

Nightcrawlers

**By Patrick S. Barnes**

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**PART ONE**

**Kelsey Turner #1**

College Park, Maryland 9:20 PM

“Oh no! No drinking for me! You guys go ahead,” Kelsey said to her friends Laura and Jasmine. They had just finished a late dinner and stood in front of the restaurant.

“Oh c’mon!” Jasmine said to her. “One round of shots and maybe some dancing and then back home we promise!” she said grinning at Laura who knew she was doing whatever she could to get Kelsey to join them.

“Yeah, just one drink Kelsey then home! We promise!” Laura said, also smiling.

“You guys are the worst! The last time we did that on a Thursday night, none of us made it to class the next day!” Kelsey said glancing at the time on her phone. “If I don’t read my notes for tomorrow, I am going to fail that biology quiz and I can’t do that,” she replied, walking backward toward campus housing. Her two friends responded by making pretend sad faces at her from in front of the restaurant.

Jasmine tried one last time. “Derrick is there,” she said looking at her phone and then holding it up. “I am texting with his roommate Ray. They are at Mackie’s right now.”

Kelsey stopped walking backward and looked at her friends. Since meeting Derrick last week at a football game, she had been working hard to see him again.

“Jasmine!” she said looking at the time again on her phone, “you better not be messing with me!” Kelsey began walking back to her friends. Jasmine and Laura high-fived each other in celebration and waited for her to join them.

Kelsey was 27 feet away when the nine-foot-tall black form appeared behind her. It enveloped her in a black liquid-like shroud and disappeared, leaving her friends screaming.

**Early Reports**

WBNR Studios Baltimore, Maryland 10:00 PM

“Hello and welcome to WBNR Early News at 10. I am Melissa Green.”

“And I'm Alex Warfield. Here's what's happening today. We are getting dozens of reports from around the country and the world of people being taken off the street by huge and unknown creatures. While it sounds like some type of elaborate Halloween stunt, these reports are numerous, and many have eyewitnesses. One of these reports is from our own Pellmont College here in the city, Melissa.”

“Thanks, Alex. As unbelievable as it sounds, multiple eyewitness reports say a huge creature appeared out of thin air, grabbed someone on the street, and disappeared again. We are working hard to get confirmation on the details of these stories and will bring it to you as soon as we have it.”

“Well Melissa, at this point I hope it is some kind of Halloween stunt,” Alex said.

“I am with you on that, Alex! In other news, it looks like the baseball strike is finally over. A contract was reached today between players and owners.”

**Terry Sanchez #169**

Sharon, Pennsylvania 10:10 PM

Fire Chief Jim Forrester exited his command vehicle at the scene of the car accident on Highway Route 62.

Two fire engines from Station 23 had responded to the highway collision. The occupants of the cars had been transported to the hospital and only the fire department remained. The wrecked vehicles were on a flatbed trailer going down the highway and almost out of sight except for the flashing yellow lights.

Most of Jim’s team were packing up their equipment and loading it into Engine 23. One firefighter was walking back to the collision location with a broom to clear debris off the road.

“How are we doing, Terry?” the captain said to senior firefighter Terry Sanchez.

“Almost done, Chief. Let me sweep this junk off the road and I think we’re ready to roll,” Terry replied. The accident had been significant with multiple injuries and both vehicles destroyed. Now cleared of wreckage, only broken glass and bits of metal remained; scattered down the center of the highway.

“Sounds good, Terry,” Jim said thinking that they might catch the end of the hockey game if they returned soon. The rest of the firefighters had finished packing up and were climbing into their vehicles.

Turning back Jim watched Terry’s progress as he vigorously swept the accident debris from the road and off the shoulder so that it would not cause additional problems. Terry finished the last push of the broom, lifted it onto his shoulder, and started walking back towards the chief. As Jim watched, an enormous black shape appeared from nowhere and flew into Terry’s side enveloping him and disappearing just as fast as it had appeared. The chief watched, speechless, as the broom catapulted into the air by the impact, landed on the now empty highway.

**Breaking News**

WBNR Studios Baltimore, Maryland 11:00 PM

“Hello everyone and thank you for joining us for the News at 11. My name is Melissa Green.”

“And I'm Alex Warfield. We are following up on a story we brought to you at 10 PM. While we thought that this was some type of hoax or publicity stunt, it’s starting to appear as a serious situation. Melissa?”

“Thanks, Alex. As mentioned at 10 PM there are reports from across the country, and now in several nations of huge creatures appearing from out of nowhere, snatching people up and in the blink of an eye disappearing again. All the information we have currently, including that from local police officials, is that this is not a hoax or publicity stunt of any kind.”

“Here in the studio, our team has seen video footage of snatchings from multiple locations in the United States that appear to be genuine. We are working to triple-check these videos before airing for obvious reasons.”

“Locally, there has been a reported kidnapping from our own Pellmont University. We’re now going to go to our reporter Nancy Marks at the scene of the abduction near the university. Nancy, what can you tell us?”

“Hi, Alex and Melissa. I’m here in front of Skipper’s Pub, one of the local dining establishments next to the university where two students watched their roommate taken right in front of them. The university police are not releasing the name of the student at this time and have asked that we also not air this until the family can be notified. The witnesses are now at the Pellmont University Police Station, but we were able to interview them before the police escorted them away. Let’s roll that video please.”

“Thanks for speaking with us. Can you tell us what you saw?”

“We were at Skipper’s and (Bleeped) was going back to our dorm to study and then decided to join us at another bar for a drink. Then this huge monster thing appeared behind her right there,” she said pointing at the sidewalk where the cameraman panned over to, “and it just took her!” she said sobbing.

“Can you tell us what it looked like?”

“It was huge! Like twice (Bleeped)’s height! Maybe ten feet tall! It was all black and just appeared behind her and wrapped her up with this weird black blanket or cape and just disappeared!” She covered her mouth crying now as her friend held onto her. “What was that?” she asked the reporter who had no answer for her. “We need to find (Bleeped)! Someone has to find her!”

**Ben Lassiter**

Catoctin Mountains, Maryland 3:28 AM

Ben Lassiter sat on the edge of his bed staring forward. His heart was pounding in his chest. He touched his neck to make sure the coldness was gone. His spacious bedroom was still dark. The illumination from the full moon came through the skylights offering some light.

Ben spent several moments trying to slow his breathing down while he thought about what he had just experienced. “*Was it real? Am I hallucinating*?”

"That was real," he said switching on the light in his bedroom. There was a deep indentation in the carpet where it had stood. There was a foul, musty smell in the air that was fading.

He thought about calling for help. There was no need for that now. It was gone. Then he felt something strange and looked down. He had peed his pants in fear. He covered his face with his hand and said, “Sweet Jesus!”

At that moment, his phone on the nightstand began to vibrate with an incoming call, while at the same time, someone started knocking on his bedroom door.

**Gerardo Fabbri #788**

Florence, Italy 3:39 AM

Gerardo Fabbri quietly closed the rear door of the jewelry store and made his way onto the side street. Walking slowly onto the piazza he joined the few late-night partygoers on their way home.

He wore a slightly dirty chef uniform and carried a backpack which portrayed him as a tired restaurant cook on his way home. It was a disguise he used quite often. No one had a clue he had just robbed the jewelry store of 800,000 Euros in diamonds and watches.

He walked with a determined, but not too rushed pace crossing the piazza and then onto Via Tornabuoni Street which led down the hill toward Holy Trinity Bridge on the Arno River. The scooter parked on the other side of the bridge would take him to his rented apartment where he would stay indoors for his normal ten days after a robbery before leaving Florence.

Gerardo thought about the heist he had just completed as he walked. As usual, his contact had provided reliable information on the jewelry store alarm and video systems. His 10,000 Euro fee and 20% commission were well worth the price for success and avoidance of arrest. With this information, Gerardo had watched the store for signs of the fall delivery which most jewelry stores completed this time of the year for the busy holiday season. The robbery had been perfect with everything working as planned.

All he needed to do now was to make it to the apartment.

Gerardo followed the street toward the river without issue. Several cars passed by without slowing. He crossed the canal drive and then onto Holy Trinity Bridge which was clear of other pedestrians. Gerardo concentrated on walking slowly. His scooter was not far now.

At the halfway point across the bridge, Gerardo watched with stunned disbelief as a huge form materialized ten feet in front of him and came rushing towards him. He was trying to grip the small automatic pistol in his pocket when the creature enveloped him in darkness and was gone.

**Special Report**

WBNR Studios Baltimore, Maryland 8:00 PM

“Good evening, I’m Alex Warfield.”

“And I’m Melissa Greene from WBNR News at 10. We are going to interrupt our normally scheduled programming this evening with a special report regarding the ongoing crisis throughout the country and the world.”

“As mentioned by the president and the chairman of the joint chiefs during the press conference just a short time ago, they are still trying to determine what these creatures are, where they're coming from, and what is happening to our people. From the president’s press conference tonight we did gain confirmation that this crisis is affecting every country in the world. Alex?”

“Thanks, Melissa. By now you've seen our ongoing coverage which includes dozens of videos showing pedestrians being taken off the streets at night by these creatures. They have taken mostly adults, although there have been several children and teenagers taken as well. There is no demographic that’s been unaffected or is being targeted at this time.”

“We do know that worldwide several hundred people have already been snatched off the streets by these creatures. They are using some type of technology we do not understand and for lack of a better word, teleporting someplace else with the victim. In addition, it appears that these kidnappings are only occurring at night and outside.”

“As mentioned in the press conference, the government, the military, and all local authorities are urging everyone to stay indoors at night. Do not go outside at night for any reason whatsoever, even for just a few seconds. Don’t take your pets out at night even in your own backyard. Don’t go outside to take the trash out. We know these tasks are necessary. Just make sure, for your safety, that all your activities are completed well before sunset.”

“There have been multiple snatching events where people are going outside their door for just a few moments. We can't emphasize the need to stay indoors at night until this crisis is over.”

**PART TWO**

**Jordan Myers #28,254**

Arlington, Virginia 9:23 PM

Major Carolyn Myers came in the door from work surprised that the house was so quiet. By now Jordan would have the TV or radio on and would be making dinner as he did most weekdays.

"Jordan, are you here?" she said.

There was no response. “*He should be home by now and it's already dark*.” She thought. Jordan’s job had modified work hours like most businesses so everyone could get home before sunset. If he were running late, he would text her and take one of the shuttles from his office.

Carolyn’s job at the Pentagon was not as flexible yet provided door-to-door service after dark. The snatchings by creatures now referred to as the Nightcrawlers had not stopped, and no one knew what was going on. Her job in logistics, while only for a few more weeks until she retired from the military, had no insight into what was going on.

Picking up her phone she dialed Jordan’s cell phone which she heard ringing in the bedroom. “Jordan?” she said, looking into the empty bedroom. She was starting to get very worried now.

She started checking every room in the house at an increasingly frantic pace including closets, bathrooms, and the basement. She finished looking in every room and glanced at the back door nervously. She hadn't checked the backyard. “*He can’t be out there, it's dark*,” she thought.

She walked slowly to the patio door, took a breath, opened the blinds, and turned on the lights for the backyard. There, lying in the middle of the yard next to the open shed was the weed trimmer and the gas can on its side.

Jordan was not there.

**Bodies of the Dead**

Washington, DC 1:25 AM

Ben Lassiter was having the nightmare again.

He stood alone inside a mass grave thousands of feet across and fifty feet deep with steep walls impossible to climb. He climbed as best he could but could not get a foothold.

Then there were the bodies. Rotting corpses were tumbling over the walls and into the mass grave from all directions, all of them decomposing with horrific smells. Their dead eyes all looked at him as they fell into the grave and on top of him. He ran away from the bodies as they came over the walls and into the grave but couldn't escape as more and more fell from all sides.

Finally, he could not run anymore as the bodies were falling on top of him and smothering him. The dissolving organs and body fluids made him sick as he tried to swim in the waves of corpses to get out of them. He swam as hard as he could as the avalanche of death fell on him until they buried him, and he began to suffocate. He tried with all his might to get out from under them and into the air, but he was failing and dying of asphyxiation and then all became dark.

Ben awoke from the nightmare and stumbled from his bed heading to his bathroom. He almost made it to the toilet, but then vomited a prodigious amount of blood onto the bathroom floor and collapsed.

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When he woke up, he was on a stretcher in the elevator with a group of people surrounding him. "What the hell is going on? Get me off this thing!" he yelled with blood still at the corners of his mouth.

The medic answered him, "Sir, you collapsed in the bathroom and vomited a lot of blood."

Ben was not in a good mood and his head was pounding, "Of course I did. I have a bleeding ulcer! Just call my doctor! Take me back to my room.”

At this point, the elevator stopped on the main level and opened to the lobby with 20 other very concerned staff waiting and looking.

Charlie Parks, his senior security officer, said "Sir, don't you think we should at least have you looked at in the infirmary?" Ben noticed that Charlie had quite a bit of blood all over him. He had probably been the first person to find him. Charlie, a former army Ranger, was unfazed by the blood.

"Charlie, I'm fine," he said. "Doctor Jenkins is on top of this. Has he been called?"

"Yes Sir, he was going to meet us at the hospital."

"Woah! Let's not do that Charlie! I don't want to be in the papers in the morning. Everyone,” he paused making eye contact with every face in the elevator and the lobby, “I appreciate your concern, but please, take me back upstairs and I will wait to see Dr. Jenkins.”

As one the group responded, "Yes, Mr. President".

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**Banshee 012**

Earth Orbit 2:23 PM

The X-54 space fighter and its rocket booster broke free of the B-52 bomber at 43,000 feet and ignited. The powerful rocket blazed fiercely while aiming upward toward space on a bone-jarring 4g burn out of the atmosphere. Colonel Mike "Macho" Freed held a loose grip over the automatic controls as the booster made for launching heavy satellites delivered the space fighter into orbit at an incredible amount of speed.

With loud popping sounds, the rocket booster expelled its passenger and continued upward. It would launch a second stage decoy 18 minutes from now that would act like a low-orbiting satellite, making as much electronic noise as possible before falling back to Earth.

Colonel Freed now held the controls as the space fighter was thrown from the booster. After tumbling a few times to play its part as a piece of space junk, the colonel sent a few minor maneuvering corrections through the attitude jets to stabilize the black vehicle which now glided silently around the planet.

The aircraft, designated Banshee 012, was designed for surveillance of foreign satellites and was so stealthy, US assets could barely hold onto a signal even when they knew where to look.

Now free to start his mission, Colonel Freed activated several passive detection systems in the space fighter and watched as the sensor displays filled up with signals emitting from the thousands of satellites in orbit. The sensors processed data from communications, weather, and military satellites to build a waterfall display with identification tags for each signal on the monitors.

What interested the colonel the most on today’s mission was the newly installed thermal display. It showed every heat source in orbit and nearby. Added a few months prior, it hadn’t yielded any new information yet. No one knew for sure that something was in orbit around the planet, but they continued to search. It would take many missions to scan the entire sky with the new instrument which was extremely sensitive. Nine more missions to be exact.

**Tasha & Jeff Reynolds**

Washington, DC 3:38 PM

Tasha awoke slowly looking at the clock. It was still early afternoon, and the sun would be up for a few more hours. She slipped out of bed, pulled on Jeff’s t-shirt, and padded into the foyer.

Jeff had showered and put his uniform back on for his night patrol. Tasha quietly watched him from the hallway as he zipped up his body armor which was covered with equipment pouches and bristling with magazines for his battle rifle. He looked menacing.

Jeff looked up at her in his t-shirt and smiled. His two-hour break had given them an unexpected afternoon siesta they had put to good use. “Hey, I didn’t mean to wake you,” he said thoughtfully while checking his equipment.

“You didn’t wake me. I have to get up and prepare for tomorrow’s classes,” she said with a worried look on her face. “Do you have to do these night patrols? Those things are grabbing people everywhere,” she added.

Jeff responded, “I volunteered for this duty; you know that. It’s triple pay and there’s four of us in each group.”

“I know, but there’s a lot of people getting snatched,” she said.

“And that’s why we need to be out there. To fight back against whatever this is. These bastards have never hit a group of people, much less four cops with rifles,” he said picking up his rifle and checking to make sure it was secure.

Tasha frowned and walked over to him, and he wrapped her in his embrace. She laid her head on his chest and looked at his kit. Pointing at his weapon she said, “That thing scares me.”

“Ole’ Bessie here?” he said with a silly grin on his face. “Bessie takes good care of me baby and she only barks at bad guys,” he continued while slinging it over his shoulder and hugging her close. “I’ll be home after sunlight tomorrow. Leave me some dinner?” He said.

“Of course,” she replied. “Be safe you,” she added as Jeff released her and headed to the door.

“Roger that, boss lady!” he grinned again and closed the door behind him.

**Col. Macho Freed #63,558**

Earth Orbit 9:33 PM

The X-54 continued to scan the sky moving at 19,000 miles per hour. The mission was now in its seventh hour and the pull of gravity was starting to slow the space fighter down slightly. The mission was scheduled for ten hours; one of their longest. Nothing new had been discovered.

The colonel was about to start his landing checklist early when a tone sounded in his helmet. It was the thermal detector. He quickly pulled the thermal display from a side monitor onto his main screen and reviewed the data. It was registering a new heat source not listed in the computer database. The source was hard to track and barely registered on the sensitive equipment.

He had to act fast. At this speed, he needed to quickly bracket the source before it was out of range. He punched the controls as fast as he could, switching the sensor hump on the back of the spacecraft to manual control.

Within a few moments, the sensors had locked onto it. The colonel pulled up the video feed which didn’t show any spacecraft, but it also didn’t show any stars either. Just an entire section of space that was dark. “Oh my god!” he whispered out loud. He turned on the communication system, “Angel Control, this is Banshee 012. I got heat and visual at 138 by," he never finished his transmission.

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 "What do you mean he's gone?" Major Travis Becker said.

The Air Force tech sergeant pointed at the scope and said, "I'm not getting anything. One moment he broke radio silence transmitting, the next moment, he's just gone. He is supposed to break into the atmosphere 37 minutes from now, but there is no sign of the X-54, not even debris.”

“Try to contact him again and keep trying,” Major Becker said.

"Banshee 012, this is Angel Control, please respond. This is Angel Control calling Banshee 012, please respond," repeated the tech sergeant.

Major Becker watched the empty scope as the tech sergeant continued to reach out to Banshee 012. "Shit!" he said.

**Officer Jeff Reynolds #64,152**

Washington, DC 9:57 PM

Washington, DC police officer Jeff Reynolds and his four-man security team advanced down the sidewalk on Madison Street. Located in the business district and after hours, the streets were empty and quiet.

The police had created the four-man security teams several months ago and they each patrolled a 50-block sector. They had yet to have an encounter with the Nightcrawlers. The only activity was the occasional car or shuttle bus passing by.

This was the team’s second time down Madison Street tonight. As they passed a shoe store, Jeff slowed his walk slightly. Something had caught his eye in the space between two buildings. It was a dark alley.

"I'm going to check out this alley for a second,'' he said, walking toward it. His three team members slowed, glancing back at him momentarily, their heads swiveling forward and to the sides of Madison Street.

Jeff flipped on his rifle's tactical light and stopped at the entrance of the dark alley. Something had moved as the team walked past the alley. It wasn't so much as a noise or light, but there had been something. “*Probably another rat,”* he thought to himself.

Jeff scanned the alley. His rifle's powerful light illuminated the ten-foot-deep passage between the brick buildings. The alley ended at an electrical junction box. The light swept left and right then upward several stories. The buildings on either side had no openings and nothing looked disturbed.

*“It sure looked like something was there,”* Jeff thought to himself.

He turned back to rejoin his squad and there it was.

"Contact front!"

**After Action Report**

Washington, DC 8:09 AM

Secretary of Defense Janet Callahan and the Commander of U.S. Space Command General Abel Garth entered the Oval Office for their meeting with the president. Ben Lassiter shook hands with everyone and dismissed his other staff.

“Thanks for coming over,” the president said as everyone sat on the couches in the Oval Office. “General Garth, I read this after-action report, but I need to understand what the heck is going on up there. Can you summarize this for me?”

“Yes, of course, sir,” he said. “As you know we have three X-54 space fighters. They are used by Space Command to surveil and if necessary, in time of war, destroy enemy satellites. These are very sophisticated aircraft that we deliver to orbit on a BR-12 rocket booster that carries commercial and military satellites. The X-54 is a stealth aircraft and extremely hard to track. Its job is to analyze everything up there and eventually glide back to Earth, landing in Georgia.”

“OK,” the president said.

The general continued, “Since we suspected the hostiles may be in orbit, we’ve been using X-54 flights to scan the skies for any trace of a vessel. This X-54 was flying its seventh mission with a new suite of instruments to detect heat signatures outside the planet's atmosphere. We guessed that they are invisible to our radar but may show up thermally against the cold of space.”

The president nodded listening.

“Around 21:00 hours yesterday, the X-54 detected the alien spacecraft from its heat signature. The pilot, Colonel Freed, had orders not to radio in unless he had a confirmed target track. The moment he broke radio silence to report the hostile’s location, his transmission stopped. He was due to re-enter the atmosphere about an hour later but failed to show up.”

The president thumbed through the report as he talked, “I don’t understand General. How did an entire space fighter disappear? How large is it?” the president asked.

“Sir, it’s about 65 feet long and weighs about the same as an F-16, around 20,000 pounds. It’s long and slender like a dagger to reduce its radar angles, but it’s a fairly large aircraft,” the general said.

“OK, I see the photograph here in the report,” the X-54’s shape did resemble a medieval dagger. “Do we have any wreckage from it? I mean, where did it go? If the Nightcrawlers blasted it, shouldn’t there be debris all over the place?” he said.

“Yes sir, that would be correct if it was destroyed in space. However, there was no explosion, flash, or intense heat to suggest the X-54 was hit by a laser or some type of weapon. It vanished from our radar scopes without a trace.”

“That’s crazy,” the president said looking at the meeting attendants and speaking to the secretary of defense, “Janet, what do you think?” he asked.

“Sir, the current theory from Abel’s group and I agree is that the hostiles used the same technology that they use to steal our people except this time they grabbed an entire spacecraft while it flew around the planet. It’s the only explanation that makes sense.”

“Do we know how many ships they have up there?” he asked.

The general answered, “Based on telescope observations we conducted from the ground, we think it’s just one very large spacecraft, sir.”

The president looked at the report and Colonel Freed’s photograph. “What about the colonel?” he asked somberly.

General Garth spoke, “We don’t think he made it sir.”

The president nodded to the general since he could not speak for a moment as the pain in his stomach intensified suddenly. More dead bodies on his watch he thought. He needed to end this meeting soon, he told himself.

The president had been visited by Dr. Peter Jenkins in the White House residence for his vomiting event during the night. Pete Jenkins was an old friend who had given him quite a lecture on taking care of himself. A nagging problem off and on for years, the president's ulcer had been stress pumped by the crisis into a very serious condition.

Even with the new medicine he started taking today, the news of this pilot's death at the hands of the Nightcrawlers made his stomach feel like a spike was going through it.

“OK, thank you everyone for coming in today,” he said feigning a look at this watch. “I need to get to my next meeting. Please keep me updated,” he said walking to his private office and closing the door. He then quickly walked to his bathroom where he threw up blood into the sink.

**Theories Meeting**

DC University, Physics Department 9:57 AM

“How can it be a cloaking field, Ivan? They still have to walk out of the location,” Tasha said. “We have like 20 videos where every exit to the area is blocked so unless they are flying up into the air there’s nowhere to go,” she continued.

Erwin threw in with Tasha, “Ivan, she’s got a point there. A cloaking field would make sense, but there’s no way to get away even if you are invisible. There are too many people around. Someone would have bumped into them or detected them trying to get by. That has not happened.”

Ivan looked at the monitors they had set up with dozens of snatching videos cued up and responded, “I agree it’s a stretch, but the alternatives to that are pure science fiction. Teleportation? Dimensional shift? We can’t even prove these types of technologies are possible at this point. The few theories that are out there are very weak.”

The group of DC University scientists were meeting to try and assist with the snatchings. Governments around the world had put out appeals asking scientists for theories on how this was happening, and what was being used to take people.

Tasha, Ivan, Pei, and Erwin, all of them astrophysicists or engineers had formed a “Theories Meeting” to go over videos of snatchings and to discuss ideas.

Pei spoke up next, “These videos are not enough. We need real data to determine what type of tech this is.”

Tasha added, “Well, without knowing when or where they will strike next, we don’t know where to set up test equipment.”

Ivan asked, “We have not considered an important factor. What are the limitations of this technology? While it’s clearly more advanced, they are only taking one person at a time who is always alone. They have not touched a group of people or even a pair of people.” Everyone agreed on this.

Tasha quietly thought about Jeff’s four-man police patrol and took great comfort in that.

Erwin who oversaw the Physics Department said, “These are all good questions, but I think we should break this down by technology even though we can’t prove any of the sci-tech stuff is possible. Perhaps we can work on ways to disrupt the snatchings based on our theories,” he said.

“I like that,” Tasha agreed.

“Me too,” added Pei.

Erwin looked at the clock on the wall. “Well, I need to teach a class in ten minutes and then get home. Same time next week?” he asked. Everyone nodded and adjourned.

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Tasha glanced at the new construction between the buildings as she walked across campus to teach her physics class. Corrugated steel tunnels were being erected to connect the buildings which would prevent exposure to the outside after dark. First created in Russia, the practice gained popularity when it was determined that the tunnels allowed for safe travel at night across long distances.

Tasha angled away from the construction noise and looked at her watch as she walked measuring how much time she had to get to class. She would make it with a minute or two to spare.

Up ahead there was a commotion in front of Tydings Hall which was the physics building on campus. A large crowd stood around several police vehicles which had parked on the sidewalk in front of the building. Tasha walked faster hoping none of her students were in trouble or there had been an incident. As she got closer, she saw that these were not DC University Police vehicles, but Washington DC Metro Police SUVs, the same department Jeff worked for. This concerned her even more as she got closer.

When she saw members of Jeff’s tactical unit get out of the SUVs and start walking towards her quickly and with great concern, she knew. Something had not been right all day, missing. She had felt it this morning after she got up and left Jeff a note for when he arrived home from work. The day had just felt different and wrong. Jeff was gone. She stopped walking, staring into the knowing eyes of Jeff’s team, and came apart entirely as Jeff’s squad mates ran towards her.

**The Farm**

Paw Paw, West Virginia 12:25 PM

Carolyn, Josh, and Mike walked with the real estate agent back to the house and barn as they completed the tour of the 120-acre parcel.

“So this is a really nice house and farm. You have lots of privacy but are still close enough to get groceries in town,” the agent said. Mike and Josh agreed while Carolyn was still looking at the listing details.

“What are your plans for the property if I may ask?” the agent said eyeing the two men and woman strangely, not sure whether they were together or just friends.

Josh and Mike smiled at each other while Carolyn answered, “I just retired from the military and want something quiet in the country. I asked my friends here to look at it with me,” she said.

“Oh, that’s great,” the agent said, breathing a sigh of relief after thinking she had offended them with her question.

The group stopped near the barn and the agent reviewed her notes, “Well, this is a nice buy. The price is a little high at $408,000, but I am sure you can negotiate that.”

“I will take it at $375,000,” Carolyn said, surprising the agent.

“Umm, OK. At that price, an appraisal should be easy,” she said.

Carolyn responded, “There is no need for that. This will be a cash deal and I need closing within 30 days, or the offer is void. Can you make that happen?”

The agent was flustered at this while calculating the commission in her head and the many phone calls ahead of her, “Yes, with a cash offer at that asking price it should be accepted.”

Mike and Josh smiled again at Carolyn’s behavior. They were used to it. Carolyn added, “That’s good. I’d like to make this offer today.”

**Blindsided**

The Pentagon, Washington, DC 8:15 AM

The events of the last three months had weighed heavily on Major Travis Becker, senior officer of the Defense Intelligence Agency’s (DIA) Orbital Surveillance Section.

After Colonel Freed and the X-54 had disappeared, Travis and his tracking team used his partial message and approximate location to find the “target”. The remaining X-54s had been grounded so confirmation had come using ground-based telescopes. While the object was invisible to radar and had abilities to bend light around it, the black section of space where there were no stars confirmed its existence. The photographs of the long black spot in space were chilling to look at.

Comforted in the fact that Mike Freed’s last mission was successful, Travis had waited patiently and with confidence for the military to act. Sadly, there had been no such response and it had been over three months. Major Becker’s position in the Orbital Surveillance Section gave him clearance to all secret tasking orders related to space operations and there had been none. As for the remaining two X-54s, they were still grounded, sitting idle in hangars in Georgia.

Finally tired of waiting for news, Travis had made several inquiries about the object, all without response. Now without warning, he had been summoned to the Pentagon by General Grassler, the two-star general who commanded all the military personnel at DIA.

After clearing security, he was escorted to a conference room in the outer ring of the Pentagon. The other meeting attendants were already seated, and he was placed at the head of the table. There were at least eight officers at the large table, including General Grassler, two other generals, and his commanding officer Colonel Tennricks. No introductions were offered. This was a bad sign.

General Grassler started almost immediately, “Major Becker, you are here today because of your repeated inquiries about Colonel Freed’s mission and the results of that operation.”

“Yes, sir. I was trying to find out,” he began.

The general cut him off sharply, “Major, did you or did you not receive from Colonel Tennricks clear instructions that this matter was to be dropped?”

Travis felt his personal temperature in the air-conditioned room increasing and sweat forming on the back of his neck as the meeting attendants stared at him. “Sir, I, umm yes sir. I did receive those instructions from Colonel Tennricks,” he said recovering a bit while glancing at the stone-faced Colonel Tennricks.”

“I see,” the General said, “so why Major are you knocking on office doors at DIA and disobeying instructions given to you through the goddamn chain of command?” he said now looking extremely mad.

Travis thought as fast as he could, “Sir, I must apologize to everyone here and especially Colonel Tennricks for my actions. I thought I would check on this matter and offer my assistance as someone familiar with the mission and as an experienced combat pilot. I also wanted to offer some ideas on intercepting the alien vessel, so we can regain control of our orbitals,” he said. It had come out in almost one breath. It wasn’t a bad effort, but he knew he was about to crash and burn.

The room remained quiet while General Grassler looked at him thinking and glancing briefly at the other generals at the table.

Travis then spoke again, “Sir, I can clearly see that the topic is closed, and I will not bring it up again.”

The General looked and listened to his attempt to reverse his career nosedive. After pausing far too long he said, “Well, Major Becker, it’s a bit late for that. You have brought us all here with your refusal to obey orders and now you have our full attention.”

“Yes, sir. I am sorry about that, sir.” was all he could think of.

The General spoke, “Major, effective immediately you are no longer in command of the Orbital Surveillance Section. Colonel Tennricks will assume your duties.”

The meeting went on for forty more minutes and Travis’ only response to his new orders was, “Yes, sir.”

**Signals Intelligence**

Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), Bethesda, MD 11:25 AM

The meeting at the Pentagon had been ugly and painful for Major Travis Becker. He had been stripped of his command, reprimanded formally, and warned that any more inquiries about this event or related would result in court martial and prison time. He was told that only his two air-to-air combat victories over Iran and the war medals on his uniform had saved him from a dishonorable discharge. He was then escorted from The Pentagon by two security personnel for added effect.

The next day upon arrival at DIA he had been transferred to a signals intelligence position with no staff or orbital surveillance access. A tiny office with one desk and not much else. While it was a demotion in responsibility, he considered it a win to still be wearing a uniform at this point.

He reviewed the meeting events with himself most of the day. Overall, he’d done his best and had no regrets about his inquiries regardless of what he told them.

More importantly, the number of senior officers in that meeting meant that his inquiries had kicked over a nuclear hornet’s nest. He knew now for sure. “*There is no reason I should still be in uniform and that is the answer to what was being done about the object high in Earth orbit.*”

*“Not one goddamn thing.”*

He had violated the chain of command and disobeyed orders. They could have easily kicked him out of the air force. Keeping him in allowed them to watch and control him.

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Undaunted, he gathered his strength and held firm despite this and carried out his new job as assigned. Now three weeks into his new position, he was the perfect signals intelligence officer. No more inquiries and no more questions, only hard work. To all those who were watching, and he had noticed one or two moments, he had completely dropped the matter.

However, for Major Travis “Taser” Becker, this was not over. Not even close. His days in a fighter plane may have been in the past, but the attitude and aggression that kept him alive in the skies was still there.

Colonel “Macho” Freed had been a friend to Travis and the entire tracking team. He and Travis had both flown F-15 Strike Eagles at one time, so they were friends in the fighter community as well, a small select group. Whenever Colonel Freed visited DIA headquarters, he always made sure to stop in at the tracking room to say hello and buy lunch for the team.

No, Travis thought. He would not let “Macho” Freed die in vain. So every day alone and exiled in his signals intelligence office, he devoted some portion of his day reviewing options and what was next.

The planet was under attack and the mission was far from over.

**Shuang Tseng #100,000**

Changzhou, China 11:33 PM

“You cannot leave at night!” Li Wei’s sister said to him in excitement.

“I cannot stay either, Sister, if I want to have a job in the morning,” Li Wei said wearily in response. He had worked a 10-hour day and was asleep when his boss Mr. Chang called and asked him to come in and look at a train currently parked at the station. “I will not be long, and the train is in the station, not outside. I will be fine. Please go to back to bed and I will see you in the morning,” he said.

She looked at him darkly and said no more, her way of telling him how angry she was.

He drove out of the parking garage of his apartment complex and onto the glowing streets of the city. Twelve minutes later, he arrived inside the train station garage.

Li enjoyed his job as a train mechanic for the railroad. Like other jobs in China, his hours were now daylight-based. However, the train at the station was taking Party members to Beijing and had broken down coming through Changzhou.

Arriving at the upper train platform, Li could see his boss Mr. Chang, and several other senior-looking gentlemen standing on the platform waiting for him. What concerned him even more was that the train engine was not inside the train station. It was several hundred yards outside.

His boss Mr. Chang spoke first, “Hello, Li Wei. Thank you for making it here so fast. This is Mr. Tseng of the Train Directorate and his assistant, Mr. Kuan.”

Li shook hands and said, “It’s an honor to meet you both. How may I assist this evening?”

Mr. Chang said, “According to the engineer the engine has a frozen bearing on the right wheel assembly and the engine cannot move.”

Li made a face and said, “Yes, that sounds like a frozen bearing. The wheel assembly will completely lock if a bearing fails to prevent the whole assembly from being destroyed. We need to back the train into the station so that we can access this wheel assembly. Have we contacted the switching yard for a pusher engine to move the train back into the station?”

At this point, the head of the Train Directorate Mr. Tseng interrupted and said, “We do not have time to wait for a pusher motor from the railyard seven miles away. The train needs to be fixed right where it is. We have a new bearing right here,” he said pointing at a box on the platform that appeared to be a replacement unit.

“That is good, however, the train is located outside, and it is nighttime,” Li said looking at Mr. Tseng and then everyone on the platform. He was extremely nervous watching them and sensing what was coming.

Mr. Tseng looked at Li and said, “This train is carrying several Party members to Beijing on important government business. It must reach its destination by 9 AM tomorrow. We do not have time to wait for sunlight to fix this train or to wait for a pusher motor from the railyard. We need you to be a good Party member and quickly repair the engine. It is your duty.”

Li spoke nervously, “Mr. Tseng forgive me, but the night creatures are still taking people from the darkness. If I go out there, I will disappear and never be seen again.”

Mr. Tseng was not pleased with Li’s reluctance and let him know it, “Li Wei, we will not be made out as fools for failure to fix this train! Now grab your tools, that part, and fix the train!” he said finishing much louder in volume.

At this moment, a voice from behind the group spoke up, “What seems to be the hold up here?” Li saw four older men in expensive-looking coats standing behind the group and the oldest was speaking, “Have you fixed our train to Beijing?” he asked.

Mr. Tseng spoke fast and said, “Soon Minister! Yes, I am giving final instructions to our train mechanic Li Wei on the repair which should be done in approximately 30 minutes.”

The older man stepped through the group up to Li who was frightened, not of the power of these ministers, but of the night creatures who would take him if he attempted the repair.

The minister shook hands with Li and said, “You are a brave man to go out there to serve the Party and repair our train.”

Li could not think of a way out of this. “It is my pleasure, sir,” he said and paused, “I am happy to report that Mr. Tseng has insisted he act as my assistant in repairing the assembly which is both brave and honorable to help a simple mechanic like myself,” he finished now looking at Mr. Tseng who burned his stare into Li.

The minister looked at Mr. Tseng and said, “Why that is an extremely brave and honorable thing to help one of your workers! We will speak highly of this on our arrival in Beijing tomorrow!” he said to the other ministers who all smiled and nodded in agreement.

Mr. Tseng, who had lost all color in his face, nodded humbly and said, “It is the least I can do for our Party, Minister.”

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Thirty-three minutes later, Li Wei climbed back onto the train platform alone where only the senior minister and Mr. Chang waited.

“Welcome back, Li Wei,” the minister said smiling.

“Thank you, Minister. It is good to be back in the station.”

Li was sweating and still trembling from watching the Nightcrawler swoop into view only feet away and snatch Mr. Tseng. While repairing the bearing, he had positioned himself as far under the train as possible while Mr. Tseng held a flashlight.

“Will our train work now?” the Minister said.

“Yes, Minister, the new bearing and adapter are in place and should get your train to Beijing without issue,” Li said.

“Excellent! Thank you again!” he said, shaking his hand and then the hand of Li’s boss Mr. Chang.

“Mr. Chang, you have a good man here. I believe our good mechanic has earned a day off with pay and a pay raise, don’t you agree?” he said.

“Yes, Minister. I will see to it.” Mr. Chang replied.

**Kayaking and Treason**

Annapolis, Maryland 10:20 AM

Travis Becker drove from his home in Washington, DC to the city of Annapolis, Maryland where he rented a kayak as he often did during the summer. He had grown up near the ocean in North Carolina and while the South River was not the same as paddling off Kitty Hawk, it was a nice diversion.

He paddled hard. The waves were choppy, and he was grateful for the extra work as it was helping to vent his frustration. He pushed the kayak against the wind until his lungs were on fire and his heart was pounding.

He stopped and drifted for a time still thinking angrily about the target in space and why the military had done nothing to stop them. Finally, he screamed aloud to no one, "Why don’t we nuke those fucking assholes?"

He knew he wasn’t the only one mad about the lack of action. There had been many worldwide protests, and some had been violent. A symbol of the frustration with the world’s governments. He thought to himself, *“If the public knew what I knew, they would go crazy.”*

Travis had spent many hours trying to understand what was going on. The President knew. The Chinese and the Russians probably did as well. He had thought long and hard as to why they were silent, but now he didn’t care anymore. *“If they won’t act, I will.”* he thought to himself.

He took up his paddle and dug in hard for the return to the boathouse. The trip out of the city today had two parts and only one of them was exercise. He left Annapolis at noon to complete his second task for the day.

Instead of going back to DC, he drove farther south. After several stops, he found a small general store that sold prepaid cell phones that would work for his needs. He then bought something to eat and drink and returned to the car.

He munched on potato chips while watching people come and go from the busy convenience store. He waited for a specific type of customer. When a single high school boy entered the store, he knew that was his target. For $300, the kid was more than willing to go back to the store and purchase a prepaid cell phone with internet access.

In a few minutes, the high school kid delivered the burner cell phone to him as instructed. Travis quickly left the store parking lot and drove even farther south to a remote location and parked.

His plan, which he had worked on for several weeks, would require many steps and the most important one was security. He first accessed the internet through the phone and then downloaded several programs that would add multiple layers of encrypted security to his efforts. Then, he entered the Dark Web searching for the web portal he knew was there. The Resistance as they called themselves were named after the French underground forces who fought against the Nazis during World War II. Their web portal was hard to locate since they often moved it. Once he found their portal, he sent his message and waited.

Waiting in the car for a response, he looked in his mirrors for other cars and considered all his actions so as not to be caught. The phone was disposable and bought for cash by a third party. It would be hard to track. He would use it quickly and then dispose of it, not taking it anywhere near his home or job. His personal cell phone had been deliberately left at home. The car he sat in was borrowed from a friend citing car trouble to minimize the chance of his car being tracked.

It was possible that he could still be discovered. No amount of security was foolproof, but he had cut the odds significantly.

Fifteen minutes after sending his message someone was calling the phone.

Travis looked at the burner phone as it rang. The phone display said unknown caller. He took a deep breath and answered it, “Hello?”

The person on the other end of the line was using a voice-changing tool, “Who is this and what do you want?” They said in an unfriendly tone.

“I want to help out the cause. I have some information about the Night..”

The voice screamed at him, “Shut up! Do not use that word on the phone! Don’t say anything over the phone about them. I know what you are talking about.”

“Okay,” he said.

“Now you need to shut up and listen,” the caller said. “If you have verified information that can help us, we will take it, but you will be forced to prove who you are and what kind of information you have. If not, I will hang up right now and you'll never hear from us again. Do you understand?”

Travis listened and thought quickly. “Yes, I understand, and I know you can use the information I have. I will do what you tell me.”

“Do you have something to write with?” The voice on the phone said.

“Yes,” he answered.

“Write this down. Go to the six-mile marker on the Washington & Old Dominion bike trail in Falls Church, Virginia. On the Northern side of the six-mile marker sign, dig down three inches into the dirt and you will find a metal container with your next instructions. You have 24 hours to retrieve that container. Follow these instructions to the letter or you will never hear from us again. Do you understand?” The voice said.

Travis knew of the bike trail they were talking about. “I got it. I can get there in a few hours,” he said.

The voice spoke one last time, “Now destroy the phone you are using including the SIM card and throw the pieces into separate trash cans.” Then the call ended abruptly.

Travis looked at the phone in his hand, thinking about what he was about to do. Then he got out of the car and smashed the phone and SIM card with a rock until it was in many pieces. He gathered up all the pieces and threw them away at several stops on the way to the bike trail in Virginia.

**Six Words**

Rock Creek Park, Washington, DC 6:23 AM

The sun was barely up when Major Becker left his home for an early morning jog. He carried a water bottle and nothing else as he entered the nearby park.

The trail through the park was several miles long and was relatively empty since it was a weekday. He completed two laps around the park to make sure that no one was following him. On his second lap, in a more remote section, he threw the water bottle into a trash can near a park bench as instructed. Then he returned home.

Carolyn watched from the woods and waited to see if anyone had followed Travis Becker. After a time, she emerged from the woods, retrieved the water bottle from the trash, and placed it inside her backpack. She walked out of the park quickly where just outside; Josh picked her up and they drove away.

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Hours later Caroline, Josh and Mike opened the water bottle and retrieved the note sealed in a plastic bag. They all stared silently looking at the message. After months of searching and over 100,000 lost souls, they had an answer to the question. Not the only question, but one that scientists, governments, religions, and families all wanted and needed to know. Who were the Nightcrawlers?

The answer arrived for three members of the Resistance on a farm in West Virginia.

The carefully folded note had only six words on it. The words were made using store-bought letter stencils glued to a single sheet of white paper. The sentence spoke volumes about what was happening but also brought more questions.

Mike looked at the note and ground his teeth, quietly and mad. He turned on his heel and walked out of the barn.

Josh stared at the note and thought what this meant to The Resistance. The note did not solve or fix what was going on. It made things even harder. Taking a last look at the note, he felt very tired and also left.

Carolyn, now alone in the barn, looked at the note with tears in her eyes. She knew this would not bring her peace. She wiped the tears away and lightly brushed the appendix holster under her shirt confirming, as she often did, the presence of the forty-caliber pistol she always carried.

*“How can we fight that?” s*he thought. Technology, resources, and weapons all better that was clear.

She decided she needed a drink. The bottle of clear tequila filled her glass over and over as she looked at the note thinking about the next steps.

Other wars had situations like this. The aggressor with more power and resources. They hadn’t always won. *“Only most of the time,”* she thought darkly.

Carolyn had served two tours in Iraq in the military police during the worst days of guarding convoys as they traversed the dangerous streets of Mosul and Baghdad. She had been in combat many times and had seen men die. She thought about those dark days and the enemy they had faced. The insurgents in Iraq had been outgunned and outmanned, yet they killed thousands of Coalition forces. It had been ugly and hard to stop.

Looking at the note she thought about the ridiculous odds facing humanity and tried to apply that situation to this one. The Coalition in Iraq had plenty of ammo, missiles, bombs, tanks, helicopters, and jets, and the insurgents barely had anything. Yet for a time, they could barely slow the rate of casualties.

As she stared again at the note, the answer finally came to her. *“Yes,”* she thought to herself. *“So simple.”*

Satisfied, she picked up the note and read it one more time before tearing it into tiny pieces and throwing it into the burn bin.

Carolyn opened the barn door and looked at the countryside. The sun’s light on the hills of West Virginia was fading and darkness was advancing quickly into the valley. She noted the time, locked up the barn, and swayed slightly as she walked the short distance to the farmhouse.

The six words from the secret note were burned into her head.

*"They have a spaceship in orbit."*

**Limited Options**

Paw Paw, West Virginia 7:48 AM

Carolyn outlined the plan to her resistance cell members the next day. Mike was not thrilled about the idea and said so. Josh stood dumbstruck by what she was proposing. He watched her closely as she laid out the components of the plan, keeping his thoughts to himself for the moment.

Carolyn finished laying out the steps and then spoke to Mike, “You're a doctor Mike. Can you do this?" she said.

Mike answered, "Oh, I can do it. It would be a mess, but I can do it."

Carolyn and Mike then looked to Josh whose silence was getting louder by the moment. Josh finally weighed in and said, “There are too many variables, and the number of tactical unknowns is huge. We barely know who we are up against,” he paused for a moment then continued, “the odds of success are very low in my opinion.”

Carolyn looked at them and said, "I know it sounds crazy, but we all saw the note. What can we do instead? I'm willing to toss this idea aside if you two can give me some other ideas," she said with her hands on her hips waiting.

They were silent.

What she was proposing was radical. She knew this, but tactics like this had worked in the past. The situations were never the same as now and the tactic she was proposing was different, but the basic premise was the same. Josh knew this well. He had been an intelligence officer and reached Lieutenant Colonel before he retired. Carolyn didn't have to cite history to him.

"Guys, I'm willing to talk about other ideas, but we don't have any," Carolyn said. "The president and the military aren't doing shit," she continued. "It's either because they're afraid or,"

Josh interrupted and said, "You bet your ass they're afraid."

Carolyn continued, "Or they don't think they can do anything to stop them.”

Josh said, "This is wrong. How can we ask anyone to do this?"

Carolyn looked at them and said, "I'll do it if we can't find anyone to do it."

Mike shook his head in amazement, looking at Carolyn, and said, "How do we know this will even work?"

Caroline was quick with an answer, "We don't, but it's the only thing I can think of that may have a chance.”

Josh spoke, “Our source says this intelligence is only a few months old. I'm hoping the military is working on something to stop them. We've all been in the service and know they don't move fast at times. Let's give them a couple of weeks and see what happens."

Carolyn responded, “And if they don't do anything? Then we'll talk about doing this?”

They both reluctantly agreed. Mike said, “I agree with Josh. I think they'll do something, but if they don't act in a month, I will do my part.”

Josh looked at both of them and said, "They're going to do something. I know it."

Carolyn thought he actually believed it and hoped he was right.

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He was wrong. Nothing was done.

The plan was put into motion 45 days later.

**PART THREE**

**One Year**

WBNR Studios, Baltimore, Maryland 10:00 PM

“Hello, I am Melissa Green.”

“And I am Alex Warfield.”

“Welcome to the Early News at 10. Here's what we're following. Today marks the one-year anniversary of this crisis. The Taken now number 198,663 and we still know nothing about the Nightcrawlers. Who they are, where they come from, why are they doing this and most importantly, where are The Taken? Melissa?”

“Thanks, Alex. Our first story will be about the growing anger in the country and across the world that our leaders have done nothing to stop this crisis. For that report, we will go to Dennis Greene in Washington who has several sources that say the government is hiding the real truth of what’s going on. Alex?”

“Thank you, Melissa. Later this evening, we're going to profile several of those who are among The Taken, including our own Nancy Marcus who was abducted from her backyard while taking her dog out for a walk.

**Broken Promise**

Paw Paw, West Virginia 2:29 PM

Bryan was waking up from the heavy sedative put in his food.

"Hey! Where the? What the fuck are you doing? Untie me goddamn it!" He was tied to a tree 30 yards inside the thick woods. Mike and Josh had carried him out there and secured him to the tree for Carolyn. They were back in the barn and not interested in what was next. He was a big guy and they had tied him with twice as many ropes as necessary.

"You lied to me, Bryan," Carolyn said quietly, "you promised."

"Well, I changed my mind. I'm not doing that, you crazy bitch," he said,
"I told you I can still help. I'm just not doing that."

"You're an accountant, Bryan. You have no military experience or any other skills that we can take advantage of."

"I'll figure something out. Now untie me from this fucking tree or I'll call the FBI on your whole crazy bunch!" he said.

That made Carolyn very mad, but she did not let him know that. She leaned in very close to his face and spoke quietly, "I asked you, Bryan. You told me that you would do anything to stop this even if it cost you your life.”

“You never said we had to do anything like that!” he said, “that’s insane. Now let me the fuck go!” he shouted at her.

She screamed back at him, "You swore to me, Bryan! Don't you care? Don't you give a shit about what's happening?" She continued, "200,000 people just gone. Men, women, children, people we love! Are you that selfish? Don't they matter to you?” she asked.

He was struggling against the ropes ignoring her. "What about Francine?" she said, "doesn't she matter anymore?”

He stopped struggling and looked at her for a long moment with hate in his eyes and said, “Fuck you! You stupid cu.." before he could finish the words, she shot him in the head. The pistol shot reverberated across the quiet valley like a thunderclap.

She looked at his slumping form. She was disgusted, mostly with herself. She thought she had vetted this one well. Better than the others which had been rushed. She picked up the shovel and began digging not far from the tree. The two mounds nearby mocked her as she dug the large grave.

**What’s the Point?**

DC University, Washington, DC 12:20 PM

Tasha Reynolds sat at her workstation and wondered why she was still trying to go on.

The five months since Jeff’s death had done little to reduce her misery. She had followed the usual advice and accepted help from friends and family, but the pain remained. Even worse was the empty place in her life without Jeff. His absence removed any motivation to continue living.

*“I used to think people who committed suicide were stupid.”* She understood them now. “*I have no one left and I can be selfish if I want*.” She thought looking at the data on her computer screen. Tasha had been staring at it for three hours and hadn't done a single ounce of work.

Her watch beeped. It was time for lunch. She wasn't hungry. She was just tired of her co-workers staring at her, so had been spending her lunch hour walking around alone not going anywhere*.*

She walked and watched people on her hour-long circle route around the campus. The day was sunny and even though it was cold many people were about trying to get as much outside time as possible before dark.

She scanned their faces as she walked. Most of them looked oblivious to what was going on. Of course, they knew about it, but it wasn't affecting them directly. Perhaps they knew someone who was taken or had a friend who had lost a family member. It was all very pedestrian. They acted appropriately, offering sympathy and concern, but eventually, they got back to their lives because it didn't really affect them. “*I was one of them for a while. Content. Ignorant. Fodder. Not anymore.”* She thought.

Her watch beeped again, and she made her way back to her office. Sitting down at her desk she realized there was a flyer under her keyboard. It was sticking out just enough for her to find, but not enough to be seen to the casual passerby. It was for a Golden Circle support group in DC. They met at a hotel not far from campus.

She had seen these groups mentioned on the news and information on them had been emailed to her with a pile of other "We're sorry for your loss" nonsense and "Here, go talk to these people about it, not that it's going to help" junk that she deleted regularly without reading.

She looked at the flyer and wondered who dropped it off. It could have been anyone. Well-intentioned, friendly, and supportive. Her coworkers were good people she thought. They still met once a week to research the snatching technology even though she had stopped attending.

A video of Jeff’s murder had been recorded by a security camera. The footage from outside the shoe store was crystal clear and included sound. Normally video of the Nightcrawlers showed brief shadows and something that looked like it was shielding its face. This video was quite different. A new camera system in good light conditions had captured a creature with hideous features that no one could have conjured up in a thousand nightmares.

The video was sold to news outlets and went viral. It was shown over and over for weeks. It showed Jeff and his team on patrol in Northwest Washington, DC. His patrol was walking down an empty city street when it slowed down to glance into an alley. Jeff had illuminated the alley with his light and seeing nothing, turned back towards the group. As he turned, a Nightcrawler blinked onto the street already moving towards him. Jeff had moved incredibly fast, bringing his rifle up and firing, but the Nightcrawler had moved with a speed no human could match. It sidestepped Jeff’s rifle, ripped open his throat with its claws, and flashed away with his body in a blink of darkness.

Jeff had been hailed a hero. Military experts by the dozen praised his actions and analyzed the encounter over and over across all media. Tasha had incredibly watched them all.

Many news organizations had tried to interview her. They camped in front of her home and refused to leave until DC Police forced them to leave and then closed her street to all traffic. Within weeks of Jeff’s death, she had moved to an unlisted address near campus and stayed indoors when not at work. The hounding by the news people and now the forced move into a cold and empty apartment added to the weight of her despair.

She tried to keep working and stay busy to avoid the emotional darkness, but each night she found herself watching the video again, reliving the terrible moment. She was so proud of Jeff, he had never given up, but now she was alone. Without him, she felt like she was slowly sinking into the deepest part of the ocean.

She looked again at the flyer in front of her and let it sit there for the rest of the afternoon as she accomplished almost nothing.

At six o’clock Tasha left her office on campus using one of the steel tunnels that connected the university buildings. She walked by tunnel across campus until she reached the parking garage where shuttle buses waited to take passengers home.

She boarded her shuttle bus and sat in silence as the bus made its way through the dark and empty city streets.

Police lights ahead slowed the bus to a stop. Two police cruisers had blocked off a 30-foot section of sidewalk. The only sign of a crime was a spilled bag of groceries lying on the sidewalk next to a purse. *“Another one,”* she thought. *“It must have just happened.”* More official vehicles were arriving, some unmarked. *“I’m not sure what they're looking for she thought. There's nothing there to see anymore.”*

No one dared get out of their cars to investigate.

The bus was eventually allowed to pass and go on its appointed route. The event drained Tasha more than she could handle that evening and getting to sleep unassisted was impossible.

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**Discussions**

Paw Paw, West Virginia 9:44 AM

“Are you heading back to the city today?” Josh asked Carolyn.

“Yes,” she answered drinking her third cup of coffee for the morning looking at the massive whiteboard. It covered an entire wall of the converted barn which was now used as a workshop, headquarters, and armory. They each had a responsibility to update their section of the whiteboard with important news headlines, signals from other cells that were rare now, and updates from friendly sources.

“We need to talk about this,” he said.

Carolyn looked at him, “What's to talk about?"

"This isn't working," he said.

"We're not even there yet," she said.

“There must be a better way of doing this,” he said looking at her.

"Yeah, what is it?" she said quickly. He was silent.

"We voted on this Josh," Carolyn said. “We waited for the government to do something, and they didn't. It's been months. They're too afraid or powerless. Just because we've had a couple of missteps, doesn’t mean it's not a good plan.”

"Missteps?" he groaned, "Is that what you're calling them?"

She looked hard at Josh. “I don't appreciate that Josh. Do you think I'm enjoying this? I pulled the trigger on all of them!” she said with tears in her eyes then turned away.”

She picked up her keys and said, "I'll be back on Friday," then started to walk out to her truck. She stopped halfway, turned around, and faced Josh, angry now. “This is war, Josh! I don't have to explain what that is to you. Total War," she said it slowly and enunciated it. "There are no half-measures if we're going to win. If we don’t do everything we can, no matter how horrific, we will be fucking extinct. The rate of snatchings has increased!” she exclaimed. “The powers-that-be know what we know, and they haven’t done anything. They're more concerned with scooping up resistance groups than stopping this,” she said.

He stared at her and replied, "It's unfair to them".

"It's unfair to all of us. You can call me a monster if you want, I don’t care. If I don’t find someone very soon, I'm going to do it!” she said and walked out to her truck.

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**Meeting Notes**

Washington, DC 6:30 PM

The Golden Circle weekly meeting started at its normal time in the hotel’s conference room. The group now had 18 members, but only 10 arrived tonight.

Carolyn had arrived early, waiting for it to start. It was her second meeting today and the third this week.

The group leader, Phillip, began as the last person sat down.

“Thank you everyone for coming tonight. I hope your week has been okay,” he said glancing around the room at each person. “Does someone want to start the meeting tonight?”

Tasha raised her hand.

“Thanks for raising your hand, Tasha. You've been to a couple of these meetings already. We're an informal group here. Please feel free to speak.”

Tasha lowered her hand and said, “Thank you. I haven't heard anyone talk about this yet. Does anyone think this will ever stop?"

Phillip glanced at the group looking for someone to answer and then spoke, “I guess we don't know, Tasha. All we can do is try to cope with our losses and hope that our loved ones will be returned to us someday," he added.

Tasha laughed bitterly and replied, "Well that's a load of bullshit,” shocking the room. "My husband's dead and they killed him. I watched him die on video three months ago and most of the world has too. He’s never coming back.”

Now the group realized who she was. Phillip knew too. “I'm sorry Tasha, I didn’t know," he stammered slightly, "we didn't know that was your husband."

The normally talkative room was silent. Phillip tried to continue, "We're all deeply sorry about your loss. To address your question, I don't think anyone knows when this will end," he said and paused. One of the other members was about to say something when Phillip gently placed his hand on her arm and smiled. Then as calmly as he could, he said, “And you are right Tasha. Your husband is dead and so is my wife Denise,” he stated flatly and sadly with tears in his eyes. He continued, “As painful as it is to hear, perhaps you said something that needed to be said. We've all been afraid to say it since we formed this group. Our loved ones are not coming back. We need to come to grips with that so we can move forward,” he said looking around the room, "myself included."

Several of the meeting participants were in tears now while the rest just stared at the floor trying not to cry.

**Assessments**

White House, Washington, DC 6:55 PM

Ben Lassiter sat in the White House residence reading while in the background his TV was showing live coverage of the protests going on in 14 US cities. His uneaten dinner sat on the table. He sipped from a large bottle of antacid as his ulcer was hurting intensely.

The national news was reporting from different cities while a moving photo banner of The Taken scrolled across the bottom of the screen.

He was reviewing a Homeland Security analysis of what could happen if they announced the truth about the Nightcrawlers.

*“I am Kyle Omar reporting from Dallas. We’re estimating the crowd here at 400,000 today. The March for The Taken is going through approximately three miles of the downtown area. So far everyone has been peaceful. The Governor of Texas is now speaking to the crowd.”*

Ben was frightened at the possibilities laid out by Homeland Security. Hoarding of basic necessities, mass rioting, vigilantism, and civil unrest were all cited as possibilities in the report.

*“Over four million are estimated to be in the streets of New York, Chicago, Dallas, Washington DC, and Los Angeles with millions more protesting in similar events around the world. Recently, the intensity of snatchings has increased and the government here and in other countries have not been able to provide any answers.”*

The report suggested that civil unrest could lead cities, states, and even small towns to declare martial law and close their borders which would cause more problems such as food shortages.

There was even one section of the report that said radical elements inside the military, frustrated with the lack of action against the Nightcrawlers, might attempt to overthrow the government. While the chance of this was very small, it would increase over time if all other factors did not change.

Safety precautions had slowed the snatchings for a time. Mandatory business closings before sunset and tunnels built to connect buildings had helped, but that was before the recent surge in snatchings. Now the numbers were just as bad as before and moving upward.

*“Hello, we are with News Stream. Thanks for talking to us. I see by your bracelet that you have lost someone to the Nightcrawlers. You’re here with many others protesting today. What do you want to say to the government about this crisis?”*

The woman who was holding a sign with a photograph of her husband responded, *“How many more Americans are going to disappear? We want some answers! My husband, two of my neighbors, and my cousin are all missing! What kind of government can’t protect its people?”*

The Taken numbered over 30,000 Americans and over 200,000 humans worldwide.

All attempts to contact the Nightcrawlers covertly to negotiate had been unsuccessful.

**One-Time Offer**

Metro Subway, Washington, DC 7:50 PM

"Hey, Tasha! Wait up,” said Carolyn. The meeting had ended, and Tasha was going down the escalator into the DC Metro System for her journey home.

Tasha quickly took in Carolyn as she came down the escalator. She had the same gold paracord bracelet that all the members of the group wore. It was now a universal symbol for those who had lost someone to the Nightcrawlers. Carolyn had the look of a country girl even though they were in the middle of the city. She wore cowboy boots and blue jeans with a large belt buckle. It was topped off with a faded blue hoodie and a ball cap.

"Thanks for waiting. I guess you're taking the Green Line too. I was wondering if we could chat for a bit," she said in a friendly manner.

They stood on the empty Metro platform waiting for the next train to arrive. Tasha wasn't in the mood for more therapy and said, "Carolyn, I'm sorry I blew up in there. I appreciate you chasing me down, but I'm really fine.”

Carolyn replied, “Please don't apologize. You're angry as hell and you should be. I'm sick of the group too. Most of them think there is some type of larger purpose for these kidnappings and now murder. I know my husband Jordan is dead and no one has any answers for me. The police, military, and not even NASA have a clue. I'm sick and tired of talking. I want to do something about these monsters."

“Carolyn, I work at the university and have a doctorate in physics. I've looked at hundreds of videos with my colleagues and none of us can make heads or tails of the technology. The Taken are being transported to another place, maybe even another dimension. Until we figure out how that works, there's nothing we can do.”

"Tasha, I don't believe that." Carolyn said flatly.

Tasha continued, "The only new piece of data we have is that they have no issue with killing us and that tells us a lot," she said with pain in her voice.

Carolyn thought about the CCTV footage of Tasha's husband playing all over the world. Tasha watched her, knowing what she was thinking. Their conversation paused as the arriving subway train squealed to a stop and they climbed aboard the empty car.

Seated next to Tasha at the end of the subway car, Carolyn knew it was time.

She had known who Tasha was from the very first meeting several weeks ago and could see the strain building in her. Carolyn could smell that she hadn't bathed in a few days and there was a hint of alcohol on her breath. She had bags under her eyes and her clothes were disheveled. Her fingernails were cracked and broken, and you could barely see the nail polish. She was an attractive woman and would turn a lot of heads when she was trying. It was clear she didn't care anymore.

Carolyn spoke quietly even though they were alone in the subway car, "Tasha, I want to ask you a serious question and I don't want an answer tonight. I want you to really think about it.”

“Umm OK,” Tasha said through tired eyes listening.

“If you could do something to make a difference in the fight against the Nightcrawlers, would you do it? No matter what the cost was? Would you do it regardless of pain, suffering, and even death?"

It was a clear set of questions that she had memorized and offered before to others.

Tasha said, "What are you talking about?"

"I want you to seriously think about your answer," Carolyn said with an intense look on her face. "If you could strike a blow for humanity against these monsters and the cost was as high as your life, would you do it?" Tasha stared at her, now understanding the real reason for this chat. “*Who was Carolyn*?” She thought.

They both looked up as the train slowed and stopped at the next station. Without another word, Carolyn stood up and stepped off the train as the doors closed behind her. Tasha stood up and watched her walk across the platform and quickly up the escalator as the train pulled out of the station.

*“What the hell*?” She thought.

**Carolyn Myers**

Metro Subway, Washington, DC 7:58 PM

Carolyn climbed up the escalator hearing the train pull away and did not look back. She made her way to the Metro garage and took a cab to the hotel. It would be a long drive back to the farm and she was tired.

She thought about her plan as the taxi navigated the empty streets. Josh and Mike thought she was wrong for trolling Golden Circle support groups for volunteers. Josh had been especially vocal about it, even though he had agreed to the plan initially. She didn’t care. She knew these groups were the best place to find someone who understood the real cost of this war.

For the most part, she liked Josh and Mike and trusted them. They had lost their spouses too. Each had been devastated like anyone who had lost their partner in the blink of an eye. In time, they had both recovered.

Carolyn had not fared as well. Her problems began when she retired from the military a few weeks after Jordan disappeared. Alone, at home, with no job to occupy her, the darkness of losing Jordan fell on her like a building. She stopped responding to life and spent most days drinking all day until she blacked out. She slept for hours at a time on her couch staring at the muted TV which was always on a 24-hour news station constantly showing updates on those taken.

After a few months, she was ready to kill herself. The drinking and occasional drugs had stopped working on her grief. She wanted to stop the pain.

The plan to kill herself gave her a purpose for a few days. She updated her will and placed photos and a few belongings into boxes marked for family and a few friends. She still drank, but in smaller amounts as she worked.

Then something had clicked inside her watching news reports about The Taken. She had become mad. Mad like never before. The sadness had boiled away and had been replaced with pure hate. She decided at that moment that she would not kill herself. She would get herself on track, stop drinking, and shuffling around her empty house like a ghost. Her new plan threw her out of bed each morning and made her work late into the night.

The plan was simple. She would kill every Nightcrawler in existence.

She had no idea how she would do this and didn’t care if she died trying. There would be no rules, no costs too high, no laws to follow, and absolutely no concern about collateral damage. “Total War” the military called it. She had the words tattooed on the inside of her right arm.

She started by selling her home in the city and buying a farm in rural West Virginia on 120 acres far from police and nosey neighbors. Then she searched for military friends who had lost someone. People like her with combat experience and no close family. People who wanted to feed their anger with the bodies of Nightcrawlers no matter what.

Eventually, she had a three-man cell of Josh, Mike, and herself. They did research, bought weapons, discussed strategies, and searched for sympathetic people using the Dark Web. They paid a small fortune to a hacker who had lost someone to teach them everything they knew about web security so they could operate discreetly. In the end, he gave them most of the money back and told them to use it to kill the Nightcrawlers.

Using the web and their new skills they made connections with several resistance cells. All of them had similar goals and they shared information online using a harmless-looking Kentucky hiking blog.

The cells had made several videos that were delivered to TV stations. They announced their plans and asked for information about the crisis and the Nightcrawlers themselves.

The videos had drawn a lot of police and FBI attention, but so far, Carolyn’s cell had stopped all the attempts to infiltrate them. They had too many requirements and checks that rooted out the authorities. Their systems weren’t perfect as the hacker had told them, but it was good enough. Combined with Josh’s army experience in counterintelligence, the wall they had constructed protected them well so far. Not all the Resistance cells had been that lucky.

Then the incredible piece of intelligence from Major Becker had fallen in their laps. He was the best asset they had. They had made him work hard to prove that he was real, and he had put his career on the line to deliver the message. The message had disheartened Josh and Mike, but not Carolyn. To Carolyn, it was a chance to fight back.

**Look Where We Are**

The White House, Washington, DC 4:23 PM

President Ben Lassiter was fed up.

He sat in the Oval Office with the secretary of state, the chairman of the joint chiefs, and the secretary of defense for a late afternoon meeting.

“I am tired of hearing we can’t do anything,” he said to the room.

The secretary of state said, “Sir, a race of space-capable creatures can most likely wipe us out with little or no effort. We’ve been working on this problem for over a year, and we don’t even understand their technology. Fighting back would be a suicide mission,” he said.

Ben remembered the night the Nightcrawler appeared in his bedroom at Camp David. It had pulled him out of bed and held him by the neck with a simple message, “Do not interfere with us or we will destroy your planet.” Then it had blinked away and left him shaking and pissing himself with fear. It gave him a chill, just thinking about the moment.

The same message had been delivered to the Chinese premier and the Russian president in a similar fashion. Afterward, the three leaders had agreed to keep this knowledge quiet while they looked for ways to stop these creatures. Days turned into weeks and months without answers. It dragged on and people were still disappearing.

“Have we heard anything new from the Russians or the Chinese? I know I agreed with the Russian and Chinese leaders on this, but we can’t let this keep happening,” the president said.

“Sir, we are in communication with them of course, but they have nothing new to share,” responded the secretary of state.

“Is it possible they are working on something and not telling us?” he said looking at everyone.

The secretary of defense replied, “As you know, sir, we had that CIA report that the Russians were trying to catch a Nightcrawler a few months ago, but those efforts failed after several Russian soldiers were ripped apart. As far as we can tell, they haven’t tried anything else.”

“And the Chinese?” the president asked.

The secretary of state answered, “There's no evidence that the Chinese have tried anything. Considering how they think in terms of disposable populations, 20,000 humans missing from their country is not a serious enough issue for them to start throwing missiles around yet, in my opinion, sir.”

“General?” the president said looking at the chairman of the joint chiefs.

"I agree with the secretary, sir. It sounds barbaric, but the old-school leadership in China still thinks like that. If the Chinese start losing people by the hundreds of thousands, we’ll see action on their part, but not until then.”

The president stood up, walked to the window and looked out at Washington, DC, and asked, “And we still think it’s only one ship up there, General?”

“We think so, sir. The ship is extremely hard to see. The good thing is that our scans of space using optical telescopes are not showing any other dark spaces which would indicate another ship.” he said. “We could send up another X-54. There are two remaining space fighters, but they may suffer the same fate as the first aircraft.”

The president answered, “Let's not do that yet, General.”

Ben Lassiter looked outside and felt the burning ache of his ulcer torturing him. The pain was almost constant now and he was throwing up blood at least twice a day. His doctor, Pete Jenkins, had told him he would be in the hospital very soon unless he reduced his stress. He didn't care about his ulcer. He just wanted this nightmare to end.

The president watched workers on the White House grounds going about their duties and thought about how many more people were going to be lost. Men, women, and children taken right off the street, from their backyards, on their way to work or school. He had to do something to stop this. He had trailed off from the meeting, lost in thought, and then realized that no one was talking. He glanced back at the room to see them staring at him.

“Sir?” The secretary of defense said to him.

Ben looked across the city at the Washington Monument and said, "We need to stop this! What kind of leaders of our people are we?” he said angrily. “We're sitting in the White House in a city of monuments dedicated to people who have protected this country, and we need to start acting like them!” He then turned and spoke to them in a calm but serious voice, “We need to screw on some goddamn courage even if it's the end of us."

The secretaries and the general looked at him like he was crazy. It scared the hell out of him to even say it aloud, to contemplate going to war with creatures who were at least a thousand years ahead of them in technology. Creatures who had promised to destroy the entire planet if they were interfered with.

He didn’t care anymore.

A dramatic easing of the pain coming from his ulcer told Ben Lassiter he was right. He continued, "I want plans presented to me tomorrow on fighting back. I don't care what it is: missiles, nukes, whatever. I don't give a damn about any treaties, other countries, or even the United Nations. We know where these creatures are, and they need to be stopped. Everyone put your heads together and bring me some options!”

**No Free Rides**

Greenline Metro Station, Washington, DC 8:03 PM

Tasha attended the next two Golden Circle meetings hoping to speak to Carolyn, but she did not show up for either meeting. She asked the group, but no one knew how to contact her or even her last name.

The strange conversation with Carolyn on the Metro continually played in her mind. *“What did she mean by, ‘strike a blow for humanity’? How? Was she a lunatic?”* There were plenty of them out there, spewing insane theories, conspiracies, and the like. She had seemed reasonable enough. *“Do something to make a difference,*” Carolyn had also said. That held the most interest to Tasha these last two weeks. Jeff had said something similar on their last afternoon together. *“Fight back against whatever this is,”* he had said. “*Was there a way of fighting back*?” She thought.

Tasha left the meeting when it was over and decided it was her last. Carolyn was a no-show and the meetings only provided fresh pain. She was close to her end; she knew that now.

At her station, Tasha crossed the parking garage to the T12 shuttle bus that would take her home. As she drew close, the bus door opened to reveal Carolyn sitting in the bus driver's seat wearing a Metro uniform.

Carolyn spoke quickly, "What's your answer, yes, or no?"

Tasha stepped up onto the bus and said, "What are you doing driving a bus?"

"Did you consider my questions?”

"Yes."

"What's your answer?"

"Tell me what's going on."

"Forget it, Tasha," Caroline stood up and started pushing her down the stairs of the bus.

"No! Stop!" Tasha yelled at her pushing back. “I want to talk to you!” she said.

“No more games, Tasha. I need your answer right now! If you could fight back against them, would you?” she said.

"Yes, I would," she answered.

"Even if it cost you your life?"

"Yes!"

"I don't believe you," Carolyn said, pushing her off the last step of the bus and roughly onto the ground. Then she climbed onto the bus and closed the door.

Tasha hit the ground hard. She winced at the sudden and intense pain. She looked up at Carolyn on the bus, angry now. The pain fueled something deep inside of her and erupted suddenly like a volcano. She got to her feet and launched herself against the bus doors smashing her hands against them and screaming at the top of her lungs. “Open the door, Carolyn! What the fuck is going on?” she yelled.

Carolyn was deadpan, holding the door closed, “Go home, Tasha. You’re not serious and we can’t use you,” then sat down in the driver’s seat and started the bus.

Tasha was even more angered now, continuing to hammer the bus doors. “Open the door! I want to fight back! Those monsters killed Jeff! Yes, goddammit!" she shrieked while still hitting the doors with the butts of her hands over and over. The door glass was now cracked, and Tasha had tears in her eyes. "C’mon! My answer is yes! Yes! Yes! Yes!" she pleaded now, still hitting the door.

Carolyn watched as Tasha pounded on the doors screaming at her*. “The others had said yes. They had all sounded so strong and determined, but when offered the chance to strike back they had been weak; buried on the farm forever with their cowardice,”* Carolyn thought.

The banging on the doors stopped as Tasha, spent of energy, sat on the ground crying with her head in her hands.

It hurt Carolyn deeply to look at Tasha, so broken and alone. She was not the ice-cold killing machine Josh made her out to be. She hated herself for what she had done at the farm. She had killed three people in cold blood and thrown their bodies into unmarked holes in the ground. At least once a night they visited her. Bryan, Joan, and Weston. They came into her dreams with their faces exploding from her gun.

On days like these Carolyn thought about giving up. Quitting the fight against these monsters. She could live on the farm and hide indoors at night like the rest of the planet. “*It would be so easy to quit. The nightmares might even stop.”*

Holding onto the bus rail Carolyn’s driver uniform had slipped down her arm revealing her tattoo. “Total War.” She read it and thought of her husband Jordan.

*“No, not today.”* she thought.

Carolyn opened the bus door and looked at Tasha sitting on the ground. Her hands were bloody and bruised and tears were pouring down her face.

"Please," she whispered. The grief ruled her now and she could barely talk.

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The T-12 bus carrying Tasha Reynolds pulled out of the safely lit garage and into the threatening night.

**PART FOUR**

**Poke A Bear**

The White House, Washington, DC 7:00 AM

The president convened the defense meeting at 7:00 AM in the Situation Room located deep under the White House.

The night before had been bad, with 108 Americans taken, much higher than average.

The secretary of state, the secretary of defense, the chairman of the joint chiefs, and the commander of space command along with their assistants waited while the president and vice president entered the Situation Room.

The president sat down at the end of the large conference table and said, “Good morning, everyone,” looking at the chairman of the joint chiefs, the president said, “General, you may begin.”

“Thank you, Mr. President,” the chairman said while activating the main video screen behind him. The video wall showed several photographs taken from the ground of the long dark vessel. Only through extreme infrared and ultraviolet photography had they been able to decipher the spaceship’s approximate dimensions for use in their planning. The view then showed icons representing stages of the attack.

The general began, “The following is our plan to destroy the Nightcrawler ship in orbit. Today’s briefing will be an overview of our attack. In the coming days, we will be sharing more details at additional briefings with specific timelines and assets involved. Our plan, sir is to launch this attack ten days from now,” he said confidently.

The president nodded as the general continued advancing to the next view, “Our objective is to first overwhelm the sensors and defenses of the alien ship so that our main attack can be successful,” he said.

The next view showed the alien ship’s position in orbit relative to the sun. “While we know little about the enemy’s capabilities, we can conclude from their behavior and ship positioning a strong dislike for sunlight. With that in mind, we plan to use every powerful laser we have, both civilian and military, to blind or at least confuse their sensors. While we do not have any lasers that can inflict actual damage on this ship, these lasers have the range to reach the ship and throw a great deal of visible and infrared light on it. We are hoping these lasers will damage their sensors or at least distract them from the main attack.

The general advanced to the next screen and continued, “The second phase of the attack will also be an attempt to damage the sensors of the alien spacecraft. We will launch and explode 80 nuclear weapons in rapid succession in orbit below the alien vessel. This many warheads exploding nearby will inundate the ship with incredibly bright flashes and tremendous amounts of electromagnetic pulse energy that could do real damage to their sensors. In addition, it provides a screen of interference for the main attack.”

The video screen advanced and showed a map of North America with dozens of lines radiating outward and going upward.

“Now the main attack will be carried out by the strategic missile wings of NORAD and our remaining X-54 space fighters. The two remaining fighters will launch at the same time, and once in orbit, fire four, high speed, nuclear-tipped, anti-satellite missiles at the vessel. This will be followed by 200 nuclear attack missiles fired from our missile silos in Montana and Wyoming.”

The vice president spoke up, “Why so many missiles, General? These warheads are large enough to wipe out most cities, right?”

The general responded, “That’s true, sir. Only one missile might be capable of destroying this ship. However, we know nothing of their capabilities. They could have defensive lasers that can shoot missiles down, extreme maneuvering ability, or even some type of force field that shields them from attack. Without knowing what they have our only chance is to use an overwhelming number of warheads to defeat them.”

The president nodded in agreement while the general continued, “We have no idea if this will work, sir, but it’s the best plan we have based on our abilities,” he said.

The president had listened with great interest and enthusiasm. The amazing reduction in pain from his ulcer continued with every moment and his sleep last night had been his best in over a year.

“General, this sounds like a well-thought-out plan. I do have some questions,” he said looking down at his notes for a moment.

When he looked up, he was confused to see the frightened faces of the general and everyone in the room. It was his last conscious thought. The Nightcrawler had appeared suddenly and without a sound. It stood behind the president’s chair at the far end of the conference room. Before anyone could react, the enormous creature yanked the president out of his chair by the neck. Slashing down with its powerful talons the Nightcrawler ripped open Ben Lassiter from his neck to his crotch spilling the contents of his abdomen all over the table as the humans in the room fell backward in utter panic. The monster screeched menacingly at the remaining humans as it tossed the president’s corpse onto the table.

Almost immediately, the massive creature fell back as the president’s secret service agent Charlie Parks, the first agent into the room, rapidly fired his pistol at the alien scoring hits on its head and chest. Injured, but far from dead, the Nightcrawler staggered back against the wall of the room.

Charlie's semi-automatic pistol clicked empty after 16 rounds and then with practiced precision, he dropped down to one knee to reload knowing that his backup would be right behind him. He reloaded fast as the next two agents in the room behind him blazed away at the monster with their submachine guns. Dozens of powerful .45 caliber rounds ripped into the Nightcrawler who had recovered and was now advancing on Charlie. The fresh fusillade of bullets halted its forward movement. Now with new injuries and enraged from the attack, the Nightcrawler screeched again and disappeared in a flash of blackness.

The underground conference room was a war zone. Smoke from the intense gunfire filled the room, bullet casings littered the floor and there was blood everywhere. The president’s blood was splattered across the walls, the table, and almost everyone who had been sitting near him as he was disemboweled. His body lay crumpled on the table with his organs scattered. The Nightcrawler’s blood splattered the back wall of the room adding to the horrendous scene.

Scores of additional personnel rushed into the room as Charlie stood up. He felt a wave of heat and dizziness roll over his body from the adrenaline flowing through him. He steadied himself for a moment and placed his hand on the president's neck feeling for a pulse knowing there was no chance based on what he had seen. Feeling no pulse, he stood quietly looking down at the man he had sworn to protect. He laid his hand on the president's back looking at the sick ooze of the Nightcrawler’s black and oil-like blood as it dripped down the walls.

**Tasha Reynolds #212,452**

Washington, DC 9:00 PM

Two days later, Tasha Reynolds left the Metro station bypassing the shuttle buses, and walked into the darkness for her 12th walk home since returning to DC. As usual, a police car found her along the way and asked if she wanted a ride. She always declined.

The news reports continued with intensity about the murders of President Lassiter, the Chinese premier, and the Russian president by the Nightcrawlers. All had been killed within moments of each other. Tasha ignored it all, went to work at the university, and walked home to her empty apartment.

She walked a longer route tonight, stopping at the grocery store for her prescription and some food. The antidepressants were not working very well, and she was doubling her doses most days. The other prescription for pain medication was newer and drew looks from the clerk every time. "*Screw him*," she thought as she pulled the bottle out walking home and chewed three fresh ones down. The pain had eased some, but it was a huge incision, and healing was going slow. Sleeping was rough as well and the third prescription from another pharmacy knocked her out most nights.

Tonight, four straight days of rain had ended, and walking home was warmer in the April evening. Each night walking home, Tasha cleared her mind completely of the darkness and spent it thinking about Jeff. She relived every moment she could remember. Dating, vacations, normal days making dinner at home, even the rare argument which never lasted long. These moments illuminated her journey home and she walked with her head up.

On especially dark nights when the bone-wracking fear of what she was doing tried to close in on her, Tasha imagined Jeff walking with her. He wore his armor and carried his battle rifle, up and at the ready. Confident, strong, and brave he walked with her through the darkness, protecting her from any threat.

The Nightcrawler appeared eight feet in front of her and was already moving when she saw it. She smiled and whispered "contact front" as it grabbed her with a powerful liquid-like grasp and then all was black.

**The Meat Purveyors**

Earth Orbit

The Vendo harvester ship was eight miles long and in an extremely high orbit over Earth. The space vessel was almost invisible to the human eye and completely invisible to radar. Its cargo hold of humans was nearly full.

The Vendos were known throughout a nearby galaxy as exotic meat purveyors. They supplied the expensive tastes of species who paid them handsomely for alien cuisine, regardless of origin. Corrupt and ruthless, they were profiteers who would turn any planet into a slaughterhouse if the price was right.

The Vendo were forbidden from hunting sentient species by treaty. However, the market for these delicacies only grew stronger, pushing many expeditions to look for new sources of food, ignoring the treaties.

The harvester ship, a food processing and storage vessel, was far from its home world. Risking a journey far into this unexplored galaxy, at the limits of its fuel, this ship had found Earth.

After their arrival, the Vendo spent several months collecting samples of the planet’s species, all taken from remote areas so as not to be discovered. The crew had dined on these creatures and determined that the race that controlled this planet, the humans, were the most tasteful and exploitable for their purposes. It had been decided that this would be the mission’s harvest.

Tasha Reynolds had been transported directly into the cargo hold of the Vendo ship. Like others, she had been rendered unconscious by the transportation process. Human physiology didn’t react well to the dimensional shift the Vendo used to jump from place to place.

Upon arrival Tasha’s clothes were removed, her head was shaved, and a surgical port had been stuck into one of her neck’s jugular veins. She was then hung upside down in a Vendo storage capsule. The capsule was grasped by cargo hold machinery and delivered to one of the sections located along the edge of the vessel where the cold of space helped refrigerate the cargo. The capsule was plugged into a pump that siphoned all her blood into another storage tank so that her meat would not rot. Coincidentally, her body was only eight feet from the capsule holding her husband, Jeff.

Tasha Reynolds was now dead and had felt no pain.

The Vendo Collector who had taken her had failed to notice the large scar on Tasha's waistline which went from one hip to another. It had been several weeks since her surgery, but the scar was still very red. However, it went unnoticed.

Dead and refrigerated Tasha would be unable to perform her daily routine. Each day at sunrise she would email the same message to a Kentucky hiking blog website. Then she would take all the antibiotics still required after her surgery at the farm. Finally, she would use the transmitter given to her by Carolyn, Mike, and Josh.

The transmitter, housed in an old cell phone, had only one working button. Each morning Tasha would place the transmitter along her incision and press the button for five seconds. The device would take a few moments sending a complicated signal through her skin to reset the bomb inside of her. Once the detonators had been reset, the device would receive a signal and blink from red to green showing that the 24-hour timer had started over.

Without this reset, the bomb continued its daily countdown to detonation unknown to the Vendo who were resting after a busy evening.

In another three weeks, there would be no more room for human bodies and the Vendo would be returning to their galaxy with news of a newly discovered delicacy.

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The next day at 2:23 PM, the timer inside the body of Tasha Reynolds completed its countdown and sent signals to two separate detonators which functioned as designed. One point three seconds later the 25 pounds of Semtex explosive wrapped with 15 pounds of tungsten ball bearings and one diamond wedding ring exploded.

The powerful explosion destroyed the cargo area it was in and tore into the ship’s number three fuel cylinder blowing the ship in half and killing all aboard.

The burning remains of the Vendo harvester ship fell from orbit, streaked across the sky, and landed in the hills outside of Colorado Springs.

**Mission Accomplished**

Paw Paw, West Virginia 8:20 AM

The Resistance cell barn headquarters had been dismantled the day before. Later that night all the materials had been burned in an immense bonfire of celebration. The Resistance cell members sat out under the stars, drank toasts for those who could not, and watched the fire burn until nothing remained.

The next morning Carolyn stood next to her tractor while Mike and Josh loaded their belongings into the cars.

Finished packing they walked over to Carolyn who happily showed them the highlights of her newly purchased tractor. Afterward, quiet words were exchanged between the three for several minutes. Somewhat serious at first, then with smiles and briefly with tears. Finally, they all hugged each other and said goodbye.

As Josh and Mike drove away Carolyn climbed into her tractor’s cab. The radio was on a news station repeating the incredible story breaking around the world. A video had been mailed to ten news outlets from Tasha Reynolds, the wife of slain DC police officer Jeff Reynolds who was murdered by the Nightcrawlers. In the video, she explained that she is a member of the Resistance and is responsible for blowing up the Nightcrawler ship. It included still photos of a large bomb being placed inside of her during a surgical procedure and the closed incision across her abdomen.

The story continued with updates from Colorado where the gigantic Nightcrawler ship had crashed after mysteriously exploding in space and falling to Earth.

Carolyn listened briefly, touching the holster of the pistol under her shirt. Then she turned off the radio and began to plow her fields.

THE END

**Epilogue**

Paw Paw, West Virginia 8:42 AM

Josh and Mike drove their cars to the end of Carolyn's winding dirt driveway. At the main road, each waved a final goodbye as they turned in different directions.

As Josh began the long drive to Washington, DC he shook his head thinking about the events of the last 14 months. So much had happened. It had been a storm of sadness, death, and danger. Now as he made his way home it was hard to believe it was over.

*“Tasha actually did it,”* he thought to himself. Sacrificed herself and destroyed the Nightcrawler’s spaceship. It was the bravest thing he had ever seen.

Tasha had arrived at the farm barely communicating. Mike had almost sedated her when they sat her down and told her everything. That the Nightcrawlers were aliens in orbit around the planet and were snatching up humans with the full knowledge of the government.

Watching her that first night, Josh told himself that he would demand that she be returned home the next day.

However, she and Carolyn had stayed up late into the night talking and, in the morning, there was a new Tasha at the breakfast table. Calm, rested, and unbelievably upbeat. She had a purpose now, she said, and that was something she was holding on to.

Within days of her arrival, Mike announced that he was ready. The barbaric surgery which placed a 40-pound bomb inside her had taken weeks to heal.

When Tasha was able to travel Carolyn had driven her back to DC. Her plan after that was simple. She would return to her job as normal. The only change was that she would work until dark every night and then walk three miles home to her apartment.

Incredibly it had taken twelve grueling days for the Nightcrawlers to snatch Tasha. Josh thought about what an emotional pressure cooker that must have been for her, not knowing when the end would come and still going out every night.

When her daily email failed to arrive on the thirteenth morning, they knew she was gone and wondered if the outrageous plan would even work.

Then a few hours later at the set time, the Nightcrawler ship exploded. Against all odds and an enemy far more advanced than humans, Carolyn’s plan had worked.

Millions of people had watched pieces of the spaceship streak across the skies of the United States before it crashed in Colorado. Even now the military was going over every inch of the crash location.

Josh’s car radio was filled with news about the video from Tasha Reynolds and non-stop coverage of the crashed spaceship. There had been one news report that human bodies had been found inside the wreckage. He wondered if his wife Judy’s body was onboard. He did not know why the Nightcrawlers were taking people, but he had no illusions that she was still alive.

The reports continued with news that the newly sworn-in president planned to address the nation this evening to discuss these events. Josh wondered whether the government’s lies about the Nightcrawlers would continue and planned to watch the broadcast with great interest.

Now ten miles down the road and approaching the interstate he realized his cell phone was still at Carolyn's.

Josh grumbled to himself for his forgetfulness as he turned around. The previous day the Resistance cell members had retrieved their cell phones and laptops from a makeshift Faraday cage which blocked all electromagnetic tracking while at the farm. It was one of the many counterintelligence tactics Josh had imposed to keep their cell safe.

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He made good time going back to Carolyn's farm and turned back onto her long driveway. As he came out of the trees surrounding the farm, he could see Carolyn's tractor in the distance and many rows of freshly plowed fields.

Getting closer he knew something was wrong. The tractor was slowly going in circles and the driver’s cab of the tractor was hanging sideways off the chassis. Josh stopped the car, grabbed his pistol from his glove compartment, and sprinted towards the tractor.

"Carolyn!" he screamed.

Running up to the slowly circling tractor he saw that it was a wreck. It looked like a monster had torn it from its foundations.

“No,” he said to himself.

“Carolyn!” he called.

There was no one in the cab. Josh climbed onto the slowly turning tractor, leaned into the lopsided compartment, and shut off the engine. The inside was slippery and wet with black oil. There was also quite a bit of human blood as well and many spent shell casings clearly from Carolyn's pistol.

Josh climbed out and stood on the broken tractor and looked around. There was nothing in sight, just an empty field in all directions. But there, a few hundred yards away he saw something on the ground in the tall grass.

“Oh no, no, no!” he said jumping from the tractor and running as fast as he could.

“Carolyn!” he called again.

It was a body.

His heart was pounding in his chest as he ran up to the body. There laying before him in broad daylight was a Nightcrawler. It was immense. Nine feet of sheer terror lying dead on the ground. Carolyn's combat knife was sticking out of one of its eye sockets. Its black oil-like blood covered the knife. The same blood that covered the inside of the tractor cab.

“Jesus Christ,” Josh said looking at the horrendous monster and knowing now that there had been a terrible battle only moments after he and Mike had left the farm.

“Carolyn!” he yelled, still scanning in all directions with his pistol aimed in front of him.

He looked down at the dead Nightcrawler wondering how it was here. He looked up into the sky. Nothing. It was a perfect day, and the Sun was shining.

"They hate the sunlight,” he said to himself.

“This is impossible. They're all dead!", he pleaded aloud to no one now with tears in his eyes.

As he spoke these words looking down at the Nightcrawler's body it shimmered into blackness and disappeared.

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The story will continue!
**NIGHTCRAWLERS 2: THE MEAT PURVEYORS** is coming.

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Thank You!



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Patrick S. Barnes lives in Farmville, Virginia. Formerly the Brand Manager for the science fiction network Comet TV, Patrick now lends his expertise to companies in brand and digital marketing. When he's not on the ice playing right wing for his hockey team or cycling through the countryside, you'll find him immersed in a sci-fi novel, series, or film. He lives with his wife and a roaming band of crazed, feral cats.