered urgently.

"Who is it?"

"I don't know, but I don't think they're friendly." I shrank into a shadowed corner where I could watch the vehicle as it passed. Strange symbols adorned the side, one of which appeared to be a silhouette of some animal in a circle. Its size dwarfed any military vehicle I'd seen before. The rumbling sound seemed to be caused more by its tracks rolling over the ground rather than by its engine; in fact, I couldn't detect any sound from its engine at all.

How can something that large be that silent? I felt disquieted — if it'd been a wheeled vehicle, we may never have heard it until too late. *We were extremely lucky,* I realized.

A strange noise, one I couldn't even begin to describe, suddenly appeared. I looked in the direction of the sound's source, and the most unusual aircraft I'd ever seen came into view. It flew so slowly that it almost looked as if it were hovering.

"What's going on? What's that noise?" the boy's fearful voice asked.

"Shhh!" I watched the odd aircraft as it meandered slowly over the neighborhood. "It's a patrol. Stay quiet for now."

The aircraft approached the garage, and I quickly moved away from the opening to avoid being seen from the air. The air swirled around violently as the aircraft passed overhead; the sound it produced made it difficult to hear anything else. It hung in the air above the garage, obviously trying to determine if anyone was there; I didn't dare budge.

Finally, it flew away.

* * *

AN HOUR LATER we had our supplies packed in a couple of backpacks I'd dug out of an old box. After our close call I knew that we couldn't stay here indefinitely, that we needed to make it to the cabin. With the car keys buried underneath the debris of my house, and the attackers now conducting patrols, using the car—or any car in fact—was simply out of the question. We would have to hike there.

"May as well try to get some rest, we're not going to leave until it starts getting dark. Less chance of being spotted then," I said.

I sat on one of the lawn chairs we'd brought inside and propped my injured foot on a chunk of broken concrete. I was not looking forward to our long hike ahead of us.

"My mom broke her foot last year," the boy told me.

Unsure why he was telling me this, I raised an eyebrow at him. "Oh? What happened?"

I saw a twinkle in his eye... he was up to something. "Yeah," he said excitedly, "she had to walk around in one of those boot things for a few weeks. I bet I can find it!"

With that, he darted outside before I could stop him. "Hey don't go out there yet!" I shouted after him.

I pulled myself to my feet and hobbled to the garage door. I could see him running down the street toward his property. Sighing, I turned around and was about to sit back down when I spotted something familiar in a dusty corner. I picked it up and wiped the dust off and smiled.

The boy returned two hours later—hot, dirty, and drenched in sweat—with the boot in his hand and a face-splitting grin of triumph. He knelt before me and carefully placed my foot on his knee. I grimaced in pain when he removed my shoe; my foot was swollen and bruised.

"Do you have an elastic bandage or any rags we can wrap your foot in?" he asked.

I shook my head — everything was buried under the house. He thought it over for a moment, then pulled off his shirt and tore it in half. Very carefully, he used it to wrap around my foot and pulled it taut.

"Aaaaa!" I exclaimed in pain.

"Sorry." He tied his shirt around my calf and fitted the boot around my foot. He clipped it in place and the pain suddenly lessened.

"You're very good at that," I remarked.

"Yeah, I did it for my mom like everyday." He plopped down beside me.

I looked at the stuffed animal I'd picked up, then offered it to him. "I know boys don't usually care for stuffed animals, but I'd like you to have this anyway. It belonged to my daughter when she was your age; it was the last thing my wife gave her before she died. My daughter couldn't sleep without it for years afterward, and said it was her good luck charm. Maybe it can be your good luck charm now."

A single tear ran down the boy's face as he accepted my gift. Suddenly he leapt forward and wrapped his arms around me in a hug. "Thank you," he choked up slightly.

He sat back down and held it to his chest. "It looks like the one my mom used to have, but I couldn't find it. That's why I took so long getting back."

He looked at me, his eyes brimmed with tears. "I love you, mister. Will you... will you be my new dad?" he asked hesitantly.

His request took me aback. I looked him over, and made my decision without even thinking about it, "Of course I will, son."

"Do you think your daughter will be there?"

That possibility hadn't crossed my mind before; if she survived the attack, she would also try to make her way to the cabin. We held our remembrance there every year on the lakeshore. "You know, I think that it's very likely that your *sister* will be there."

* * *

WE STRUCK OUT at dusk. We kept away from open areas as much as possible in order to avoid being seen by any passing patrols.

"I don't think we're winning," my newly adopted son said.

I managed a wan smile; this kid was very perceptive. "No, son. I don't think we are either."

"What are we gonna do?" he asked while climbing over a pile of concrete.

"If we can, we'll stay at my cabin for as long as possible. We can hide out in the wilderness if we have to abandon it."

I felt grateful for the walking cast he'd remembered; it allowed me to make better progress than earlier that day with very little discomfort. "What hobbies do you have?" I asked.

"Besides video games?"

I laughed. "Yes, besides video games."

"I like to write poetry," he said, somewhat shyly.

A small animal chattered angrily at me from the darkness, apparently I passed too closely to its nest for its comfort. "Really. I'd like to read it someday," I said.

"I'm not that good, to be honest."

"That doesn't matter. If it comes from your heart, then it'll always find an appreciative audience."

My son—I loved the sound of that—walked in silence, deep in thought. Finally he spoke: "I have one I wrote for an assignment in school."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a crumpled piece of note paper, which he handed me. I opened it and read it in the light of the rising moon.

Left Behind

*All those memories gone,
Good and Bad,
Strong and Weak,
Happy and Sad.
All gone-
To no return...*

*Remember all those times?
For, they passed us without hesitation.
Years go by like the seconds on a clock-
With one long sigh,
We all must say good-bye*

*Memories fade,
And all are left behind...
All are left behind...*

"This is really good," I told him.

"Honest?"

"I wouldn't lie to you. Is that how you felt about someone?"

He kicked a stone down the street and listened to it skitter across the asphalt before it bounced into the culvert. "Nah, the assignment was to write something emotional and that's what popped in my head."

"Well, I like it."

"Thanks, dad. Can I have some water? I'm thirsty."

I paused by a crushed car and removed my backpack. I reached in and pulled two bottles out, handing him one.

He unscrewed the cap and took a sip; we began walking again. "How long will it take to get there?"

I thought about it for a few minutes. "By car, it takes about an hour, so..."

"And it takes like twenty minutes to drive out of town," he interrupted.

"Yes," I continued, "I think we'll be there sometime after midnight."

"That's a long walk," he observed.

"True, but we should be safe there."

"Will my sister really be there? You're not just saying that, are you?"

"If she survived, then she'll definitely make her way over there. That's where we do my wife's remembrance every year, and that's coming up next month."

A few moment passed while he thought it over. "So she might not be there for a little while."

"Probably not, but I have no doubt that she'll go if she can."

He kicked another stone. "I can't wait to meet her, what's she like?"

"She's a poet, like you. She loves animals and has a huge heart."

"Cool."

A large crater on the side of the road forced us to walk between the ruins of a school; I tried to ignore the miasma of rotting bodies as we made our way through. Suddenly, the familiar sound of one of the strange hovering machines broke the silence. I turned around and saw a spotlight quickly approaching us.

"Run!" I pointed at a large shape in the darkness, which I prayed would be able to hide us. My son didn't hesitate and took off.

I hobbled as quickly as I could, but the aircraft was approaching too quickly. I wasn't going to make it; looking around in panic, I spotted a burnt-out bus close by. I turned and hurried toward it. Too bad I didn't see the body.

I fell over the corpse of a man, his skin badly burnt. My son turned around and saw me fall.

"DAD!" he shouted, and ran toward me.

"NO! GO BACK!" I yelled. It was too late.

The spotlight shone on him and I could see in vivid clarity what happened next. The sound of gunfire broke the air and I watched helplessly as the bullets tore through my son's body, each bullet strike spraying blood from his bare chest and back. His mouth and eyes were wide open as he fell to the ground.

"NO!" I screamed. The murderous machine flew off and descended a short distance away.

I picked myself up and ran over to where he lay. His breath came in short, rapid gasps, a bloody froth bubbled from his mouth. Tears poured down my face as I fell to my knees and his small frame in my arms. I held his limp head with my hand and sobbed.

"It's going to be okay son," I lied. I wiped blood from his mouth and kissed his forehead. His eyes rolled over to meet mine.

"I love you, dad," he said before dying in my arms; his good luck charm dropped from his hand. Grief flowed over me; I held his body against mine and I cried convulsively.

"I will remember you, my son."

In my grief, I didn't hear the approaching soldiers until they surrounded me and had their weapons pointed at me. I looked up and saw them for the first time.

They're not people! I thought.

Indeed, while they did have two arms, they also only had two legs... not four; how they were able to stand upright on only two legs mystified me. They had lights attached to their helmets, so I could see that their skin also did not have scales; even more bizarre and disturbing than that, was the fact that each soldier was colored differently. They ranged in tone from dark brown to a pale color. Their strange white eyes, which had a ring of color surrounding the pupil in the middle, stared at me.

One of them shouted something at me in a strange language, gesturing at me to stand.

"You bastards! He was only a child!" I screamed.

If they understood me, they made no such indication. Instead, two of them grabbed me and twisted my arms painfully around my back. Another raised the end of his weapon and thrust it at my head.

They truly are alien invaders, I thought before my world went dark.

THE END