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Opening extract from

The Tomorrow Seed

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ONE

It was a typical English village, picture-perfect in thatch and stone. A parade of pretty, lovingly tended gardens. The bright bloom of flowers like an Impressionist masterpiece fragrancing the air with summer. A welcoming shop. A congenial pub. The cottages old friends whispering silent gossip. The peaceful, weathered church presiding serenely over all. It was the kind of rural idyll that would clearly be a front-runner for Village of the Year.

Were it not for the corpses.

Some were in the street where they must have staggered at the last in hope of help that never came, lying now like litter, one middle-aged woman dressed for bed. Several slumped in cars, lifeless limbs unable to turn the ignition key, the road ahead invisible to sightless eyes. An old couple sat on their garden bench, their backs propped up against the wall, heads leaning close together and lips parted as if exchanging a final confidence, rotting in death with as little fuss as they'd gone about their business in life.

Most of the bodies, however, would be inside. Many villagers would have made it to the church, seeking comfort in its cool and meditative sanctuary; the stench precluded any need to check on that. More still would be hiding away in what had been their own homes. The six teenagers clambering out of

the sparkling new 4×4 knew it would be so. Since leaving the Enclave a week ago, every village they'd passed through had been the same.

'Another day, another shit-hole,' grumbled Richie Coker.

'Don't worry,' said Travis. 'We won't be staying long. A quick restock and then we're out of here. Everyone armed?'

Everyone was. Travis and Antony with subjugators, the others with personal selections from the small armoury they'd amassed during their travels. Handguns for the three girls, a shotgun for Richie which he swung about with exaggerated menace.

'Yeah, and I reckon Freud'd have something to say about *that*,' remarked Mel.

'I don't know, Trav,' complained Jessica. 'Shouldn't we respect the homes of the dead? Taking weapons in – is it really necessary?'

'It's not the dead we need to watch out for, Jess,' said Antony.

'No.' Linden shuddered though the morning was warm. 'It's the living.'

The Scytharene. Or the feral gangs of youths like the few they'd already encountered, roaming the countryside directionlessly, driven mad by grief and horror. In a worse condition than those who'd been abducted into slavery by the alien invaders. Enemies and dangers on all sides. Linden gripped the handle of her pistol tightly.

'Ready?' said Travis. 'Then like the man in the movie says, let's go to work.'

At least there was one thing Richie was happy about. His clothes. The forced removal of his cherished hooded sweatshirt

and his favourite baseball cap aboard the *Furion* prior to processing had been calamitous enough, a major blow to his sense of self – 'a real bloody downer', as Richie had eloquently put it – but he'd been even less enamoured by the garments that had replaced them. The grey uniform of the slave while in the custody of the Scytharene. Similarly unprepossessing khaki combats once they'd escaped the aliens and joined the meagre handful of soldiers and scientists at the Enclave, all of whom had now gone the same way as the villagers. Over the past few days, though, the teenagers had been able to ransack stores and houses with impunity; everyone had found and now wore clothing in which they felt more comfortable. For Richie, the hoodie look was triumphantly restored. In fact, apart from the black hair beneath the cap having been allowed to grow a little, anyone seeing him now who'd also known him before the Sickness, recognising the heavy, naturally sullen features, might assume that Richie Coker was unchanged from the bully and all-round lout he'd been back then.

The anyone would have been wrong.

It was in the way he followed Linden Darroway around with his eyes, like they were trainee stalkers, like they were dark in colour because secrets could best be kept in darkness. Something was different about Richie Coker these days, though whether that something would improve him as a person or make him worse, perhaps time had yet to tell.

The Coker stare switched from Linden to Travis, the second of his two companions. 'So how does it feel, Naughton?'

'How does what feel, Richie?'

'This. Being a criminal. *Stealing.*'

Travis looked up from the cardboard box on the shop's

counter that he was busily filling with canned goods. 'We're not stealing. We're foraging for supplies.'

Richie chuckled mischievously. 'Which we're gonna pay for, yeah?'

Travis refused to rise to the other boy's jibe. 'If you put that gun down for a moment, Richie, you'll probably do a better job with your packing. And only liquids of a non-alcoholic variety this time, huh?'

'It's just that back at school and at Harrington and all, you were always such a stickler for the rules, weren't you, Naughton? Making a stand. Doing the right thing. And now you're up to your arse in stolen goods and you're not even thinking twice. What's happening, man? You turning into me or what?'

Travis grinned at the suggestion. Linden didn't. Linden suddenly hurled a can of beans across the shop that almost took Richie's head off. Her hazel eyes flashed with anger and her elfin face contorted, flaming almost to match her russet hair.

'How *dare* you say that, you ugly cretin? How *dare* you? Travis is nothing like you. What have you ever done for anyone but yourself? All you are is selfish. All you do is use people and hurt people. You're not fit to lick Travis's shoes.'

'Hey. Hey. Lin. Calm down.' Travis's brow furrowed as he placed his hands on the girl's shoulders. 'What's the matter with you?'

'*Him*.' Linden stabbed an accusing finger at Richie's heart. 'He's the matter with me.'

'I don't . . . must be PMT, Naughton,' said Richie innocently. 'Or else you're not treating her right. If you want a bit of advice, nudge, nudge, I know a few tricks to set a girl's pulse racing.'

'Get out!' Linden screamed. 'Travis, tell him. Tell him to get out. I can't even *look* at him.'

Puzzled, Travis nodded. 'Might be better if you waited in the car, Richie.'

'Sure be quieter. Try her on some of that vodka behind you, Naughton. Might chill her out a bit.'

'Get . . .' But before Linden could advance to *'out!'* Richie had got.

'Now maybe you'll tell me what's really the matter,' Travis encouraged with concern.

But, of course, she couldn't. Not exactly. Not entirely. Linden might not have felt able to look at Richie but she scarcely dared to engage Travis's gaze either. Those piercing, searching, irresistible blue eyes of his, they'd see through her for sure, identify her guilt and deduce its source.

'It's Richie,' she said. A lie with a grain of truth at its core was always more convincing than one with none.

'I kind of gathered that.'

'I can't stand him.' So why had she slept with him?

'Yep. Got that, too. And?'

'Isn't hating someone's guts enough to lose it once in a while?' Slept with him while Travis, her boyfriend, the boy she loved, the only boy she truly wanted to be with, was absent risking his life for each and every one of them, including Richie, out of sight for a few short hours. But to cheat on one boy with another only took minutes.

'Losing your temper's one thing, Lin,' Travis said, 'but you just took going ballistic to a whole new level. Like there's more to this than general hostility. I know Richie isn't going to be winning any awards for his humanitarianism, but he's no more of a thug now than he's ever been. I think, actually,

in some ways he's becoming almost civilised – he pulled Antony out of that Joshua, remember? Something's having a good influence on him.'

'Don't you believe it,' Linden muttered. Travis didn't know.

'What I'm saying is, you've never reacted to Richie like this before, and you've known him a while now.' He paused. 'Has something happened, Lin?'

'No.' Travis couldn't know, must never know. 'Of course not.' Never ever ever. For his sake as well as hers. 'Just . . .'

'Just?'

'Well, he was riling you, wasn't he? Provoking you. And he shouldn't. He hasn't the right.' She covered up her anxiety with a smile. 'Nobody speaks to my boyfriend like that.'

Travis took the cue and wrapped his arms around her, kissed her forehead. 'Well, I appreciate the sentiment, Linden, but the day I let *anything* that Richie Coker says affect me is the day I hand the keys to our little group over to Antony. I can handle Richie Coker.'

'I'd sooner you handled me,' Linden diverted, completing her deception by running her fingers through Travis's tangle of brown hair. 'If you know what I mean.'

'Sadly, I think we'd both better restrict ourselves to bottles and cans.' Travis glanced around at the half-empty boxes of supplies. 'We need to get on. And *you* need to try to get on with Richie, Lin. We're stronger when we're together. Will you?'

'Will I what?'

'Be nice to Richie. For me?'

'I'd do anything for you, Travis,' said Linden, and hated herself.

*

It wasn't the bodies that distressed Jessica most. She wouldn't go quite as far as to say that after you'd seen one victim of the Sickness, you'd seen them all, but the disease's trademark crimson circles scarring the flesh were pretty much identical on every corpse, and dead people in any case, she was finding, seemed somehow too remote from the living to be disturbing: unreal, inorganic, like statues carved by the most morbid sculptor in history. No, the deceased themselves were not the problem. It was what they left behind that upset her.

She should have teamed up with Travis, Linden and Richie at the village store. Plundering shelves of produce was neither as intrusive nor as emotional as picking through private houses that had once required an invitation even to enter. Nobody displayed the relics of their precious past where the public bought their vegetables.

Antony and Mel were upstairs. She could hear them rummaging. Jessica herself stood in the cottage's tiny parlour like a guest nervous of her reception. The curtains were drawn and she wanted them left that way. Greater light would reveal more starkly the owners of the cottage's belongings, and that could well bring tears. Not because of what the objects were in themselves – a cluster of matching tables, a Delft pottery milkmaid, a carriage clock – but because of what they signified. Lives had been lived here, and the furnishings, the ornaments had provided the backdrop for those lives, like a stage set for a play. But the actors were all gone now and the drama was ended. There could be little more lonely than an empty room.

The photographs were the worst. Strangers smiling though there was no one left to love them. Jessica's heart wrenched

every time she saw the photographs, proudly arranged on mantelpieces and sideboards. This time she didn't look.

'Find anything good yet?' Mel barged into the parlour, made Jessica jump. 'What are you standing in the dark for? Let's shed some light on the subject.' Which she did, yanking back the curtains. She sniffed at the contents of the room like a unimpressed auctioneer. 'Nah, nothing of any value here. Bet there'll be an oil lamp or candles or something, though, in the kitchen. You all right, Jess?' Because the blonde girl was blinking her large green eyes and pressing her trembling lips together as if she wasn't.

'I'm fine. Something in my eye, that's all.' Probing it with a slender finger.

'You sure?'

'No.' The damn photographs. She hadn't been able to ignore them entirely in the flood of morning light. A grandmother, a little girl balancing on her knee and laughing at the precariousness of her position.

'Jessie.' Mel's voice was warm and tender. So were her arms as they enfolded Jessica.

It was akin to being embraced by night. Melanie Patrick's pre-Sickness wardrobe had been as black as the hair that cascaded over her thin shoulders. Post-Enclave, she'd reverted to type. Mel was the sartorial equivalent of Henry Ford and his Model T: she'd wear any colour you liked, so long as it was black. Baggy was also good, so the curves of her body couldn't be seen, so her sex could be obscured. But not her feelings. It took more than a few scraps of fabric to conceal what Mel felt for Jessica Lane.

Right now, Jessica didn't care about that. She was grateful for the comfort. 'It's stupid. I know. I'm stupid. It's just a

photo, people I never even... That old lady, Mel.' The grandmother. 'Do you think she lived here?' Mel's eyes strayed meaningfully to the ceiling. 'Oh, *God*.'

'She looks peaceful, though, Jess. Antony covered her up.'

'What about the little girl in the picture? What do you think happened to her?'

'I don't know.'

'Do you think she's still alive somewhere, wandering with one of those horrible gangs we saw? Or maybe she's in a cryo-tube aboard a slavecraft waiting to be transported to the Scytharene homeworld. Do you think she cries for her granny or her parents every night to come and save her?'

'I don't know, Jessie,' sighed Mel, 'and I'm not sure it does us any good to dwell on it. We can't help little girls like that. At least, not until someone's beaten the Scytharene.'

'So,' said Jessica bleakly, 'never, then.'

'What's this, a tea break?' Antony Clive breezed into the room looking as if he was about to depart on a bracing walk through the grounds of his own estate. A tweed cap wouldn't have gone amiss on his head of tight blond curls. His finely chiselled aristocratic features, however, darkened from a smile to a frown when they registered Jessica's expression. 'Jess?'

Grudgingly Mel stood aside. The boy hugged Jessica instead.

'I'm all right, Antony. I was saying to Mel . . . I got a little upset by the photos, that's all.'

'Maybe a bit of fresh air'll help,' suggested Mel. Bonus: she wouldn't have to watch Antony fondling Jessie like that.

'Good idea. Very good idea,' he agreed at once. And it must have been Antony's public-school, play-the-game upbringing, Mel reflected. An asset on the rugby field, no

doubt, but it had made the former Head Boy of the Harrington School absolutely bloody useless when it came to detecting hidden agendas. 'Mel and I can finish up in here, Jess. You pop outside.'

Jessica nodded. 'I think I will.'

And she did feel a little better in the open. Their car was parked about a hundred yards down the road, nearer to the shop. Richie was leaning up against the vehicle smoking. Jessica breathed in deeply. The cottage, all of the houses, they were more like graves these days. She closed her eyes, lifted her face to the sun, swept her long hair back and tried to forget for a moment where she was, tried to remember her life before the Sickness and the Scytharene.

The whine of a dog refused to let her.

Jessica opened her eyes to see it quivering on all four paws just inside the garden, the gate swung wide. The mongrel's fur was filthy and matted, its body so skinny every rib could be counted and each heartbeat bulged like a ball thrown against its chest from within. The animal seemed barely able to stand, but it found the strength to wag its tail feebly and its brown eyes appealed plaintively to the girl as they'd doubtless done to many humans before, begging food, craving affection.

Jessica felt an urge to supply both. The latter she could manage immediately. 'Hello, boy. Hello. What's your name? Are you a good boy?' She bent down, extended her open palm, inched closer towards her new little friend. She'd always wanted a dog, a collie like Lassie so they could have adventures together, or a beautiful Labrador she could have her picture taken with when she was famous. Dad had said no. Dad had said dogs were a tie. Dad had said dogs were more trouble than they were worth.

Perhaps Jessica could prove him wrong after all this time. 'Good boy. There's a *good* boy.' Closer to the whimpering, motionless canine, leaning forward, reaching out her hand to touch him, to stroke his muzzle. 'You don't need to be frightened. There's nothing to be—'

The dog went for her. One second it was whining forlornly, the next it was growling and predatory, its lips peeling back to expose sharp and snapping teeth. It lunged for Jessica's hand.

Which she snatched away with a squeal, recoiling in shock. The dog, undeterred, launched itself snarling at the girl. Jessica jerked sideways, avoiding the animal's leap. But though the dog landed awkwardly on the grass it twisted around like wire to confront her once more, eyes crazed, muscles bunched. Aiming for her throat this time. And Jessica back-pedalling frantically, fearfully. Stumbling.

She screamed again as she fell. How could she defend . . . The gun. Tucked into her jeans. If she could reach it. But the maddened dog was sensing easy prey. Its bark might almost have been of triumph.

A shot rang out across the garden with the stinging crack of a whip. Not from Jessica's weapon, though. From Mel's, her gun fired warningly into the air. She and Antony had heard Jessica's cries, were racing from the cottage.

The dog didn't care who they were. It knew only that they were enemies and more powerful than itself. It did what aggressors normally do when suddenly finding themselves outnumbered. It fled.

'You all right, Jess?' Antony kneeling beside her, raising her up. 'Did it bite you?'

'No. No. But it was *going* to. I mean, I think for *food*,

Antony. I think it would have tried to kill me if Mel hadn't . . . *God.*' Her stomach heaved.

'What's going on? Who the hell's shooting?' Richie appeared the other side of the garden hedge, flourishing his shotgun as though keen to join in.

'Panic over, soldier. You can stand down,' Mel said. 'Man's Best Friend turns out to be a bit of a bastard after all.'

'Come again?'

'We had Fido try to turn Jessie into a main course. Guess a diet of nothing but meaty chunks out of a can and a few biscuits must piss you off eventually.'

'A dog attacked Jessica?' Richie frowned.

'If only the examination system was still up and running,' Mel said ruefully. 'You're a truly A-star student, Richie.'

'Drop dead, Morticia.'

'Do you think we can stop bickering?' Antony had helped Jessica to her feet but she still seemed shaky on them. 'Let's get Jessie to the car. It's okay, Jess. We've scared the thing away. It won't be back.'

A distant barking drifting on the air.

Mel stiffened. 'Can we have that in writing, Antony?'

And multiplying. And approaching. And escalating in volume.

'I reckon bloody Fido's gone to fetch his mates,' said Richie. 'Maybe we should *all* get to the car.'

And not *barking*, either, not really. More of a baying, a howling, insistent, inexorable. Chilling. Like a pack of hounds on a hunt before they tear the fox to pieces.

'Oh, shit,' gulped Richie.

Bounding into the street from the other end of the village to the car, dogs. Dozens of dogs. Every breed. Emaciated,

caked in dirt, some of them bloodied, all of them savage. Once, and not too long ago, either, they'd been domesticated, family pets, children's playmates, pensioners' companions. But the Sickness had deprived them of their owners and denied them their source of food. Starvation had done the rest. They'd reverted to the wild. They were wolves again. And the bloodlust was in them.

'Run!' bellowed Richie.

The teenagers did, sprinting for the car, but they weren't going to outpace the pack. The larger, stronger dogs in particular were gaining. An Alsatian with gristle where its ears had been. A Dobermann streaked with blood and slavering.

Mel fired her gun into the air again. This time the animals didn't even flinch.

'Not over their heads, Morticia, you tart,' Richie raged. '*At* them. *Shoot* the buggers.'

'I can't . . . I can't shoot a *dog*,' Mel moaned. Her finger was on the trigger but she hesitated.

The Dobermann didn't. Its black body and swiping claws were almost on her.

A white blast from Antony's subjugator froze the animal in its tracks and dropped it thudding to the road.

'Can't think of them as dogs, Mel,' he advised, firing again. 'They're wild beasts now.'

'Yeah, I can tell you've been on safari, O Great White Hunter,' Mel retorted. It was easy for Antony to mow the creatures down. The rest of them didn't have the luxury of his subjugator's stun function. When they opened fire, they were shooting to kill.

And she had no choice but to do that, to open fire. Blood sprayed from the Alsatian's chest. And as the animal yelped in

pain and died there in the street where its owner might once have walked it, Mel felt like a murderer.

In the village store, Travis and Linden heard the gunfire. Drawing their weapons, they rushed outside.

Into a canine obstacle of their own.

Bare-fanged, ravening brutes numbering in double figures. Surging for them. Springing at them. Totally by instinct, Travis fired his subjugator, removed the threat of the lead dogs.

Linden was slower to react. When she'd lived with the Children of Nature, she'd been taught to love and care for *all* of Nature's creatures. Whether that instruction included those creatures seemingly intent on ripping her throat out was an issue she didn't really have time to debate just now. Sentimentality had already placed her at a disadvantage.

An Airedale clamped its jaws around the forearm she'd raised to deflect its flight. Just as well her sweatshirt had long sleeves. A Boxer and, absurdly, surreally, a poodle, snapped at her wildly kicking legs and feet.

'Travis!' Occupied with the elimination of their other assailants. She'd have to do the feminist thing and save herself. Just as well it was her right hand still free. Her gun hand. The Airedale was clinging on, its teeth biting through her sweatshirt, bruising her arm, about to puncture the skin. 'God,' she uttered. *Forgive me*, she felt.

Prodded the barrel of her gun into the dog's chest and blasted. Noticed the animal was still wearing a collar as its jaws widened in agony and its eyes glazed and her arm was her own again. Noticed the shiny silver disc still dangling from it. Read what it said.

Forgive me, she prayed again.

And maybe someone had. She didn't have to kill any more. Travis and his subjugator had been busy.

'Come on, let's get the car open and started up,' he urged, darting towards it and pulling her with him. The others were converging on the vehicle too but still embattled by the pack and further off. 'Hope Richie's left the key in the ignition.'

He had. And there was no building of tension like in the movies. The engine started first time, allowing both Travis and Linden to provide covering fire and help haul their friends into the car.

'Go, Naughton, go!' From Richie, sprawling unceremoniously across the back seat.

'Mel . . .' Travis said. The black-haired girl was still yards away.

'What's Morticia waiting for? A better offer? Get a bloody move on!'

'That's what's so inspiring about you, Coker,' said Antony acidly, piling in with Jessica. 'You're so concerned for the welfare of others.'

'Sorry I'm late.' Mel dived into the back too. 'Did you miss me?'

Linden and Antony slammed the doors shut. The dogs propelled themselves impotently, idiotically at the windows, their bodies thumping and slamming into the vehicle.

'Yeah, too late, you bastards.' Richie pressed his jeering face against the glass where, an inch away, a less than golden retriever howled its frustration. 'You want to take a bite out of us now, you need a can-opener. I hope you all die.'

'Shut up, Richie,' glowered Linden. 'This isn't the dogs' fault. They can't help what they're doing. The Scytharene have forced them into it. They're only trying to survive.'

'Us too,' reminded Travis as a bony greyhound somehow vaulted on to the bonnet and kind of butted the windscreen. Travis stamped his foot down on the accelerator. The greyhound slid off the car almost comically.

The crunching bumps as the 4×4's wheels ran over dogs too slow or too lunatic to get out of the way, however, were far from amusing.

Jessica peered through the rear window. Those animals that remained alive were compensating for the loss of their original prey. They were fighting each other for the right to devour their dead companions. Jessica turned away quickly.

'Everyone all right?' Travis said.

Mel broke into shrieks of hysterical laughter. 'All right, Trav? Sure. I've never been better. We've been chased out of a village full of corpses by a pack of homicidal hounds and who knows, just around the corner an army of albino aliens might be lurking to chuck us into slavery for the rest of our naturals. All right? How come you even have to ask?'

She was still rocking with bitter hilarity as the village vanished into the distance behind them.

Before the Sickness, Vernham Hill had been a notable beauty spot. Tourists had come to climb its steep, wooded slopes and to admire the breathtaking view from the summit. The crashed and blackened hulk of the Scytharene slavecraft *Furion* had put paid to that, gouging deep, dark channels in the earth and splintering once-towering trees into matchwood. The scars of the recent battle between the *Furion* and a force of Joshua Assault Vehicles, all of them destroyed, did little to restore tranquillity to the scene either. It would be a long time before sightseers returned to Vernham Hill.

Those who came here now had different priorities.

Scytharene warriors in their customary black armour, their helmets modelled after savage beasts or birds of prey, swarmed over the ship's remains like ants. Through vents and tears in the metal as well as more conventional hatches and portals, they ventured into the interior of the *Furion*'s broken crescent. When they emerged again, sometimes it was with something that in size and shape approximated to a body. On these occasions, they deposited their find on the ground where similar objects lay, zipped into bags and catalogued by comrades in red. Then they returned to the wreckage. This process was repeated very many times, with very many warriors participating. The rows of body bags stretched further than the eye might care to see. Even the pitiless, pupil-less crimson eyes of the Scytharene.

Which perhaps explained why two of their number stood at a distance from the majority's grim work, closer to the smaller ships that had brought them here and that now occupied the brow of the hill. On the other hand, perhaps it was the golden armour in which this pair were clad that distinguished them from their fellow Scytharene, in ways more profound than simple colour. They were a female in her twenties and a male more than twice her age who, unlike his companion, was draped in robes, also of gold. Neither wore a helmet, allowing direct comparison to be made between the facial features of the Scytharene sexes. Not that there appeared to be any real physiognomical differences. Both heads were entirely hairless, the skin utterly white, the white of bled meat, the white of fresh skulls, and in common too were the lumpish cartilage ears with the half-moon flap, the flat, ugly nose, the lipless mouth that unseamed itself when

preparing to speak like a wound splitting open, and those eyes, like jellied blood. Only at the bellineum was gender expressed. The jutting buttress of bone that bulged along the forehead above the male's eyes was as pale as the rest of him; the female's bellineum, however, in keeping with the traditions of her kind, had been painted in bright, seductive hues, decorated with symbols like hieroglyphics. Inscribed less permanently on each of the Scytharene's faces were the emotions of anger and loss, but whereas rage predominated in the male, with the female the gentler, sadder condition seemed to prevail.

A warrior approached the pair, punched his fist to his heart and bowed his head deferentially. 'Fleet Commander Gyrion,' he addressed the gold-robed male.

'Warrior-Prime Murion, report if you would.'

'We've already recovered a significant number of the crew's bodies as you can see, Fleet Commander,' said Murion, 'but I'm afraid the operation will take a considerable time to complete. Perhaps you might prefer to return to the Culler and I'll send word when—'

'I *prefer*, Prime,' corrected Gyrion, 'to remain where I am and not to have my movements dictated to me by my subordinates.'

'Yes, sir. My apologies, Fleet Commander, sir.'

'My son perished aboard the *Furion*, Warrior-Prime Murion. My son made the ultimate sacrifice for the Scytharene cause and proved himself worthy of his noble bloodline. My son is a hero of his race, and I will not leave this place until *he* does. Retrieve every one of our fallen brethren, Prime, and do so quickly.'

'Yes, sir, Fleet Commander Gyrion,' assured the warrior

subserviently. 'Then perhaps the Lady Dyona might be more comfortable . . .' Indicating the ships, seeking to redeem himself.

'Your solicitude is appreciated, Prime, but unnecessary,' said the female Scytharene. 'Lord Darion was my betrothed. My duty is also to remain here.'

'Of course, my lady. Forgive me.' Bowing his head once more, Warrior-Prime Murion beat as hasty a retreat as he dared. It was not sensible to risk the disapproval of even a single member of the elite Thousand Families, let alone two, and one of those Fleet Commander Gyrion.

Who stared after the soldier with contempt. 'There must be contamination in that one's bloodline, Dyona,' he observed coldly. 'An alien in the ancestry, as the saying goes. A poor example of our people, putting relaxation before revenge.'

'I'm sure that's not an error you'll make, my lord,' said Dyona, with a sardonic note that a more sensitive soul than Gyrion might have detected.

'Indeed not.' His eyes like lava. 'The Earthers will pay for the crime they have committed.'

Fighting for their lives against alien invaders whose intention was to enslave them, Dyona thought. Who were the real criminals here?

'This is a miserable, primitive planet,' Gyrion growled. 'I can hardly bear to tread its surface and its foul air is a corruption in my lungs. The impurities of alien environments revolt me. Thank Ayrion the slave harvest is well advanced. With our profits from the sale of these wretched savages I will build the finest mausoleum our people have ever seen in which to enshrine the body of my brave and beloved son, Darion.'

'I'm sure he'd appreciate that,' Dyona said. She was lying, of course, but her tears were true. They brewed scarlet in her eyes and coursed down her blank-paper cheeks like trickles of blood.

Their appearance embarrassed Gyrion. Blood was only acceptable when spouting from wounds inflicted in battle. 'You miss him, of course,' he said gruffly.

'I loved him.' And she still did. Not even death was mighty enough to change that.

'Then take pride in the manner of his passing,' his father said. 'Battling for what he believed in.'

'Oh, I do, my lord,' Dyona said fervently.

'The superiority of the Scytharene race.'

Hardly. Gyrion's ignorance almost made Dyona laugh. Darion had been killed alongside the crew of the *Furion*, indisputably, but he'd not been *fighting* alongside them. He'd opposed them. He'd despised them. He'd rejected every single tenet of his people's Master Race creed and allied himself with the Earthers. And at the last, during the final conflict, however it had actually transpired, whatever the details of Darion's death, Dyona was absolutely certain that her lover had been fighting *against* the Scytharene. Her heart exulted with that knowledge even through her grief.

'And at least the cursed traitor Shurion spoke of must have died with the rest.'

The traitor. Gyrion's own son.

'Indeed, my lord,' said Dyona. 'A most happy occurrence.'

And the traitor's body might have burned. Darion was gone. But his spirit and his inspiration would live on, Dyona vowed. *In her.*

*

'I'll miss my old Gameboy,' said Antony.

Richie swigged lager and leaned forward leeringly in his chair. 'You talking electronic leisure devices, Tony, or the kid in the next bed at that poncy bloody school of yours?'

'Oh, Richie,' complained Jessica, 'why do you always have to lower the tone?' She didn't glance Melwards.

'It's okay, Jess,' Antony said loftily. 'Richie can't help it. That's the problem with having more nostrils than brain cells. I mean computer games generally. I'll miss those. I know it's only a small thing—'

'Unlucky, Lane,' chuckled Richie, and had to duck to avoid the cushion flung like a Frisbee at his offending head.

They'd parked up for the night at an isolated and fortuitously corpse-free cottage. They'd shifted the chairs in the front room into a circle and by candlelight were sharing their thoughts on those items of pre-Sickness life they most regretted losing.

'Funny, I wouldn't have put you down as a fan of those shoot-'em-up games, Antony,' said Mel. 'Richie, yes – or would have been, if he could have worked out how to turn the computer on.'

'Bet I know how to turn you on, Morticia,' came the retort.

Mel snorted. 'What's in that can? Lager or libido? Get a grip, Coker – so to speak.'

'And actually, if anyone's interested,' Antony pointed out, 'I *didn't* play shoot-'em-ups or whatever you want to call them.'

'Not much need to now, anyway,' said Travis. 'These days we're shooting for real.'

'Yeah. Would have made a great game, though, wouldn't it?' Mel's voice became exaggeratedly dramatic: 'Will you

survive "The Attack of the Scytharene"? Or, the Sickness was only the beginning. Now battle for freedom or become "Slaves of the Scytharene".' She shrugged. 'It's a shoo-in. If only the marketing people weren't all dead.'

'I preferred,' persisted Antony doggedly, 'more constructive games. Games where you built something rather than destroyed it, that tested you with something more positive than beating your best friend's body count. Were you familiar with *Pax Britannica*? You had to found a new British Empire in the twenty-first century. I used to spend hours playing that.'

'Me too,' Jessica laughed, clapping her hands with delight. 'Mum and Dad bought it for my fourteenth birthday. I loved that game.'

'Really?' Antony gazed at Jessica. He looked kind of dazzled. 'What a coincidence. How far did you get?'

'Oh, I never managed to civilise the *whole* world. The Middle East was always a bit of a problem. And Australia.'

'Well, I worked out a few short-cuts. . .'

'Lord save us,' groaned Mel. Something else Jessica and Antony had in common. *Damn.* 'Let me restore sanity to the proceedings and step in with some of the things I *won't* be sorry to leave behind. Politicians telling us to do one thing while doing the opposite themselves, like bog-standard comps for us, posh public schools like Antony's for their kids. Has-been rock stars flying round the world pontificating about how it's our moral duty to save the planet by – uh – *not* flying round the world. Talent contests for untalented wannabes where you phone in to vote but the results are fixed anyway. Any magazine with the word "celebrity" on the cover. Footballers earning more in a week than a whole football team's worth of nurses could in a year. Health and

safety regulations being used as an insidious form of social con—'

'Mel. Mel,' interrupted Travis. 'Thanks. We get the picture. Just a pity it's the wrong picture. What do you *miss*?'

'Well, we could do with a satnav system for the car,' Mel said moodily. 'Might help us find the next bloody Enclave a bit easier.'

'We'll be there tomorrow,' Travis promised, and with a pointed glance at Antony: 'Early.'

They hadn't been wandering aimlessly since the battle with the *Furion* and the fall of the first Enclave. The sheet of paper the late Dr Mowatt had given Jessica and Mel identifying the positions of other such military-scientific installations had become like a treasure map to the teenagers, offering a rich reward of hope. What if all, some or even just one of these other Enclaves turned out to be operational, occupied by living people, soldiers, scientists, *adults*? Perhaps there were experts in residence who already knew how to defeat the Scytharene, who even now were masterminding the perfect plan to expel the aliens from Earth, to send them scuttling and vanquished back into space. Or perhaps not. The group had located two of the Enclave sites so far. Both complexes had been hollow shells. What if, in time, Travis thought fearfully, hope became hollow as well? What would they do then?

He'd wanted to push on today, maybe even reach the next base before dark. Surely, the next Enclave would be the one. But Antony had proposed instead that they stop for the night in order to be fresh for the morning. The others had agreed with him, which perplexed and kind of annoyed Travis. He didn't understand. He never wanted to stop.

'What about me?' Richie was demanding. 'Don't you wanna know what *I* miss?'

'We already *know* what you miss, Big Guy,' Mel said. 'Pornography, amphetamines and kids with dinner money to extort. I'd rather ask Linden. Lin?'

Who, everybody realised, had been silent throughout the entire discussion. Five pairs of eyes turned quizzically to her.

'I don't . . . I'm not . . .' Linden looked away. 'I can't do this.'

She sprang to her feet and ran from the room.

'Lin? What's . . . I didn't mean to upset her.' Mel half rose from her seat. Travis saved her the trouble of the other half.

'It's all right. I'll go.'

'Chicks blubbing for no reason,' Richie grunted after them. 'That's something that'll *never* bloody change.'

Travis found her in the dining room, leaning her arms on the table and her head on her arms. She was crying quietly.

'You want to try my shoulder, Lin? Not quite so hard.'

She looked up and her face in the moonlight through the window was like silver. 'I'm sorry, Travis. I must have made myself look foolish.'

'Not to me you didn't. Not to the others, either.' He pulled up a chair beside her, twined a protective arm around her. 'What's wrong?'

Linden smiled wanly. 'I'm not sure it's worth me saying. It's stupid, really.'

'Foolish. Stupid. I'm beginning to see a pattern developing here. *Tell* me.' He stroked her cheek and dampened his fingertips with her tears. 'Trust me.'

'How many millions did the Sickness kill, Travis? Or is it

billions? And the Scytharene. So many people I haven't cried for, haven't mourned. And yet this morning I kill one dog, *one dog*, an animal, it wasn't even a human being, and I can't get it out of my head, and I'm sorry and ashamed . . .'

'Lin, you didn't have any choice . . .'

'I know. I know. Rationally, I know, but here, Travis' – pressing her hand against her heart – 'what I *feel* is different. The dog had a name-tag on its collar. I read its name as it died. Scamp. I killed Scamp. Some kid had loved that dog, Trav. I know it was a child, a little girl, a little boy. They'd loved him and they'd called him Scamp. In a different life they'd done it, a better, happier life, and I shot their beautiful dog dead.'

'Linden . . .'

'And I'm crying for him. That's the bizarre part, Travis. The human race virtually at the point of extinction and I'm grieving for a solitary dog, not all those people. There's got to be something wrong with me.'

'There's nothing wrong with you.' Travis cuddled her. 'Linden.' He adored saying her name. He'd never realised a word could be so stirring, so tantalising. 'Nobody can feel about millions the way it's possible to feel about one. A million deaths is a statistic. A single death – that's something else. That's an individual, and that's when loss can touch us, when we can begin to care. I mean genuinely. The way one person *can* care for another, get close to another.' And Travis could hardly have drawn closer to Linden right at this moment. Their bodies were locked together. 'The way one person can love another . . .'

'Do you love me, Travis?'

'Oh, yes.'

'I'm glad. I love you.'

'Linden . . .'

'Do you believe me? Do you believe I love you?'

'Lin . . .'

'Say you do. I want to hear you say it.' Anxiety behind the eyes.

'I believe you. I know you love me.'

'Then don't leave me tonight. Be with me. All night.' In urgent whispers. 'Sleep with me, Travis.'

And uncertainty in Travis's voice. Fear as well as longing. 'Lin, we said we'd—'

'We said we'd wait. I know. Until the time was right. But I think we've waited long enough, Travis, don't you? I can't – I need you loving me. Time's now.' She took his hand, squeezed, made to stand.

He checked her. 'Linden, it's just . . . You know I haven't . . . *been* with anyone before.'

'You told me that. Makes me a lucky girl to be your first, Travis Naughton.'

'It's just – I want this, tonight, to be special. You and me, Lin. I don't want to let you down.'

'I'm sure you'll measure *up,*' Linden grinned. She kissed him deeply, her tongue flickering hotly over his. 'Don't worry. Relax. Enjoy. Listen, I'm not exactly gossip column material myself.'

'Ash . . .'

'Ouch.' Masking a sudden fear with a short laugh. She hadn't wanted to hear *that* name tonight.

'Ash is the only boy you've ever – slept with?'

'Does it matter?'

'It matters,' said Travis, simply and sincerely. 'Maybe it shouldn't, but it does.'

So Linden lied. Richie she struck from her memory. Richie had never happened. 'Then yes. Ash is the only boy I've ever slept with – but he won't be for much longer. Will he?'

'No. Not for much longer.'

'Pleased to hear it. Shall we?'

And this time when she rose, Travis let Linden lead him to the stairs.

'What about the others?' he whispered, hearing their voices from the front room.

'I think it's better if we just keep it to you and me, for tonight at least,' giggled Linden. 'Let them find their own kind of fun.' She began creeping up the stairs. 'God, it's dark. I can hardly see.'

'That's good, isn't it?' Travis followed her into the blackness. 'Love is blind.'

Which was perhaps why neither of them noticed Richie Coker brooding in the shadows of the hall. Richie could see them, however. He'd been watching for a while. And he knew where they were going. And why.

His fists were clenched.

TWO

Travis remembered how his mates had talked about girls back at school: 'That Janine Collier, she fancies you . . . You're in there, mate, she's *gagging* for it . . . Cheryl Stone? You got more chance with *Sharon* Stone.' And gawped and ogled: 'Will you *look* at that bum. That's got to be one of the top ten bums in the world, that has . . . legs up to her armpits, yeah. Course, they've gotta be that long or they wouldn't reach the ground . . . Alison Grant? I *know*. She's so hot I could drink her bathwater.' And boasted: 'We *did* do it, I'm telling you. At Dale's party, in the spare bedroom, while everyone else was off their heads . . . While her mum was out shopping . . . She went to the loo and when she came back in she was starkers. I'm not kidding . . . In the back room of the youth club where they keep the old table-tennis tables . . . Babysitting for her next-door neighbours . . . All the way . . . Twice . . . Three times.' And largely fantasised.

Travis had joined in, of course. Leching over teenage girls was what you did when you were teenage boys, and from what Mel had told him –with a chaste touch of moral disapproval, as though she herself was immune to such predilections – the same was pretty much true in reverse for girls. But though he'd been happy enough to be lewd and vulgar with the rest of them if the conversation had taken a