

# Operation: Jack Frost (Novel)

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A 17 year old super soldier is on a mission in Alaska to defend the homefront from skirmishes with Russian invaders. He idolizes a man named Cook who is his squad leader. Cook is the rebel of the group. He doesn't wear proper armor, he disregards regulation, yet he fights like no other soldier can. For this, he is kept as an average soldier with no prestige; however, could there be more beneath the surface to his carelessness and combat genius? This story follows Carson on a journey as a young soldier through every day issues of teen life to catastrophes of apocalyptic proportions. Carson is still searching for some sense of identity and trying to make meaning of the things happening around and to him, and grasping for stability while his reality slowly crumbles.



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## Chapter 1: Seeing Myself

A familiar flickering blue light stirred me into sub-consciousness. Could it really be time already? I thought. My first reaction was to question very loudly within my own thoughts. Is it time to mobilize? No answer met my mental question, as it usually did. Then I remembered why this was the case, and why I could feel the biting Alaska cold in my thighs. The previous night I had dropped off his activation chip and my contacts at the repair shop for an upgrade. I squeezed instinctively at the handles of the US army issue sleeper pod I was lying in and the cloaking turned off, materializing my own body and the rest of the pod for the outside world. I, Carson Mills, was a super soldier on a special military operation of dire importance, code named "Operation Jack Frost" because of the intense cold of the Alaskan front we defended. I sat up and felt the aches and pains of six months at war in this drastic combat, something I was not used to. I made to get up after turning off the flashing light inside my pod. It only flashes when enemies were approaching, but we weren't scheduled for combat for another four days. As I thought to myself, I began to really feel the cold, so I picked up his pace to a trot as I made for the armory to get my chip and contacts.

The world, through natural eyes, was a strange place to me by this point. Scanning around me, the swarm of soldiers in their pure white combat armor mixed with the whiteout conditions made everything quite nearly impossible for me to see, much different from when my vision was enhanced through the contacts. I reached the armory and stepped inside.

"Hey Bill," I said through chattering teeth. I had forgotten just how cold Alaska truly was.

"I see you're here for your gear, correct? We should be mobilizing soon, within the hour I think, orders of General Burdock. You should get yourself combat ready as soon as possible," replied Bill in his deep, gruff voice. Bill stood at least a head over me. He was older as well, serving from the ages of 16 to 42 in the army. Now approaching 55, he was hardly a man fit for combat, so he served as weapons expert and manager at the armory. The military was harder on a man than before, taking a drastic toll on the body due to all the enhancements, vigorous training and harsh weaponry. He had a full head of black hair with grey streaks shooting through it and a rough looking beard that seemed an extension of his hair that simply decided to grow on his face instead. His eyes were drooping and tired looking, his eyelids falling lazily over the constantly bloodshot eyes. They were such a dark brown they nearly appeared black. He was battle scarred and a master with nearly every firearm you could bring him. The worst scar was a gruesome stab wound to the neck where the blade had been jerked to the side. Despite all odds, he survived the mauling, but only barely.

"I thought Corporal Stein was in command of our regiment?" I questioned. Although dwarfed by Bill, I was really on the short side of average. My hair had grown from the fresh shave military issue it was when I got to the battlefield to a swooping whirlwind of blonde, which hung nearly to my shoulders. It wasn't unkempt, however, as one might expect with a soldier. It stayed straight and tidy, partially due to the natural way it grew and partially due to the frigid cold and extreme dryness of the climate. It was too cold for much humidity. I was not particularly muscular, looking much less so than the average super soldier you might encounter, but I was definitely strong for my size. Strong enough, anyway, to fight in roughly two hundred pounds of equipment, although the chip's muscle enhancement could be a major help. I preferred to keep my face clean-shaven.

"No, he got transferred to a black ops assignment. Working with the real cutting edge of both tech and troops, you know?" Replied Bill. "Burdock took over the position in his absence. They believe him more qualified for the job anyway, which he really is, and he likes working with us grunt troops. After all, we're the ones who do the real work without crying about who's technology is better, am I right?" With that he heartily slapped me on the back, nearly propelling me into the floor. "Oh, right, no suit. Sorry buddy, I forget how scrawny you are without it sometimes," he kidded.

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"Yeah, yeah I know, just hand over my stuff and I'll be on my merry way," I said, annoyance only feigned in my tone. Bill handed over the chip and the contacts and after a brief salute we bid each other farewell. When I arrived at the equipment bay, I placed in the chip and felt the effects course through my entire body as a wave of golden glow pulsed across every nerve in my body, shining through the flesh. I could feel the cold ebbing out of my body as a comforting warm replaced it. My muscles tightened to their normal strength. I removed my coat and walked towards the uniform waiting in a locker nobody had touched yet. The men around him dressed for battle, some with smiles on their faces singing songs of victory and inspiring tunes with their buddies, some with panic in their eyes as they solemnly donned their clothing, wondering if it would be their final time dressing up for the fight, and a small margin bowed their heads in prayer or kissed crucifix necklaces as they rapidly muttered to God under their breath. The small mirror in the locker reflected an image I did not often see - my own self. At first glance I admired what I saw: Broad shoulders, fairly muscular arms and chest, bright blue eyes, and all topped off by a great head of hair. It had been a fair amount of time since I had seen a mirror without my chip or contacts in. Then, however, I began to notice things that were most displeasing. For one thing, the lack of proper bathing while in combat had left me with quite a bit of acne for a seventeen year old. The other men in the room were mostly full adults, as they had only recently re-lowered the recruiting age from 18 to 16, as it had been when Bill enlisted. Another recent fault was the way my eyes were now sunken into my skull more than before. This combined with the paleness and the acne made me regret my previous good feelings about my appearance. Fifteen minutes to go time, repeat, fifteen minutes, warned my squad commander. The notice issued through the radio function of the chips almost surprised me after my posing session in the mirror. I had to hurry up.

I slipped on the first layer of his three layer combat gear. The first was a full body Kevlar suit with insulation on the inner side. This had a large opening down the front, so as to allow you to step in and pull the sleeves on over your shoulders. The result was rather like a black turtleneck jump suit. The second layer was a thick vest of scaled armor, comprised of a material derived from spider's webbing which is proportionately stronger than steel. The scales covered every inch of the thing, brown scales of the spider web material providing superb protection to the wearer. The final layer was a host of advanced, condensed carbon fiber plating which covered nearly every inch of the body. This layer was strapped on piece-by-piece, taking by far the longest to apply of all. It was well worth it though, as tests with the armor when fired upon at point blank range had shown only minute tolls taken on the surface. Flakes and chips burst off but the flesh placed behind it went completely unscathed by small arms fire until fired upon eight times in the same spot. The wearer is as a tank, nearly impossible to harm. This was only given to the front line troops. A lighter version was adapted for black ops units, and the first two layers are the standard issue of all units that aren't direct spearhead troops. The outermost layer was, for the units of Frost Company, pure white, to blend with the snow. After I was suited up, I got my contacts out from my pocket. Although I have 20/20 vision, these contacts were essential to surviving in 2053 warfare. As I placed them in, I closed my eyes, allowing the changes to be made as the same familiar biting sensation dug into the entire surface of my eyeballs. The pain was but momentary, and the benefits became apparent and all too worth it when I opened my eyes to the new world that presented itself to me. The contacts faded all unnecessary material to black. This included the falling snow, the ground, and most of the terrain around me. What was left was an outline of what was once there. Objects potentially used for cover were lightly shaded blue. My own body glowed a bright gold, signifying something deemed "high importance." Friendlies were a deep shining blue, and enemies ranged from brown to red based on threat level. All the men I have encountered thus far have been a reddish brown, the only deep reds I saw were the bullets tracing towards me and the live explosives being hurled in my direction. I grabbed a large, full metal assault rifle from the locker and closed it. I was about to leave when something in my gut instructed him otherwise. I opened it back up and saw my helmet sitting on the floor of the locker. I picked it up and had it ready to go on my head when I spotted two bandanas lying beneath the spot where the helmet had been. A smile crept across my face as an idea formulated in my mind. One was black and the other was red, two of my favorite colors. How could an opportunity this perfect be missed? I placed the helmet on a hook in the locker and instead tied the black bandana around the top of my right arm, and the red one folded up around my head. I looked back into the mirror and was pleased with what I saw. The sunken eyes and paler complexion had

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enhanced my intimidation in a way, and the bandanas had given me that rogue look I had always admired in some of the other men who fought without helmets. I had promised my mother at home that I would always wear full gear into battle, but then again, I had also promised her I would keep my hair short, wouldn't take up smoking and wouldn't adopt the foul language most soldiers did, all three of which I had fallen short of completing over my time here on the front. I shut the locker and headed out of the army to meet my squad mates and be briefed on the operation they were about to undertake, lighting up a cigarette on my way. Although I was underage, nobody said anything because life was immensely stressful on a soldier, especially one as young as I am, and any way they could cope with it was accepted. The smoke felt good entering my lungs as it helped push back the cold that seemed to pierce into my heart; however this troubled me little, as the chip helped pain and cold tolerance alike. I arrived at the gates of the camp to find my squad waiting for deployment.

"Alright, are we all clear on the plan then?" Announced the squad leader, Sergeant Cook. He too was wearing no helmet, although most of the men in the squad had made no modifications to their gear. Cook, however, chose to do what he wanted. He had removed his left shoulder plating and many pieces from the legs and forearms. What was left was a patchwork collection of battered, pockmarked armor, which in many places let the vest of scales underneath show through. As a result, they had his second layer vest dyed white to match his outer plating. Being the rebel he was, he had decided to spray paint a big black bull's eye on the front and back of his torso. He thought it funny to watch the enemies fail to kill the man that was literally a "moving target." His skin was dark and he was around the same height as me but definitely more built. His facial hair seemed always to be a short scruff although he was never seen shaving, and he wore his hair in a short mohawk, buzzing the rest of it all the way off. His preferred combat headgear was aviator sunglasses and he always got his hands on a cigar before going into the fight. The sole reason his ridiculous behavior was tolerated was because of his extreme ability in combat. He had more kills than any of the men in the base; including the commanding officers (he even kept a tally on one of the few remaining pieces of plate armor). The only reason he wasn't promoted or transferred to black ops was simply because nobody else would have him due to his sheer defiance of regulations. He preferred it this way however, as he enjoyed being just another one of the boys fighting for their lives in the baron Alaskan front.

"Ah, I see you decided to join us, Mills. So nice of you to try to dress like me, too!" He addressed me in a mocking tone which was met by low laughter from the men, even a few chuckles from some of the petrified new recruits. "Alright since pretty boy over there wasn't here, I'll go over the general idea once more," said Cook in his usual sardonic manner. "Fourth Squad encountered some Russians while on border watch, said this wave's packin' some serious heat. They're pinned down and can't get themselves out of it. Apparently the Russians have some pretty tough tech of their own, and they plan on using it to tear you all apart. We're moving in with Alpine company to help reinforce the Fourth. The more we sit around here, the more of them are being picked off because apparently they don't know how to defend themselves, so if everybody's all done playing dress up it's time to get rolling." Cook picked up his gun, slammed in a magazine and chambered in a round. "Let's move," he said as a malicious smile played across his face.

## Chapter 2: Sonic Slaughter

Approaching the battleground, some of the newbies were obviously scared senseless. This would be a baptism of fire to remember. I saw on the horizon explosions going off, gunfire flying in every direction and men being hurtled into the air. Alpine Company was right on our heels, but being the first to fight was never an easy task. Coming ever closer to the fight, Blue figures were suddenly struck in the head, keeled over and faded out to black all along the entrenched borders. A sinking sensation washed over me as I began seeing gleaming red figures storming the trenches - hundreds of them. Although I was one of one hundred and fifty men, the nerves still gripped my chest, tightening my insides and making a bead of sweat roll down my spine, instantly freezing halfway down my back.

"What is this, your first fight?" teased Cook. "Compose yourself; it looks bad to the newbies." This belittlement actually reassured me, and as I took my first steps onto the battlefield I was calm and collected. Another drag on my cigarette brought my nerves to steel as I sighted in on my first target. I aligned the red dot sight on the top of my rifle to the neck of the gold tinged red figure. This was an officer I was about to drop. Breathe, aim, and squeeze, I thought, remembering my training. With a smooth exhale my finger glided the trigger all the way back, releasing three rounds in rapid succession, streaking with intense speed to my enemy to deliver three fifty caliber blows directly on target. The man fell like a rock, although the color remained in his figure. He got back up, shook his head, and looked directly at where I was standing. "This can't be good," said Cook as the enemy officer brushed off the three rapid headshots. The figure raised a pistol, and with seemingly a point shot, hit one of the rookies directly in the chink of his armor. The loud crack thundered an instant after the round traced through him and his blood drenched the snow. He fell down, dead instantly as the blue faded out from his figure and he turned to black. I glanced back up as the officer lowered his pistol yet continued to stare into my squad. All of a sudden, an ear-splitting screech overwhelmed the radio signal of my chip and I fell to the floor, squirming about helplessly as the relentless assault on my ear drums continued to unceasingly pierce into the depths of my ears. The men all around screamed and tore their helmets off in an attempt to rid themselves of the audio assault. Two more rounds streaked through the air, one hitting one of the newly helmetless men's head. The only way to assuage my ears seemed to be to remove the chip from my brain. I groped at the right side of my head searching for the small slot as the screech continued to sound. Men's ears ran red as the overwhelmed radio signal continued in their ears, many being picked off like cattle by the Russian soldiers. Stealing a glance upward, I saw a group of roughly twenty brightly gleaming red figures moving in on us, guns trained on my comrades, lead by the same officer who initiated the attack. They opened fire with their guns, spraying my squad with bullets, taking out many men who had shed their helmets to try to rip out the chips. I felt blood streaming down from my ears as I ducked my head under my arms and hit the ground, still groping for the slot where I could rip out the chip. Bullets bounced from my armor as my fingers finally met a small metal slot and he felt the chip's exterior. I ripped the thing from its place and the screech ceased at last. My ears were still ringing unbelievably, and the full effect of everything unleashed its toll on my natural body. The armor protecting me now felt as a whole other person sitting on top of me, my bleeding ears surged immensely, paralyzing pain coursed throughout my entire body as I curled into a fetal position and tucked my head into my arms. I felt each bullet deflecting off my armor as a knock-out punch against bare skin. New waves of pain rolled over me with each impact. The world's colors were back. All was snow blind white and sanguine with streaks of pink. The bodies of my squad mates littered all around as the ringing began to recede and screams now met my ears. Through all the suffering and chaotic gunfire, I heard one thing that rallied the near dead hopes pitifully lingering in my heart. Through the carnage I made out screams of defiance, and some straight vulgarity, coming from none other than Cook. He had somehow managed to remove the chip before the rest of them and was now standing at the front of the pack, administering a thorough lead-cased beat down on the Russian assailants. Wielding two assault rifles, one in either hand, cook was firing into the advancing enemies, pulling clean head shots as their bullets all whizzed just to the side of the man that was literally a "moving target." He glanced behind him to his decimated squadron of men laying broken and battered, many dead, to find me, a seventeen year old kid in a red bandana, raising my assault rifle to aid in his fight. He smiled and began shouting to the advancers again

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(mostly profane insults) as he dropped one weapon to drag me off to a large mound of snow to our left. The whirling snow created a white out as my vision began to fade in and out of focus and the world became less real by the minute. Amazingly, Cook had pinned down the entire squad of advancing Russians, fired eighteen rounds into the front their commanding officer, and pulled me out of the fight. We were now all that remained of the squad, and everyone from Alpine Company had been wiped out. Cook and I regressed to a small cavern in the rocks to wait out the battle and call for backup. We made sure to warn the men of the audio attacks which had overcome the whole company. Cook tossed a blanket to my bloody form as he sat down with his own.

"It'll get cold in here waiting for rescue, and you can forget about cuddling up to me for warmth," said Cook with a deadpan face. "Get some rest. I'll keep watch until they arrive." Sleep seemed nowhere to be found as I tried to doze off in the corner. It would be hours until anyone could clear the area outside. The explosions seemed a trivial thing as exhaustion and loneliness set in on me. I decided against lighting up another cigarette. I missed my mom, and hardly thought she would approve.

## Chapter 3: A Moonlit Stroll

The hours seemed to come and pass as if someone was hastily turning the hands of time. Night had fallen full and bitter cold upon the now silent scene of the recent chaos. Although I could not see outside, I knew what wreckage lay so close by yet so far behind. I envisioned men's bodies littering the ground, Russian soldiers scavenging their bodies for useful information and components. I chanced a look at Cook, who had passed the time staring at the wall straight ahead of him in the wide and dimly lit cavern we had come to rest in. He had gone through a full pack of cigarettes by this point, and was still going strong. Something was off, although I could not put my finger on it. I decided to chance at replacing my chip, which was amazingly still tucked within my palm in my vice-like grip from when I first ripped it from my own head. Letting up on my grip and looking at the thing, its outward appearance seemed a bit of a surprise at first. It seemed to have a bit of a life of its own. Every once in a while it would give sort of a surge of life-like energy and light, emitting a soft yet rich golden light which illuminated the immediate surrounding area of the cavern. I pictured the surges as a sort of sub-human breathing, the chip sustaining its own life while emitting light and providing super-human capabilities for another. I thought of the sheer genius of the thing itself, although I knew nothing of how it worked. I imagined all the wars and destruction of the past. A crazy thought occurred to me: What if all the chips were infused with souls of past fallen soldiers? A chill ran down my spine that had nothing to do with the sub-zero temperatures of the night.

"What crazy thing are you thinking of now?" Questioned Cook. He had this way about him, a near telepathic ability where he could tell when someone was in deep thought, and sometimes what it was about. My pale blue eyes met Cook's, grey and piercing, although strangely comforting.

"Nothing really, I was thinking about chancing again with my chip, seeing if the audio attacks are gone yet." This was not a total lie. It had been, in fact, what had prompted me to gaze at the chip in the first place.

"Not a bad idea pretty boy," said Cook with a tone of interest. "But hold on; let me be the guinea pig for this one. Your head's taken enough for one day." Cook could be noble when it was most needed. His fingers procured his own chip from seemingly thin air (it was hard to tell in the dim light of the cavern) and brought it coolly to the right side of his head where the metal sidings of the receptor slit protruded slightly from his scalp. "Cheers," he said as a tiny click sounded, meaning the chip had connected. All at once, his body seized up in pain, and a jolting arm ripped the thing out of his head once more. He cursed in frustration. "They still got the frequency broadcasting on override!" He let out a sigh of disappointment and looked briefly to the floor, raising his eyes upon his next words.

"Alright pretty boy, time to learn stealth."

Being without the chips meant that our armor would be too heavy to move efficiently in the night, and as the frequency was still broadcasting, that meant the Russians were still actively controlling the area outside. They had taken the ground and had not yet given it up. I had to strip many layers of my outside armor, leaving behind bits and pieces I deemed least vital and less cool looking. I stopped once my body felt to be its normal weight again; not that of the crushing armor I had known in the time spent in the cavern. All that remained was my left shoulder pad, curving elegantly down my upper arm and giving me adequate protection from high shots and my knee and elbow pads. I felt as one of the black ops members. Cook hadn't needed to ditch any pieces of armor, as he already wore few enough that he could manage without enhanced strength. It also helped that he was strong enough to move in a full suit without any help. Both of us deciding we were sufficiently prepared for nighttime movement and sneaking, we gathered our weapons and headed to the mouth of the cavern, Cook finishing a final cigarette, as the red glow would be a dead giveaway in the nighttime darkness.

"On my signal, follow me. Stick close but maintain intervals, and for God's sake stay low, boy!" Cook thrust me to one knee, mirroring his own position. "Better," he said, glancing out towards the pitch blackness, the only light being what was caught from the moon and reflected in the snow. "Mess up and we're both screwed, got me?" He didn't even wait for a response. "Let's roll"

The frigid night air filled my nostrils and pierced my lungs. I had been trained to withstand drastic cold and extreme conditions. Still, my skin seemed to contract at contact with the open night. We crept silently as



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shadows blended with the night. We approached a bend in the hillside which was home to the cavern. Cook was barely visible in the darkness, and I nearly slammed into him, only barely stopping myself inches from my partner.

"Alright pretty boy, here comes the tough part. The part where there's a legitimate threat." Cook's tone was dead serious despite the humor in his words. "Around this bend is the field we fought in earlier, the trenches aren't too far away. Closer than you thought, right?" Cook peered around the corner to the battlefield of a few hours ago where barbed wire, trenches and towers had been placed feebly to help hold the line against the Russian march. He quickly reeled his head back. "They got the whole place patrolled, spotlights and snipers in the towers. Take a look, but make sure you aren't spotted!" I approached the corner as Cook stepped back to allow me to take a look. The sight that met my eyes was gruesome. The bodies of US soldiers, Alpine company and the Fourth Regiment alike, dotted the snowy ground, little heaps of darkness that once sustained life, personality, beliefs and thoughts. The victorious party had made itself at home and cleaned up their portion of the dead, however left that of the opposition to the scavengers. The Russian soldiers were turning the dead over, taking money, ammunition, anything they wanted. I was so intent upon watching the enemy turn over my comrades that I barely noticed the spotlight creeping up to our position, until I heard a shrill voice behind me shout, "Down, pretty boy!"

Cook's cry had not been in time, and the spotlight had caught me dumbfounded, gazing upon the scene of the battle from earlier in the day. Rapid machine gun fire opened up and barely caught my elbow as I snapped into attention and flew behind the hill cover once again. Every light in the area began searching the position, finding the intruders. All guns were fixed upon this point. The faint barks and howls of search dogs, intent upon finding human blood, reached our ears.

"Follow me, now!" Shouted Cook, sprinting now into the open desolate snow-covered ground, abandoning his rifle where he had been crouched moments ago. The area was lit brightly with search lights. Whistles and gunfire echoed from every corner of the Russian encampment, bullets streaking just behind and barely to the side of Cook, who was now dashing for dear life to a nearby trench. My legs acted of their own accord as I too ditched my rifle and drew my pistol in pursuit of my much more experienced partner. Bullets did not fear me as they did the wild man a few yards ahead of me. I felt a shot graze off my shoulder pad, nearly knocking me off balance completely. I barely stumbled into the pit ahead of me to meet an enraged and adrenaline-pumped Cook. His eyes those of a mad man, he drew his knife from its case strapped to his left forearm and pressed it to his bare left palm, squeezing hard as he slid the blade smoothly along his own palm. He wiped the blade off in the snow before replacing it in its case and tightly closing a fist to pump out more blood and let it slip gracefully into the snow.

"What are you doing?" I shouted, wildly confused. I knew the acuteness of the dogs' sense of smell.

"Shut up, I'm saving both of us!" Replied Cook as he quickly snatched my bandana and wrapped it around his still bleeding palm. He then reached into the pocket on his vest and pulled a small baggie of a substance as white as the snow around them. "They're getting closer, I can hear their footsteps," said Cook as he removed the rubber band from the top of the baggie. "You never know when this stuff helps, be it work or pleasure," he said through a snicker as he sprinkled the powder over his own fresh blood in the snow to his right. "Cocaine's one powerful drug, any dogs that come to sniff this will get just a touch more than they bargained for." My jaw hit the floor. No words would materialize upon my tongue. Cook then formed a neat line upon his finger and snorted the stuff down in one go. "Let's go, we don't have much time before they get here. Follow me!" We set off down the trench system, following its winding curves and intersections with an instinctual bearing of Southwest, the direction of our encampment, in mind. Every once in a while we would hear hurried footsteps or distant barking in the distance. A few times we heard whistles and excited whoops followed by the swift cracks of gunfire, only to be followed by the silence that meant it had been a false alarm. The base was on edge. There were enemies in its bounds and every Russian army member deployed there was determined to be the one who found them and savored the last kill of the day. As we came to a tunnel in an approaching hill, we heard chatter inside. It was rapid Russian, none of which Cook or me could understand. Cook stopped a distance from the entrance and listened. "Sounds like about four of them, maybe five. Still got your pistol?" I held up the compact handgun for Cook to see. "Ditch it, that'll only get us spotted, unless you have a silencer on you." Cook grabbed the weapon and pressed it into the snowy siding of the trench, covering

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it again and smoothing over the sides with the now freshly falling snow. We were each sprinkled with flakes, making us appear as phantoms in the night stalking through the camp. Cook procured a second knife; this time concealed in his boot, and handed it to me. I examined and admired the thing. It was perfect in length and weight for close range combat.

"You carry two knives with you?" I questioned in a joking tone.

"Three," replied Cook, as he pulled back his vest to reveal a third knife strapped to his bare chest. "Whatever helps you sleep at night, right?" I couldn't help but chuckle. "Alright pretty boy here's the plan. The guards in there are most likely doing a standard watch duty. I've come to know the Russian army basic encampment setup, and a bunker like this is usually pretty close to the exit. They'll be armed and ready, yet most likely a little chummy, meaning they won't be expecting this, judging by the amount of gabbing they're doing in there. Two guards on the doorway, one on either side. I'll take the one on the left and you get the right. Improvise from there. Ready? Oneâtwoâthree!" On that count, Cook slid from the trench wall and glided through the doorway, with me close on his heels, swift shadows of death coming to reap the enemy.

I reached around into the room lit yellow by a field lantern hung on the wall and grasped for the guard I knew to be here. My fingers met with the throat of the unsuspecting man, and I reacted from instinct. I threw a punch with my knife hand, impacting with my fist instead of my blade, stunning the man for an instant. My mind froze. I was never in combat like this before. The door guard seemed to know what he was doing better. The man's angry brown eyes and scruffy jaw line made him appear to be at least forty, an experienced fighter. He swiftly head-butted me, throwing me off my guard. The Russian struck my temple with the stock of his rifle and took aim at his opponent and chambered his rifle. My eyes looked up to peer down the barrel of the weapon as I braced for the worse. Then I saw the fierce appearance of Cook dash forward and grab the guard by the wrist, twisting and breaking it with ease. Cook's eyes were like those of death himself, his scowl reflecting every wrinkle etched into his face, emphasizing the severity of his intentions. The guard let out a shriek of pain as Cook's blade punctured him twice in each arm, immobilizing him on the spot. Cook then swung around to deal with the assailants behind him. Everything seemed to happen in half speed. He ducked low and thrust his blade into the stomach of the first man, twisting the knife and grasping the man's forearm as he elegantly rolled him over his shoulder, slicing along his torso the whole way until the guard laid a bloody heap on the ground. The second man hesitated at this sight, giving Cook just the opening he needed. He struck swift and cleanly to the soldier's neck, not once but three times, ensuring his kill as he planted his boot to the man's chest and threw him to the floor in one fluid motion. He then turned slowly with the greatest composure to the guard who had thrown me off initially. The man was clutching the four clean puncture wounds on his arms, yet remained defiant and ready to fight. Cook threw a jab with his knife for the man's chest, which he blocked and countered with a swift kick which caught Cook right under the chin. Cook reeled back onto the ground and spat blood onto the snowy floor, looking even meaner and more dire than before. He rolled up and feinted another jab at the soldier, reeling his left hand around for a roundhouse punch to the man's jaw. This threw him back a bit, and as Cook went for the kill the man regained his composure in the last second, stopping Cook's knife mere fractions of an inch from his neck. The two struggled, pushing with all their might at each other. My hand seemed to save Cook by its own choice. I rolled onto my hands and knees, grabbing my knife which lay where it had fallen after the soldier had head-butted me. I slid the knife quickly at the back of the man's ankles, bringing him to his knees as he hollered in pain. Cook seized the opportunity to approach his now totally immobilized opponent. He looked coldly into the man's eyes for a moment, then spat into his face before snapping his neck like that of a chicken. He wiped his knife off on the uniform of one of the now five dead men in the room before replacing it into its case as I stumbled to my feet, still woozy from the combat I had just seen and that of earlier in the day.

"Well trained, these ones," murmured Cook as he spat out another bloody wad, this one containing a tooth.

"That's our way out." He gestured to the exit of the bunker. It was a latched door, apparently explosive-proof and had a fingerprint scanner on it. "Let's play find the officer," he said as he and I began to search the dead for any signs of significance or special notification. It was more than likely the commanding officer's fingerprint we needed. The man who Cook had first taken out (I hadn't even seen Cook's first two kills) wore neatly painted red stripes on his right shoulder pad of his armor and a small symbol that resembled a triangle made of red stars on his left breastplate. Cook grabbed his hand and dragged the body over to the scanner,

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placing the dead officer's fingertip onto the scanner. The door made an electronic beep and opened smoothly for us. "Time to go home," Cook said with a smile and a backwards glance towards me.

The walk back to base had been relatively peaceful, aside from the brief sprint from the entrance to the few trees that dotted the landscape between the Russian encampment and our own. Thoughts dwelled in my head, thoughts of little baggies of white powder. I looked to the man trudging ahead of me, the man I admired so much for his fearlessness and combat ability. It had been a massive shock to me to think that one of my biggest influences had been hiding a cocaine addiction. Was that the real reason he refused to be promoted or join up with black ops? Maybe his radical behavior was not only a side effect of, but a way of covering up this new-found secret. My head swam and my body ached all over. I could've sworn that even my blood hurt. Trying to think of Cook as less than a hero was difficult to say the least. I recalled the cavern and Cook's strange behavior, and how now he seemed back to his normal self. It had been many hours since either of us was alone at that point. Maybe Cook had simply been feeling the effects of going sober for the first time in a while. The cocaine had in all honestly helped us escape the dogs though; the dogs would have surely caught up with us, had their noses not been powdered.

"So I'm guessing you're all shut up because of what you saw back there." Cook's voice gave me a start after the regression into my own mind. I took longer than usual to reply.

"I'm no stranger to combat. You think I'm still scared of a little blood?" My voice faltered at this attempt at a joke.

"You know that's not what I'm talking about. Listen Carson," the mere fact that he had used my real name, not some ludicrous nick name, was enough to put me on edge from the start. "You know I'm a good guy. You've seen the things I do for you and the other guys. If word of this got out, I'd be screwed. Make sure that doesn't happen, alright?" Cook stopped walking and waited for a response. I stood dumbfounded at what he had just taken in. I didn't honestly know what to say. In an instant Cook drew his blade and threw me into a nearby tree, pressing the blade to my neck. "Alright punk, there's two ways I can go about doing this. I can either trust in you, or I can rip your throat out right here and leave you to bleed out like a pig. I like you kid. Don't screw that up." Tiny beads of blood had begun to appear on my neck. I had to act fast.

"Alright, I promise! I won't breathe a word about it! Just let me go!" My voice was strangled by fear's choking grasp. Cook was suddenly more menacing than any enemy I had ever faced. My hero, my idol was pressing a blade to my throat to cover up a dirty little secret.

"Good. There's a reason I keep you around. You could be useful with some careful instruction. Remember that." At Cook's final words, the knife slacked slightly and I scrambled to the floor and caught my breath.

"Now hurry up, we want to make it home before lunch." I hadn't even taken notice to the sun rolling up over the horizon, bringing a dull glow of what would normally be a glorious sunrise. The fighting had plagued the sky with haze and filth in much of the world. Beautiful sunny skylines weren't something you saw anymore, not even in the remote wilderness of Alaska. We continued on our way to base to recuperate and find out what became of our comrades. It wasn't until almost noon that we arrived back at the encampment. I nearly collapsed into my sleeper pod after removing my armor, falling asleep the moment my eyes shut.

## Chapter 4: Fact or Fiction?

"Carson, Carson wake up!" A gruff voice spoke above my head. I opened my eyes to see an enormous head of shaggy hair gazing down on me, the door to my sleeper pod wide open.

"Bill?" I asked as I rubbed the substantial amount of sleep from my eyes. How long had I been asleep?

"Correct! Cook says you couldn't knife fight your way out of a paper bag. It's time you learned to gut some Russians." Great, I thought.

Bill had set up numerous dummies inside of the indoor training facility. Now, this facility isn't the size of your highschool gym. No, this was a massive underground arena, big enough to host practice fights between squads of soldiers with enough seating to allow the entire platoon to watch. Of course, all the training was done with guns that fired plastic pellets, yet had the sound, feel and recoil of a real gun. There was a Plexiglas shield for the audience. The arena was abandoned today, except for Bill Carson and their dummies. The dummies wore old pieces of armor scavenged off fallen enemies. It was similar to the outer layer of armor I wore only designed chunkier and heavier, however made of the same materials. The Russian soldiers were not equipped with the two extra layers under the plating, meaning they could be more easily killed.

"Now," began Bill, "The first step is to find a chink in the armor, any sort of opening you can find and exploit. Example." Bill approached the nearest dummy and immediately went to work. Every time he stabbed, he shook and twisted with the knife quickly but briefly, causing deep messy wounds. Bill had the dummy reduced to scraps of fabric and stuffing in a matter of seconds. "Now," he said through heavy breaths, "your turn." I walked towards the next dummy and drew my knife. The first opening I noticed was a joint in the armpit. I feinted towards the neck, not knowing why I was trying to fake out a dummy, and shifted directions mid swing, thrusting the knife upwards into the joint of the armor. I jostled the blade around inside the burlap sack of stuffing which was my foe for today before pulling it free and stabbing again at the neck. I made a clean cut across and withdrew my blade, turning towards Bill. I shot him a classic 'how do you like me now?' look.

"Not bad," Bill said, "but you're not getting creative. These guys are trained to gut you like a pig." I winced.

"You need to hit the unexpected places, move in one fluid motion, each attack building off of the last." As he said this, he threw his arm back, his elbow colliding with a dummy's face, his knife with its forearm and pulled the blade upwards, making a massive gash up the whole arm. Stuffing littered the floor. "That limb is now immobilized," he said as he launched his next attack. He grabbed the dummy by a joint in its breastplate, bringing his foot down on its knee, breaking its leg. "Now that he's messed up, we can go in for the kill," Bill said. He slammed the hilt of the dagger into the temple of the dummy so hard its helmet cracked. He then spun the blade around and utilized this new weak point by driving the knife straight through the ruined helmet and into the dummy's head. It took a few tugs to remove the knife.

"See, the trick is that they'll be expecting an attack to the throat or head, being the only true places where a stab can be fatal in this heavy of armor. The key thing is to immobilize their limbs first and make sure they can't counter your attack, because believe me, they're trained to counter effectively." The muscles in his neck tensed around the scar he bore from when his throat was slit halfway. "Let's try it again."

By the end of the day, every dummy in the arena laid a heap of stuffing and burlap scraps strewn about piles of armor. My arms were on fire from all the practice, however I really felt as if I had made some progress. I was just as quick with a knife as Bill was on the dummies now, finding that with each practice it became easier and easier.

"Alright, not bad!" Bill gave me a big, toothy grin. Bill was like a big grizzly bear, and seeing him smile was nearly as strange as seeing him disembowel a room of dummies. "Now, draw your knife. I have one last test for you."

I drew my knife. It was the same blade that Cook had given me. The thing was pretty wicked with its pointed edge, one razor sharp side for slicing, the other jagged for hacking and sawing. It was made of a strange black metal I didn't recognize, however the thing stayed super sharp. The cutting edges hadn't even lost their color from wear and usage. It seemed the knife wasn't simply painted black, it was made of black metal. Why hadn't I noticed how cool this thing was before? I thought. Why hadn't I even examined it at all?

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Bill took a step forward and paused, looking me up and down, his own knife at the ready.

"What's the test, Bill?" I asked. Bill gave me a warm smile.

"Fight for your life." At that, Bill kicked a shower of dirt into my face, sending me stumbling backwards. Bill yelled and charged, barely giving me time to react. He stabbed downward violently and quickly, straight towards my chest, however I caught the blow on one of the notches of my knife. I worked my wrist under Bill's and threw his arm off.

"Whoa!" I cried. "Bill, we have no armor, this is NOT a good idea!" Bill swung at me again and I parried his attack only barely.

"Your enemies won't hesitate just because you have no armor! They will look for your weakness and exploit it. No mercy!" Bill pressed me, our knives like swords slashing and clanging off of each other, each attack coming closer and closer to my undefended neck and torso. Bill surged forward, unleashing a vicious assault upon me, catching me with a minor slice every so often and landing a few punches on my face. Did I mention that hurts? Alright, I thought, I've just got to think. Clear my mind, exploit his weakness. I ducked a high slash and found myself below Bill's downward plunging knife. I rolled to the side, the blade catching the dirt where my head had been, and I took this opportunity. I sprang up from my roll, now behind Bill, and grabbed a handful of shaggy brown hair. I slammed the hilt of my knife into Bill's back and kicked out the back of his knees. I went to put the blade to Bill's throat, forcing his surrender, when Bill countered. He reached behind him and grabbed me by the hips, throwing me overhead into the ground.

"Uhhh," I moaned, stunned on the floor from this sudden show of brute strength. I tried to get up, but quickly lost my balance and toppled over on the floor again. Bill pressed his boot into my face and muttered something in Russian. Then I realized Bill's weakness. He fought with rage, hardly controlling it. It could help him when he was pressed, however in his offense Bill's rage would blind his judgment. I seized the revelation and did the first thing that came to mind: I punched Bill in quite an uncomfortable place.

"Ooof!" Bill lost all his air faster than a popped balloon and I rolled out from under his boot as the brute crumpled under his own weight. I got to my feet. I cleared my thoughts and considered my opponent. Bill was a formidable fighter, much larger than me and clearly stronger. I knew I had to force Bill's attack and catch him off his guard, as I had done before, however this time I had to take him down quickly and efficiently. Bill charged and I held my ground. At the last second, Bill lowered down to tackle me, but instincts took over and I went into overdrive. I leaped into the air and wrapped my left arm around Bill's neck, while at the same time driving my knees into his back. Bill let out a groan and toppled to the ground, but I wasn't done yet. Bill went to counter, rolling over underneath of me and taking a quick stab at me, but I anticipated the counter. I caught Bill's strike wrist-to-wrist and drove my free arm into Bill's elbow with a sickening crunch. Bill screamed in pain and I slammed my head into Bill's. Bill sagged back down and I was left straddling over him with my knife to Bill's throat. The fight had been won when a slow clap came from Cook, standing at the arena's entrance.

"So the pretty boy can fight," he said, obviously not very impressed. Cook strode forward and I climbed off of Bill, who was still slightly disoriented.

"Alright, seriously, what just happened?" I asked. "Why did Bill attack me?"

"It was a trai-" Bill tried to reply, but broke into a coughing fit. When it died down, he continued. "It was a training exercise, Carson. Cook wanted me to test you in real combat. You did well, better than either of us expected. Now would you help me up?" I took Bill's hand and gingerly brought him to his feet. Bill said his thanks and leaned heavily on my shoulder, still off his balance from the fight. I had so many questions, yet no words to put my thoughts to. I wanted to scream. I knew Bill had been trying to help me but I was fed up with Cook deceiving me.

"Cook," I spoke, my voice quivering with suppressed rage. "Could I talk to you in private for a bit?" Cook gave me a crooked smile.

"Sure thing, pretty boy. But let's drag the mammoth to the infirmary first."

In case you've never had a two hundred something pound man use you as a crutch, my advice is this: Don't. The short walk seemed to take hours with Bill Leaning on me for all his support. We finally checked him in to have his arm mended and his back checked. The medical care would probably have him fixed up soon, as the injuries were mostly minor. Cook and I then headed outside for our little chat. We went around the back of the

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infirmary to a medical supply storage tent and headed inside.

"So what's on your m-" He was cut short when I slugged him in the face. "Alright," he panted as he got up, his anger building up. "I'll give you that one, and that was a good punch. You normally hit like a s-" He was cut short again by another punch to the face. He toppled backwards, knocking over medicine bottles and unused syringes. "ENOUGH." His anger had almost boiled over. Blood trickled from his lip "Now tell me, what do you want?" I didn't know where to start, so I went with the first thing that came to mind.

"You never let them promote you because you're scared of getting caught, aren't you?" The rage was boiling out of my veins. I was about to explode like Carson-colored fireworks. "You were my hero, I looked up to you man! And now I find out you're nothing but a drugged up lunatic who'd rather slit my throat than accept his problems?" Cook glared into my eyes. They say when you're messing with somebody dangerous that you're playing with fire. I may as well have been juggling nuclear warheads, and I was just fine with that. It felt great to let my anger explode like that, and before I could stop myself I let a bomb drop.

"And who is Calder?" The question hung in the air. The air inside the tent seemed supercharged, as if at any moment it would erupt and vaporize everything inside. Cook's expression didn't falter. His face was pure malice. His eyes could have panicked fear itself. I wished I could have bit my tongue. Cook simply looked at me.

It started with his eyes. They began to glow that same pale blue I had seen in my dream, then it spread to his skin. He was literally glowing. The whole tent was illuminated by his pale glow.

"You know nothing." His voice melted my nerve and snapped my composure. It was flat yet menacing, like a cobra daring me to prod it once more before it strikes. The glow intensified and he took a step closer. Before I knew what was happening, his hand shot out and touched my forehead.

What I saw would stay with me a lifetime. The world was ablaze, fire consuming everything that once lived, men in business suits were literally tearing each other apart, nothing but hatred and the desire to kill reigning in their minds. Sky scrapers blazed and crumbled, mushroom clouds sprouting up everywhere. The sea swallowed the land, the water washing red with blood. I somehow understood. It was the next apocalypse, the final destruction of mankind. The world was ashen and torn apart, the magma in the earth finally swallowing the surface and leaving the world a clean black slate of cooled magma, ready to start again. All that was preserved were a few small places in the world which weren't swallowed by the magma. My vision returned to the present and I crumpled to my knees, feeling nauseous and weaker than I ever had before. I looked at my own hands to make sure they were still there, and that I wasn't in a business suit. I still had both hands and I was business suit free.

"So the vision didn't tear your mind from your body," Cook said in a cool level tone. The glow on his skin had subsided and beads of sweat formed on his forehead. "Perhaps you could have been convinced. A pity your death is both imminent and necessary." With that he strode out of the tent, leaving me clammy and shaken on the floor of the medical supply tent, grasping for consciousness but coming up short.

I came to some hours later. I saw the sun through the small window in the medical tent, sunken low in the sky, casting a blood red tint over slick icy slopes. Clouds obscured what would have been a beautiful sky, a slight breeze emphasizing winter's embrace. I broke into a coughing fit, feeling like my lungs had been collapsed on themselves and were slowly inflating again. I muttered Cook's name and slowly got to my feet, feeling the energy returning to my body, coursing through my veins. Thank god for the chip, I thought, knowing such a recovery would have taken me much longer in my natural state. My mind began to race as the reality of what just happened began to set in. There was something up with Cook, that much was obvious. There still remained, however, the question of what exactly happened before I blacked out. What exactly had he shown me? Guys in business suits, fire, chaos, I couldn't remember much more. It hurt my head to think about it. I resolved to continue with my day as usual.

## Chapter 5: Movin' on Up

I made for the armory to pick up a weapon, as I lost my rifle in the last mission. When I got there, Bill was waiting, vestiges of our training session still covering his body. Bill didn't have a chip like the rest of us, as he no longer fought. His body recovered at the normal rate, which meant he would be pretty badly messed up from our fight for quite a while. The fact that he put himself through that for my well being actually meant a lot.

"Looking good," I said casually as I approached the armory. The front side of the building was open with a counter from the ground to waist height. Bill and the other workers usually tended behind the counter to weapons, repairing and tinkering with them between visits from the other soldiers. Bill gave me a grin full of crooked teeth.

"Nice hair, Nancy." He was just jealous of my hair, or so I liked to think. "I got something for you."

"Oh how I do love gifts!" We really were quite sarcastic at times. "Is it a pony? I hope it's a pony." This last comment of mine was met with a few odd looks from the other soldiers who overheard. I addressed them casually. "Hey, how's it going?"

"Alright, get inside or else it's going in the furnace," said Bill. I smiled and entered through the side door. The armory was much hotter inside than one might think an open faced building would be. "I've been playing around with the design for our standard rifle. I've been looking for a way to use the chips for an offensive purpose. You know, channel their capabilities for destructive uses as opposed to their current constructive ones. Well check this out." As he finished, he snatched a rifle from a row of seemingly identical copies. In fact, their seemed nothing special about the rifle at all, except a set of small black teeth on the grip.

"It stabs me while I shootâ!" I couldn't think of how this would help me in battle.

"If you'd try it, you'd see it does a whole lot more than that," Bill said, his voice full of longing for me to test this new creation of his. I reluctantly took the gun from him by the foregrip, careful to avoid the teeth until I was ready to use it. I stepped up to the firing range behind the weapons racks and drew a magazine from the wall. I slid the magazine in smoothly; I really loved how nice the action on new guns was. Examining the teeth, I decided it was time to man up and try it. What's the worst that could happen? I pulled up a section of my glove, revealing bare skin on my palm. I stole another glance at Bill's anxious face and took the grip with confidence in his work. Immediately I felt the effects of his tinkering. A red pulse flashed across my vision. All targets glowed red as usual, only this time, something felt different. I could actually feel the rifle pulling itself towards the targets, as if eager to show me what it could do. I could see Bill smiling out of the corner of my eye. I decided to stop fighting the rifle's pull, to will it to do what it pleased.

All at once, the rifle took command of my arms and centered itself on the first target. I felt an itching in my trigger finger, the gun asking me to pull the trigger. I wanted to do it; I wanted to unleash the fury of this new found tool, so I gave in. The rifle squeezed my finger the second before I could do so myself. Instantly it drilled the target, square in the center with three rapid shots, and then moved itself to the next. I felt the same itching in my finger, a desire, a hunger to kill all red in sight. The targets blazed scarlet in front of my eyes, and all at once I was a hunter of red. I let the rifle command me, allowing it to fulfill a long awaited frenzy of bullets, demolishing any and all targets in sight. I drilled through every target in the range, shooting one after another, feeling better with each round I put through the paper. The gun centered itself on the last target and took out the entire center of the bulls-eye. The rifle then tugged again, this time swinging me completely around and turning the barrel on Bill. I felt my finger itch; the gun was hungry for blue.

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"Woah, woah, easy now! You'll get your chance to use that thing on a real person, just not on me." Bill pushed the barrel down and immediately I felt guilty. Had I really just contemplated shooting Bill? I uncurled my grip on the gun and the spikes came out of my hand. Surprisingly, they drew no blood. My finger still itched.

"Bill, you're a genius. How did you come up with this?" I looked with admiration at the man I'd just sighted in on.

"He didn't," stated a voice that I didn't really recognize. A short, brown haired man stepped out from behind one of the gun racks. He was a little shorter than me, with hair buzzed short and protruding cheek bones and a cleft chin to match. His cheeks were rosy and his eyes were bright green like glowing emeralds. The inventor spoke again.

"I'm Jared Kelly, your new squad leader." He said this like it was casual news. Was I really being transferred away from Cook?

"Bill," I began, "what does he mean?"

Bill smiled at me, his face hefty and gentle. "Didn't Cook tell you? You've been promoted to Black Ops, boy." This was unreal. I've served my whole military career, not that it was a particularly long one, at operation Jack Frost. I didn't even know how to feel about this promotion.

"What can I say?" I felt dumb asking the question. "This is such an honor, what did I do to deserve it?"

"Bill said you would be a fine candidate. Your age was a factor in our decision making, however we heard of your bravery and stealth abilities after what happened to Alpine company, and Bill assured us of your combat abilities, both ranged and close quarters." Bill broke into another smile. "You will leave tonight to head to basic training, if you have no further business here. Now, if you'll excuse me, gentlemen, I must be off to tell the other new initiates." And with that, my life in the special forces began.

I was packing up all my stuff from my sleeper pod, not that I had a lot of stuff. I packed a duffel bag full of a few outfits of worn white cargo pants, a few thermal shirts, a picture of my mom, my wallet, an carton of cigarettes and my knife. I was wearing my finest cargo pants and a gray sweat shirt that said 'state champs '98!' on it. Champions of what, I had no idea. I took it with me from home when I first arrived here, feeling that the only protection from cold I would need would be a sweat shirt after my cold tolerance was enhanced. I zipped up the bag and said my final goodbyes to the sleeper pod that had housed me since I first got here. It was funny seeing the little gray egg-shaped bed I had spent so much time in, now vacant. It appeared no different from the others, however, it had a sense of home that I knew I would miss; the feeling in my heart was close to pity, yet I couldn't place if it was for the pod or for me, for both were now parting ways from each other. It felt like home and looked sad and empty without my stuff in it. I got way too sentimental about simple things.

I trudged off through the gates of the base camp for operation Jack Frost, leaving for the last time, heading towards sergeant Kelly's truck and a new way of life. All the snowy white tents blew in the wind, men in cargo pants and thermal shirts just like mine bustling about, unaware of the vacancy of a seventeen year old kid making his way towards bigger and better things. I looked one last time towards my home for the last two years. Little did I know, this would be but the first in a long series of tough goodbyes I would have to make.

The next eight months were a rigorous training program. They made me turn in my chip and contacts and train in my raw form, working every muscle more intensely than ever before. I was doing things I never knew I could before. They had me running and hurtling obstacles with weights strapped to me, slowly increasing the



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weight as I went on. There were climbing walls that shook violently when you climbed and had obstacles that dropped down from above, making the climb more extreme. There were scenarios where they would let out trained dogs and have me escape and carry out a dummy body in full armor. They basically had me run every sort of work out they could think up, climb and jump my way over obstacles, and learn to shoot while moving with expert precision. By the end I was a mobile, quick fighting machine and I felt unstoppable. I couldn't wait until they let me use my chip again. There was no way anything would stand in my way then. After the training was over, I was told I would have a few months off to go back home.

This seemed crazier than any training exercise they had me go through.

I once again packed my bags and headed out the front doors of the large black training complex, leaving the building for home. Home hardly seemed a tangible thing anymore. It felt as if a different life, someone I once was who died and gave way to the new Carson, the super soldier. They had me flying home on a single engine plane and we landed after a turbulent, stomach turning flight. Despite all my training, I still wasn't invincible to motion sickness. The first steps from the truck that took me home seemed like a dream.

## Chapter 6: Homecoming King

Walking up the cracked, weedy sidewalk of 257 West Elder Street was unreal, like I was looking through a foggy lens. My old home stood a small double house painted beige with forest green shutters and a green door to match. Our porch had peeling paint and a fat golden retriever, two things that drastically contrasted with the hard packed snow and vicious guard dogs of my other home. I took it all in, the overgrown grass, the single tree in our front yard, the small chain link fence in front of all the houses, the cars parked in rows down the side of the street. It all felt new again, yet familiar and comforting at the same time. It felt great. I climbed the stairs to my door slowly and patted the chubby pile of fur on the head.

"Good boy, Charlie," I said before knocking on the door. Almost instantly, the door flung open and the screen door shot out, slamming me in the face.

"Oh, dear!" My mom came out in a flurry of worry. She had a right, as she just smashed me in the face with a screen door. "Oh dear, Carson, I'm so sorry! Oh your nose, are you alright? Come inside, let me have a look."

I smiled at her and stopped clutching my nose. "Mom, I'm fine. It's so good to see you." I stepped through the doorway and gave her two years worth of missed hug time. When we broke she was slightly teary eyed but grinning like it was her first time seeing me again. We went inside and I unloaded everything that had happened in the past two years. I told her about my latest training, the missions I had gone on since we last talked, and my recent promotion. I held back all the scary parts and the whole mess with Cook. Alaska sounded a lot better in the mom-appropriate story version.

"I'm just so glad you're home," she said, still smiling. My mom was short; around five foot four, with brown curly hair that hung only slightly shorter than mine. She and I looked nothing alike; she always told me I got my looks from my father, but my personality from her.

"Now, I have a surprise for you," she said. "I told the school that you were coming back to Brampton, and they said they would be delighted to have you come in and give some guest speaking about your experiences. I told them you would be honored to come in and talk." Dilemma. I would love to come in and talk, had I not been nearly caught up in the middle of a drug related scandal and betrayed by my hero. I couldn't tell my mom, though. I told her I would go and we went out for lunch. I had my favorite, a turkey club with fries and a pickle. I hadn't had real food in so long, I savored every bite. My mom and I talked about everything. We talked about what I was going to say, all the things we would have to do while I was home, what I was going to wear, and what I was going to do with my hair. She always protested my hair.

Being an only child has its advantages and disadvantages. One advantage is that because nobody else is in the house, I'm always her 'perfect son.' Things are great when I'm home. Where it gets touchy is when I'm not. My dad left us when I was less than a year old. My mom had to pick up extra jobs and struggle to make ends meet. Growing up, this was normal, but it wasn't until I was old enough to understand all she went through for me to truly appreciate how amazing of a person she was. She bent over backwards to make my life as normal as any other child's. Because of this, her life centered on me. If I was away, she was totally alone in a small house in a residential suburban neighborhood in Bramford, Ohio. Her life was lonely. I felt like I needed to make up for lost time in the gaps that I was home. We went home and settled on a date for me to come in to school. After a night of playing chess and watching old movies on TV we went to bed. The next few days were the same. Mom and I went out and ate together, hung out around the house, I helped her with some house work projects, and we found things to do in our down time. Charlie, the lazy dog on the porch, mostly hung around and got pet when he could. He didn't need much to be content.

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Being home was great, but of course there was something stirring beneath the surface. At nights I would lay awake and wonder about the whole Cook thing. What did my dream mean? Was there really a hatch that lead from our base to that of the Russians? What had really happened in the tent? There was no chance he could have channeled into my thoughts or anything like that, yet the visions seemed so clear and so real. All the destruction, all the pain and all the sorrow. All the chaos. I would lie on my mattress in total darkness or pace around in my room, my mind racing, my thoughts slowly driving me insane. On my fourth night home the thoughts totally got to me. I had to get up and go somewhere. I crept out of the house and put on my sweatshirt and some cargo pants, instinctively strapping my knife to my left ankle. The cold of the black steel bit my flesh.

I crept out of my room, closing the door carefully so as to not wake my mom. It felt strange sneaking out of my house when I was a soldier, but I didn't want to wake my mom and I really just wanted some solitude. Most things in the house - furniture, floor, et cetera - were made of wood. This made them incredibly squeaky. I moved as a shadow across the tiny living room, my mom asleep on the green couch, barely stirring. She still had the ancient TV on, many colors of light battling each other for control of the room. A swift exit through the front door put me back out on my front porch. Charlie's huge brown eyes traced my descent down the porch steps and he let out a soft whimper. The big baby loved attention.

Strolling down the street, I had no real direction in mind. I zipped my sweatshirt up and threw my hood over my head, hoping the night air could still reach me inside the cloth. My thoughts wandered about the confines of my head, touching here and there on subjects at random, though never fully dedicated to one thing. Maybe that's just what I needed, anything but more Cook on the mind. Cars lined the residential street and a million other houses stretched down its remainder on either side. Every house and every car so closely resembled each other. Things seemed opposite in today's America. All technology was devoted to the military, the public remaining virtually stuck in one place for a few hundred years now. Sure, they had some important medical innovations, but the average man could never even dream of the things the military was accomplishing through technological means. This philosophy wasn't exactly new, just accentuated in modern day. What struck me as odd was the backwards sense of conformity. Cars, houses, clothing, food and basically most things domestic looked so similar. It was as if independent brands had died out and given way to titans of their given industries, destroying competition, and with it, diversity. I passed by brick house after brick house, all with the same walls, windows, porch and roofing. Even the decoration efforts of the people seemed sub-par. I felt like this world of one saw me as the anomaly just as much as I did it. I stuck out from the average person with my long hair, cargo shorts and grey sweatshirt. Most people in the cities wore brown or black pants and some sort of a dress shirt of a common style. Society itself saw me as an outsider, and with each conformity I noticed, my vision of myself as such increased.

I rounded the corner of the residential street and emerged in a neon jungle. Restaurants, theaters and gas stations lined this street. Here people bustled about, and the noise hit me like a brick wall. It was amazing, really, how quiet and tranquil the residential streets were. They were a stark contrast to the business hubs that hummed through the night a mere block away from them. I decided a gas station would be tonight's destination. I strolled up to the sidewalk and waited as a stampede of cars thundered by. The traffic light overhead blinked yellow, then red, and the metallic river parted before me. I jogged across, not wanting to be in the tide when it next broke free. I approached the station and was almost to the door when a nicotine craving set in. One smoke before the rest of the journey wouldn't kill me. I leaned against the brick siding of the station and felt the cool damp brick as if it were on my bare back. This sweatshirt didn't do much, did it? I fished in my pockets and found a few crushed cigarettes and a stress ball. Finally my hand met one intact, and it was on to part two of the search. I groped every pocket but came up short.

"Crap, no light," I said aloud. I heard a small flick and a tiny flame lit next to me.

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"I got you, buddy," hummed a deep voice behind the flame. The stranger lit my cigarette then retracted his hand into the shadows shrouding him.

"Thanks," I said, a little confused. "Not too bad a night, reasonably clear sky."

"You're right. I almost hadn't noticed." A hulking brute of a man in a navy uniform stepped from the veil of darkness, still clutching the lighter like an insect in his massive hand. The man's hair was pale blond. His gaze met mine and a chill shot down my spine as cold as his piercing, pale eyes.

"C-Calder?" I shuddered. This couldn't be happening. He turned to me and smiled, a name tag illuminated in the pale, silver moonlight nearly exactly matching his eyes.

"Don't forget that name when you talk to my manager, buddy. Break's over, I'll see you around." He snuffed out his cigarette under a mammoth shoe and strode into the gas station. I wasn't going to let him get away that easily. The knife's cold throbbed in my ankle as I glided around to the door and inside the station. I gave the place a quick scan. A small Indian man in a black sweatshirt browsed various snack items while a woman around 19 debated name brand cold medicine or its generic counterpart. I joined the guy in the snack isle and feigned interest in some chips. I spotted the giant behind the counter stocking some candy by the register. Other than we four, the store seemed deserted. I didn't know what my plan was. All I knew was that I needed to get to the bottom of this whole mess with Cook, and Calder was my ladder down. I grabbed the chips and began making my way to the front counter. The front door suddenly swung open and a guy in a long trench coat swooped in and approached the counter. I sunk back into the snack isle and watched from a distance, unable to understand fully what the two talked about. Snack Isle Man took a step closer to me, and I heard him mumble something under his breath. I caught his eye for a moment and gave him a questioning look. He hardly breathed the words, but I read his lips.

"Easy, tiger." He strode back towards the storefront and preoccupied himself with more products. More confusion seemed to present itself to me with each minute. I should have stayed in bed. Then, in an instant, the situation flipped. The man in a trench coat pulled a gun on Calder and began screaming for him to hand over all the money in the register and a candy bar. What an odd thing to demand in a holdup.

"Alright, alright just settle down," said Calder. He maintained perfect composure as he slid the key into the register, never breaking eye contact with the lunatic in front of him. The exchange was seamless. Calder handed over the money and a candy bar, and the gunman bid his thanks. Calder put his hands back up in a sign of resignation, but the gunman smacked him in the temple with his pistol. Calder hit the floor with a deep thud and the gunman made a break for it. That's when Snack Isle Man came alive and sprang at the bandit just before he reached the door. The two wrestled on the ground for a moment, but the gunman was quickly on the floor with a bloodied face and two guns fixed on his head. The Indian man had brought his own piece of the party.

"Alright, get up! Move!" The man had a commanding voice. He stowed the new weapon in his holster and drew a police badge. "You're under arrest for armed robbery and assault. Now if you'll kindly join me in my police car out front." The two went outside and more policemen stormed inside, followed by a few paramedics. They checked with the woman across the store as the paramedics brought Calder to his feet. He dusted off the dirt from his clothes, but otherwise seemed fine. The paramedics insisted on giving him an examination before turning him over to police examination on what happened. It seemed again that I was the outcast, the only one to whom nobody showed particular interest to or relation with. This, however, was only before a snide, cocky voice behind me changed my life forever.

"Didn't hurt you, did he, pretty boy?" I turned and was face to face with Cook. He smiled, missing several teeth and looking roughly 10 years older than the last time I had seen him. I acted on impulse. My hand shot

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to my knife, and I plunged the blade at its former owner. His hand stopped mine just short of his chest and twisted my wrist around, turning me backwards and forcing me to bend at the waist. He drew his gun swiftly and I felt the barrel press into the back of my spine in classic execution style.

"You know nothing," he said through a crooked smile. That was the first time I died. I felt the bullet explode through my skin, ripping apart my throat and tearing out more flesh and blood than I thought I had. I fell face first into a pool of myself, wondering how much longer I would see this world. I saw Cook's shoes turn on a dime and rock backwards with the kick of his gun. He blasted off six shots from his pistol. I saw the smoking shell cases fall to the ground, mingle with my blood as more thuds indicated fresh corpses. All was quiet as Cook took a few more steps towards the counter.

"Cook, they didn't need to die. We're almost done here, anyway." Calder obviously had more of a conscience than Cook.

"It matters? They were witnesses, and more importantly, a way to relieve my itchy trigger finger."

"You can't blast everything that comes your way. After all, look what happened last time you got crazy. Bit off a bit more than you could chew, huh?" I heard another thud, this one mixed with a crunch. Then I heard deep groans from someone on the floor.

"Don't you ever disrespect me like that again, understand?" Had Cook just leveled Calder? "Insubordinate trash like you is what causes me to do sloppy work. I missed his head, but with that much blood loss he'll be out soon." I felt myself slipping downward a bit, my peripherals becoming fuzzy. "Too bad I had to kill him, he could have been a valuable replacement."

"What for, sir?" said Calder.

"You." I heard a final round fire from Cook's pistol and he tossed it onto my back. "Good riddance to trash, I say." Cook strode past me and left through the front door. So he had missed my head, which was good. The bad news was that he was right about the blood loss. I was losing my grip on reality. Through the storefront windows I saw the city skyline erupt, aircraft emerging from the black sky and raining explosive ordinance on the seemingly identical buildings. Cook spoke into the radio of his chip. "Ease up on this position, I'm going to hang out and command from here. This building will be the only thing standing after the bombs are dropped." The door shut and Cook disappeared and slipped into the alley. Then my whole world disappeared and I slipped into blackness.

Dying is easy. It's coming back that sucks.

## Chapter 7: Wake Up

I saw lights, flashes, felt things jabbing my flesh. Everything was a blur, I had no idea how long it had been. Frankly I didn't care. I was in the dark, alone, but at peace. From a great distance I saw strange faces through two small openings, portals to another world outside the darkness. I was slipping back, receding into the soothing darkness, and the faces were contorting with frustration. They jabbed me with more needles, passed warm fluid through my body; only, it didn't so much feel like my body anymore. I felt as if it was a distant memory, calling to me from another life. My spirit was the same, simply set free of earthly troubles. I felt as if I was an entity, removed from my body and the world around it, yet still attached by an inexplicable link.

I caught fragments of what the faces were saying, things like "blood loss," "gauze," and "field kit." Was I in some sort of trouble? I waded through the dark, venturing closer to the portals to this strange world I once knew. I got close enough to hear more of the conversation. A short guy was bent over me with all sorts of gizmos, obviously frustrated.

"I can't afford to lose anymore blood. I've regenerated the tissue, but his body's not accepting it. I'm losing him. I said hold his arms down!" I saw the man jab something into my side, and all at once I was overcome with a wave of massive pain. I felt as if there were a cord tied somewhere inside me, and the more they prodded my body the more this cord tugged on my insides. It was pulling me towards the portals, but I didn't want to go. The closer I got, the pain intensified, and more of my life came back to me. Someone shot me; Calder? No, Cook. Cook shot me. I hated Cook. My home city was burning and blood stained the hands of an unknown enemy. I was bleeding out and complete strangers were trying to save me now. What was left for me to return to? Death seemed the preferable option. Then another memory of my life came back to me. A new possibility came, a reason to live: vengeance.

I mustered all my will and crawled back to the portals. I was getting closer, but my entire body seared as if my veins ran with lava. This was my body again, and I felt clearly the place the bullet had demolished my neck. The pain was excruciating, but I was mere inches from the portals - my eyes? I felt like I was drowning, the darkness pulling me back under. A black liquid overtook my feet, my legs, crept up my torso. I pulled, but the abyss seemed stronger. I was falling back from the world, memories fading, the liquid calming, soothing so long as I accepted it. My head went under, but I gave one final lurch forward. Once again I was laying on the floor, back in my body, my real body, back in the real world. I flew upward, gasping for breath with panic-stricken eyes.

"Woah, woah, easy man, relax. I got you, don't worry." The short guy eased me back down onto my back. "That was some hit you took, blew clean through your neck man. You hearing me?" The lights in the store were all off, a faint orange glow casting through the windows from outside. My body no longer burned as it did before, but I had a killer pain in my neck still. I guess that's the downside of getting shot.

I looked up at Snack Isle Man, the guy who just saved my life. "I'm alright, let me just gather myself together." I sat up and rubbed my face with my open hands. When I looked around my vision blurred, then steadily came back into focus. Bodies littered the ground, paramedics and cops alike. Those who didn't flee, it appeared, had been wasted on the spot. Cook was a heartless maniac, and right then and there I swore he would burn for this.

"Here, let me help you to your feet." Snack Isle Man took my hand and steadied me as I stood up. My legs felt shaky, but they took my weight and gradually I felt back to myself. He turned and surveyed the store for any other potential survivors.

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"Thanks a lot. You know, for saving me and all." I felt stupid for not apologizing earlier. He didn't seem to mind though. "I'm Carson, by the way. Did you catch which way the guy who did this went?" Snack Isle man turned back to me.

"Sorry man, I took cover once he went trigger happy. I thought he was one of us, messed up that a freak like that can make it into the force and do something like this to good men and women." He swore under his breath.

I was a little surprised by this. "Wait, you mean you thought he was a cop too?"

"We figured him for one of us. He and his buddy responded to my call for backup. I'd been tailing that creep who tried to rob the store for some time. He held up every convenience store and gas station for two miles along this road. Must've been desperate for money." He turned his head away when he said this, a pained expression in his eyes. "It just isn't right that he died like that. The guy didn't seem right, desperate like a cornered animal. Then some psycho comes along and blasts him for no reason, along with a whole lot of good people." He swore again and turned away. "I just wish I could've caught him, but I decided saving one life was worth more than ending another. Anyway, it seems like we've got bigger problems."

Suddenly I remembered the more dire threat. The city outside was ablaze.

## Chapter 8: Urban Wasteland, Part One

"Where do we go now?" My question seemed stupid as it hung in the air. Where was there to go, really?

"I say we find the quickest way out of this city, pick up any survivors we can on the way out." Snack Isle Man sounded confident, like he'd been trained for this at the police academy. "My name's Brad, by the way. Now stick close, if you want to make it out alive."

It seemed funny for me to follow a cop now that I had Special Forces training, but it did feel good to let someone else take the lead. That was something I wasn't very good at. I saw my knife on the ground and scooped it up before Brad noticed. As far as he was concerned, I wanted to be just another civilian he had to extract. I noticed something was off. We were missing one hulking corpse. Calder was nowhere to be seen, and I was sure Cook had taken care of him. I stowed my intrigue and went on following. We strode out the door and Brad hugged the wall, trying to stay low. He drew his weapon, a nine millimeter pistol. Not bad for civilians who get out of hand, but nothing to be used against an organized force. The whole city looked like it was bathed in fire, some smaller buildings reduced to rubble and much of the street torn up. Larger skyscrapers remained hollow shells of themselves.

We crept to the side of the building, towards the alley I first encountered Calder. We skulked down, keeping our heads low and stopping at the corner to check if the next street over was clear. That's when something caught my eye. Something moved, just a flash of movement, behind a burned out car parked along the street. I halted Brad in his tracks and gestured to the car.

"Did you see something?" His voice was a whisper. He was smart, but silent gestures would have been ideal.

"Something moved behind that car. Let's check it out."

"You stay put," he ordered, "I'll check it out." He approached the car with his weapon drawn. His voice boomed as he approached the car. "Whoever you are, I can help you. Just come out from hiding and I'll get you out of this city. You have nothing to fear." His last word echoed off the smoldering buildings as he stood a few feet from the car, as if fear was taunting us, always coming back no matter how hard you fought it. "Alright, you've got three seconds before I come get you. Three. Two. One." I saw it the moment he said one. A few blocks down the street in a half wrecked warehouse, a long barrel protruded from one of the many vacant windows. It shifted ever so slightly to the left, centering exactly on Brad. I had to act fast. I charged him, pulling him to the ground. As we went down, the person behind the car stood up. A gleaming figure emerged from hiding. He wore a pure white suit of armor, polished to perfection and covered head to toe in either plate or flexible synthetic armor. His helmet's visor was tinted deep blue, opaque from the outside. More importantly, however, he was about to kill us with the pure white assault rifle he was holding.

I sprang to my feet and grabbed his rifle as he raised it to fire. In one fluid motion I slammed the rifle into his chest with my left hand and grabbed my knife with the other. I rammed the blade into his throat guard, expecting a cushy layer between the plates of his chest piece and his helmet. Much to my dismay, however, the knife glanced harmlessly off, barely leaving a scratch in his armor. This was some good tech. The soldier broke my grip on his rifle and kicked me in the chest, sending me staggering back. He took aim at my head, but Brad was on his feet now. He fired off three shots, slamming the enemy in the head, but the small rounds hardly did more than my knife to the tough plate armor. It was enough to shake the guy up, though. He lost his balance, and I struck. I bent at the knees and charged straight to him with my shoulder. I planted my foot between his the moment I made impact with his gut and wrapped my hands around the back of his knees. I picked him up, took three steps driving him back and slammed him down firmly into the broken pavement with a perfect tackle.



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I stood up and kicked his rifle to the far side of the street. Brad came over with his gun trained on the soldier's head. He still didn't know about the sniper, though. A bullet streaked past his head and he hit the pavement, escaping death's clutches by fragments of an inch. The soldier was getting back to his feet and I needed to act fast. I picked up the soldier's assault rifle as he charged me. He got to me before I could get a shot off, ramming his fist into my gut and forcing a painful oof! out of me. The sniper had to have chambered another round by now, and the soldier began to back up, giving his buddy room to shoot. I caught on and caught him by the wrist, pulling the soldier in front of me at the last instant. The bullet caught him straight in the head, not piercing his armor but definitely giving him a brutal shock from the impact. He dropped like a rock, and the second muzzle flash had given away the sniper's location. I sprayed a few rounds from the rifle straight at the window, and surprisingly landed a few on the sniper. They didn't pierce his armor, but I saw the rifle's barrel sink back into the window. This rifle was surprisingly accurate.

"On my six," I ordered Brad. It was funny how quickly our roles were reversed. We made a dash for the next street over, emerging from the alley into a ruined neighborhood. I looked back at a terrifying sight. Ten soldiers dressed in pure white armor were on our tail, ready to tear us to pieces. They flew single file through the alley, running faster than any armored man I'd ever seen. They had to have chip implants. The closest one fired off a burst, rounds panging off the ground around our feet. I returned three shots, bringing our pursuers to a crouch, and darted to the nearest house. It was a tall, narrow three story home made of brick, just like those around it, but not attached to them. Every floor had been burned out, but the structure of the building remained intact. Perfect.

I picked up speed and called over my shoulder. "Hey Brad, any chance you could get through this door?" A smile played across his face. He charged ahead, picking up speed straight towards the wooden door. At the last second he leaped and twisted midair, throwing his shoulder into the door. The thing exploded into a shower of splinters, falling all around Brad in the foyer. He got to his feet and ran down the hallway, emerging in a back room. He got to work on the back door, fiddling with the locks to try to get out again.

"Get that open, but we don't run until I say so." My voice sounded so much more confident than I felt. In an instant a plan formulated in my mind. The enemy had used fire based weapons on much of the city, killing the residents but leaving the structure of the buildings intact. That just might be the key. I scanned the walls as I backed down the hallway, finding what I was looking for halfway down the hall. A thick pipe snaked along the floor, up the wall, and into the next level, where I knew it did the same. This pipe carried gas to the upper levels, just like it did in every other house. If the fire bombs hit when nothing was burning gas that meant the pipes would be intact. I bashed the pipe with the stock of my rifle again and again, until finally a leak sprang. I charged to the back room, the enemy pounding up the front porch just behind me.

"Got that door open, Brad?"

"One secondâ.alright there it is." He pushed the door open and stepped outside with me following, but I kept one foot inside. The enemy soldiers rushed through the hall, four going upstairs, the other six charging down the hall, spotting us just before they reached the middle. That's when I fired my weapon. Enough gas had built up, and the whole hall erupted in flames. The supports of the ceiling, so close to the gas pipe, groaned and gave way, sending two upper floors crashing down on the soldiers. I shut the door and Brad and I bolted across the back yard. We hopped the fence and made our way from the heart of the city into the suburbs, hopefully leaving the storm troopers behind.

## Chapter 9: Carson Crumbles

Our exodus from the city was a mix of stealth and strange tension. Brad was obviously wondering how a civilian could've not only gotten safely out of the city, but helped a police officer out whose mission was to escort people safely from the city. I let Brad reassume the position of leader, however there was an unspoken understanding of who was really in charge if we got into another tight situation. We moved swiftly and silently, shadows melding with the blackness of the night. The city behind us burned and before us endless suburbs stretched on for miles. About a mile in, Brad suddenly stopped and turned toward the sky.

"More bombers." His eyes betrayed the pain he held inside as jets streaked from the clouded sky, raining fresh waves of explosives and fire onto the city he called home. I guess the city was my home as well, but recently I've grown further away from my civilian life, molding into the perfect soldier as my time of service grew longer. I'd been fighting about a year and a half and I was already being recruited for special ops units. Combat was becoming my life. Each day took me a little further from home, from my mom.

Oh lord, my mom.

It hit me all at once. I hadn't even thought about her. As the flames lapped the walls of every building, the tallest crumbling to dust, fresh waves of hate and anguish buffeted my heart. All of my insides contorted into a knot the size of my fist, my stomach dropping to the floor. Devastation brought me to my knees and the tears were unstoppable. Fury brewed inside me, throbbing in my throat and bellowing out of my mouth in an uncontrollable fit of screams. Brad tried to stifle my screaming, but the rage was too much. I could not be controlled. The troopers stormed down streets, coming from the city to capture us rogue civilians. I didn't care. When these pigs got close to me, I was going to tear their limbs off.

I fired like a mad man, my vision completely red. I drilled about six of the enemies in the head, snuffing the life from their worthless bodies. Five soldiers remained from the initial charge, but more were surely on the way. I charged them, spraying with deadly accuracy. Two more soldiers were cut down before I ran out of ammunition. I reached for my knife and prepared to take my revenge hand to hand.

I leaped into the air and kicked the first soldier in the chest with both feet. He slammed the pavement with his back and I landed straddling his chest. I wasted no time slashing straight to his neck, but his throat guard was too thick. I heard Brad firing shots somewhere behind me. If nothing else, he was brave to stick with me when I acted foolishly. I sliced enough of the soldier's armor to free his helmet. I pulled it off, revealing his face. He was blond with brown eyes and rugged facial hair, sweat drenching his face from the flames in the city. I looked him dead in the eye and spat in his face before I began bludgeoning him with his own helmet. I didn't stop. I didn't think. I just kept smashing and smashing, my vision a complete blur. I hated this man. I hated everything he stood for, I hated what he had done, and I hated whoever was feeding him orders. I was a monster, a rage-fueled demon from his darkest nightmares here to exact revenge for the death of my mother.

The other men reached me, the butt end of their rifles meeting the back of my head. I fell to one side as they beat me mercilessly. I felt one slip a tie wrap over my hands and bash me again with his rifle. My vision went fuzzy and I began to slip from consciousness. I heard Brad go down shortly after and I knew we had lost. The enemy dragged me across the pavement, a sanguine trail forming in my wake from the back of my head.

This trail would always lead back to the point where I hit bottom, the point where I had crumbled to my weakest possible state, been reduced to a writhing creature who fed off his own rage. I had burned myself as brightly as possible in a state of righteous fury until all that was left inside was anguish and disgust. The pain in my heart far surpassed the pain in my body. My mental state was on the verge of collapse and the enemy had me in their hands. I had dragged another down with me, someone who only wanted to help. For the

## Operation: Jack Frost (Novel)

second time in the day my grip on the world around me faltered and I slipped back into blackness, reemerging what seemed like seconds later as a splash of icy water slammed into my face.

## Chapter 10: Crawl

It felt like drowning, the water rushing over my mouth, choking off any oxygen, something heavier coating my face and concealing my eyes from the world's light. A hood? Yes, they must have covered my face. It would appear they had also gagged me and bound my hands. Total submission seemed to be their aim.

"Up!" The voice commanding me had a thick accent, though not Russian. "Right, this way then," my imperator demanded. Was I crazy, or was that a British accent?

I followed the tugs in a rope binding my hands. The sounds of desynchronized footfalls ahead and behind me combined with an overall pungency of the area told me I was in a line with a few other captives. None of them smelled too fresh. We marched as one unit with many legs for quite some time, navigating twisting corridors and stairs for what seemed like hours before the Brit spoke again.

"Mr. Juarez, block 576 reporting."

"Bien, back to your station, soldier." Spanish? This was getting weird. Hurried footsteps echoed down the hall as the Brit made his way back to wherever he had brought us from. Chair legs scraped the floor as Mr. Juarez stood from his desk, pacing along the line of captives. I heard a whipping of fabric, a few stifled grunts, and then a momentary silence.

"Well, this certainly won't do," came the voice of Juarez. A loud crack of gunfire rang out, causing many in the line to flinch. My resolve held, however I couldn't help but be a bit disturbed as I heard a body fall to the ground. Another sound of a hood being pulled, another moment's inspection, then another pistol round.

"No, no, no! All so weak, so injured, you captives! None of you will do." The man next to me whimpered in fear through his gag. Juarez did not even bother pulling his hood. As the bullet slammed through my fellow prisoner's chest, I felt a fine mist on my bear arms. Still my nerve held. I was determined not to let this maniac break me even as my brother in bonds slumped at my side, the life draining from his form. Juarez took three steps in my direction. Greasy fingers gripped my hood, ripping it, along with a few hairs, from my head. The dim yellow light of the room flooded my fully dilated eyes, blurring my vision for a moment. I picked one part of the blur dead ahead of me and fixed my eyes upon it. I would stare straight ahead and portray no signs of weakness. A grimy, thin face appeared from the blur. He sized me up, taking apparent interest.

"Finally! You will do, chico. Head through the green door way and proceed to sanitization. The rest of you, end of the line." He emptied his chamber on the remaining four prisoners in the line, nine in total. I doubt it was coincidence that he had to reload his weapon after killing eight prisoners. Eight bullets, nine candidates. One is chosen, the others are dealt with swiftly.

I made my way to the end of the tiny dirt room. There was a desk with boxes upon boxes of 45 caliber ammunition, as well as a messy stack of papers, a coat hung on the wall, a single hanging lamp and three doorways. The hallway that lead us to the room was dirt as well. One doorway was green, marked "Sanitization." The other was a red frame with no door, much wider than the other. A quick glance revealed a massive chamber filled with something that made my stomach writhe in disgust. I needn't say what was inside. Suffice it to say that as I left, two men hurled the newly deceased through the red doorway, and it didn't look as if mine was the first group to be judged.

I left the room as quickly as I could. It seemed that for now I was safe, my only remaining choice to obey my captors. The door led to a long, dimly lit dirt hallway. Was this whole place a tunnel system? Better yet, where am I? I trudged down the hall, the falling bombs still clearly audible on the surface. It would seem these

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invaders were processing their captives as they fought. This was efficiency in the sickest possible way. Ahead of me was another green door. I opened it and stepped through. On the other side was a queue of men, hands unbound. A guard at the door grabbed my wrists, cutting me free of my ties. His knife work was sloppy, and he sliced my wrist. I portrayed no pain as he snickered, clearly aware of the slip. This room was different, much larger than the others. White screens lined either wall to my left and white, small windows near the ceiling revealing armed troopers in gleaming white armor, their rifles trained on us prisoners below. I guess this type of supervision eliminated the need for bound hands. At the end of the line were various screened in areas, each taking one man at a time.

Hours passed as I slowly made my way to the front of the line. A constant stream of fresh captives made its way in behind me, replenishing the line as more and more were taken behind the screens. Two soldiers made their way to the next block of five captives, me included. They pushed us to the direction of our assigned screens. Hesitation gripped at my nerves and my legs suddenly froze. I had no idea what awaited me on the other side, no idea what they were going to do to me. Suddenly a thought occurred. Back pocket, something small. I reached into the pocket as secretly as I could. My fingers met something small, metallic. Familiar slots traced my fingertips. A chip? Impossible, I hadn't brought one with me, however this was my only chance. I snatched it from my pocket, then, disguising the motion as a head scratch, slipped the chip into the slot on the side of my head. Amazingly, it clicked, and all at once the visual displays flooded my sight. I navigated the interface as quickly as possible. All I had to do was find one function before they got me through the curtain, and I was home free. Finally, I found what I was looking for. Text appeared on my vision.

"Enter sleep mode?" I selected yes. All at once, my body went limp, my heart rate slowed to a stop. I felt myself grow colder.

"Beginning artificial metabolic function," read the display. This setting was designed for emergency situations in which the user would need to simulate death. Part of the special ops training was the installation of the program, as well as the necessary training to control your body from going into shock at the sudden halt of regular functions. The chip would bypass my heart, yet sustain my pulse and digestive system for as long as "sleep mode" was in effect. I don't know how the thing ended up in my pocket, but I silently thanked God, or whoever was watching over me, for this stroke of fortune.

"Looks like this one's no good. Take him to the red door." The commanding guard spoke with no genuine concern. Why should he care for these lower beings, these roaches?

I heard a commotion break out in the line behind me as the guards picked up my corpse, now losing its heat to the cold underground air. I heard someone struggling with their bonds, trying to cry out in opposition. As I was hoisted up, I got a clear view of my sympathizer. A mammoth of a man shook with rage, screaming his throat raw as he approached the nearest guard. His head was a quivering mass of black curls, two beady black eyes barely visible through his hair.

Bill?

Bill grabbed hold of the nearest trooper, intent to tear him to pieces, however they were prepared for this. The guard reacted swiftly, incapacitating Bill with some sort of stun weapon. The brute fell limp instantly, yet the armed guards held their fire.

"This one's too valuable to put down," announced the trooper. "Process him in place of the scrawny blond kid. He'll be much more submissive once it's done." As they dragged me from the room, a team of men assembled to take Bill in my place behind the screen. I would never know what happened behind those screens, for which I believe myself quite fortunate.

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The guards hauled me back down the hallway to the red doorway, hurling me into the sickening chamber that lay beyond the red doorway. The next hours stretched for what seemed like an eternity as I lay motionless in a growing mass of human decay. Some still lived, still writhed, helpless in the pit of the unfortunate. As the bombing ceased, so too did the inflow of corpses. This was my only opportunity. There was a small ventilation grate at the top of the room. I had to wait until I was absolutely certain the chamber was vacant of guards.

When I finally found my opportune moment, I rebooted my bodily systems. Slowly, the heat crept to my extremities. I said another silent prayer of thanks, including a blessing for those not so fortunate as I. I clawed my way to the top of the mound, creeping slowly towards the wall with the ventilation grill so as to not alert any guards. I carefully removed the grate and pulled myself inside. The shaft was tiny, a tight squeeze even for someone small like me. For someone Bill, such an escape would have been impossible. I would have to remember to come back for him. I crawled my way to freedom inch by inch through the tiny tunnel. The smell was putrid, every part of me ached, yet I knew I had to get out. If not for my own sake, I had to find help for my city, for those still inside this disgusting place. No more fear, no more running. I was on a mission. Opposing Cook's cause would be my motivation, not some foolish yearn for revenge. Now that I knew the true depths to which his faction would sink, whoever they may be, I understood that this was much bigger than I could have ever imagined. This surpassed my hardship, my mother's death, or the capture of those I held dear. Personal motives be damned, I had to stop Cook simply because it was the right thing to do. The pain of those behind me driving me on, I found my way to a hazy light streaking through another grate. I bashed through it and flopped out onto a dusty field.

Outside air exploded into my lungs. The air smelled of charcoal, thick with dust and grit, yet anything was better than the stench seeping out from that vile place behind me. I turned and wretched, only now processing the horrors I had just faced. My body was weary and I needed sleep more than anything. I rolled onto my back and let exhaustion overcome me. I hoped to slip into blackness and finally get some semblance of peace, yet strange dreams came, however uninvited they were.

## Chapter 11: Revelations

Images flooded my mind's eye, never staying in one place. Phantoms danced before my eyes. The sky, pristine and sparkling blue by day, glittering with a radiant array of starlight, slowly grew colder and hazed, the thick dust of urban waste thickening with the passage of time. Filth. Visions of megalithic cities, masses of people creating and building, all leveled in an instant by the wars of human history. Decimation. Crowds of people hunched over and sickly, unable to seek help while they die in the streets. Pestilence. Disparity between those who have and those who have not, the squandering of good health, good fortune, and clean habitat by the fortunate few, scowling down on those underneath them for no reason aside from an inborn animosity. Hatred. Again the apocalyptic flames burned in the sky, the streets, and the buildings. People tore each other apart, the end of the world playing out again and again in my head. This had all happened before. I could not explain it. This was something I simply knew. This was the insight to Cook's vision, his cause, his motivation. He was intent to destroy what humanity had become and rebuild as it was in the beginning. The thoughts he had revealed to me in the ice cave echoed through my mind as I watched the planet being torn to pieces. He was right, we have allowed ourselves to be consumed with hatred. I could attest to that with firsthand experience. I finally saw the meaning. His goal was just, this much he had finally revealed to me. Was I wrong after all?

"No." A tired, ragged voice spoke clear in my mind. "His goal is just, this much is true; however, he himself is not devoid of the human corruption of which he seeks to rid the world. His cause is to fight fire with fire, stop hatred with more hatred. You will be the key. You, who have witnessed firsthand the grotesque reality of corruption, understand this one simple truth: That it is not the goal alone which justifies the cause, but the means with which one gets there."

A ghostly image of my own face, aged and weary, faded through the apocalyptic visions, leaving them to dim out to black behind it. It continued to speak the prophetic words.

"The end to your current struggle grows near, child, and though you are broken and weary, you will soon find yourself capable of far more than you could have ever imagined. This much is certain. Whether or not you will succeed, however, you must decide for yourself. Sending this message will be the last thing you ever do, a truth you must be well aware of when you send it, for as things were in the beginning, so to must they be in the end. These truths will escape you for a period of time, for you are only human, but you must always remember that your enterprise is just, and that even your own death is surpassed by the importance of the greater good." The face faded to black, its eyes slowly shutting as mine opened, seeing the barren world ahead of me as if for the very first time.

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