

Tribes

“How long has it been since...”

Cynthia’s voice trailed off. David’s look said everything. She had broken an unspoken rule. Neither one liked to bring up memories from those terrible days of blood and fire. So many dead. So many wasted lives.

David closed his eyes to think. The images in his mind were still fresh and vivid. Sometimes he awoke from sleep with a shout to take cover. He shook his head to clear one especially gruesome image: Fireballs splintering glass as they crashed through the windows of a packed auditorium.

The theme of the annual meeting of the American Astronomical Society that year was “Death from the Skies: Fact or Fiction?” David and Manny were the only two scientists who presented anything other than the usual Pablum that such ideas were fodder for Science Fiction books and movies.

“Less than six months,” The annual meeting is held every January. Hard to believe it was now July. They had no way of knowing for certain, but nearly three quarters of the world’s population had been wiped out in the bombardment of that day. David looked up in the sky at the cause of all that destruction: A planet.

“It seems like it’s been forever,” Cynthia said. “So much has changed. I feel like we’ve been living in this constant dread and fear all our lives.”

“I know what you mean,” David said. “I have a hard time remembering simple things like going to a grocery store with shelves of food, instead of empty blood-spattered isles where people killed each other over the last can of corn.”

A shot rang out in the distance, down in the city. The gangs rarely came up to the university anymore. They had smashed and destroyed anything of value long ago in their quest for food. David and Cynthia had secured an area near his old offices in the Astrophysics lab.

Their own stash of food was dwindling each day. They had decided tonight they would have to venture into the city. They had planted a small garden behind the stadium across the street. It was just now starting to produce a few tiny carrots, potatoes and some greens. It took constant care each day to keep it hidden and safe.

“We’re lucky you built this shelter last year,” Cynthia said.

“Slipped it into the plans when they were finishing the new observatory.”

Cynthia laughed. “Didn’t they wonder why you needed this little room?”

“No. Everyone knows astronomers work at night. It seemed right to have a place to lay down for a while.” David liked to hear Cynthia laugh. “You know, I think I spent more time here waiting for the clouds to clear instead of driving back to my apartment. Never imagined this would become my home.”

They were both quiet for a few moments, lost in thoughts of happier times. There were only three telescopes in the observatory, but of course, no electricity. David wanted so much to fire up the generator and get a closer look at the planet that dominated the sky above them. So close, yet so unknown.

That would have to wait until the gangs killed each other off. Maybe then some semblance of society and civilization would return. He knew there were other pockets of survivors who were not hell-bent on killing each other. Like David, they had prepared places of safety, even after the government outlawed preppers.

“It’s time to go,” Cynthia said quietly.

“Right.”

They each knew how dangerous this was. Cynthia almost got caught on their last foray into the city. A small crowd of thugs had broken into one of the last food distribution warehouses. They usually took what they could and returned to their own strongholds, but this gang had stayed, because there were so many items left.

Cynthia had crawled in a back window to the office above the truck loading ramps. All the essentials had been looted long ago. Water, toilet paper, anything

that resembled canned food and of course, weapons. She had spotted a hunting bow that someone had missed and waited until she was sure the warehouse gang was asleep. If only the box hadn't been so bulky. It accidentally banged against the railing when she slipped on something going upstairs to the office window exit.

She froze. Too late. The gang had a guard. His cry woke the others who came running. Luckily David heard the commotion, crawled in the window behind her. He still had a few more rounds in his Sig Sauer besides a full clip in the Glock.

“Get the Jeep started,” he said. “I’ll be right behind you.”

A single shot did the deed. When the man closest to the stairs fell dead, the rest of the thugs hesitated. David jumped from the window, ran for the Jeep. They were on their way before the gang could get to their vehicles.

Funny, that’s one thing that wasn’t in short supply. Thousands of cars, all with at least some fuel, littered the city. Didn’t want a used car? Any one of the dozens of new car lots were still well stocked. The only difficult part was getting gas without electricity. The long hose on David’s hand pump did the job.

Tonight the target was a smaller food distributor that supplied restaurants. David had scoped it out a few nights ago. It seemed quiet enough, almost hidden away in the back streets of Boulder, not more than five miles from the University.

Neither spoke as they drove to the area. Many months of these forays had taught them which streets to avoid. It wasn’t exactly a zombie apocalypse, but not

hard to imagine what would happen if you ran across one of the larger gangs. They were easy to spot, almost always on the street corners burning something or other.

In less than ten minutes they had arrived. David cut the lights and then the engine, coasting to a stop about a block away from the little industrial complex.

“Looks like we’ll be getting some exercise tonight,” Cynthia said.

“Sorry. Didn’t want to chance getting any closer on a first visit. Besides, we parked her once before. Remember? This neighborhood is right next to that big pile of ejecta that’s still smoldering. It’s just about a block north.”

Cynthia sniffed. “Yep, I can still smell the Sulphur.”

They both grabbed backpacks and flashlights. Batteries were also on the hard to find list but David had put away almost a case of new ones last year just after he knew exactly what was coming at them in the sky. A twinge of guilt hit him once again as he thought how he had been bought off by the government.

“You okay?” Cynthia asked.

“Yeah. Just wishing I could have done more to warn the people.”

“Look. We’ve been over this lots of times. You didn’t cause this. It was going to happen no matter how much advance warning you could have given.”

“I know. Sorry. Don’t mean to be a downer. It still sucks because...”

“Stop.” Cynthia held up her hand. “I don’t want to hear it anymore.”

David smiled at Cynthia, although he doubted she could see him in the dark. He felt lucky to be sharing this ordeal with her. She was a no-nonsense kind of person. Helped him see how much practicality they needed to get through this.

He reached over and touched her arm lightly. “Thanks.”

“For what?”

“For just being you.” He wanted to say more, but they came to the back door of the distribution center quicker than he had expected. “Ready?”

“Looks like someone’s been here already.” Cynthia pointed to the broken window on the door. Several empty boxes lay around the back parking lot. She switched off her flashlight. David did the same.

The door was not locked. They stepped carefully over a pile of glass barely discernable in the fast-fading twilight. They passed several offices as they went down the hall. Odd layout. One more door and they were in the center of the storehouse. It was pitch black. David thought he heard the scuffle of a rat.

Without thinking, he switched on his flashlight. Ordinarily, this was the spot to stand silent for a few minutes listening to make sure you were alone.

The beam shone upon the source of the noise. Not a rat, but a man. Behind him were several more, each holding a stick or a bat.

“Welcome to our humble abode,” one of the men said. He looked dirty and hungry, much like the others. “Is there something you wanted?”