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LIFE FULL OF EMOTIONS – INCIPIENT EMOTIONS

LIFE FULL OF EMOTIONS – RECURRING EMOTIONS

LIFE FULL OF EMOTIONS – RELENTLESS EMOTIONS

LIFE FULL OF EMOTIONS – JOURNEY FULL OF EMOTIONS

LIFE FULL OF EMOTIONS – FINAL EMOTIONS

RAVEN'S PHOENIX

THE DOME CODE

skye-lewis.com

THE DOME CODE

A YA science fiction/dystopian novel by
Skye Lewis

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*For Charles, who never stopped believing in me
For Lucca, who outdid themselves on the cover
For Lisa, who made the world come to life
For my cat, who was always by my side
For all of you, I'll be eternally grateful*

CHAPTER ONE

A dark, smoggy day in the middle of autumn, the horns blared throughout the city, deafening and overwhelming from above. The sky blanketed in thick clouds of smoke. The ground was shaking as gaps split along the landscape, the earth being forced apart by bombs thrown onto the concrete. Cars being tossed, a bus launched by a sudden protrusion. It flew through the sky before landing on a group of humans trying to flee. They had been driven out of their homes by the sounding horns and fallen bricks of the collapsing buildings.

A young couple rushed through the streets, holding hands, trying to find shelter. The explosion happened in an instant. A nearby wall shattered into large blocks of flying concrete shrapnel. One moment, the couple was there, the next, they were gone.

In the distance, there was a vague booming sound like a kettledrum being beaten. The noise got louder and louder until all that could be heard was the ear-splitting noise. A roaring fire devastated the house of a family, caused by several bombs dropped on their home. The owners attempted to flee the burning ruin, but it was all in vain. The obtrusive fire obliterated their home. Fragmented glass and debris found their way down several yards away due to the impact of the incandescent blazes erupting. The frigidness of the city's stale air was swallowed by the scorching flames.

In the clouds overhead, huge balls of fire burst through the layers of it, leaving nothing but holes behind. They crashed into the earth, unheard over the horns, with devastating impact. There was no escaping the rifts in the ground as people fell into the deep gaps. Others tried to dodge the falling flames, a beautiful blossom of light that spread to whatever it touched, turning it to ash, blowing the ash to the sky.

A bomb exploded near a truck as it launched into the air, flying straight towards the remains of a wall a young boy was hiding behind. His face was covered in ash and blood. It crashed through the wall and exploded, just as he got pushed away towards cover. A high-pitched ringing filled his ears, left him disoriented. Dust and smoke filled the area as he looked up. A single hand could be seen sticking out of the debris. His heart hammered in his chest as he crawled closer, taking a closer look at his supposed rescuer. His eyes fell on the bracelet, which was one he recognised all too well. He started digging as if his life depended on it, explosions went off all around him, heavy gunfire in the distance. Terror stabbed his heart as the face became clear.

"Mummy?" he called out.

A look of anguish crossed his face, his mother lay there, dead. She had saved his life while giving hers. He desperately tried to revive her, hitting her chest every so often. He couldn't control his breathing; hiccupping sobs were the only sounds he was capable of making.

"Mummy, wake up!" he yelled as his cheeks were wet from crying, his eyes red and puffy.

A thick plume of smoke near him, a black-clothed figure approached him with a KSG in his hands. His eyes weren't visible due to the black Trooper helmet he wore. He gazed down at the young boy whose belly was cramped while looking up at the Trooper.

"I got another one!" the raucous voice called out over his radio, grabbing the boy by his arm.

But he had no intention to leave his mother as he tried to free himself from his grasp. The Trooper grabbed him and threw him over his shoulder, giving him no choice but to cooperate, too shocked to counteract. His chin trembled as he watched helplessly how his mother's body stayed behind. He wept.

As the Trooper progressed through the destroyed city the boy once knew as his home, he stared at the scorched earth surrounding him. The rural landscape that had been scattered with houses and trees was unrecognisable. There was now nothing but flames and earth where there used to be life. Tears stung his eyes like tiny vipers, dripping down from his bloodied and soot-covered face. All around him was nothing but a whirlwind of disorder and violence, a blur of colour and vicious motion. His lungs filled with dust-choked air, intermixed with the bitterness of iron, the taste of his own blood. All around him, he heard the cries of people, the screams of injured animals, and the thunder of bombs exploding.

He was shoved in the back of a fortified van by the man carrying him, closing the doors as he tapped the metal, motioning for the vehicle to move. He crawled towards the window to take one last look at where he left his mother, his eyes landed on the letters on the Trooper's back: CRISIS. That was the last thing he saw before his vision was once filled with the sightings of the demolition.

Chaos flooded the once crowded square of the city. Rooftops of the shops ended up on the ground, the markings could barely be seen due to the debris that covered it all. He slid down the rough interior of the van until he sat on the floor; he shrank back against the metal and closed his eyes, wishing his mother was there to hug him.

Swerving to avoid getting hit by falling debris of buildings, he was tossed all around the back of the van, the sounds of gunfire and bombs being dropped were the only things he could hear, as it drowned out the sound of the roaring engine. He lost his balance, drops of sweat and tears

beading on his forehead and cheeks. His back struck the rough wall of the van. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't keep his legs pulled up tight against his body, as gravity wasn't in his favour. His stomach was sour with nausea, he felt like he wanted to throw up. But nothing came out. He could only sit there, alone, and wait for this to be over.

Seconds turned into minutes; minutes turned into hours. That's what it at least felt like to the terrified boy. The van came to a rough stop. Yelling could be heard from outside, gunfire in the far distance. The van wasn't exactly soundproof, everything could be heard loud and clear. That scared him the most, for he had secretly wished to escape the blasts. The back doors opened; the same Trooper stood in front of him. Without warning, he grabbed the young boy's arm and hauled him out. He had to adjust to the light, for he had seen only darkness for God knows how long.

Around him, there were a dozen vans that were all emptied. Some were in worse shape than others, with holes from bullets or shrapnel. The vans had blacked out, armoured windows at the front, and lower body armour surrounding the exterior. Some seemed to be bulletproof, like the one he was in, as it had zero damage from the blasts they drove through.

They stopped in front of a seemingly normal wall with greyish bricks. The Trooper pushed a button that couldn't be found without knowing its location. The wall broke in two with a metallic grinding sound that caused the boy to cover his ears. His eyes widened in disbelief for he had never seen such a thing happen before. On the left side, five big rods protruded from the wall's edge, the other side had five holes bored into the stone wall, in which they fitted perfectly. Yet now, they were separated from one another.

As he looked up, he saw metal wheels, mechanisms to maintain the opening and closing. He saw a big room filled to the brim with Troopers running around in front of him, carrying guns and yelling at one another to hurry up. It was pure chaos, the boy was overwhelmed, hit by a wave of confusion, blistered with panic. His world seemed to spin, all around him a swirling mist of unknown faces, and lights. There was barely any colour in the room, only darkness and blackness.

He was dragged towards a new wall, which opened up the same way as the previous one. Once again, he had to cover his ears as the sounds were too loud. All of a sudden, he felt himself going further down to the ground, exhaustion took him. Yet he was yanked back onto his feet by the Trooper.

"Got no time for sleep, boy, we gotta bloody move."

All he wanted was to sit down, stop running, stop being dragged to places he had no memories of. The walls closed behind him, sealing him off from the destructive world he had just escaped. He looked at the overly

bright room packed with ammo, bombs, and guns. He had no idea what to think about it, whether they were the enemy or not. He was shoved into a smaller room in the far back. The Trooper sat him down on a small chair, a wooden desk in front of him. He then left the room in the blink of an eye, leaving the boy all alone, confused and petrified.

Minutes passed by before the doors swung open, revealing a young woman with blonde hair who knelt in front of him. She carried a bucket with her, filled with cold water and a rag. Her hand moved up to his cheek, yet he turned his head away.

“Don’t be scared, I won’t hurt you,” her appealing voice told him.

‘Never talk to strangers. Never trust them.’ That warning went through his head as his mother reminded him multiple times whenever they were outside. She took the rag and rinsed it thoroughly before she moved her hand back up towards his cheek. He refused once more. She put the rag back and made him look at her.

“I don’t mean any harm; I just want to clean you up.”

‘No one does anything just, not unless they want something from you.’ His mother’s voice rang through his mind once more. His hands lay in his laps, trembling. The young woman held his hands, smiling at him.

“I’m Joanna, but you can call me Jo.”

He looked up at her. A single tear rolled down his cheek as she wiped it away. A sudden feeling of trust washed over him. He felt safe with her, she seemed genuine. Her hand went down to the bucket once more. She took the rag and repeated her earlier intentions. Little by little, the young boy’s original hair colour and facial features surfaced. His freckles along with a birthmark on his left cheek, his dark blond hair, and brown eyes.

“There, now I can see your handsome little face.”

She rinsed the rag into the water, now mixed with nothing but dirt, soot, and blood. A dirty hickory colour remained. She remained at his eye level the entire time to avoid intimidating him. He had been through so much and didn’t deserve any more stress or fear.

“What’s your name?”

He looked at her. His name, the only thing he had left of his mother. By the time he managed to get the bracelet off her wrist, he dropped it as the Trooper took him. Another tear rolled down his face as he saw the image of his dead mother in front of him, traumatised for life. He felt her hand as it touched his skin, just like his mother used to do. He leaned into her touch for it was a familiar feeling to him, which he was desperately searching for.

“Zachary...” he answered softly. “Zach.”

She gave him a kind smile before she got up, extending her hand for him to grab. He hesitated, then gave in and took it. She led him through the door. Instead of turning left the way they came in, she turned right, bringing him into a completely white room. There was one chair in the middle, a small stool next to it. There was a single smaller silver cart with needles, syringes, cotton balls, bandages, and small vials. She urged him to sit down on the chair, taking a seat next to him. He knew what was about to happen and tried to run, yet she was faster and stopped him by grabbing his hand. He screamed, hoping that someone heard it.

The door flew open as a middle-aged man walked in. He had a three-day stubble beard with short grey hair, a right prosthetic eye, and wore a black turtleneck sweater. On his left cheek, a scar, which scared Zach more than his glassy eye. He found comfort in the young woman's arms as he shrank back in fear, a fear he had never known tilled him. The man stood in front of Zach and smiled at him.

"Zachary, isn't it?" he spoke with a gravelly calm voice.

He looked up at the man, his lips trembling. How did he know his name? Had she told him? Then he noticed the woman holding a piece of paper with his name written on it. She was too late to hide it, which made the man chuckle slightly.

"I'm Mr. Ashwell. I know what you went through on the streets." He knelt to be at Zach's eye level. "I'm sorry for your loss, Zachary, but I promise you that we'll take good care of you. You're safe here, they won't be able to hurt you."

They? Who are they? Zach had no idea who started the attack, which reason was behind it. He watched as the man took the syringe from her, adjusting the needle to extract a transparent liquid from the small vial.

'Do you know why I don't let you take any injections, Zachary? Because they're not good for you, they'll hurt you. Trust your own body and what it's capable of,' that's what his mother told him each time she refused to let a doctor inject him with something unknown. And so, he shook his head.

"My mummy doesn't want me to."

The man smiled sincerely at him as he put the syringe back down. He looked directly into Zach's eyes. Out of his pocket, without breaking eye contact, he took a device. There were no buttons, it was a simple thing. A small green screen at the top, CRISIS written at the bottom. The same letters he saw on the Trooper's back. Before he knew what was about to happen, the man held the device against his forehead. A loud beep came out of it, his throat tightened because of it. The man slowly turned the device towards him.

Infected. That's what the green screen said. Infected with what? Was he sick? The colour drained from his face as he had no idea what it meant.

He wasn't exactly taught how to read yet, but he somehow could decode the word. His mother used to say he was too smart for his age.

The man patted his shoulder gently. "No need to worry, Zachary. We'll make you better. This injection will assure you don't get sick."

He looked back at the needle once more. He nodded slowly before he turned his head away. He didn't want to look as the needle went into his arm. He smelled alcohol, a swab that cleaned his arm before the needle went in. A tiny hint of a tingle rushed through his arm as he felt the needle. When he looked at his arm, there was now a small plaster.

"Good job, you're such a brave boy," he said, putting the syringe down. Then, reaching back into his pocket, he took out the bracelet Zach had dropped earlier. Zach snatched it from his hand, holding it against his cheek to smell his mother's perfume.

He looked at the man who gave him a sincere smile. He then took Zach's hand and guided him away from her. For a second, he didn't want to leave her as she had a friendly face, but he also didn't want to stay anywhere near her. She was still a stranger, and his mother had always told him not to trust kind strangers. Then again, so was he.

The man guided him towards another room, looking similar to the first one he was in. The only difference was that there was a big screen on the wall. He sat him down, squeezed his shoulder, and left without another word. The lights turned off; the room was completely dark. An uncomfortable sense of vertigo washed over him, even though he was sitting solidly. The uneasy feeling blossomed slowly into outright dread.

What are they gonna do to me? was all Zach could think of. He had to get out of there. They didn't tie him up, he wasn't a prisoner. He could just walk out of that dark room. If he managed to find the door. He got up, trying to find the door with his arms stretched out. He used to be afraid of the dark, but his fear of not knowing where he was or what would happen overpowered that. It was downright terrifying to be put into a room without any explanation. An onrushing sense of claustrophobia made him spin around the room as he was unable to find a way out.

A five-year-old who just lost his mother, alone in a dark room. That thought made him tremble from fear. It was as if the room had no end. No matter where he went, there were no walls. It was an empty void of blackness. He couldn't even walk back to the chair, for it seemed to have disappeared. Trepidation was what he felt to the core.

A light turned on; the screen lit up. He turned around and stared at it, slight awe overtook his mind. What were those colours he saw? Who was that little puppet that appeared? He seemed hypnotised, walking back to the chair. His big brown eyes gawked at the puppet boy.

"Hey there, Zachary! My name's Mr. Giggles! We'll have so much fun together!"

Fun. He remembered that he used to play in the backyard with his dog, nothing but a carefree life as a kid.

"Why don't you tell me your age?" the overly enthusiastic voice asked him.

Age. He remembered his last birthday party. His mother bought a truck for him, one he played with until bedtime.

"Five," he answered.

He remembered the big five on his cake, lit with a small flame that he was supposed to blow out. Today was his birthday, and he wasn't able to extinguish the little flame. Just as he wanted to do that, the alarms blared, and his mother ran to their bunker. Not arriving there in time.

"You're such a big boy! Now, you know what happened out there, don't you?"

Zach shook his head. He didn't know. How was he supposed to? Even his mother was at a loss when the alarms sounded. She told him nothing, only to run for safety. *Safety.* What even was the meaning of that word after what happened?

"Well, don't you worry! Those *aliens* won't get to you, you're safe in here. With me!"

He looked at the screen. *Aliens? Safe?* Is that why they brought him here? To protect him from what was lurking out there? Were they the ones who took his mother from him?

"What do *they* do? Those *aliens*?" he asked with a trembling voice.

He had never heard about *aliens* before. It was all rumours, fake. His mother told him that he shouldn't believe anything mentioned on the news. Such things didn't exist.

"They're the ones who got you infected, who made you sick."

He saw something right in front of him that didn't register with his brain.

An image appeared on the screen, portraying a video of weird-looking people. They couldn't even be called people. Bald heads, pointy ears, olive skin, and no nose. Only one nostril. They had the body of a human, yet their heads seemed unearthly. Additionally, his eyes fell on the five dark green capillaries crossing their bald heads. What were those things? Was it supposed to be hair?

"They're the reason your mother died," the boy puppet said with a voice that sounded much less child-friendly. A lot darker, eerie.

Zach didn't pay attention to it as hatred filled him. *They* killed his mother, those *aliens*. *They* attacked his home, destroyed everything he knew. Though, the image of his mother became less and less clear, started

to fade. He tried to grasp the memories, hold on to them, see her face, remember her name, his home. Oblivion was all he had left.

"Who are you, what's your age, and why are you here?" the boy puppet asked.

He stared at the screen, blinking rapidly. He felt a brief moment of calmness, he no longer stirred in his mind. He was at peace.

"Zachary, five years old." He looked at his feet, feeling a gap of emptiness in his mind. Though he couldn't give it a name. "You protect me from the *aliens*," he said, looking back up.

The boy puppet clapped his hands and disappeared. The screen turned off; the room became dark again. Zach was calm, he wasn't panic-stricken.

The door swung open, revealing Joanna. She smiled at him, extending her hand.

"Come with me."

He got up from the chair, walking over to her silhouette given life by the faint hint of light behind her. His hand found hers. He didn't walk with force this time, but with acceptance, and *free will*. The few steps he took brought him to a big iron door with no door handle to open it. Only a little device with buttons and numbers, a tiny yellowish screen at the top. She gracefully slid her card through, and two beeps followed. A not-too-loud clonk followed before it swung open. The metal door squealed as it scraped the floor.

She pushed him inside, the door slamming shut behind him. The gust of wind that the door caused reached his hair, his skin. It was a lovely cold breeze, even if it lasted only a second. He slowly turned around.

About fifty boys gaped at him. He saw dark-skinned boys, Asian boys, chubby boys, and slender boys. All kinds of body shapes, sizes, races, and ethnicities. Some wore glasses, varying lengths of hair, and diversified clothing. All sat at a long table, a tray of food in front of them. A salad, some chicken bites, and rice. He took the last free seat next to an Asian boy, sitting across from a slender boy with ginger hair.

The Asian boy, with short black hair, slid a tray towards him, filled with the same rations as all the other ones. A bell sounded, chiming as a hand-held brass bell. The boys all began to eat. It almost looked like they had been waiting for his arrival. The sense of normalcy he felt was replaced by a small convey of confusion that found its way to his brain, but it was soon replaced by genuine hunger. Zach's hand took a hold of the food provided, chomping into it, consuming as much as he could, for he had no idea how long it'd take before he could eat again.

CHAPTER TWO

Someone shook him awake. His eyes snapped open, looking at the Asian teenage boy staring down at him. All around them were tiny beams of lights coming through the sheets of the fabric of the tent they slept in. Early morning. He sat up as the Asian boy grabbed his gear, checking his gun to ensure its accuracy.

"Come on lad, we're already bloody late."

The tent was cleared out, all beds were empty. *Late, again. Sarge won't like that*, Zach thought. He tied his boots. He was halfway done when he got his pack thrown at his guts. He looked up at the Asian boy, annoyed.

"Oi! Could've taken my balls out with that."

The Asian boy suppressed a laugh, opening the tent. "You could do with some new ones. Girls around here got bigger balls than you."

Girls. He hadn't seen one in ages, only Joanna. And she was a *woman*. He vaguely remembered the contours of a blonde girl's face, someone he played with when he was younger, now nothing but a faint remembrance. He followed the Asian boy outside.

The *Brome* – that's what they called it – a khaki tent constructed with a wooden entrance, sandbags on both sides for protection.

"Cinderella finally decided to join us?" a raspy voice called out.

Zach turned his head towards the pointed-chinned Caucasian teenage boy with the hooked nose. He ran his thick fingers through his unruly dark blond thatch of hair. "Cheery as always, aren't you, Seb?"

He wasn't as big as Zach, indicating he could easily take him if needed.

"The day I'll be cheery to see you is the day you need to put a bullet through my head." His scratchy voice sounded so low and cruel. Almost comical.

Charming. Zach never liked Seb. He hated him the second he met him, and that feeling stayed for as long as he could remember. The Asian boy clapped him on the shoulder before steering him away from Seb.

"Thanks, I was this close to honouring his wish."

The Asian boy laughed, shaking his head. "Best not to waste your bullet on a squander like him."

Zach had an uneasy grin, following him towards the training compound, a wide field with a lawn, obstacle course, courtyard walls varying with stone walls and mud-brick walls, a cemetery, – which they called *Boney* – and a river.

"Zachary, Samuel, delighted of you two to join us."

Zach nodded; unease settled in. Sergeant Lawrence was known for his punctuality, and his strictness in punishing those who weren't. "Sorry, sir. It won't happen again."

Sergeant Lawrence nodded, turning towards the group, a quick movement of his head motioned for them to stand in line. "As you all know, the *aliens* are multiplying. Our fortifications have thus far managed to keep them at bay, but the clock's ticking."

Right, *aliens*. That's what they called them. Even though they destroyed the world, it seemed unpleasant to designate them like that. He had a hard time grasping the true purpose of their wrongdoings, dimly remembering that he was saved by CRISIS, the organisation they stuck with. He had no idea what the letters stood for, and frankly, he didn't know if he wanted to know. Yet he wondered for the millionth time what his past was before he arrived here. He knew he had a mother, yet he couldn't recollect her face or her voice. It was a blank canvas; it was as if she never existed. *I've got a mother*, he kept repeating in his head. *We all do*.

He got pulled out of his thoughts by various murmurs between the A-Squad members.

"We're sick of those injections and tests, we wanna venture out there and fight!" the brawny teenage boy with side shaved hair said. He was bigger and quirker than all of them, lacking brain capacity. Brute force, that was his game. And he was the oldest too.

"Calm down Matthew, all in time. You've all consummated your training, which denotes there's authentically only one last test needed."

One last test, he thought, *that's what they always tell us*. He looked sideways at his fellow Troopers, hints of agreement and disagreement written on their faces. Aside from the injection, he knew they'd have to run the course one last time. *It was tradition*. Sergeant Lawrence stepped aside, shifting his attention to their assignment. Grunts of annoyance came out of the boys' mouths. They tossed their guns aside, dumped their packs, and lined up; a row of Troopers on both sides gawking at Sergeant Lawrence.

Zach stood next to Seb, knowing this would be a competition run. Seb glanced at him like a ferocious animal on its way to freedom. He swallowed; his heart sank. He'd have to pray for a lifeline, to surrender. Though he wasn't going down without a fight, without trying.

"You're going down," he snarled at Zach.

Sam ambled up to Zach, clapping his shoulder. "No pressure, but we're all counting on you to show him who's the boss."

"I'm the boss," Seb spat, "and you know I'm bloody right, squinty eyes."

Sam pointed at Seb's chest. "Watch your mouth, fugly."

They had a go at each other's throats, cheered on by the other boys. Zach tried to separate them, rewarded with an elbow straight in the face. He got pulled up to his feet, roughly without proper care.

"Stand down!" Sergeant Lawrence yelled.

Seb and Sam broke apart, both none too happy about what went down. Sam's face showed an odd mix of proudness and horror, whereas Seb was fuming. "You better make up your mind on who you want as your friend, and who as your enemy," he growled.

He stormed off, pulling a chubby teenage boy with him, the youngest of them all.

"Sorry, sir," Sam said, wincing. He pressed himself against the back of the wall as hard as he could as Sergeant Lawrence marched up to him, his posture menacing.

"It has been ten years since you started training together, yet I'm developing despondency for how exceedingly bad you lads are at being a team."

That epiphany made Zach realise that ten years had passed since he got here. *Ten years*. It all went by in a blur. He woke up at 6:00 a.m., went for a morning jog, came back for training, ate dinner, and went to sleep. A vast routine. Every month they got an injection, important to keep the infection at bay. As claimed by CRISIS, the infection went from physicality to airborne, but be that as it may, no one had gotten infected yet. They found out by analysis, not by actual physical proof. So far, no one distrusted CRISIS or President Ashwell, though a part of Zach did. But why was there this feeling of scepticism? Why did he eradicate the reassuring thoughts he woke up with every single day?

"Back to your tents you go. We'll handle the final test tomorrow."

Sergeant Lawrence stepped away from Zach, watching as the other boys saluted him before he retreated.

Sam walked over to him, jarring him out of his thoughts. "Never a dull day in camp, eh?"

Zach shook his head. "No, never."

Sam wrapped his arm around Zach's shoulder as they left the course. He had an *odd feeling* that something wasn't right, but didn't want to provoke the temper that at times flared up within Sergeant Lawrence.

"I'm gonna hit the shower, can I leave you alone for a minute?" Sam asked as he took his shirt off. "Not that you're gonna bugger someone by tweaking their ear."

Zach scoffed a little. "I ain't nothing like Seb."

Sam suppressed a laugh. "Course not," he said with a wink before he disappeared.

He sat down on his bed, looking at the tattoo on his wrist. *Twenty-four*. He was Trooper number twenty-four when he got brought in. He was at a loss for how many more boys existed out there, young teenage boys just like them. He only knew that the city was divided into ten zones, each holding two Squads of Troopers, consisting of ten boys. A simple math trick

showed there must be about two hundred boys out there, just like him. Despite trying to avoid thinking about it, his mind kept wandering back to the restless doubts. His brain was on overload as he tried to make sense of why those *doubts* kept creeping back. No sheer explanation.

“Penny for your thoughts?”

He looked up at the tall clean-shaven teenage boy who rocked a black tapered mohawk. He had always been the rebel of them all, his demeanour gloomy and ominous, his personality philanthropical once cracked. He sat down on his bed; his brow creased, looking him dead in the eye.

“Nothing in particular, just thinking.”

He flopped down on the bed with a heavy flump, cracking it with his tallness and muscles.

“Whatever you say, chap.”

He took his journal out, scribbling away like he always did. He was quite introverted, didn’t bother to be much of a talker. Zach laid down and stared at the Brome’s ceiling. Despite him thinking he wouldn’t be able to, he soon drifted off to sleep.

A cold hand clamped down on his mouth made him snap his eyes open, baffled at who did that.

“Shh, there’s a fight going on.”

It took a second or two before his eyes focused on who stood in front of him. It was Sam – his best friend. He leaned back on his heels, taking his hand away. “It’s Seb, bullying the hell outta poor Eddie.”

Eddie, the chubby boy with curls who was covered in acne. Zach felt sorry for how everyone treated him, still there wasn’t much he could do about it. If Sergeant Lawrence found out about him intervening, he’d have to sleep in the *Bin*. Their name for the prison cell Troopers would spend the night in when they broke the rules or got in trouble.

“Don’t tell me you’re too knackered to move,” he snickered. “Didn’t we make a promise to poor Ed?”

The last bits of the lingering haze of sleep he had faded as he sat up. “All right, keep your bloody hair on,” he scoffed, getting hoisted up by Sam. They snuck their way through the Base, zigzagging around a bunch of dogs that guarded the site.

“Get low,” Sam ordered as he went on hands and knees, crawling towards the cafeteria. Zach hesitated at first, wondering why this was necessary, but did as he was told. They stopped below the dusty window; Sam popped up his head first to indicate the severity of the situation. There was a red light flickering above them, following their movements, stopping, and continuing. *A camera? That was new*, he thought to himself.

"You see that?" he whispered as loudly as he dared, tapping Sam's shoulder.

Sam shushed him, too focused on the scene unfolding in front of them. The yelling coming from inside was a sub-current of a forecast. Zach had to see this with his own eyes, pushing Sam out of the way for space. He leaned forward until his nose touched the smooth cold surface of the glass. The thick-glassed window made it hard to apprehend the actual words used. It sounded more like tear-filled gibberish. Zach grew perfectly still, squinting, listening.

"What's wrong, fatty? Happy you didn't have to complete the test today? I bet your porky arse would still fail at climbing that wall."

Several barks of laughter came from inside, some sounded forced. Zach lowered himself, noticing how Sam's slant eyes were filled with hatred.

"We gotta teach that bugger to pick on someone his own size."

As he got up, Zach pulled him back down. "You wanna get killed? If Sarge finds you in there, you'll be sleeping in the Bin."

"Screw that. Rather risk a night filled with icy chills than let him have his way."

Before Zach could counteract, he took off. *Why's he so annoyingly stubborn?* he asked himself, rushing after Sam, only to find the door blocked by Matt and Nick, the dark-skinned teenage boy with strong arms and a broad chest. The only one who could rock a man bun.

"Trust us, we're doing you a bloody favour," Nick spoke, pointing at Sam giving Seb an uppercut. It was unavoidable. Alarms blared, sounding from all directions, and everyone knew what that meant. *The camera. It must've noticed something*, he told himself.

Matt and Nick bolted away at full speed, disappearing around the corner as Zach stood there frozen. He clamped his hands to his ears before he looked at the worn picnic table nearby and tilted it, hiding behind it as three Troopers stormed inside the cafeteria, breaking the group apart. He took small breaths through his nose, though his pumping heart needed oxygen desperately, his lungs screaming for air. Sam and Seb were both taken down to the Bin. Eddie stayed behind as the others returned to the Brome. Filled with certainty that it was safe to go in, the tall boy with the tapered mohawk cut him off, brushing past him.

"You okay, buddy?"

Amid ten years, Eddie found a friend in Josh, though he suffered from social anxiety. It was surreal to think that a rebel like him, was on edge with every communicative encounter, yet Eddie's sparkly personality helped him overcome such demons. Zach turned around, heading over to the Brome, knowing they wouldn't be fed for the day.

As he walked past the cemetery, he felt the sudden desire to stop by a certain grave. It was abominable to think that teenagers needed a place like that. He memorialised the day he was seven, and twenty young men were supposed to eradicate the *aliens*. Some never made it back. There was one boy who cared for Zach like a big brother. *Jonathan*.

He missed him. The day Joanna told him he had succumbed to his sustained injuries; was the day he swore revenge. He was only sixteen at the time of his death. It made him eager to join the Troopers, to do his name justice. Despite *knowing* what happened to Jonathan, he still had so many questions splintered in his mind, to this very day. It was hard to keep them straight when he spoke to Joanna, but she promised him he didn't suffer. Frustrated at best because he swore, he knew what losing someone felt like. His memory loss in that segment was baffling, more so because he knew it was lodged in there somewhere. Everything after his rescue was freshly stored in his memory, except for all that happened before that. He knew he had parents, everyone had, but he had no clear image of what they looked like, what their names were, where they were. All that was told to him, was that all of their parents died, wiped from existence.

He entered the cemetery, a small clearing about ten square feet, bearing only three graves. He stared at the grey gravestone.

"Jonathan," he read aloud. It was all the stone said, carved in with a dagger. He sat down in front of the grave. He craned his neck to look over the stone, to make sure he was all alone. His attention then shifted back.

"They bugged poor Ed again today. The lad never gets a bloody break around here." He sighed, touching the tattoo on his arm. "You're such a lucky bastard, never got any mark on you. Sam says we'll end up like numbers instead of names. Quite hard to believe, innit?"

But was it? he thought. There were always bullies around, and thus victims.

"Very."

He got up so hastily that he staggered back a step. The figure giggled, stepping into the final beams of sunlight. His ginger tousled taper cut looked as fine as ever. He stood there with his arms crossed, the scar on his forearm caused by a prank gone wrong. The boys liked daring one another, swaying Sergeant Lawrence into accepting it during the weekends. There was this one night where they dared him to kiss Seb, which went awry. Seb stabbed him, and the boys were forced to stop their little game.

"Didn't mean to scare ya," he said, jabbing a thumb over his shoulder. "But Eddie's asking for ya."

"Why?" *You know why*, he chided himself. Zach was known as the peacekeeper. A title he took quite literally. "Where's he at?"

"Went into the Prayhole."

Right, the Prayhole – that’s what they called the chapel. Some of the boys were religious, praying to whatever God was out there that they’d live to tell the tale to their grandchildren someday.

“Thanks, Alex.”

He nodded before they parted ways.

He stopped in front of the large wooden door that’d let him enter the concrete-blocked building. He stepped inside the small room. An illuminated space, small rays of light running via the window on the west side, the other side darkened by shadows. He found Eddie kneeling in front of the altar marking the centre of gravity of the room. He crouched next to Eddie.

“You’ve never believed in God, have you?” he asked.

A soft sniffle escaped. He cried. A stab of pain sliced through Zach’s chest. It was hard to compute why they were always after him. They were all in the same boat. Despite everything they all went through and witnessed first-hand, Seb chose to be a bloody arsehole.

“No, I don’t,” he answered after an awkward silence. “Never have.”

Not that he could *remember* anyway. Was he raised religiously? Was his mother a worshipper of God? Maybe, maybe not.

“Barely anyone does, maybe that’s why they hate me.”

Hate? How could anyone hate him? Sure, he was clumsy and never knew when to shut up, exhausting himself from trying to communicate with everyone, but he was no hateful person. He got tired of being hit by waves of hopelessness whenever Seb had a go at him.

“No one hates you. Some of us just don’t see the bigger picture.”

Eddie didn’t bother to look Zach in the eye. His eyelids fluttered briefly, trying his best to suppress the tears.

“What’s that bloody bigger picture then? ‘Cause I’m not aware of it.”

Zach sighed. How could one boy, shorter than Zach, cause so much despair? *Is it jealousy?* he wondered. *Is he timid?* Whatever his reasons, they weren’t pleasant.

“He doesn’t understand that God made us who we’re supposed to be. No matter what we look or sound like or how we act, He found the beauty within us.”

Eddie slowly turned his head towards Zach, stunned. “I thought you had no belief?”

Zach snickered, nodding slowly. “But you do.”

He felt his body itching with the desire to hug him, though laced with the lingering fear that he’d do something inappropriate, considering Eddie had an aversion to being touched. Zach wrinkled his nose up at the sudden smell of burning wood. That smell was lodged in his memory when he fled

the now destroyed city ten years ago. They both got up, rushing outside. Matt and Nick struggled to extinguish the obstacle course part from the forked flames. Zach was baffled by the complexity of the day's events unfolding after one another. His mind spun with the possibility that it was deliberately set on fire. A huge blaze made all boys stagger back. Sergeant Lawrence marched over to them, quenching the fire with ease. He looked over at the four boys standing there.

"Who did this?" his strict elevated voice asked.

The way he said that gave him a chill, suppressing his honesty. That's when Seb appeared, pointing his finger at Eddie.

"I saw him right before he entered the chapel, bloody bastard put oil everywhere."

That left Zach bewildered. He couldn't be serious. No idea what came over him, he treaded towards Seb. He held out a hand and pushed Seb in the chest. He stumbled backwards, grumbling furiously, but remained calm in front of Sergeant Lawrence.

"Alex's an eyewitness, he saw everything Eddie did before he went inside," he implied. Relief flooded his chest when Nick backed him up.

"I was out for a late-night jog when I saw Alex and Eddie talk. Didn't seem like there was any oil involved."

Seb grew panicked. "Shut your mouth," he murmured in a distant voice. He set off for the Brome at a brisk pace, indicating defeat.

"Go to your tents. No one comes out until morning."

The boys nodded, saluting as Sergeant Lawrence walked away. Matt swatted Eddie on the back before he and Nick were the first ones to head back. Eddie's jaw dropped slightly. He came so close to interrupting all of them but willed his mouth shut out of fear.

"Come on, buddy, let's hit the hay."

They went back to the Brome in silence at an equal pace. Both felt the leaded edge of sleep that entered their minds. The long day they've had, had finally caught up to them.

CHAPTER THREE

The sound of a brass wind instrument resonated through the Brome. Zach stirred in his sleep, refusing to open his eyes. He grunted as a pillow found its way to his head.

"Who did that?" he asked drowsily.

No one replied, dead silence filled the Brome. He squinted, his eyes trying to find the perpetrator, only to find himself completely alone in there. He sat up, looking straight ahead at Eddie's bed. A red stain. *Is that blood?* he wondered, rushing over to his bed; his heart leaping into his throat. He clasped the bloodied shirt between his hands, his muscles clenched. He sat there, motionless, dawn began to make its mark. The sky seemed to have lightened considerably even in the last minute or so.

They slept with ten boys in that tent, though there was no sign of any of them. Faint voices in the distance, further away from where he was seated. He recognised Sam's voice, and Alex's. He forced himself up and stumbled outside, finding a crowd gathered in the middle of the obstacle course. He walked over to the crowd, forcing them to disperse. He saw Eddie's body on the ground. A huge red stain formed on his chest; a dagger protruding from the same spot. He sank to the ground, defeated. *Who did this? Why did they do it?* he asked himself, looking up at the crowd.

When his eyes landed on Seb, he couldn't control his anger. But as he attacked him to the ground, he found himself on top of Jonathan. He staggered back until his back collided with his gravestone. Sweat dripped down his forehead. He looked at Eddie standing in front of him, his chest red. Next to him stood Jonathan.

"Why did you let 'em kill us?" Eddie asked, his voice distorted.

Zach was unsure of what to say next. He hadn't killed them, had he? *No, he'd remember that.* Jonathan's hands clasped around his throat, squeezing, choking Zach. He tried to break free, tried to get the clasped hands around his neck off him, to no avail, as he was much stronger than he was. Small ragged breaths escaped his throat while being held in a chokehold, and there was nothing he could do about it. His life flashed before his eyes. In the distance, the repeating sound of the bugle. *Is this the last sound I'll ever hear?* he wondered. The wonder didn't stay long. The last thing he saw was a bright white light, then darkness.

"Zach!"

A cold splash of water hit his face; his eyes snapped open. He sat up too quickly, hitting the bottom of the bed above him. They slept in bunk beds, five of them filled the Brome. He stared at Sam's face.

"You had quite the nightmare, didn't you champ?"

He wiped the sweat off his forehead, his eyes scanned Eddie's bed. *No blood.* Had it all been a dream? It felt so real. Sam elbowed Zach in the ribs. His face went white.

"Come on, everyone's waiting for you. Can't start without our star Trooper." He walked away from Zach, though the latter didn't follow. He turned back to face him, noticing how pale he looked. "You okay? Look like you've seen a ghost or something."

In a way, he had. *Thought* he had. A high-pitched snicker made Zach look up at the entrance of the Brome. Seb stood there, arms crossed.

"Come on slowpoke, beauty sleep time's over," he spoke, a squeaky sort of snort reached Zach's ears before he turned away, looking satisfied with his remark.

Something about him made everything look terrible. Sam's hand landed on Zach's shoulder, squeezing it for a second.

"You look pale, want me to ask Will to take a look at you?"

He shook his head. Will was their medic, a clever teenage boy, devoted to his role within the Squad. Something Zach admired about him. More so, he admired his hair. He had the best hair of them all, a honey blond pompadour.

Sam nodded at his response, offering his hand. "Come on then, don't wanna piss him off even more."

Him. Sarge. Zach could care less about him now, he wanted to see Eddie.

"Is Eddie okay?"

"Yeah, why wouldn't he be?" Sam asked with raised eyebrows. "Okay, apart from him being bullied last night, he's up and about cracking jokes like he normally does."

He's okay. He's freaking okay, he thought to himself, relief flooding his chest. He got up, slipped his shoes on, and followed Sam outside.

They were all waiting for him, just like they did yesterday. Sergeant Lawrence stayed silent this time, pointing at the woods in the distance.

"We've decided to swap the annual test course with a different one, made just for you lads."

A punishment for yesterday's events, he told himself, *that's what this was.* He could've known, yet he suppressed the thought that he'd go through with it.

He looked over at the top of the ridge, straight at the sickly trees that provided an environment for them to train in without ruining functional trees. He had been there before, absolutely despising the place.

Farther back, in the depths of the woods, were barely any trees left. No dense, healthy trees that provided oxygen. He was startled to realise

that he hadn't even looked at Eddie once. Was he scared to see his dreams mirrored on his chest, afraid to find out that he was injured? Whatever the reason, the marching footsteps of his fellow Squad members made him jump out of those thoughts. He felt a tap on the elbow.

"Come on, don't wanna be the leftovers," Sam joked, walking over to the new set of scenery, which inexplicably made Zach nervous. Though this course would be far easier than the other, his face bared his worry.

"We can do this," Sam reassured him. "You and me, like we always have."

"Right," Zach answered shakily, even though nothing could've been further from the truth. He didn't believe he could.

"Can you two poofers get married already?" Seb scolded, throwing in as much sarcasm as he could.

The boys surrounding them laughed hysterically at his comment. Zach had to suppress a groan, knowing Sergeant Lawrence stood right in front of them.

"Thank you for that unnecessary insight, Sebastian. Now, give me fifty."

All boys simultaneously threw their bodies on the ground, doing as they were told. Grunts and groans filled the area. Some struggled, like Eddie and the short, quite skinny teenage boy Ben, though everyone else seemed to do just fine.

"Back up on your feet, run five miles."

More groans left the boys' mouths as they ran in a line. Zach ran behind Sam, unaware of who ran behind him. His face hit the earth; mud covered his face.

"Better watch where you're going with those two left feet, cow," Seb said with a smirk, passing Zach.

"Come on, take my hand."

He looked up to see Nick's hand waving in front of his face. He grabbed it so Nick could pull him back up to his feet.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, just a little dirty."

Nick forced out a pathetic laugh. "Not only dirty, you bloody stink." He patted his back. "But cheer up, there's no girl to impress around here anyway."

Girl. There it was again, that word. Why weren't there any girls in the city? Of the places they travelled to, there were none, just filled with boys to the brim. *Were they extinct?* he wondered. There was no time to think as the whistle he heard in the distance told him he had been gone too long. Nick jogged further, forcing Zach to follow as he didn't want to be last. *Again.*

They arrived together; Sergeant Lawrence didn't comment on Zach's appearance as he addressed the Squad.

"Somewhere in these woods, there's a Trooper wounded, and it's up to you to find him. You'll drag his bloody arse back to us in stealth. Enemies will have you surrounded; you'll be shot at from all sides."

This was it, the final test. The jitters came creeping back like they never left. Someone threw a KSG at him, which he caught just in time. No idea who did that, he readied the gun, there was no point in throwing a tantrum about that anyway.

"On your marks, get set... Go!"

With a loud boom, the gas pistol went off. The boys darted away in different directions. He watched which direction stayed clear, and went that way with his heart pounding in his throat. They used dummies for these missions, though it was unknown in what state they'd find them in. Blown to bits, cut in half, a simple flesh wound, unknown until they'd find them.

He scanned the ground, knowing a true Trooper camouflaged himself to stay out of harm's way, even while wounded. He found a helmet, then saw two legs spread out near a scraggly tree. He sneaked closer; his gun ready. For all he knew, it could be the enemy.

As he rounded the corner, he saw a dummy that looked just like Jonathan, cut clean in half. Zach staggered backwards until his back hit another tree. This couldn't be his mission; the Trooper was said to be alive.

A gunshot in the distance, birds flew away in panic. *Did someone get shot? Weren't they the only ones out here?* he asked himself, worry creeping up inside him. He ran as fast as he could, then stopped.

A dead boar lay on top of a boy, his legs protruding from underneath its body.

"Can someone get this bloody thing off me?" he heard Seb ask, muffled.

He didn't think twice and removed the beast, freeing Seb.

"Thanks, I was being crushed by that son of a..." He looked at Zach. "Oh, it's you."

Zach noticed the huge scratch on Seb's arm. "You need to clean that, it'll get infected."

"Shut up, cow. I know that."

As he looked through his pack, he found nothing to help him. Frustrated, he threw his gun on the ground. Zach opened his pack, pulling out the medical equipment they needed. Seb snatched it from him. "I can do it myself."

Zach raised his hands in the air and stepped back, watching as Seb struggled.

"Screw you bloody boar!" he yelled, throwing the unopened bottle of alcohol towards it. Zach, trying to comprehend as he was approaching Seb, took the bottle, opened it, and looked at him.

"Stop being a selfish arsehole for once and accept my help."

Seb seemed to have no choice, and he knew that. An irritated groan came out of his mouth as Zach kneeled. Without warning him of the possible sting, he began to clean his wound. Seb bit his shirt, trying not to scream, though he was on the verge of crying. Zach could only imagine how much this must hurt.

"All done," he said, bandaging his arm. Seb looked up at him. A small hint of thankfulness flashed in his pupils. As he got back up, he asked the one question he hadn't asked yet. "How did he get you?"

Seb, about to thank him, swallowed his words as he got up. "Just like all those bloody things do, creeping up on you 'til you're below 'em." For some reason, he stared dead at Zach. "Why do you care anyway? Just so you can make fun of me back at camp, eh?"

Zach shook his head. "No, it could've ended badly. I wouldn't joke around about that possibility."

Seb's narrow eyes lit up with confusion, but before he could ask, Matt ran over to them. "Eesh, what happened here?"

Seb grabbed his gear, pushed past both boys, and left. Matt and Zach exchanged looks, both stayed silent. They parted ways to complete their mission. Zach had lost the urge to fulfil the mission and redeem himself fit for official duty, but he hadn't forgotten about why they did this in the first place. Annoyance crossed his face as he was disappointed with himself for thinking that way. He almost screamed in frustration but remained quiet. He had a job to do.

"You've all returned, very good," Sergeant Lawrence said, watching Eddie return last. He examined the bodies. "Most of these seem to be in a good condition. Good job, lads." The group cheered in unison once they realised what that meant.

"This calls for a celebration!" Alex called out.

Their spirits were raised, Zach's wasn't. He steered clear from the happiness as he knew they still had a blood test scheduled.

And as if Sergeant Lawrence read his mind, he addressed the crowd. "Calm down lads, all in time. Let's get you down to the LAB first." *The LAB, a chic word for what it stood for. Loimology Analysing Boardroom.*

Clear down heartened faces looked at Sergeant Lawrence before they all headed back to the Brome to prepare for the blood draw. As Zach was left alone with Sergeant Lawrence, he sensed a chance to ask for a solid answer to a question that he had for quite some time. And this time, he'd resolve to make him tell him.

“Sergeant, how come the injections aren’t permanent, even after all those years of redeveloping ‘em?”

He watched in anticipation as Sergeant Lawrence turned around slowly, a fake smile plastered on his face. “The infection mutates. And because it’s airborne, we can’t seem to find a way to destroy it for good. Not until we’ve killed every last one of them.”

Zach noted the darkish look in his eyes, reminding him of his nightmarish encounter a couple of years earlier. He saw the same darkish look in someone else’s eyes, but couldn’t picture the face. It almost felt like he was reliving it without knowing he did. That deadly look was a form of darkness he couldn’t describe.

With a muffled boom, both turned their heads towards where the sound came from. With a sudden jerk, Eddie showed himself as he had been hiding behind a tree. Seconds earlier he pushed himself into that upright position, before stepping into sight.

“Sorry! I didn’t mean to eavesdrop!” Eddie said, startled.

It was Eddie’s specialty to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. Zach didn’t dare to meet Sergeant Lawrence’s eyes, neither did Eddie; both looked down at the ground.

Sergeant Lawrence guffawed, crossing his arms. “Off you go, lads.”

He spoke the last word with a warning. Zach was now left with no answer to his question, annoyed with Eddie for being the one responsible. Complete silence settled over the two after Sergeant Lawrence walked away.

Eddie’s face scrunched up in confusion. “Why didn’t he punish us?”

Zach shushed him, putting a hand to his mouth. “Shut up,” he said. He didn’t sound annoyed, though not pleased either.

“Sorry,” Eddie murmured.

Zach pulled his hand away, almost in a trance, scanning the area. “Is there anyone else here?”

Eddie shook his head. “No, just me. I swear.” His gut clenched as he spoke those words.

Zach sighed while nodding, patting Eddie on the back. “Just don’t do it again, okay?”

Eddie faced Zach gravely, pure guilt written all over his face, a muted sliver of fear.

“Hey, it’s okay, really,” Zach reassured him. Though he couldn’t get Sergeant Lawrence’s eyes out of his head, laced with something dark. That gleam made him scared. He had to keep Eddie out of those worries to keep him safe.

He wrapped an arm around him and together they walked back to the Brome, where the first two were taken away for blood testing.

Will and Ben brushed past them, following the two Troopers.

Zach sensed the palpable excitement hovering in the tent, it was clear the boys were celebrating their so-called graduation. The second the four of them were gone, they threw their fists in the air. Zach sat down on his bed; he wasn't much of a partier.

He noticed Seb's creased forehead while glaring at him, yet Zach didn't bother to do the same. He just laid down, waiting for his call to go to the LAB, to see Joanna.

It didn't take long before it was his turn. He and Alex wandered after the Troopers who guided them towards the LAB.

"Always a surprise what y'all find behind that door, eh?" Alex said. He sounded ticked off. Despite his curiosity as to why, he didn't get the chance to ask, as they were separated.

They forced Zach into the smaller room to wait for his turn with only one chair to keep him company. The sudden eerie silence somehow gave him the creeps, though he had been in that room before, almost every month. *Why the nervousness?* he wondered. *A gut feeling, something felt off. Something was gonna happen, something drastic.* He didn't understand why he had those morbid thoughts about what could be the final blood test, what was unfolding behind that closed door.

He looked at the handle attached to it. If he wanted, he could just yank the door open and peek inside. In a second, he'd walk in himself. *Why bother.*

Panic flared in him, his gut screaming at him to get up and walk away, to warn the others. He had no reason to do this. *Stop, stop thinking for a second,* he ordered his mind, a queasy twist forming in his stomach. The door swung open; Alex walked out. Nothing seemed to be amiss with him, though he wasn't as cheery as he used to be.

"Zachary," Joanna's voice called out to him.

While drowning in a sea of confusion that he created in his mind, he stepped inside. There was a table in the left corner, on it were a microscope, multiple tubes of blood in a small rack, a couple of unused plasters, and labels. Next to the table, in the middle, was a knee-break chair. Next to that sat Joanna on a small stool. She smiled at him.

"My, you've grown in the last month, haven't you?"

She smiled at him, to which he forced himself to meet her smile evenly. He sat down and extended his arm like he always did.

"I'm tall enough, don't need any extra inches," he joked. He had to hide his worries and play along with the game.

"I remember the day you were brought here, such a tiny child with the cutest brown eyes." He felt the needle go into his arm, finding its way to his vein. "And they haven't changed a bit, still as cute as ever."

Some might say she flirted with him, but that was just her demeanour, her personality. When he met her, he was only five, she was about sixteen. And here he was at the age of fifteen, ten years later. She had to be at least twenty-six, if not older.

"There, all done." She gave him a plaster, then smiled. "I'm gonna miss seeing you."

He looked at her. *This was it? Never see her again?* "What do you mean?" he heard himself ask.

"You were always my favourite patient," she spoke absently, attaching the label to the tube, and putting it with the others. She stood there in front of the table, frozen. "The truth is in your blood," she spoke with a haunted and hollow voice before she held a gun to her head.

Before he could act, she pulled the trigger, the bullet went clean through her head. He watched as her body dropped to the floor, blood everywhere.

"No!" he cried out, seeing her lifeless body on the floor. He landed on his knees on the floor, crying. He crawled over to her, performing CPR on her, but to no avail.

The door swung open; Troopers rushed inside. As they saw the bloody scene, they dragged Zach away from her. "No! She's still alive, I can save her!" he yelled, trying to break free. "You can't leave her there! She's still breathing!" She wasn't, but he had the firm belief she was. He was thrown out in the rain, in the mud. He sobbed in a dishevelled heap, his grief pouring out in a flood of uncontrollable tears.

"Sheesh, cry-baby, what got you all riled up?" he heard Seb scoff. His eyes noticed the blood on Zach's shirt. "Whose blood is that?"

A mood of reserved shock came over him, he couldn't get that horrific image out of his head.

"Zach, whose blood is it?" Seb asked again, angrier this time.

Zach looked up at Seb, his lip trembling. His mouth was too dry to swallow, wishing he had some water to take a sip. He mumbled something, indecipherable. Seb grew agitated and didn't bother to be polite about his ways of getting an answer from Zach. Until he spoke with deep breaths.

"Jo... killed herself... in front of my eyes..."

Seb gasped, stumbling away from Zach. Even he liked the woman, everyone did. She was gentle, and caring. He kneeled next to Zach. And as much as he didn't want to, Zach found himself in Seb's arms, sobbing uncontrollably. Normally Seb would've pushed him away, but he didn't this time. He wrapped Zach in a hug. They sat on the ground, getting soaked through by the rain, but neither cared.

CHAPTER FOUR

A chorus of questions filled the air, murmurs from all sides, Troopers milling about with sorrowful looks, solemn faces. Zach sat on the bed, still covered in her blood, eyes red and puffy.

"What do you mean shot herself? Why did she do that?" Matt asked, demanding answers.

Seb raised his hands in the air. "Don't ask me, I wasn't in the room with her. Zach was."

It sounded like an accusation, though it wasn't meant as one. Seb knew Zach wasn't a cold-blooded killer. Not even the slightest hint of doubt crept into his mind, he was certain about that. Though Zach wasn't paying attention to what was being said; he was stuck in a traumatising trance.

"He didn't kill her, did he?" Nick asked, shocked.

"Course not! How can you even bloody think that?" Sam jumped up, ready to defend Zach at any given time. "He cared just as much about her as we all did."

"Let's just wait on an official statement of the Troopers," Ben spoke, running a hand through his slick back blond hair.

"As if they're gonna tell us anythin' like that," Will answered. "This will be an official investigation, and Zach's the main suspect."

"Says the medic who has zero experience with politics," Josh scoffed.

"Like you know anything about either, Joshua," Will replied, arms crossed.

"Don't use my full name, tits."

"What did you just call me?"

The two were about to go at each other's throats until they heard a thud. As they turned around, they found Zach on the floor. His eyes were closed, seconds earlier they rolled up into his head.

Will kneeled next to him for an examination. "Make some space!" he yelled as everyone rounded up around Zach. His body seemed rigid, nothing but his chest moved. "I need some water!"

Sam leaped into action and grabbed his canteen, giving it to Will with a trembling hand. He wet a rag, placed it on Zach's forehead, and checked his breathing. About two minutes later, he shot up in a sitting position. His eyes snapped open, blinking rapidly. His eyes darted back and forth, and he sucked in a huge breath.

"Easy, you're okay," he heard Will tell him calmly.

He noticed he was surrounded by all of them, though he had no idea what happened.

"Let's get him up," Matt said. He felt two hands under his armpits, lifting him. They sat him back down on his bed.

"Took quite a nasty fall, might have a bruise or two in the mornin'," Will said.

"Attention Troopers, there's an emergency meeting at the Salute. I repeat, there's an emergency meeting at the Salute."

The Salute, a word made up by Sarge for the bigger building east from the terrain. Barely used.

"I'll go ahead and tell 'em we're with one man less," Nick offered before leaving. The others followed suit, there wasn't much they could do anyway. Seb lingered behind, shaking his head, going with the others. Only Sam and Eddie stayed behind.

"You okay?" Sam asked, obviously concerned and shocked.

Zach nodded slowly, though that nod was a lie. He was far from okay. He felt all of his joints complain due to the earlier rough pull-up. Or maybe it was from the nasty fall, hard to tell.

"I'm weak..." Zach whispered, though loud enough for Eddie and Sam to hear. They both shook their heads simultaneously.

"No such thing as that, mate. You went through something traumatising, all of us would react the way you did," Eddie reassured him supportively.

Traumatising. Deep down, he experienced that before. But couldn't remember. Why couldn't he remember? He sat dumbfounded as he couldn't shake the odd feeling that it felt like a *déjà vu*.

There was complete silence in the Brome, even around it, as if the wind swept through the area, drew out all the sound. Sucked out, might be a better description for the eerie silence that hung in the air. He was glad that he wasn't alone. Sam was the voice of reason, Eddie the calming presence. That's why he liked them so much, they *completed* him. He looked down at his hands, the veins practically popping from his skin as he clenched his fists. He couldn't conquer the agony he felt, let alone the frustration.

"They want us in," they heard Josh's emotionless voice tell them.

Sam's eyes narrowed. His mouth pulled into a tight grin. "You tell 'em that we ain't going anywhere. Can't they understand that he needs time?"

Josh shrugged. "Don't say I didn't warn you." He left without saying another word.

"We stay here, no arguments, no questions asked," Sam spoke determinedly. "Ain't no way I'm letting you walk there and pretend nothing happened."

"I can decide for myself," Zach replied with a slight hint of annoyance, yet he knew Sam meant well. It wasn't meant to sound the way it came out. Sam nodded and raised his hands in the air, then walked out. It was clear that he wouldn't argue with Zach, at least not now.

Eddie wanted to speak but was silenced by Zach shaking his head. He didn't want to hear it. "Come on then," he said, extending his hand.

Zach took it and together they headed over to the Salute.

All eyes were on Zach the second he stepped inside. He ignored their stares and walked over to where Sam was. Sam remained quiet, refusing eye contact.

Sergeant Lawrence cleared his throat. "Good, thank you all for attending. Now, as you all have heard, there was an unfortunate event that occurred earlier this evening. It's with great sadness to announce Joanna's death. We'll bury her tomorrow at dawn before we continue with our lab tests. We've already appointed a new doctor who—"

"I beg your pardon?" All eyes turned to Zach as he blurted that out. "How can you act like she's replaceable? With all due respect, sir, but that's cold-hearted."

Sergeant Lawrence walked over to Zach, his posture threatening. Zach showed no fear, yet he felt it building up inside.

"I didn't say that, Zachary. Don't put words into my mouth. Besides, we still haven't had a one-on-one talk since it happened. So, if there's anything you'd like to share about what happened in there, now's your chance."

Is he serious? he asked himself, *it sounded like an accusation.* All of his Squad members were now spectators, holding their breaths. No one said anything, an uncanny silence.

"He didn't do it," he heard Seb say. "The state I found him in wasn't just a shock, he was truly traumatised. I've seen tons of stages Troopers can be in after they murder someone, this wasn't one of 'em. The cry baby's innocent."

Of course, he had to end with an insult, he thought. Though he had to admit it was the first time he agreed with what he heard come out of his mouth. Until the last bit. He didn't know whether or not to look at Seb and mouth him a *thank you*. He ended up not doing it. Still, it was nearly impossible for him to grasp the fact that he stood up for him. *Seb, of all lads.* He too realised that such an accusation wasn't right, not after what he had just gone through.

Though Zach's gut clenched as Sergeant Lawrence approached Seb. *He's gonna punish him.* Zach had a consuming urge to just run away even though Sergeant Lawrence was no longer standing in front of him.

"So, he's telling the truth? She killed herself?" he prodded.

Before Seb could speak, a Trooper came inside, whispering something in Sergeant Lawrence's ear. "Looks like we've got an autopsy report." He turned back to Zach. "Follow me, Zachary."

Zach left with him, everyone watched with bated breath. He felt a quick pat on his shoulder, presumably from Sam, before he left all of them behind in the Salute.

As they arrived in the morgue, the *Death Den* – as they deemed it – Zach had to stand in the far-left corner. He saw the tall bald man bending over her body, sending chills down his spine. He stared at her still opened bright blue eyes, the bullet hole straight in her forehead, dried blood surrounding it.

“Yes, fascinating,” he heard the bald man speak, his voice higher-pitched than he anticipated. “As if she knew where to shoot.”

He heard Sergeant Lawrence sigh, leaning against the cabinet.

Zach had never seen the bald man before, but he looked creepy. His pointy nose was practically touching her cheek while examining the fatal wound, a huge mole on his right cheek as he turned to look at Zach. He stared into the man’s round eyes, feeling as if he had seen him before. He was unable to connect memories to his face, which drove him insane. *Why does he look so familiar?*

“You must feel terrible,” he told Zach, holding the bullet in his hands. “She practically raised you, didn’t she?”

Sure, she had been there for him when he had to be tested, but he wouldn’t call it raising. If anything, both were forced to do what needed to be done, that much was clear from her warning before she killed herself.

“Did she say *anything* before she died?” he heard Sergeant Lawrence ask.

That sounded sinister, almost like they were afraid she did, he thought to himself. He shook his head, hoping that his act of innocence was believable enough for them to lay off.

“No, nothing.” His eyes darted back to how she laid there, a horrific image he wouldn’t be able to erase from his memory anytime soon. As the tall man bent over her once more, he looked pretty ridiculous the way his tall frame appeared, *almost like he was a half-goblin*. That thought made him snicker, though he didn’t anticipate to.

“Something funny, Zachary?” he heard Sergeant Lawrence ask.

“No, sir.” He hoped that his shaky voice didn’t betray his lie.

As the tall man touched her in inappropriate places, he wanted to scream to leave her alone. He didn’t, for he knew he’d be thrown in the Bin.

“You’re dismissed,” Sergeant Lawrence said emotionless.

Zach nodded and saluted him before leaving. The second he stood outside, he took deep breaths, inhaling the fresh air. It smelled awful in there, reeked of death, which wasn’t weird with it being a morgue. Still, he lost his appetite for the day.

He arrived at the Brome, hearing muffled conversations. He waited before entering.

"All I'm saying is, we can't rely on him in the field now."

"Belt up, Matt, he's not deemed unfit for duty. It was a tragic event that he'll learn how to deal with eventually. Don't rush him into anything."

Of course, Sam. The only one who cared enough to go against anyone.

"As if he'll ever recover from this. Remember how long it took for him to get over Jonathan? The lad's a wreck, unreliable. He might get us killed."

"Pipe down you bloody bugger, you know you're talking bull."

"Yeah? We'll see about that when the need arises."

Before they could have a go at each other's throats, Zach stepped inside. They watched him in mute contemplation as they realised, he had heard everything. He laid down on his bed without saying anything. The others stayed silent, waiting patiently for dinner time.

Someone gripped his shoulder without warning him. He shot up in a sitting position, his head colliding with Josh's. He shushed him before releasing his grip on Zach's shoulder. As he looked around, the Brome was empty.

"The others are eating, figured we'd let you rest. But there's something I gotta show you."

Zach slipped on his shoes before heading outside, looking at Josh who motioned for him to follow him. While crouched, Zach went over to him. He nodded at Josh for confirmation he was doing okay before they moved forward, straight through the obstacle course towards the LAB.

"Don't make a sound," Josh ordered Zach before opening the louvre to enter the vent.

We're gonna get in trouble for this, was all Zach could think about. Josh disappeared into the darkness via the mere eight-inch-by-nine-inch opening. He looked around to make sure they weren't followed, before sliding in after him.

The ventilation shaft dropped vertically for about ten feet, then turned a right-angled corner where Josh stopped Zach. He pointed down at the vent grille they stood on. Footsteps below confirmed someone was coming. Fear tormented Zach, his hands and forehead beading with sweat because of the dampness of the vent.

"How are the results looking, Clifford?" a dark, haunted voice spoke.

Clifford. That name doesn't ring any bells, Zach thought to himself. The bald head that appeared right underneath the vent grill, however, was one Zach recognised immediately. It was the man from the morgue.

"It's strange, one of them came back negative. No improvement on his stamina."

"How's that possible? I thought we upgraded the formula?"

Whose voice is that? he wondered. *It's not Sarge's...*

"I don't know, sir, no one else knew about it."

"She knew." He sighed. "That's why she killed herself." Out of anger, he threw a stack of papers on the ground.

"Calm down, sir. Think of your heart."

Heart? he thought, *that has to be some sorta heart condition reference.*

He stilled himself. "Just... tell me whose results came back negative. We'll deal with her situation later."

"Trooper thirty-three, sir."

Trooper thirty-three... thirty-three... he repeated. *Who's thirty-three?*

"How unfortunate, such a smart young man who had lots of potential. The other results are good enough for us to continue?"

"There are no further deviations thus far. It seems to be working the way we anticipated with the others."

Trooper thirty-three... Who the hell's thirty-three? It was maddening, almost like he had a short circuit in his brain.

"Prepare the lethal injection. Make sure he feels no pain."

Forty-one is Seb, Josh is twenty-nine... Zach's jaw dropped. *Sam. They're talking about Sam.*

Before Josh could stop him, he was crawling through the shaft as fast as he could. He had to reach Sam before they did. He had no idea why they wanted Sam dead, he barely understood anything they were saying. The only things that kept repeating in his head were the words *lethal injection* and *Trooper thirty-three*. Sam, his best friend, would die if he wasn't fast enough.

Then, the mention of Joanna made him stop for a second. Her death wasn't a coincidence. She saw the results before they did. *What did she say again...?* He dug deep into his mind. *Come on, think! Think...* Panic flooded him as he couldn't retrieve her warning. How much deeper did he have to dig? What did she say to him before she ended her life? *Truth, something about truth...* It had to be on the edge of his mind.

Then a light went off. *The truth is in the blood.* He remembered. *That's* what she told him.

He crawled out of the small opening and as he got up, he almost fell down a small gap, staggering because his legs were wobbly from fear. He reached out, caught hold of a monkey bar, and swung himself forward to regain his balance.

"Zach!" he heard Josh yell behind him, but it wasn't stopping him from heading towards the Brome. Every second counted.

"Sam!" he yelled, running inside. The others looked up startled, Eddie threw his book across the room from fright.

"Calm down wazzock, the hell are you throwing a tantrum for?" Seb asked displeased, almost like he growled when he spoke.

So much for his kindness and short attention span, Zach thought. Though he quickly shifted his attention back to the problematic matter at hand.

"Where's Sam? Has anyone seen him?"

"Yeah, Trooper's picked him up two minutes ago," Ben spoke, not looking up from his journal. "Why? What got you all riled up?"

"They're gonna kill him," Zach said, no use in beautifying the truth. "He's dead if we don't find him."

Seb laughed hysterically, cackling, slapping his knee as he shook his head. "The lad's gone mad. I told you he was crazy."

Josh finally caught up with Zach, panting as he wasn't in the same condition as Zach was. "It's true, I heard it too."

"Seriously? Of all people, you drag poor Joshie into your absurd conspiracies? You need to get laid man, I swear," Seb continued.

"Just please, listen to me," Zach said. "I know I sound like a lunatic, but you must believe me. There's something wrong with his blood. I overheard the man from the morgue talking to someone who said that—"

"Put a bloody sock in it, mate, you're talking gibberish."

No one seemed to have Zach's back at that point, even Eddie was quiet.

"I swear to you, something's whacked. We just gotta get Sam outta there and—"

The night bell sounded, way earlier than normal. That must be a sign.

The boys were all seemingly confused, yet no one believed a word of what Zach and Josh just claimed. They went to their beds, preparing for the night ahead.

Zach held back his tears, he couldn't believe no one cared enough to look past the by *them* claimed stupidity of his accusation.

Sam's not gonna die tonight. He won't, he told himself. *Not on my watch.* He took his rifle.

"You're such an airhead," Seb scoffed.

Zach looked straight at him; his face filled with determination.

"Maybe, but at least I'm a real Squad member, and I uphold our oath. Squad goes in, Squad comes out. *All of us.*" With that, he left the Brome, his mind focused on the task ahead.

CHAPTER FIVE

Where are they holding him? In the Bin? In the LAB? he wondered. He crouched while moving forward, walking as stealthily as he possibly could to avoid being detected. His eyes scanned the corners of the walls to look for cameras, trying to do everything he could to not be caught. A bright flashing red light caught his attention, a camera that saw something. His only way out was traversing through the woods. He sneaked towards the outskirts of the woods, close to the tall sparse trees that everyone deemed creepy.

It was dense, the fog hung low. The air was no longer pleasant, it was humid, stiffening his lungs. He felt the urge to cough but withstood it. He noticed the searchlights turning on, sweeping the ground right in front of the camera where he stood seconds ago. Normally he would've thought that his mind was playing tricks on him, but this was all too real. He had to get out of there.

He wasn't wearing his Trooper outfit, which was a higher risk to get caught.

He sprinted towards the thick copes of trees, the same area where he had been earlier that day. The woods were about two acres, the trees were tall, looming over him with their sturdy trunks. Sun nor moon would be able to shine through the canopy of leaves. He peeked through the heavy foliage; the cameras were still searching for him. *Trapped like a rat*, he thought, his eyes scanning the thin branches in front of him. A beetle walked over a branch as if he was the only one in the world. *Freedom, no fear of a death sentence by blood. What a life.*

He got back up on his feet, the leaves and fallen twigs crunching underneath him as he sneaked away, further into the woods. His shortcut wasn't available, he had to be creative. This was the only way to keep his cover and reach the LAB. If any, that's where he should be. It was the only place they performed any kind of blood-related examinations; lethal injections weren't too different from that. The medical tent where he once spent the night in, was what they called the *Sicknic*, a combination of sickbay and clinic, but it wasn't logical for Sam to be there.

His eyes stayed riveted on the ground, keeping an eye out for any boobytraps left behind. *Typical Eddie to forget to clear his own*, he thought, sighing softly. *Gotta be careful.* It sounded as if he was morphing into Ben, the cautious nerd of the Squad with the scrawny neck. Spending so much time with people did make you mirror their personalities. *Not a good sign, most definitely not a good sign.*

A twig snapped somewhere to his left. The thoughts he had faded like they never existed, jerking his head to the left. He listened; his breath

stilled. He was too scared to make a sound. Another snap, sounding a lot closer than the first. He ducked behind the trunk of a large oak, his heart leaped into his throat, a tingle of fear that went all the way from his head to his feet, and back. He crouched, frozen, as if time stood still, rooted to the spot.

It grew silent, peaceful. He shouldn't get too comfortable; it couldn't have been an animal. *Wait, Seb was attacked by one earlier today*, he remembered. *Maybe it was an animal*. Calmness washed over him, but only for a split second.

He winced as a cold gust of wind reached his bare arms, goosebumps everywhere. An icy shiver ran down his back as he heard yet another snap of a twig directly behind him. The damp air in the woods caused sweat beading on his forehead, though it could very well be a direct cause of the fear he felt. *Maybe both*.

His consciousness felt detached, almost as if it got separated from his body after hearing that snap. Another twig broke, right behind him. He was too scared to turn around, afraid of who might be there.

"I come in peace," he heard Josh say, teasing.

Holy fudge. "You scared the crap outta me." He wasn't even afraid to admit that he was terrified. "Don't ever do that again."

"And miss out on all the fun? Nah, nor can do, mate."

He extended his hand to help Zach back up to his feet. He took it hesitantly, his legs shaky and unsteady. He clapped him on his back.

"Don't tell me you peed yourself?"

"No, almost though." *Shut up, dumbass*. "How did you sneak past the cameras?"

Josh smirked, showing him his small toolbox. "You know the answer to that, mate. I'm the master of stealth, remember?"

Zach rolled his eyes at him. *Master of stealth, my ass*. "We better keep moving. The longer we stall, the more Sam's at risk."

"Copy that."

Mentioning Sam brought Josh's seriousness back. Zach went up ahead, Josh followed after him, like true soldiers making their way through the battlefield.

They stopped at the edge of the woods, looking directly at the LAB.

"You sure he's in there? We only get one shot at this."

Zach shook his head. "No, which is why I think we should split up."

"You're a nutjob. You seriously think that's a good idea?"

"I don't see any other solution, do you?" he spat. "We can't teleport ourselves from one building to the other. Just trust me on this."

Josh sighed, then nodded. "Okay, where do you want me to go?"