

PROLOGUE

The sleek shadow of a teenage boy slips across the New Horizons campground and up to the charred opening of a long wooden cabin. Tensing at the distant shriek of a bird of prey, the boy strains to sense movement in the night. When silence follows, he loosens his grip around his spear and relaxes again. It's nothing. As usual, the night has inflamed his senses. Refocusing on his task, he steps through the doorway and disappears from sight.

His callused feet pad rhythmically as he moves over the cabin's ashen floorboards, favoring the wall to avoid disturbing the fifty-odd sleeping boys inside. He stops and scans their rows, looking for the telltale sign of his target—a neck ringed with angry pink scar tissue.

There.

In the middle of a clump of sleepers he spots who he's looking for and, leaving the wall, steps lightly over bodies until he's hovering over the shivering figure, like an emaciated specter of death.

He pauses, thinking twice about how to accomplish his task. Like everything in the wild, it requires care. Not the care of kindness, but of caution. For even in sleep he knows there is no peace for the children of The Compound.

His intuition serves him well. Before his fingers even make contact with the sleeping boy, a squeak in the floorboards brings a hidden short spear to his neck in a flash. Another ounce of pressure would certainly mean death and for a long moment neither boy moves. Finally, the sleeper's eyes register recognition and his shoulders relax.

"Jesus Christ, Mute, chill out," the waker snaps in a harsh whisper. He pushes the spear away from his neck saying, "You're up for watch is all."

Mute sheaths his spear in his belt without answering. He stands up slowly, arching his back to quell a deep ache before turning his focus to the interior of the cabin. All is quiet, save for his rouser taking his place on the floor to get some sleep in the remaining hours before sunrise.

"It's no joke, man. You need to relax or, I swear, you're going to kill someone one day," the boy says, adrenaline still pumping through him. "I'm all tooled up now. I probably won't be able to sleep, goddammit."

Mute disregards the boy, stepping over him and walking towards the entrance of the Great Lodge. Once the centerpiece of the long-abandoned summer camp, the lodge is less impressive now, gutted by the fires of the Loner revolt. He stops as moonlight catches his eye through a jagged hole in the roof. Looking up, he's suddenly aware that the same moon also shines over another world—a *real* one—out there somewhere beyond the border, far away. *Better not to think about it*, he decides as he takes his first steps outside.

Leaving the lodge behind, Mute's nostrils sting as he steps into the open air and the nauseating smell of smoke hits his nose. *I'll never get used to it*, he thinks bleakly, choking back a thin cough. *How long does it take for smoke to clear, anyway? How long until life becomes normal again? I can't take much more of this crap.*

In no hurry to take his post in the surrounding woods, Mute scans the apocalyptic campground, imagining what it must have been like before it was destroyed. It was a place he'd only heard about in whispers; the center of power in the Compound, run by a brutal leader who called himself Talon, where kids became animals.

He shivers in the early morning air as he resurrects the collapsed water tower in his mind, imagining what life must have been like for the wild boys who inhabited the camp before it was taken over by Adam and the rest of the Loners. As rustic as it would have appeared to a new enrollment, it was downright opulent compared to the open forest where Mute came from. Standing in the remains of what was once the center of power in The Compound, he suddenly feels like a freed slave stumbling upon the ashes of Rome unaware of the events that brought it to its knees, but glad it fell all the same.

Mute's thoughts turn dark then. *How resentful they all must be now*, he thinks, *beaten and forced into the thick. If Talon is half as dangerous as I've heard then he'll want revenge.* The Clan would be back in one form or another, he was sure. It was only a matter of *when*.

It wasn't always like this, Mute laments as he continues through the silent campgrounds. *I never used to have a target on my back, and I liked it that way. What the hell was I thinking getting involved in all this, anyway? Hell. Yes, life is hell now.*

Pushing past the edge of the campground and into the surrounding trees, Mute wades through the brush to find his watch post. He isn't particularly careful in his movements, which is by design. Alerting a watch partner to your approach is the best way to avoid getting accidentally stung. As though to prove this, a sharp whistle makes him stop in his tracks. He whistles back and the pinched face of another teenage boy with dark, mud-lined eyes pops out from behind a feathered hedge about twenty paces ahead.

Mute hangs his head. *Elijah. Great. It's going to be a long shift.*

Elijah sighs. "Of course I get a shift with the one kid who doesn't talk," he says before turning away and walking back to stand behind a crude barricade made of flame-licked wood at the base of two thick oak trunks.

A small fire flickers on the ground at the base of the barricade and Mute takes his place beside it. As he sits, Elijah delivers another sigh. "Nice of you to finally join me, Alexander the Late," he says without the hint of a smile. "Three hours of talking to myself. What fun. *Woweee.*"

Mute ignores him and settles in, leaning his back against the low wall. The watch post is one of four on the ground while four more are in the trees around the camp's perimeter. Manned twenty-four hours a day since the rebellion, setting them up was Adam's first order when they'd first arrived in camp. Unsurprisingly to Mute, he usually gets night shifts. It's hard to compete for plum spots when you lack the ability to whine to the boss. But he doesn't mind. It's hot during the day and he barely sleeps anymore, anyhow.

Looking up at Elijah he notices the boy's eyes are more anxious than usual as he stares into the dark abyss of trees.

"There's something out there," he whispers as though sensing Mute starring. "Can you hear it? I mean, you can't talk, right? So your hearing must be better than mine." Elijah looks down at him, almost pleading. "I heard that somewhere. That people's senses get more powerful when they don't got all of them. Is that right?"

Mute wishes he could tell him it doesn't work that way when someone slits your throat, but he only shakes his head.

"Well, whatever. There's something out there, and I'm not crazy either. Some of the other guys are saying they've heard something moving around out there in the night. Something big. A *monster*, some of them are saying. Like, maybe they threw something in here with us, you know? Just to see what it would do. What we would do. You think that's possible? You think they made something and we're just here to see how it plays out?"

Mute doesn't.

“You know, it’s a lack of imagination that does you in, Mute. You should remember that. You have to imagine the worst thing possible otherwise you won’t be ready when the worst thing shows up and gets you. And it always gets you. Just a matter of when.”

Mute rolls his eyes and turns back towards the fire. *As if this night couldn’t get worse, Elijah decides to become a philosopher.*

His stomach knots up suddenly and he winces. He’s already getting hungry. Food has been scarce in the camp for weeks due to what Anthony called *enhanced security measures*. Paranoia, others might call it, but whatever was going on, hunting parties were strictly forbidden and, as a result, there wasn’t much on the menu these days except what was available around the perimeter. One more day of pigweed and berry stew and Mute thought his voice might actually heal just to scream.

When the pain in his stomach subsides, Mute readjusts his body to ward off another attack and thinks about Elijah’s words. As far as he’s concerned, Elijah fails to recognize that the worst thing *already* happened to each of them the day they were thrown into this cursed place. Nothing could surprise him now.

“Whatever, tough guy, you’ll see,” Elijah mutters without taking his eyes off the forest. “Monster or not, there’s something out there. Something bad is coming and this Marcus kid can’t get back here soon enough as far as I’m concerned.”

Marcus Riley. The name has become synonymous with hope around camp in less than a month despite the fact that most kids never even laid eyes on him. Getting him out was the reason they’d all come together and now the promise of his return is the only thing keeping them from splitting up again. Not much to count on.

If Mute had a voice, he would have said it was foolish to think this Marcus kid was coming back. Hell, they didn’t even know if he got out! And when A.S.S.P was always five steps ahead of them all, who’s to say they weren’t watching his every move if he *did* get out? The whole thing seemed too impossible to contemplate. They were stuck here and so be it. The only thing to do now is watch your own back or risk becoming a—

Thrashing in the dark punctures Mute’s thoughts and he jumps to his feet.

“There it is!” squeaks Elijah, turning back towards him. “Jesus, do you hear that? What the hell is that?”

Mute hears it— a sluggish plodding, like a heavy creature dragging its bloated body through the underbrush. And Elijah was right, it sounds *ungodly* big.

Digging his heels into the dirt, Mute pulls his short spear from his belt and faces the sound.

Thrash Thrash

Jesus, he thinks, the thing sounds like it’s getting closer!

The boys step together, shoulder to shoulder, spears pointed forward as the sound of thrashing and cracking branches gets closer until it seems to come from all around them.

Elijah spins, scanning the trees, looking for the source. Then he whispers, his voice shaking, “Mute, can you tell where it is?”

Thrash Thrash

He turns back to Mute who shakes his head, eyes wide with fear.

“Well, what do we do?” Elijah whispers. “What the bloody hell are we supposed to do, anyway? I’m not going *out* there.”

Mute takes a step away from the barricade then stops, suddenly embarrassed at the act of cowardice. He looks into Elijah’s dark eyes and the two boys stare at each other for a long moment as though trying to gauge each other’s thoughts without admitting their own.

Thrash Thrash

Without speaking another word they turn and run.

