

## Chapter 1

"Ready for the descent?" My operator's drier than sand voice resounds in my ear.

I check my equipment for the third time that morning – failing to carry the right armament could mean the difference between life and death out in the Area: on my weapons belt the titanium combat knife and the revolver clipped on next to it, the railgun strapped to my back, the satchels of emergency rations and ammunition clasped on the left side of my hip just above the first aid pouch. Then I slide the visor across my eyes, waiting out the familiar moment of disorientation as the device aligns itself with my optic muscle, and the blueish, semi-transparent screen appears on the inside.

"Ready," I say when I'm certain everything is working as it should. There won't be any going back once I'm out of the elevator.

"Descent initiated..." My operator's detached voice comes again. "Release in three... two... one... you're off."

The floor gives way under my heavy combat boots, the circular hatch door dropping away into breezy nothingness. Underneath, there is a tube just wide enough for me to stretch my forearms to the sides for balance as I go into a fall nearly uncontrolled by the magnets clinging to the tunnel wall. Down, down, down it goes, the whole mile the Wall is tall.

Arid wind from the desert below whips my hair upward as I watch the environment flit past on either side of me, tinted yellow by my visor. Most of it is the sickly yellowish-brown colour of a thirsty earth beneath a light blue sky, but the narrow forest-belt that surrounds America is a darker shade of sun-burnt charcoal. Beyond the greenery the desert goes on for miles, dotted here and there with the Ruins of our forefathers and the burnt-out remnants of our last clash with the enemy. Creamy wastes of drifting sand and rock-strewn hamada expand into the distance to the north, crumbling skeletons of buildings built centuries before the Invasion provide shade to the west. Dead trees and bushes dried out by the ardent sun reach skyward with their scraggly limbs.

The magnets on the soles of my boots kick in as I arrive at ground level, decelerating my fall until I come down on the circular metal platform with a loud clink.

"All clear," I inform my operator.

I can almost see his unpleasantly pinched face nod. "I have you on my screen. Checking vitals... good. Rundown of the Area in your immediate vicinity: no hostile forces detected at a radius of two-hundred yards. Everything in order so far. You're free to roam." With a faint click, the elevator wall slides into itself, leaving a human-sized hole in front of me.

I step outside into the warm sand. Heat assaults me the moment I am out in the open, a waft of bone-dry air that's been stripped of everything cool it ever held. Behind me rises the Wall that surrounds the worn steel dome of America, just visible beyond the battlements. In front of me is the sentry-forest that shelters the city from spying eyes and provides another layer of protection from the enemy. Nothing moves at the treeline as far as I can see.

That doesn't mean the Others aren't there.

My eyes flicker toward the upper right corner of the visor's screen.

Temperature: 57° C and rising

Wind Speed: negligible

Humidity: largely nonexistent

Nothing out of the ordinary.

I take off toward the shady treeline at a slow jog, breathing deeply into my stomach, saving my energy for the desert beyond, where I'll need all my strength and speed. Yet I'm under no illusion the Others couldn't be waiting in here as well. Waiting for a scout-sentinel like me to cross the tree-belt on their own.

But an asset would slow me down.

And the battle is too harsh to rely on anyone but myself.

I'm almost at the treeline; shortly before I reach it I cast a look over my shoulder at the human sentinels patrolling on top of the Wall, surveying the Area through their visors, then low-hanging branches and tangles of dry black brush swallow me whole.

The sun doesn't burn down as violently inside the forest-belt as it does in the desert. The trees, a mixture of juniper and pinyon and desert ironwood, genetically enhanced to withstand most of the intense heat and drought, spend shadow and sanctuary. I pass through a scattering of yellow needles and crisply blacked limbs. Not too far ahead I can see the sentries gleaming in what little light penetrates the charred foliage above and reflects on their casing. Their silvery-white spherical bodies turn on their metal sockets with a low whirr as they register the vibration of my movement on the soft ground, the sound so ominous and threatening in the sweltering noon heat that I have to force myself onward.

My fear is irrational. The sentries are semi-sentient turrets designed to keep the forest clean of the alien threat, calibrated to distinguish human soldiers from the enemy and won't engage with the former while eliminating the latter on sight. I don't trust them. I can't help staring over my shoulder at the sinister red lens that sits in the middle of the mounted sphere like an evil eye as I jog past.

Then I'm out of their range and at the other end of the sentry-belt, where I take a moment to scour the environment ahead: any alien movement has to be registered immediately, because failing to do so might turn just as lethal as carrying the wrong or faulty equipment.

"You're clear," my operator's voice resounds in my ear. "The Area is clean within a radius of several miles on all sides."

"Thanks."

I shield my eyes with my forearm and gaze ahead. Out in the white-hot haze of dunes everything seems calm and in order, as it should be this close to America, but that doesn't mean the Others aren't around. More than a few scouts have lost their lives relying on technology too much, and the operators' scanner at the wall have been known to malfunction when there are interferences or the heat becomes too intense. I narrow my eyes and the visor pulls the images closer, enabling me to see into the distance clearly as I do a slow 190° turn. The sun glares hotly from the cloudless sky, dipping the area into white-hot light, throwing stark shadows on the pliable ground in which anything could be hidden. The brightness of it burns in my eyes despite the visor's shielding capacity. A not unpleasant smell of warm sand and dried resin drifts around me in the scare breeze as I listen into the day, where everything is silent save for the crunching of sand underfoot and the sound of cones clicking together in the branches overhead in the nearly imperceptible breeze.

Heat caresses what little of my face is exposed under the visor and ghosts over my neck with the low wind. I could get used to it if the ultraviolet rays weren't so lethal—and if the Others weren't lurking around every corner to gut us and eat our flesh.

"I'm moving out." I take a step into the sunlit wastes before me and began to sprint toward the sunbaked ruins that were once part of a pre-Invasion town even larger than America's steel dome. Cover is what I need now, both from the ardent sun and the enemy's line of sight. There's no room for error now.

Two decades ago it would have taken a simple craft thirty minutes to reach the outskirts of the Ruins. But there's no need for vehicles if you can run 25 miles per hour, in an exosuit that takes most of your weight, boosts your speed, and keeps you cool, without breaking a sweat.

Twenty miles and 40 minutes to the nearest building indicates the gauge on the left side of the screen.

Speed: 27 mph. Once I'm there I can follow the alien tracks I unearthed yesterday. Wind plays with a few loose strands of hair in the back of my neck. The sun makes my shadow warble and the skin around my nose itch with tiny pearls of sweat as I push myself toward the shade.

I pass the run-down gas station with its frayed danger signs and arrive at the Ruins with time to spare. The numbers on my visor show that I surpassed yesterday's speed and should still be out in the open desert.

Half a second later it adjusts to my current position and the data stored from yesterday's scouting mission appears on the interface.

I keep my right hand on the weapons belt and my back to the crumbled facades as I make my way along the edge of the Ruins toward the plateau where I'd seen the enemy patrols not twenty hours past, taking cover where I can in the sun-blasted terrain: corroded flanks of vehicles, tall weeds and brush growing from the cracked road.

The drought-scarred hamada is empty. I didn't really expect the enemy to linger. I crouch down at the end of the tracks saved by the visor, whose physical traces have long vanished with the drifting sands, and trace my gloved fingers over the desert pavement. There's not a hint left. I stand. If I were an Other, where would I go from here? The plateau around me branches out to a shallow dust-bowl to the north, a small hill to the north-east, and into wind-swept dunes in the other directions.

The dust-bowl and the dunes hold little of interest – for us or them – and the only landmark on the hill that might be worth investigating is the steel skeleton of what might have been a radio tower pre-Invasion, still desperately reaching skyward.

I start toward the hill at a sprint. Even if there'll be nothing to be found atop, there might be something beyond. I reach the foot of the hill with time but no breath to spare; the visor won't be so generous once it has adapted to the new speed level. Then the numbers change and the distance to the top is calculated. Up the slope my infantry boots sink into the sand ankle-deep despite their soles designed for desert use. Hot dry wind whistles in my ear.

“Dalta.” My operator's voice startles me in its abruptness and the use of my first name. “Movement spotted ahead.”

“Cavy?” I can't help myself.

“I would be grateful if you desisted using that term.”

I grin despite myself. The Others have been called too many names to count. Take your pick. Monsters is a public favourite. Cavy was coined by a scientist who thought we could use the aliens's bodies in experiments once we conquered them. He was one of the first to vanish. We didn't conquer them.

I mostly call them this: a target.

“How many?”

“One – two at most – a hundred yards ahead of your current position.” He coughs dryly. “Proceed with caution.”

“Understood.”

The link goes silent. I sometimes wonder what it must look like from the outside: a slender dark-haired girl of seventeen in a sand-coloured skinsuit talking to herself. But I'm not. The earpiece is a tiny part of the visor clipped to my ear and somehow potent enough to receive and transmissions from the Wall – standard equipment for all American scouts and soldiers post-Invasion – and the mouthpiece is installed directly in my visor and equally as invisible.

On the screen two scarlet dots appear close by, blinking to indicate the enemy's position. I drop into the sands on my belly and pull myself onward with my hands while thrusting the slope behind me with my feet. Two isn't too bad. One would be easier – at least as easy as killing an Other can be.

The slope steepens and ends in a tuft of coarse bristlegrass just tall enough to hide my lying form as I press myself snake-like on the warm ground. The two scarlet dots haven't moved – I halt. Or are there three? At this proximity, the markers converge into an indistinct red cluster like a drop of bright blood. I frown at the speck. Two isn't too bad. One would be easier. Three is suicide.

“There's two at least,” I say quietly.

“Proceed with caution,” says my operator's dusty voice.

I grimace. I sometimes think my operator wants me dead.

I grit my teeth and continue forward on my belly, inch by inch, silent on the soft ground. Up ahead the skeletal shadow of the spindly tower lies in wait like a hungry beast. Two or three Others are clustered in the semi-darkness so close together they seem to be standing on top of one another, their jagged black outlines half-hidden against the burnt-out facade of the tower. I duck lower into the brittle grass as the

width of my screen screams scarlet at the close proximity, but the flickering closeness of the dots remain impossible to count. Two? Three? *Four*? A shiver of cold sweat trickles down my spine despite the afternoon heat.

“What can you see?” The loudness of my operator's voice makes me cringe involuntarily even though I know it's only in my ear.

“Two or three. Close formation,” I breathe. “Not sure what they're up to.”

“Well then do find out.”

He really wants me dead.

I shift position to get a better look, a trickle of sand coming loose under my belly, and I freeze as it disperses down the hillside with a low sssht. Too loud. They'll notice. They can hear a snake below the sand from a hundred yards with their heightened senses. My hand jumps to the revolver on my belt: Retreat is not an option in these circumstances.

The Others don't move. Impossible. What are they doing that keeps them so occupied? I swallow my fear and shift forward another inch. The Others are intent. I can hear the guttural noises in which they speak – if the grunts and groans can indeed be called speech – and their throaty breaths.

But *what* are they doing?

“It looks like they're talking...” I cringe again at the volume of my own whisper.

“Don't be silly.”

I desist a roll of the eyes only because it'll make the visor go haywire.

“What do you want me to do?” My fingers are already busy unstrapping the rail from my back as quietly as possible.

I can take out one, maybe two if I'm lucky and not spotted immediately after the first discharge hits. The third will be a problem with the rail. The fourth – if there is a fourth – will gut me alive even if I'm fast enough to draw the knife.

My operator doesn't respond immediately.

I breathe deeply and slow down my frenzied heart, forcing myself to let go of the tension in my limbs and the stiffness of my fingers as I steady the rail on the ground and wait as its scope aligns with my visor.

Distance: two-hundred yards flashes across the screen as the rail locks on the first target.

Probability of direct hit: 97 percent.

I should be 100 percent. I don't miss.

I level the rail and the position marker turns into concentric scarlet-blinking squares as it locks on the target. The warm draft barely disturbs the sand under my chin as I exhale. My body is relaxed and my focus singular. Everything is silent. The seconds before a kill are the only time I'll rely on the visor to watch my back and warn me should anything else creep up from behind, because if I don't, I'll miss, and then all three of the aliens will be on me in the blink of an eye.

I pull the trigger back halfway and listen to the low whirr... whirr... whirr as the electromagnetic projectile charges up inside the rail. Any second now I'll receive the order.

My breath stalls completely now as my mind calms to the cool calculatedness that precedes a kill. My nerves vibrate in time with the charging rail.

“Do not engage.”

The air goes out of me in a low sigh and I let go off the trigger prematurely. The rail powers down with an equally dejected sound.

“Why not?”

“Because I said so.”

“They're right there!”

“I can see that.” The dry voice stays impassive. “And I say not to engage, Miss Rim.”

It's Sentinel Rim. My teeth grind together with the effort not to snap back as the rail rattles back into its harness on my back.

"Orders?" I ask.

"Observe," He says after a moment. "Do not engage."

I don't respond.

"Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Your brain activity is spiking." His tone's turned flat as the plains. "Need I pull you out of this?"

My nostrils flare. "No."

"Good." He doesn't sound like he feels it really is good. "Continue surveillance at a distance—we need to know what they're up to."

I drop my chin back down into the sand and consider the Others. We knew they arrived on Earth in 2030. Thirteen years ago. Three years after I was born. We couldn't communicate with them, but that didn't matter much. They weren't interested in parley or negotiations of peace. They wanted our resources, our flesh, our planet.

The Others came without warning during the First Night. Europe and Eurasia were the first to fall. Both continents were stripped clean of raw material and their population decimated. Millions of people were killed. Cities were levelled. The Others turned their attention on the southern continents and Australia during the Second Night. The Dark Night followed. That was when we lost contact with Canada and the Northern States.

By the time our forefathers realized something was amiss, the invading forces had advanced too far to employ defensive strategy. The Last President of the United States was indecisive. By the time he agreed to deploy a nuclear warhead it was already too late. The Others' arrival had come so unexpectedly there was no time for counter-action left before they reached the coast. Destruction spread inland. The neglectful President was disposed of and a new government formed. The Council. The Council tried to correct the President's mistakes, but our nuclear arsenal had been destroyed, the military scattered. There are those who claim this was a good thing despite the horrors we now face. I doubt they ever knew loss. About the same time the Others started their conquest, the sun's ultraviolet activity increased. The Council commanded what was left of the military northward and organized the survivors to build a steel dome around the last city: America. Like the main continent. The name is supposed to instil a sense of community and unity and solidarity.

At least that's what we assume happened. In theory. In reality the total loss of contact makes it impossible to determine the whole impact of the Invasion. There could still be survivors out there in the world, but most of the intelligence we are able to gather from the outside amounts to little more than rumours and I'm not old enough to remember anything myself.

I don't know how long I've been lying in the sand when the Others move. One after the other they troop down the hillside to the north in a more or less straight line. I wait until their still obscurely clustered markers drift alongside the edge of the screen before I push myself up into a kneeling position and rise, sand cascading out of my exosuit and the rim of my boots. I'll have to follow them at a distance, but first I'll check out the spot by the tower in case they've left anything. I saw them dip down and examine – or place – something in the sand more than once, and if they're mining the plateau or placing traps it could turn ugly very quickly.

I slip into the shadow of the tower and crouch to examine the ground. The wind has already cast a layer of sand upon most of their clawed footprints. My gloved fingers sift the sand among the tracks of a single Other. Within half a minute nothing indicates their stay any more, save for their wobbling shadows in the dunes below.

Damn it. I'm about to stand when the something white-hot slices through my gloves like a sun-heated blade and sears my fingertips and I only just manage to strangle a yell of pain with a low gasp.

"What is happening?" My operator asks as I draw back my hand. There're red blisters on it, and the smell of burnt flesh fills the air. Why a burn?

"I think I –"

The words freeze in my mouth. Movement in the corner of my eyes shortens my breath. Though I'm kneeling on the earth, a shadow darker than that of the tower itself hovers over me as if I were standing, raising a hand of its own accord. I throw myself sideways. The Other's three-inch claw whizzes past my ear and slams into steel. I suppress a growl just as feral as the Other's. How did I not notice the scarlet-flashing of my visor?

I roll and pull myself upright, hand jumping to the revolver on my belt, but then the Other is already upon me. I dodge a second hit. My boots slip and slide on the loose sand as I level my arm and pull the trigger, miss even at this proximity because in the last moment I have to let myself fall to avoid a blade-like talon swiping at my head.

The Other is fast. Faster than usual. It gives that otherworldly noise that makes my skin crawl. Up close it's almost human in size and shape, but that's where the similarities end. The Other is some eight feet tall and its deformed body bulges with rippling muscles that look like putrid boils. Three to five inch claws sharper than my titanium knife sprout from each of their hands. Its skin is black as engine oil and hard and tough as steel. Its eyes are black voids without whites and its mouth is a gaping chasm hungry for my flesh and blood.

Too close.

I have to put space between me and the –

I can't suppress a groan as my head rings with the impact of a claw with the side of my face. My visors crack. Blood spurts from the gash in my temples and sprays into my eye. I struggle to stay upright and throw my arms up before the next swipe slams into my chest and I'm tossed backward against the tower wall. My back slams into steel. White-hot pain sears through my spine as my vision darkens momentarily. I force myself to focus over the pain.

My hands are empty. Where'd I leave my revolver?

*Crash.*

I twist aside and stumble as the Other's body slams into the tower and is momentarily stunned. Blood trickles into my mouth and I spit it into the sand. I'm not going to die here. I spy my revolver on the ground behind the Other's hunched back. I roll onto my feet and deflect most of the Other's swipe with my right arm, where blood quickly blossoms from its edge. I lunge forward. My fingers close around the revolver and I turn just in time to land on my back as the Other slams itself into my chest. Pain surges through my body. I clench my teeth and cramp my bloodied fingers around the revolver. I'm too vulnerable. My arm burns and blood makes the revolver slippery.

The Other towers over me, ready to finish me off. The sky beyond its horrible head is aero-blue and brilliant. Out of the corner of my eyes I see its two companions outlined in the distant dunes. How could I have been so stupid? Why didn't I check whether they'd left sentries? But they never do. They aren't smart enough.

The Other dives down on my midriff, forcing the air out of my lungs, and its jaws snap at my neck. I wedge my left forearm between its razor-sharp fangs and try not to scream as they clamp shut. Black stars pop before my vision. A whimper escapes my throat.

All the while my operator is oddly silent. Are they always silent if their charges are about to die?

The pitiful thought floods my senses with alertness.

I will not die here.

I won't be as easily defeated as my mother.

A growl bursts out of my chest with the savageness of a desert wolf. I let the revolver drop onto my chest and rip the combat knife out of its sheath. It slides smoothly into my palm. I rear upward like a sand viper and stab the knife up into the Other's side in a swing that turns into a sharp jab at the end. The impact is jarring and the creature gives an inhuman howl in what I can only hope is pain. I take the revolver up and

level it before the creature has a chance to retaliate, switching to hard bullet instead of the plasma projectile it used for the first shot, and dig my blood-slick forefinger into the trigger, hard.

*Crack.*

The reinforced titanium bullet goes right into the Other's eye. Pieces of brain—if the spongy black matter is such—splatter the hill behind it. Black blood and puss drips down onto my cracked visor as I summon the last of my strength to roll myself out of the way of the falling carcass and stand on shaky legs with half a desperately insane laugh on my lips. If they don't advance me for this I don't know what will convince them.

"Sentinel Rim." My operator says the moment I'm upright. "You are required to return to base immediately."

*The gall!* "Why didn't you warn me of that Other?"

"You are injured. We cannot use an incapacitated soldier on the battlefield."

"You didn't warn me."

"There was a solar interference." My operator's voice is impassive as always.

I wipe blood from the side of my face and prod the gash in my temples. It doesn't seem deep, but half an inch to the left and the Other would have done to me what I did to it. I look down at my hand. There's a hole in my glove where I singed my fingertips before the fight.

I look back to the center of the shade: a metallic glint meets my eye half-covered by dirt. I leave the alien carcass where it is – the sweepers will remove it later and walk to the iridescent spot. My stomach cramps as I brush debris off it with my boot. I don't want to risk crouching as long as I don't know if I'll be able to get back up.

"Are you listening to me, Miss Rim?"

I don't respond. My efforts reveal a hand-sized disk that looks like a plasma mine. The thought makes me shiver slightly. But if it were a plasma mine, pieces of me would already be dripping down the slope of the hill. There's a familiar symbol etched into the metal: a single star on stripes.

"Return to the Wall immediately."

I shift my gaze to the empty horizon. My operator never was really good at making me follow orders.

"They got away." I can't even see the Other's outlines any more.

"Do you want your privileges cut?" Though he hasn't raised his voice I can tell he's annoyed. Let him be. He almost got me killed. Unfortunately we've worked together long enough that he knows just which buttons to push. "Insubordination will have you out of the scouting missions sooner than you can think," he says, "and then there won't be an advancement for either of us."

I kick at the sand and regret it immediately when pain shoots through my stomach. It's not fair the operators have so much control over us. They never risk their lives. They don't know what it's like to face an Other in battle, where there's only your weapons and your wits to help you survive. They don't know the exhaustion of tracking down the enemy in the desert at 60° C in the shade. Most of their days are spent in an air-ventilated room somewhere atop the Wall and I doubt mine's ever been anywhere near the elevators.

And yet they're the ones who get to make the decisions on the battlefield.

"Miss Rim." Impatience tints his words.

I'm out of options and the kick's made my stomach churn painfully. "Understood."

"Then return to base immediately."

I clip my revolver back into its holster and start back the way I've come. It takes longer with the injury and by the time I'm back at the Ruins the sun already starts to set. Long shadows warp the air among steel and masonry and I make sure to take cover where I can among the crumbled houses and rusty machinery. I'm about to head out to the sentry-forest when a flicker of movement down the road catches my eye. My hand jumps to the revolver as I whirl around. Nothing to be seen at first, then my gaze falls upon the man standing in the run-down entrance of a house in the distance to my right. The man's wearing a

debris-brown robe that allows him to all but melt with the environment, its hood draped over his head, a rope slung around his narrow waist to keep it together.

I snort. My hands slides from the revolver and I begin to jog out into the open.

There are those people who believe the Others are a kind of supernatural harbinger sent by God. These Cultists refuse to live within America's steel dome and the protection it provides, preferring to take their chances in the Ruins to be close to their saviours even when it gets most of them killed within a month.

I cast a look over my shoulder but the Cultist has vanished. In front of me rises the sentry-forest, behind it the Wall with its elevator tubes, and beyond that I spy the steel dome of America, its solar panels gleaming like the scales of snakes. I wonder when the Cult will learn that, though the Others came from the sky, they're nothing God-sent.