

Books by Skye Lewis

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

THE ISLAND TRIALS

THE SEVERANCE CURE

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THE SEVERANCE CURE

A YA science fiction/dystopian novel by
Skye Lewis

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For my cat, the son I never dared hope for
For David Ashford, who saw my potential
For my nan, who passed away before she saw this book
For my proud grandad, I'll be forever grateful

CHAPTER ONE

Seated in a white chair, a young man thrashed about, desperately trying to escape his bindings. His grunts echoed hollowly in the vast room around him. The chair was cold and unyielding, its steel frame biting into his skin despite the thick padding that had been placed there. His wrists and ankles were bound tightly with rubbery straps that smelled faintly of antiseptic and fear.

His heart thudded in his chest like a drum that had lost its rhythm, each beat a staccato reminder of his racing thoughts. His eyes darted around the room, taking in the labyrinth of pipes and tubes that snaked along the ceiling, the gleaming metal surfaces of the counters, and the myriad instruments that hummed and beeped with a life of their own. The air was stale, recycled through vents that whirred and clicked. The walls were lined with cabinets filled with bottles and vials of every size and colour, their contents a mystery to him, though the promise of pain was unmistakable.

The doctor, a stern-faced man with short black hair and glasses that concealed eyes never quite meeting the young man's, bustled around the room. His lab coat billowed behind him like a cape. His movements were precise, almost choreographed, as he checked dials and made notes on a clipboard.

The doctor's name was Ralph Darach, a former associate of Duncan Ashwell. But the young man had come to think of him as *The Maestro*, conducting his twisted orchestra of science with a cold detachment that sent shivers down his spine. Ralph's voice was the only sound that pierced the quiet, a low murmur of words and numbers that seemed to dance in the air before dissipating into the void.

The last thing the young man remembered before waking up here was the sharp prick of a needle and the sensation of his world spiralling away from him like water down a drain.

The door to the lab swung open with a hiss, and a young man in a lab coat entered. He had green eyes that seemed out of place in this dystopian chamber of horrors. His spiky brown hair, combed to the side, gave a trustworthy feeling. The tiny piece missing from the top of his right ear made the young man wonder what had happened to him. The man approached the young man cautiously, as if he were a wild animal he didn't want to startle. "I'm Jonathan, Dr. Darach's assistant. And I know this all seems a bit scary, but you're in *good* hands." He tapped a nearby screen. "We're about to begin the first phase of the experiment."

The young man barely heard the words, swallowed by the harsh voice and the faint edge of something inhuman within it.

The chair began to recline, the restraint around his forehead tightening as the room tilted backwards. The lights above grew brighter, then dimmer, and his vision swam with spots. He felt a coldness spread through his body, starting at his toes and creeping upwards like a shadow.

"Just relax, it'll all be over soon." Jonathan's voice grew distant, the words turning into a comforting lullaby as the world around him blurred and faded into something fuzzy and indistinct.

The coldness gripped his heart, squeezing the breath from him. His eyes snapped open, and he saw Ralph standing over him, a syringe in his hand. The liquid within swirled in vibrant colours, pulsing with a life of its own.

As the needle descended towards the young man's arm, the room around him began to spin. He tried to scream, but the sound lodged in his throat, a silent cry that reverberated through his mind as the world faded to black.

When the young man awoke, the pain was searing. His muscles contracted, and his bones twisted as though being reshaped into forms that defied nature. His skin itched and burned, as if a thousand ants marched beneath it, rearranging his very essence. He could feel his body changing. It was growing, stretching beyond human limits.

The room remained the same, but his perception of it had shifted. The edges of everything blurred and sharpened in dizzying contrast. The familiar smells of antiseptic and fear were now overwhelmed by the coppery tang of his own blood and the sickly-sweet scent of something foreign.

The restraints held him in place, a cruel reminder of his captivity, as his body fought the transformation. His skin stretched tight over the shifting bones, and his teeth ached as they lengthened, pushing painfully against his gums. He felt his nails thicken, turning into claws that scraped against the armrests. The agony was so intense, he thought he might go mad, but the thought passed quickly, swallowed by the overwhelming tide of pain.

When the change was complete, the young man felt a strange sense of relief. The pain had subsided, leaving behind a heavy ache that pulsed through his body like a second heartbeat. He tried to sit up, but his new form was unwieldy, his movements jerky and uncoordinated. Looking down, he saw that his hands were no longer hands at all, but grotesque appendages ending in sharp, hooked claws. His eyes had transformed; the pupils now dilated into black voids that saw everything in harsh, unrelenting contrast. His body was covered in a patchwork of decaying flesh and torn clothing, his veins now pitch black, crawling beneath his skin like creeping shadows.

"How do you feel, Rory?" he heard Jonathan ask.

"*Reborn*," Rory hissed, his voice rasping through his new, jagged teeth.

"Good that," Jonathan replied. "Your vitals are stable. Tell me what—"

Rory began to struggle against the straps, desperation flooding through him. His breathing grew ragged, and just as he was about to let out a scream, his body convulsed violently.

The first flicker of fire ignited deep in his chest, a tiny spark that flared up into an inferno in an instant. His skin blistered, the smell of burning flesh overwhelming his senses. The chair beneath him began to smoulder, its plastic

and fabric warping and cracking under the intense heat radiating from within him. He watched, horrified, as his hands turned to ash before his very eyes. The flames crawled up his arms, licking towards his face.

The agony was beyond description. An all-consuming, searing heat that burned away every part of him. His screams were swallowed by the deafening roar of the flames, which now consumed his entire body. The pain was a chaotic symphony of sensation. His consciousness began to slip away, the room around him dissolving into a haze of heat and light.

Through the haze, he caught sight of Jonathan's face, which was a mixture of devilish delight and disheartened frustration. Jonathan seemed pleased with the results, but there was a flicker of something else, something dark and unresolved, in his eyes.

The fire vanished, replaced by an unbearable cold that seeped through his body, a void that seemed to devour him whole. Rory's muscles locked in place as the last of the flames flickered out. With a final, pathetic groan, the chair beneath him gave way. Rory crashed to the floor, his body now reduced to a charred, smouldering husk, the remnants of his former self barely recognisable.

The lab fell into an eerie silence, the faint *hiss* of cooling embers the only sound breaking the stillness. The air was thick with the stench of burnt flesh and plastic, mingling into a nauseating fog that clung to the walls.

Zack, a three-year-old with a mop of unruly hair, wandered the halls of the facility. His small hand trailed along the wall, fingers exploring the cold surface. His bare feet made no sound as he padded through the corridors, unaware of the horrors that lurked behind the closed doors he passed.

As he turned a corner, the acrid scent of burning filled the air, sharp and unsettling. He stopped, his nose wrinkling in confusion. The door to the lab where Rory had been transformed was slightly ajar, and through the crack, he could see the room beyond. Something no child should ever have to witness.

Rory lay on the floor, his body a twisted mess of blackened flesh and bone. The flames had long since ceased, but the stench of charred remains lingered in the air.

Zack took a tentative step forward, curiosity overcoming his fear. He had never seen anything like this before, and part of him wanted to understand, to make sense of the creature that had been created. His eyes widened as he looked at Rory's body, the smouldering embers of what had once been his flesh, layers of fine ash left behind. But it was the sound that truly terrified him. The crackling of bones as they calcified, turning from living tissue to something more akin to stone.

The horror washed over him in waves, each more powerful than the last. Tears filled his eyes, and his lower lip quivered as the weight of the situation settled in. The room around him seemed to close in, the walls pressing against him, and the floor grew unsteady beneath his feet. He stumbled backwards, slapping his hand against the doorframe.

A piercing scream escaped him when Rory's hand grabbed his leg. He kicked desperately, but Rory's hand remained unmoving, frozen in place.

"Help!" Zack cried, voice cracking. *"JJ, help!"*

The lights flickered, and the room grew darker. Zack's sobs echoed through the corridors as he stumbled and fell, scraping his knees on the unforgiving floor. He tried to turn and run as fast as his little legs could carry him, but Rory's hand, now a grotesque mass of bone and tissue, clung to him.

"Push the button, Zack," Jonathan's voice came over the speaker, cold and measured. *"Go on, I know how much talent you possess when it comes to pushing buttons. Remember what I showed you four months ago? Only you can push the button. Only you can stop this."*

Zack felt the same pressure Jonathan had placed on him back then, shaking his head repeatedly. *"No! Don't wanna!"*

Jonathan let out a loud sigh through the speaker. *"Don't make me hurt your Daddy."*

Zack cried louder, his tiny face scrunching up. *"Mean man!"*

"I can be way meaner if you don't do what I say. Push. The. Button."

Zack's hand hovered above the button, hesitating. He looked at Rory, whose eyes met his. Zack couldn't tell what his eyes were trying to say, but the thought of Jonathan hurting his father was more terrifying than anything else. With trembling hands, Zack pressed the button.

A large stone, attached to the ceiling by cables, came crashing down, pulverising what remained of Rory. White dust settled over Zack instantly; his tiny foot trapped underneath the rock.

He screamed in pain, tears streaming down his face so fast that his trousers were soaked.

Jonathan finally emerged from his hiding spot, walking over to Zack, who struggled desperately to free himself. *"Make pain stop!"* he whimpered.

Jonathan loomed over him. *"You continue to defy me as your caretaker. This is precisely where you belong right now. See it as a little loophole that'll grant you your freedom if you listen and do what I say."*

"Please," Zack begged, *"I pain!"*

Jonathan sighed, looking over at Henry. He waved him over, and as Henry lifted the rock from Zack's foot, Jonathan smiled. *"Like I said, earn it."* He motioned for Henry to drop it, crushing Zack's foot a second time.

Jonathan stood before Zack, bending down to his level. *"Listen, kid. I've already killed your Mummy, and I can kill your Daddy too. Don't make this any harder than it needs to be."* He slipped his finger under Zack's chin, forcing the boy to meet his gaze. *"So, next time I ask you to push the button, what's the one thing you gotta do?"*

"Push..."

"Good boy."

Jonathan turned on his heel, walking away without saying another word.

The pain in Zack's foot was unbearable, a white-hot agony that shot up his leg, searing through his very soul. He could feel his bones grinding together, the pressure unrelenting as his sobs filled the small room. He screamed again, his cries echoing off the walls. The tears streamed down his face, mixing with the dust and grime that coated his cheeks. His breath came in ragged gasps, each inhale a battle against the pain that threatened to swallow him whole.

The world around him turned into a blur of shadows, morphing into a jagged tomb of twisted metal and broken glass. The only light came from the flickering emergency lights above, casting eerie patterns on the floor as they danced in their death throes.

"Zack? Can you hear me?"

Zack heard an unknown voice reach him in his head, panic-stricken by how clear it sounded.

"Don't be afraid of me. I'm a friend of your Daddy. My name's Andy, and I'm here to help you. I've seen what you're capable of. You're a special one. And I'm special too. Now, listen to my voice, okay?"

Zack nodded slowly. The voice was far kinder than Jonathan's had ever been, and something inside him told him he could trust this person named Andy.

"Concentrate on my voice. Let it in."

Zack shook his head. "No, not know."

"It's already in you, Zack, it just needs to come out. Think about Daddy, okay? He's right here next to me and he loves and misses you so much. If you do this, you'll come home, I promise you that. But you gotta listen to yourself. Let it in. Set it free."

"Daddy?" Zack said, his heart lifting with hope.

"Yes, Daddy's right here. He needs you to be a strong boy. Can you do that?"

Zack nodded determinedly, feeling a strange warmth spread through his body. It began in his chest, a gentle glow that grew stronger with each beat of his heart. The pain in his foot lessened, replaced by a tingling sensation that spread up his leg and into his torso. He looked down, and to his amazement, he saw his skin knitting itself back together, the bones beneath realigning with a sickening crack. The rock that had held him captive began to shift; the weight lifted as if by some unseen hand.

With a final push, Zack managed to wiggle his foot free from the rock's grip. He rolled onto his back, panting heavily, his eyes wide with shock and disbelief.

The warmth grew stronger, the glow now visible to his own eyes, pulsing in time with his heartbeat. It was as if a switch had been flipped, and now, instead of fear, he felt something else. Something powerful and fierce.

He stood, legs trembling, and stepped forward. The pain had vanished, replaced by an unfamiliar strength surging through his veins.

"Good lad. Don't tell the bad man about this, okay? It'll be our little secret."

"Okay."

Those were Andrew's final words to Zack before their connection ended.

CHAPTER TWO

Sam shifted in his bed. He felt a darkness around him as if the air turned solid, pressing on him as though to kill him. His eyes snapped open as he imagined himself in a wooden box, buried like his girlfriend. The horrible cube of splintery construction pierced his mind.

A faint light entered the room, falling on Seb's and Tim's faces. The lumps of dim shadows around them made it seem as if they were surrounded by the souls of the people they couldn't save, but Sam blinked it away, rubbing his eyes.

Hearing Seb's and Tim's soft breaths, he knew they were still in a deep slumber.

He exhaled a deep breath, lying back down onto his pillow. His razor-edged nerves settled down slowly as he took from underneath his pillow a poem he had been working on.

*When you first appeared, my dear Maddie, my world lit up.
I loved everything about you,
The karaoke you sang in the pub,
Your heart so kind, pure, and true.
I loved your body,
That made me feel warm and safe,
For your desire to be a jockey,
Washed over you like a rainbow wave.
I loved your eyes,
Sparkling even on rainy days,
Claiming that the skies,
Would never be strays.
I loved your mind,
For it thought of others with every breath you took,
Caring in love and soul's bind,
Reading book upon book.
I loved your soul,
Clear and gentle as the sea,
Taking you from me was my toll,
When you said goodbye, my love, darkness engulfed me.*

He sighed softly, unable to tell himself whether it was finished or not. "Time tells the truth," he whispered before falling back asleep.

"Sam, you awake?"

The words slithered through the crack in the door, a soft rasp that barely pierced the silence of the night. Sam blinked the sleep from his eyes and sat up, the sheets clinging to his damp skin like a second layer.

I've fallen back asleep. Then why isn't it lighter outside?

He frowned, trying to shake off the newfound grogginess that clung to him like a fog.

"Sam?" The voice cut through the silence, probing for an answer.

"Yeah, I'm up," he mumbled, his voice thick with sleep.

There's no way I've slept longer than the first time I woke up. What's going on? Was I drugged?

He swung his legs over the side of the bed, placing his bare feet on the cold, hardwood floor. The room was a shadowy mess, the only light a silver of moonlight that had snuck in through the window.

I don't remember the light from earlier being moonlight. I'm pretty sure it was... sunlight? No, it's in the middle of the night. That's not—

His own thoughts were cut off by the darkness that began to feel thick, almost tangible.

He stood up, his body protesting with a chorus of creaks and pops as he shuffled towards the door. Ever since he, Seb, and Tim had restored the old house, it had a way of playing tricks on him, making him think Maddie or Zack, sometimes both, were still walking its halls.

But this time, the sound felt wrong. The voice didn't belong. Sam paused, his hand hovering over the doorknob, his heart hammering in his chest. The house remained still, as if listening for Sam's next move. Sam took a deep breath and pushed the door open. The hallway looked the same as always, nothing out of the ordinary. And yet, a chill danced down his spine, a cold finger tracing the contours of his fear. He stepped out into the hall, the darkness enveloping him like a shroud.

The voice had stopped. The silence was eerie, almost unnatural.

"Is someone there?" he called out. His words echoed through the house, bouncing off the walls and coming back to him empty and hollow. There was no reply.

He padded down the hall, the soft thud of his footsteps the only sound in the otherwise muted house. A floorboard groaned beneath him, pushing back against his weight. He paused, listening, but the house remained mute.

Maybe it was just the wind, he thought, trying to convince himself. But the voice was unmistakably human.

As he reached the top of the stairs, the stillness was broken by a faint rustle. It was a sound so subtle it could've been missed by anyone else, but not Sam. His ears had always picked up sounds well, not as finely tuned as Seb's, but still impressive. He froze, his hand gripping a nearby chair tightly. The air grew colder, the silence now a living, breathing entity that suffocated the very life out of the room.

He didn't know why, but something deep within him screamed for him to run, to get out of the house as fast as he could. But he couldn't. Not without knowing what was going on. He took a tentative step forward, every movement measured. The rustle grew louder, drawing nearer.

In the moonlight gloom, a shadow detached from the wall, a silent sentinel that had been watching him all along. Sam's heart skipped a beat, his breath catching in his throat. The figure began to meet Sam halfway, a predatory grace to its movements that sent a shiver down Sam's spine. *That's not the wind.*

The shadow grew more defined, and as it reached Sam, he could make out the shape of a person, tall and broad-shouldered, clad in black. His mind raced, trying to piece together the puzzle of this unwelcome visitor. *Is it a burglar? Or a lost traveller seeking refuge as the city's nowhere near done with its rebuilding process? Or something far more sinister?*

The figure paused, tilting its head slightly, as if listening for Sam's retreat. But Sam didn't move. His legs had turned to jelly, his mind a whirlwind of thoughts that refused to coalesce into a coherent plan. The shadow grew more substantial, its edges sharpening into the unmistakable form of a man with a purpose. And that purpose wasn't friendly. It had no eyes, and its head was barely attached. Shadows crawled on the figure's form, twisting it into some kind of monster. Despite having no eyes, it somehow fixed its gaze on Sam and charged.

Sam crashed through the concrete wall, landing heavily in the unfinished yard.

Sam shook his head after the impact. He could hear an engine roar to life. Mud and rocks flew at him from all sides, as if multiple engines fought for traction.

He felt blood drip down his head, knew his scalp was cracked right open. His vision became blurry, his breathing uneven.

"Sam? Sam, are you hit?" Tim kneeled over him, examining his body. He lay on his right side, his headwound facing the ground. "Come on mate, are you hit?" He carefully turned Sam on his back, gasping at the gash that coated his scalp. "Bloody hell..." Sam awoke slightly, stirring a little. His right hand moved up to his head, grunting. "Stop, Sam, stop! You're hit in the head, okay?" He turned his head just over his shoulder. "Seb! Seb, wake the bloody hell up!" He turned to Sam whose eyes were closing again. "No, no, look at me. Sam, look at me. I got you, okay? But you gotta stay awake now." He looked around for any signs of a break-in, but it was too dark to see.

Seb appeared behind him. "What?"

"It's Sam, he's hit in the head. It's *bad*. His scalp is all open."

Seb immediately knelt next to Sam, his hands moving carefully to orient himself before he touched him. His hands were soaked in blood. "We need to get him outta here."

"I know." Tim tried to get up. "Sam, can you hear me? I need you to hold on to me, okay? We're gonna do this slowly."

Seb took his shirt off, following the trail of blood with his hands until he found what he believed to be the right spot. Holding the shirt against it, he felt

Sam flailing around. "Sam, stop! You gotta be still, mate. You got hit in the freaking head. You gotta let us do the work."

Sam was out of it, unable to hear anything they were saying.

"Sam, stop!" Tim yelled, pinning Sam down as well as he could. Sam calmed down. "Okay, there we go. We're gonna get you outta here. All you gotta do is put your arm around me, and I'll do the rest, okay?"

But Sam's arm remained down this time.

"Oh, come on! Help me out here. Sam? Sam, just listen. I'm gonna need you to focus, okay?" He looked into Sam's eyes, having two empty sockets staring back at him. "Focus, Sam, focus. Put your arm around me on three, okay? One... two... three."

Sam's hand moved up high enough for Tim to help him the rest of the way. Sam let out a soft grunt, as Tim managed to get him up on his feet. Sam hung like a puppet in Tim's arms as Seb ran towards the van, getting the doors open upon the first try.

Tim struggled trying to keep Sam upright, practically dragging dead weight around the yard. "Call Nora, tell her we're coming in hot."

Seb took his braille keyboard phone out of his pocket, dialling her number. "Leonora, it's me, Sebastian. Sam's been hurt. It's bad."

"I'll be down in a jiffy."

He ended the call, helping Tim to get Sam in the van as well as he could, but Sam's body bended over in all ways but the right one, and both struggled to get him in.

"Oh, come on!" Tim exclaimed, pushing against Sam's back. "Come on!"

Getting him inside, Tim jumped behind the wheel while Seb sat in the back with Sam, cradling him in his lap. He kept his shirt pressed against the wound to try and stop the bleeding.

"How long you reckon he was out there?" he asked Tim, who took off with screeching tires.

"Dunno. I heard a massive *bang* noise, so I don't think he was out there long."

"Did somebody hurt him intentionally?"

"Looks like it. Baffles me as to who, and why. There's no way it was Jonathan. It's not his style."

Tim zigzagged through the still unrepaired remains of what was once Zacropolis. Despite it having been only four months ago since they had returned and lost Zack, the rebuilding process had been slow. At least they had a tiny infirmary up and running to take care of the wounded.

The car skidded to a halt in front of the clinic's doors, and Nora rushed out in her nightgown, pushing a portable stretcher. She and Tim worked together to get Sam on it. After a failed attempt in which Sam almost rolled off it, Nora quickly examined the gash.

"That's at least a 4-inch laceration that he's got there."

"Is that bad?" Seb asked, who followed the two of them as closely as he could.

"His skull is fractured. He might need surgery to release some pressure."

"I'll help," Tim said. "You can't get anyone here at this hour."

Nora nodded.

"Wait, doesn't he need like a scan or x-ray or something?" Seb asked.

"No time," Nora replied, "if we don't get him into surgery right now, he won't make it. Scans can be done afterwards."

Seb nodded solemnly as he stopped, hearing how they wheeled Sam away. Unsure of Sam's fate, Seb sat down on a chair, burying his head in his hands. "*I thought we were safe,*" he whispered, crying softly. "*I thought we were safe...*"

Josh was the first to arrive after Seb had called everyone, hugging Seb tightly. "He's gonna be okay. He's survived so much. A head wound won't be the end of him. We can't seem to get rid of him, and you know that."

Seb nodded slowly. "I know."

"How's Tim's progress with Sam's surprise?" Trying to get Seb's thoughts turn to a happier matter, Josh focused on the surprise they had been secretly planning for the past two months.

"He's almost done. We just need to make sure it can't malfunction."

"Good that."

They heard footsteps behind them. Alex and Stan ran over to the two.

"How's he?" Alex asked.

"What happened?" Stan added.

Josh shook his head. "Not now. We'll talk once we know more, okay?"

Both nodded and sat down next to Josh and Seb once Josh convinced Seb to sit down too.

"Tim's in there too?" Stan asked.

Seb nodded slowly. "He's assisting Nora."

Alex sighed. "He's got balls, I'll give him that."

Stan couldn't help but chuckle at that. "Did you call Val and such too?"

"No, just you lads. Only Alfie's missing."

"Present." They turned their faces towards where Alfie's voice came from.

"I came as fast as I could. Is he still in surgery?"

"Yes. Go see if they need an extra pair of hands."

"Copy that." Alfie marched inside while the others stayed behind.

They looked towards the closed doors, hearing a beehive of activity happening behind it. Their eyes were glued to the clock hanging above the door. Each tick of the second hand echoed in their ears, a painful remainder of the time passing without any news of Sam.

Seb found himself in a limbo of dread and anticipation. His mood was taut, his face a canvas of fear.

The door swung open briefly. Their hearts skipped a beat, but it was only Alfie who rushed out to retrieve something from the medical storage room. He gave no information as he swung the door shut again.

The silence was punctuated only by the occasional murmur from behind the closed doors.

Inside the room, Alfie, Tim, and Nora worked in unison. The light above Sam's head was a harsh beacon in the otherwise grim room, illuminating the deep crimson of his blood. Tim's brow was furrowed with concentration as he followed Nora's instructions, his hands shaking slightly despite his best efforts to steady them. Alfie passed instruments with grace, his eyes never leaving Nora's as she meticulously worked to repair the damage to Sam's skull. The air was thick with the scent of antiseptic and the underlying metallic tang of fear.

Stan, normally the most vocal of the group, stood up and began to pace. His footsteps echoed off the floor as he tried to outrun the anxiety that clung to him like a second skin. Alex walked over to him to try and comfort him.

Josh sat with his eyes closed; his fingers interlocked in a silent prayer.

Seb leaned against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest, his blind eyes staring blankly at a point somewhere in the middle of the room. He felt nothing but a gnawing ache in his chest.

The minutes stretched into hours, and the tension grew. Outside, the night lifted, revealing a radiant sun rising above the horizon. Despite the rigidity, it casted a mesmerising glow upon the infirmary. The sunlight peeked through the window, casting a glow over them that seemed to mock their anxiety.

In the operating room, the rhythm of the operation continued unabated. Sweat beaded on Nora's forehead, but she didn't waver, her eyes locked on the wound. Despite the gravity of the situation, they worked in a harmony that could only come from a well-oiled machine, or a group fighting for the life of someone they cared deeply about.

A sudden change in Sam's vital signs had Nora's head snapping up. Her eyes met Tim's, and a silent understanding passed between them that time was running out.

Tim's hands grew steadier as he assisted her, his mind clearer in the most critical part of the operation. Tim's heart raced, but he kept his composure, his eyes never leaving the monitors that tracked Sam's fragile existence.

The group grew restless. Each tick of the clock was a dagger in their hearts. Josh reached for Seb's hand, his grip tight and reassuring.

The door swung open again, and this time, it was Tim who emerged. He was covered in blood, his hands shaking.

"Is he okay?" Alex asked, his voice almost lost in the roar of their beating hearts.

"He's stable," Tim said, his voice a mix of exhaustion and relief. "But he's not outta the woods yet."

Those words hung in the air, a knife that had just missed their hearts. They breathed in unison, the tension in the room shifting from fear to hope.

"He's a fighter," Josh said. "I told you. You can't get rid of him."

Expecting a chuckle or two, but not receiving any, Josh refocused on Tim.

"He's gonna need loads of time to recover from this. But even though the race is far from over, we've at least survived the first hurdle."

"Can we see him?" Seb asked, even though his question nullified itself.

Tim nodded and the others followed closely behind him. Seb felt a flicker of hope that his friend would pull through.

The air in the operation room was now quiet, almost sacred, as if the very walls were holding their breath. Sam lay on the table, his head wrapped in a thick bandage, tubes and monitors connecting him to a symphony of beeping machines. His chest rose and fell in a steady rhythm.

"Why isn't he moved yet?" Stan asked.

"Too risky," they heard Nora say behind them. "I don't dare to move him."

Alfie stood at the foot of the table; his eyes red-rimmed but his gaze unwavering. "He's gonna need us," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "He's *strong*, but this isn't over yet."

"We're not going anywhere," Josh said, stepping forward. His voice was thick with emotion. "We'll be his beacon, like a silent vigil in the face of the unknown."

The others nodded in unison and as they stood there, they leaned on each other for support.

CHAPTER THREE

The lab was a whirlwind of white coats and gleaming chrome, a vivid contrast to the dense forest just outside the panoramic windows. The sun had already disappeared behind the mountain range, leaving the sky painted with a palette of fiery oranges and deep purples. Inside, the soft hum of machinery and the occasional beep of a computer was the only soundtrack to Jonathan's evening.

The lab was a sanctuary of innovation, nestled in the heart of the jungle, where they studied the untouched wonders of nature to create Jonathan's future.

"It's done, sir."

Jonathan turned around sharply. He stepped closer to the glass enclosure, his heart racing. Inside, the Akrep lay still, its metallic carapace reflecting the last vestiges of daylight. It was a marvel of biomechanical engineering, a creature that blurred the line between living organism and man-made machine.

"It's beautiful," Jonathan murmured, his breath fogging the glass.

"Beautiful, *and* deadly," Ralph corrected him, his tone a mix of admiration and caution. "The stinger on that thing isn't just for show. It's capable of emitting a serum that could revolutionise medicine. Or," he paused, his eyes darting to the lock on the enclosure, "it could do the exact opposite."

"Don't be such a defeatist," Jonathan barked.

"I'm more of a realist, sir."

Jonathan sighed. "Just tell me how accurate it is to *my* wants."

Ralph nodded, tapping the glass carefully. The Akrep's tail twitched. Jonathan collectively held his breath. Ralph then walked over to a nearby terminal and pulled up a detailed schematic. "It can heal injuries, cure diseases, even regenerate lost tissue."

"And?" Jonathan asked impatiently.

Ralph sighed. "*And*, it can make people fully obedient, instantly killing those who are defect."

"Good that, I don't want a repetition of Sam and his lunatic goons." He felt a tickle in his throat, growing more insistent as he talked, until he spoke the last word. He coughed, the sound echoing through the emptiness. A crimson droplet splattered against the dusty floor.

"Do you have any pain in your chest? Shortness of breath?"

"Some, and a little," Jonathan scoffed, "don't ask such stupid questions."

His hand tremored, his pupils whitened, his body a pale complexion.

"Sir, I think you should sit—"

"I don't *need* to do *anything*!" Jonathan yelled, wiping the blood away from his mouth. "You focus on that genetically altered beauty over there and let nothing else take you off course. Got that?"

"Yes, sir. Understood."

Jonathan cleared his throat, his knees buckling underneath him. He grabbed the nearby table. "Just tell me how I control the bloody thing," he said,

his voice strained. He was coughing and wheezing, each breath coming harder than the last.

"The stinger is connected to a highly sophisticated neural network. It's designed to respond to certain commands, so once we hook you up to it, you'll be in full control of it."

"Good that. I need you to start collecting data when you set up the first simulation. We need to improve the serum's delivery system if it's not fully optimised. They've already ruined my chance of getting better, so I'll ruin the only good thing they've got left in life: their free will. I'll take their whole city; I'll take every single person they've ever associated themselves with. If I die, so does the world. They'll take a ride to the underworld alongside me." His cough grew worse, and with each hack, blood pooled in his mouth.

The Akrep's eyes, two gleaming red orbs, bored into Jonathan's very soul. Knowing that something so small could hold such power made him smile. As Jonathan stared into the Akrep's eyes, he saw a ghostly version of himself, pale and drawn. His eyes were sunken, and dark circles lurked beneath them like shadows. His chest heaved with the effort of each shallow breath, until darkness claimed him.

Jonathan stirred, peering through half-open eyes. A wet rag on his forehead made him sigh annoyedly. "Ralph?" he croaked, trying to sit up. He looked at the monitor once he heard the rhythmic beeping. He ripped the wires from his hand and arm, throwing it all to the side.

"I wouldn't move around if I were you, sir. You've got a severe case of pneumonia which is complicated by the lung infection. Then there are all the blood clots slowly forming—"

"Just give me the bloody injection."

"Sir, you know that despite all the experiments we've done with those lads, it's not sufficient to act as a cure—"

"It works just fine to keep the disease at bay. They ruined my chances at a cure; you don't need to constantly remind me of that. Just get me back on my feet so I can destroy those who destroyed my plans, destroy all they loved and built."

"As you wish, sir."

Jonathan looked over at the Akrep as it began to stir, its legs flexing with a precision that spoke of a mind behind the mechanical façade. Once Ralph had injected Jonathan, he brought up the Akrep's interface, displaying a complex web of algorithms and commands. He plugged it into Jonathan's neural network while his fingers danced over the keyboard. He whispered to the creature in a language of ones and zeros.

Slowly, the tail lowered. The stinger emerged, a thin syringe glinting in the light. The serum inside was a clear, viscous liquid, its potential as dangerous as it was alluring.

Jonathan smiled as he closed his eyes, feeling the data enter his own brain. This was science at its most primal, pushing the boundaries of what was possible.

As the Akrep's tail hovered just centimetres from the glass, Jonathan knew he could finally change the world and end it.

Zack looked at the television with a few rusted coils in desperate need of replacement. He looked at the Buppers, his favourite television show that his parents watched with him every morning. It was the only thing left that still felt like home. The fact that he missed it, his family most of all, was proof that it was where he belonged and where he was loved.

He hadn't heard the voice in his head for a few days now, and he was wondering why his father's friend hadn't come back yet.

"Andy?" the young boy tried for what felt like the millionth time. "Daddy's friend?"

"No! Let go of me!"

Zack startled as he looked behind him at the closed door. He heard scraping against the floor, agonising screams, and horrendous yelling.

"Stop!" Zack yelled, covering his ears with his tiny hands. "Make it stop!" He began to tremble once he ran to the corner, sliding down against the wall until he hit the floor. His heartbeat was exceptionally fast, his eyes wet with tears.

"Zack?"

Zack screamed, but not loud enough to drown out the man's screams.

"Andy? Daddy's friend?"

"Yes, I'm right here buddy, I'm right here. Why are you scared?"

"The voices. So loud, so mean. Bad."

"Are they angry voices, Zack?"

"Yes, very loud. It's pain."

"Do you hear 'em right now?"

Zack removed his hands from his ears, considering Andrew's question. He gradually got up from the floor, much more relaxed. "No," he said, chuckling. He exhaled sharply, visibly relieved. He sat back on the chair he was seated on before, folding his legs up crisscross-applesauce style. "Did you make it go?"

"Yes, it's just you and me right now, buddy. How are you? Did they hurt you?"

"No, not me. But a man."

"Did you see him?"

"No. Behind door."

"Have you left the room you're in since we first talked?"

He looked around the room, trying to remember if it was the same room, or a different one. He couldn't choose the answer, so he stayed quiet.

"Can you do something for me, buddy?"

"Yes."

"Okay, can you touch the telly?"

Zack looked at the height of the television on the wall, thinking deeply before trying to jump to reach it. He fell on his bottom, but not a single cry came out of his mouth. Somehow, deep down, he knew that this was his way home. He looked behind him at the chair and began to drag it towards the television. He

climbed up on it but was still unable to reach it. He stood on his tiptoes, his fingers inches away from the television.

The door swung open behind him as Ralph walked inside. "What on earth are you doing?"

He dragged Zack off the chair, who desperately held his hand out towards the television. The boy didn't say a word. He remembered Andrew's words all too well: *don't tell the bad man about this. It'll be our little secret.*

Led into a room, he saw a man caught unsuspectingly in thorny vines that sapped his vitality. Zack gasped at the horrid sight as the man's skin burned alive, fading from existence.

A piercing sound, as if a table saw had gone wild, filled Zack's head. Shadows swarmed all around him. He watched in horror as a chopper bucked wildly right outside the window, its rotor caught on fire. Zack had never seen anything like it. He threw himself to the floor, his tiny hands trying to cover his head. Somehow, he remembered some of his father's lessons. *No matter what, protect your head before anything else.*

"Zack? What on earth are you doing?"

Zack slowly looked up at Jonathan bending over him. He noticed the window showed a clear, blue sky on the outside of it, nothing indicating that a chopper on fire crashed into the wildlife surrounding the building he was being held in. He looked over at the man still strapped to the vines, but nothing was left of him. His eyes bulged out of his head, which was somehow less scary than the chopper he had seen.

Secret, Zack told himself, no tell. "Scary," he said, pointing at the dead man. "Hate it."

Jonathan laughed softly. "Don't be afraid, little one. It's to serve a great purpose." He pointed at the window. "You see that? What's out there?"

"Out," Zack answered. "Grass."

"Well, yes. I meant more... what's *out* out there?"

Zack didn't understand his question, moving his head sideways.

"You know what, I'll show you." Jonathan grabbed his hand, which Zack forcibly accepted. He pointed at the Akrep in its confinement. "You see that majestic creature? Its stinger will control people by folding something called a cellular protein into one that's considered abnormal. Or a misfolded protein."

Zack looked over at the dead man's body, trying to make sense of the words Jonathan used. He simply nodded. He had seen his father do that many times when his mother asked him to do something.

"So, what we do is we produce something called a neurotoxin so that it can be genetically engineered. Which means that those who can't handle it and aren't good enough for my army, will suffer greatly before they die."

"The screams?" Zack asked softly.

"Yes, the screams you heard belonged to this man. You're a quick study, Zack. I hate to say that you inherited Sam's brains. I always hated it when he outsmarted me." He eyed Zack darkly. "You're not gonna outsmart me, are you?"

He shook his head.

"Ralph, will you do the honours?"

"Sir, are you sure he should be watching? He's only—"

"Do it."

Ralph sighed. He freed the body from the vines, putting it on a nearby table. Jonathan urged Zack forward, making sure his eyes reached the body.

"What this?"

"Well, Ralph's gonna make an incision right here in the man's basal ganglia, which is like something called a craniotomy."

"Sir, he doesn't understand a thing of what you just said."

"Oh, shush, he's way smarter than he lets on. Aren't you, Zack?"

Zack simply nodded again, trying to look just over the body. He was indeed smart enough to know that if he looked, he would be traumatised for life.

Ralph hooked the body up to an IV.

"That's a phenobarbital mixture, and it'll keep our project nice and quiet."

Ralph took a bone saw and began to cut through the man's skull. Zack refused to look, closing his eyes until the saw stopped. When he opened his eyes, he puked all over the floor, much to Jonathan's annoyance.

"You piece of shite!" He hit Zack with the back of his palm, leaving a red print on Zack's cheek. "Get outta my sight!"

Zack, with a throbbing cheek, ran outside, back to the room with the television.

Jonathan sighed with frustration as he looked at the dirty floor. "Finish the procedure and get to cleaning."

Ralph nodded, removing the host's frontal lobe, the only part of the brain that allows a person's social understanding and reasoning.

Ralph walked over to the massive lift shaft that was connected to Zacropolis. He injected the frontal lobe with a dark-purple liquid, sending the waste of it to the city.

"Now we wait until their most precious resource, their free will, returns to us. Then we sent Akrep in for the finishing touch."

Ralph nodded, closing the shaft. He looked over at Jonathan, the evil smirk on his face speaking more than any word could. He knew that his plan to destroy and conquer what was left of Zacropolis, much to Sam's dismay, would corrupt the city according to his own end-of-the-world worldview.

Once he reached the room, he stood back up on the chair to try and reach the television. "I wanna go home!" he cried out. "Andy! Home!"

Tears streamed down his cheeks as he desperately touched the television repeatedly. But Andrew was long gone.

CHAPTER FOUR

Josh observed Seb who paced around the room, bumping into things occasionally. Normally, he got used to his surroundings relatively easily, but now he was completely disoriented.

"I'm not sure Seb could take another loss," Josh said solemnly. "He's lost too much."

"Like *we* haven't?" Stan scoffed from across the room. "We've *all* lost a tremendous amount of people."

"You know what I mean. He's Zack's godfather. He and Maddie were closer than any of us were with her, you gotta admit that. If he loses Sam, he loses his whole family. It's a simple fact. He's never seen any of us as family. Not even me, and I've been with him and Sam since the beginning."

Stan remained silent, but his facial expression softened a little.

"Sam's gonna be fine," Tim exclaimed, "he must be."

"Oi! I need some help in here!" Nora yelled.

They all turned their heads towards a frantically waving Nora trying to catch anyone's attention. "His oxygen levels are plummeting!"

Alfie stormed past Josh who had gotten up to head over, accidentally throwing him against the wall. Alfie observed the monitor as he skidded to a halt. "Even with the ventilator we've hooked him onto, he's not getting enough oxygen. He's barely sitting at 90."

"His peak pressures... they're through the roof," Nora said. She moved her ear closer to Sam's chest. "I'm hearing no air movement." She pulled the endotracheal tube carefully but swiftly out of Sam's throat. "Bag him. It's our only choice."

As Alfie stayed on the bag, Nora moved closer. "Sam? Can you hear me?"

The monitor flatlined.

"He's in full cardiac arrest!" Nora started compressions as Alfie kept bagging him. Something caught her eye, and she lifted Sam's shirt. "Oh, my goodness..." Once Alfie's eyes landed on Sam's chest, he looked shocked at Nora. "Whoever hit him on the head didn't just do that, they also caused blunt force trauma to his chest. How did we not see that? They kicked him repeatedly. There could be some damage to some of his major organs too. How the bloody hell did we miss this?" She stopped giving compressions and gave him an injection of adrenaline, then hooked him to a defibrillator. "Stop bagging him and step away."

Alfie did as he was told, stepping aside as he watched Sam's body react to the shock. His own heart pounded in his chest.

A second shock went through Sam's body as Alfie observed the monitor.

"Is this safe?"

"A lot safer than me pressing down on his chest. It's a special one that regulates life-threatening conditions we can't detect without thorough tests. It's his only chance."

A third shock, then the tiniest sound on the monitor.

"He's in V-tach," Nora said, smiling, "we're almost there."

The defibrillator monitored Sam closely, administering a tiny shock to restart his heart entirely. His heartbeat turned regular.

"We got a pulse!" She smiled, then pointed at the bag. "Keep going, his lungs are still in respiratory failure. We got his heart going again but he's still unable to breathe."

Alfie didn't hesitate and continued to bag him for a few more minutes until Nora stopped him. Both looked at his oxygen level going steady, slowly ascending.

She let out a long sigh. "His breathing's starting to stabilise. You can stop." Alfie stopped and Nora put him on extracorporeal life support. "It should help his lungs by giving them a chance to heal. The kicks to his chest caused a pulmonary contusion and a literal shock to his system."

"So, how long does he have to stay on it?"

"As opposed to the endotracheal tube, at least a couple of days. I hope that his oxygen levels will increase that way, high enough so we can take him off it."

"He'll finally be okay, right? No more surprises?"

"We won't know until we take him off it to see if he can breathe on his own. I'm sorry, Alfred."

He nodded, sighing. "I gotta tell the others. They probably heard everything and... and I can't even begin to imagine what's going through their heads right now." He headed outside. Staring at so many worried-looking heads was almost too much for one person to handle, but he nodded. "He's gonna be okay."

Sam's eyes fluttered open, blinking heavily against the bright light shining down on him. "What the bloody hell?" He shielded his eyes. "Where am I?"

"Oh good, you're awake."

He looked over at an unknown woman, her grey hair in a firm bun. Her glasses balanced on the tip of her nose as she wrote something down on his chart.

"Wh—what happened?"

"You were trying to hang a new lightbulb in your house and fell of the ladder. You hit your head, but fortunately for you it's nothing too serious. There are no broken bones, MRI came back clean."

"And my girlfriend? My son?"

"They weren't near you when you fell. So, maybe next time you should make sure she, or any other adult, is there to spot you. You feel me?"

He was surprised by the way the elderly lady spoke to him, but he figured she might simply be trying to get on his level.

"Where are they? Maddie, and Zack?"

"Went to grab some lunch, should be back soon. Can I get you anything? You must be thirsty."

"How long was I out?"

"A couple of days. We were forced to put you in a medically induced coma to allow your body to rest and recover."

"Wait, I thought you said—"

She didn't let him finish his sentence as she marched out the door. Sam stared ahead in confusion, until he heard a squeak. He looked over to see Maddie jumping up and down as she rushed over to him, enveloping him in a crushable hug.

"Maddie, oof! Maddie, Maddie, you're choking me!"

"Sorry." She quickly let go of him. "I just thought I'd never see you again after your alternate universe coma fever dream, but you're here! Alive and well!"

"What did you just s—"

"Zack's been working on making you a get-well-soon card. He really misses you playing ball with him."

"Yeah, I bet he does."

"And Seb's been here too, but he couldn't stand watching you die in this life and die in real life, so he left early this morning after I told him he couldn't stay here night after night."

"What? Die in my—"

"You know how he's always acting like he's everybody else's shoulder to lean on, but even the strong snap. It's inevitable."

"Maddie, stop! Stop talking for just one second!"

He found himself standing across the room, staring at the bed his body lay in, attached to a machine. He stared at Nora explaining to his friends what was going on.

"So, this machine takes his blood and what it does next is putting extra oxygen in it before returning the blood to his body."

Seb leaned closer to Sam's ear, and without anybody being able to hear what he said, Sam heard it loud and clear. *"You being sick is only temporary, you hear me? All these machines are gonna make sure you're gonna be okay, and they'll make you better. But wherever you're at right now, you gotta come back to me. I'm not joking, Sam. If you die, I'm gonna kill you."*

Sam tried to walk to his own body, but he couldn't. He watched as his friends left the room one by one, leaving Sam standing there helplessly.

Seb was the last to leave, and as he walked straight towards Sam, Sam extended his hand. He let out a shocked breath, watching as Seb walked straight through his body.

"So, what do you think?" he heard behind him, staring at Zach.

"Bloody hell." He looked at Zach from head to toe, stunned. "You're—"

"Alive? Dead? Ah, who knows. It's all bloody the same, ain't it?" Sam watched as Zach walked around him, chuckling. "You're probably wondering whether you're dead or not, huh? Well, close, but not quite. You see, Nora over there, and bloody precious Alfie, saved your life. At least, for now."

"So, what? This place is like purgatory?"

"Bingo! See, this is why we were friends, Sammy. So bloody smart."

Sam watched as Zach still circled him. "So, am I being punished or something? Is my time up?"

"Guess that's up to you." Zach stopped walking. "But first, you need to relax. You can escape, but it can also keep you here if you're not strong enough to fight it."

"And let me guess, you're my subconscious?"

"Bingo again! Man, you're *good*." Zach chuckled. "Who else were you expecting? Your girl? Nah, she's safe in heaven, didn't wanna disturb her pretty face."

"You're not saying that Zach's—"

"In hell? Nah, but choosing him over Maddie was easy. I don't play with pretty girls." Sam turned around sharply as Zach disappeared and reappeared behind Sam, whispering in his ear. "*Careful. Don't let those intrusive thoughts come to light. I'm all of you've got.*"

Sam held his breath, his fists clenched.

"You know, it's quite funny. My whole life, nobody really saw me. All of you were so caught up in your own things, it almost felt as if I were just an annoyance you were forced to deal with."

"What?" Sam turned to face Zach. "That's not true. You know I *always* had your back."

"Did you?" Zach scoffed. "You know, up there, people finally see me the way I've always wanted to be seen. I matter up there."

"You mattered to me."

"Did I?"

"Yes, how can you even say that?" Sam's fists unclenched. "I didn't know that it mattered to you how other people saw you. You never gave a crap about that."

"Maybe 'cause you didn't pay enough attention to that. You ever think about that? And yet once more you show that you were *way* too busy with yourself."

"Zach, stop! That's not true. You know that's not true."

Zach waved him off.

Seb sat next to Sam's bed, hearing the steady rhythm of his heartbeat, and the rhonchi sound of the breathing tube. His right leg shook consistently; his hands trembled. He tried to keep his own breathing steady.

"Seb, it's time. You need to take a break."

Seb heard Josh's voice behind him, shaking his head. "I'm not going anywhere. I wanna be here when he wakes up."

"That's not gonna be for a while, Seb. You know that."

Seb shook his head again. "You'll have to drag me outta here, 'cause I'm not willingly going."

Josh sighed as he sat down in front of Seb. "I'll watch over him, okay? The second I see any changes; I'll go and get you right away. You've got my word."

Seb's eyes looked over at Josh, his blind eyes staring dead ahead. Josh patted Seb's shoulder, to which Seb finally got up and left the room.

Josh grunted as he sat down where Seb just sat, staring at Sam. "I dunno if you can hear me, Sam. But I know that you've never given up. Not once. Not after you lost Zach, and certainly not after you lost Maddie. So, don't start doing that now. Seb has lost basically everyone he cares about, and he can't survive losing you. You know that. He tried to end his life and only you kept him going." He leaned closer and grabbed Sam's hand. "Wake up!"

I'm trying, Josh. Believe me, I'm trying.

CHAPTER FIVE

Seb found a bench outside and plopped down on it. He buried his face in his hands and began to sob. The laughter of children playing nearby failed to bring him joy or distract his mind.

"Please," he begged, looking up at the sky, "I dunno what's up there or if there's anything, 'cause I don't believe in anything, but I need Sam to survive. *We* need him to see this through and put an end to Jonathan's tyranny. We need to find his son, and we need to reunite 'em. Please, he's all I've got. And I l—"

The ground beneath Seb trembled, the air around him vibrated with an ominous rumble. The laughter of children playing outside turned to shrieks as the sky filled with dust and debris. A deafening boom ripped through the air. The windows of a nearby home shattered, leaving a gaping, ruined shell.

People on the street screamed and scattered as a plume of smoke and fire shot into the sky. The air grew thick with dust, making it difficult to see or breathe.

"Josh! Tim! Anyone?" Seb coughed as he tried to figure out where he was and what had happened. "Hello?"

His instincts told him it was no accident. He knew this was Jonathan's doing. He knew Jonathan was planning things, but he never thought it would come to this. Panic began to set in as he thought of his friends inside those now crumbling walls. "Sam!" His cupped a hand to his air, straining to pick out familiar voices from the crowd, hoping to catch any trace of his friends.

Sure enough, Val, Ray, and Reggie came running towards the wreckage, their faces a mix of shock and determination.

"Seb, move!" Val commanded him, his voice cutting through the din of fear.

Seb felt three separate winds rush past him, only able to identify Val by his voice. Whoever the other two were, he couldn't tell. He took a tentative step back until he heard the crack of something underneath his feet. He gasped as he felt it wasn't any object. Leaning down, he touched skin.

He let out a scream, shaking his head. "No, no, no! We were rebuilding! This wasn't supposed to happen!"

He looked over at the screams coming from behind him. With his dishevelled clothes, he turned towards the infirmary. His blind eyes filled with the gravity of the situation as he stood frozen, his heart pounding in his throat.

He knew that he couldn't sit idly by. His friends were inside, fighting for their lives, fighting for their city. With a newfound resolve, Seb pushed aside his fear and made his way to the infirmary, disappearing into the flames and smoke.

The stench of burning rubble and the cries of the injured filled the air. He moved swiftly, his training evident in every step. With a face masked of concentration and grief, he moved alongside the path he took to get outside, knowing it was the only way to reach Sam and his friends.

As he got closer, Alfie spotted him and rushed over. "You can't go in there, Seb! It's not safe! We gotta go!"

But Seb wouldn't be deterred. "Our bloody friends are in there! We gotta help 'em!"

"There's nothing we can do for 'em," Alfie pleaded. "There's no way they survived."

"They can't *all* be dead!" Seb yelled. "I *refuse* to believe that!"

Alfie looked at him with a mix of admiration and concern before nodding. "Okay, stay close to me and don't let go." He forced Seb's hand onto his belt as he grabbed a dust mask, handing one over to Seb. Then he took a flashlight out and began to walk.

Together, they ventured into the bowels of the decimated building. The air was thick with dust, and the floor trembled beneath their feet. The flashlight beam danced over twisted metal and shattered glass, casting eerie shadows on the walls stained with smoke. The sounds of rescue efforts filled the air, punctuated by the occasional wail of a survivor or the crunch of debris shifting.

They climbed over piles of rubble and bodies, navigating a maze of corridors.

"Josh? Tim? Alex?" Seb called out for his friends.

Alfie's eyes scanned the destruction, searching for any sign of their friends. Each room they entered was a tableau of tragedy, but he didn't let it deter him. Instead, he focused on the task at hand. As they moved deeper into the building, the sounds grew fainter, the air thicker. A sense of dread began to coil in their stomach.

"Are we too late?"

Alfie paused; his hand found Seb's arm. "We're getting close to the epicentre of the blast. Be prepared for anything."

Seb took a deep breath, steeling himself for what lay ahead. He had to find his friends. He had to find Sam to make sure he was okay. He didn't dare to think of the alternative.

They turned a corner, and the sight that greeted them was one of utter devastation. The walls had caved in, leaving only a small gap to crawl through. The air was hot and acrid, the smell of burning plastics and metal assaulting their senses. A biting tang of metallic, burnt sulphur alongside a strange greenish pallor that lingered in the smoke as it billowed outward. It was the unmistakable trace of barium.

"They used nitrogen oxide and mixed it with barium compounds. It creates a thick, toxic haze which means that we'll soon feel the weight of it. It's nasty stuff."

"Barium poisoning..." Seb said, barely audible.

"We're here." Alfie stopped. "If anyone's still alive in here, we'll find 'em."

Seb nodded. With a prayer on his lips, he followed Alfie into the heart of the disaster.

They crawled through the narrow opening, the weight of the world above them pressing down like a leaden blanket. The scene inside was hellish. A tangled mess of gurneys, broken glass, and crumpled drywall. The air was thick with dust, causing their eyes to sting from the acrid smoke.

"Is anyone there?" Alfie called out, his voice echoing through the wreckage. There was no response, only the mournful groan of the damaged building. They moved cautiously, searching for any signs of life. The beam of the flashlight bobbed as they progressed, casting a light over the destruction.

A faint sound reached them, a low moan that grew louder as they approached.

"There! Someone's alive!" They quickened their pace, the adrenaline coursing through their veins.

Alfie's heart skipped a beat when he saw the crumpled form of Stan beneath a pile of rubble. His clothes were caked with dust, and his leg was trapped beneath a heavy slab of concrete. His eyes were closed, but when he heard Alfie's voice, Stan's eyes fluttered open.

"Alfie? Seb?" he croaked, disbelief mixing with relief. "Thank heavens, you're okay."

His voice trembled with emotion as Alfie took his hand, assessing Stan's condition. His eyes skimmed over the wound on his leg. "It's bad, but you'll make it if we can get you outta here."

"Where are the others?" Seb asked hopeful.

"I dunno," Stan answered honestly. "I tried to find everybody, but I walked into an empty room. They were all gone."

"Gone?" Alfie looked over at Seb, then back at Stan. "What do you mean, gone? As in *gone* gone?"

"As if they disappeared. As if Reggie made 'em all invisible."

"Did you see Val?" Seb asked. "He ran inside with two others."

"No, I didn't see anyone. I very bright light flashed, and the worst pain I've ever felt washed over me."

Seb heard a nearby earpiece crackle to life and tried to find it, while Alfie applied a tourniquet to his leg. "Go for Seb."

"Seb, thank goodness, where are you? We're back outside, but we can't find you."

"We went inside to try and find you lads," he answered Val. The other end of the line was difficult to hear as it malfunctioned intermittently. "Val? You're cutting out."

The line went dead.

Seb threw the earpiece down, slamming the ground in frustration.

Alfie looked behind him. "We gotta go. Help me dig him out. We need to move fast before this place comes down on us."

Hearing Alfie's voice tinged with urgency; Seb walked back over to help. Together, they worked to free Stan from the rubble. Each movement sent waves