

# *Last Worst Hope*

## **1: The Ruins**

It was all over in about 14 minutes, give or take. I can't give you an exact timing because there was no one around afterwards to provide one. Our cities lay in ashes. The human race was finished. I was a young teenager at the time, and the memories are elusive now. I think I've blocked a lot of them out. The Professor reckons it was 23 years ago last July. I'll take his word for it. Time doesn't mean much to the children of the rubble.

My luck held out until I was down by the river. Across the water, I could see the skeleton frame of the London Eye, standing silent like an ancient pyramid or a Mayan temple lost in the jungle. One day I guess the A-Frame will give up its ghosts and send what's left of the broken spokes, hanging cables, pumps and motors down into the depths of the dirty Thames.

The attack came on without warning, as they always did. One moment everything was fine. I was moving along the embankment, picking my way through the large chunks of concrete and masonry that littered the road like giant boulders. The next, it felt like my head was being torn in two. The entire world was shooting across my field of vision from left to right at a hundred miles an hour. I staggered a step or two and grabbed desperately for a hold on a blur of grey stone that was swinging by. I scrunched my eyes shut and held on. The wave of pressure filling my head passed almost immediately. I took several deep breaths, keeping my head down. The world was safely back in place when I finally opened my eyes.

When you were playing as a child, did you ever spin around and stop suddenly? Remember what that was like? The world carries on moving for a few moments, even though you're standing still. Weird, huh? Welcome to the world of vertigo. Only it's a lot worse than any childhood experience you may have had. The speed at which everything moves is much faster, and it's not just one long, continuous sweep that fades quickly away. It's a repeating series; left to right, left to right, left to right. A split second each time. When I first began to get them about eight or nine years ago, an episode would last for several hours. Now, I just have these sudden flare-ups; over almost before they begin. Unfortunately, they leave me so unsteady that a stiff wind can knock me over.

It had to happen then, of course, when I was out scavenging alone instead of with my usual crew. Mia was down in Woking, checking out rumours of possible newcomers, and Neil was in the infirmary again, his arthritic joints making it hard enough for him to get out of bed, let alone out of

the Compound. When that happens, it's official procedure to dive into the replacement pool rather than go out alone. Unfortunately, the only stand-ins available that day were Stefan and Portia. The thought of trying to stop him from wandering off every couple of minutes and listening to her politics at the same time was just too much to bear. Also, it had been more than a year since my last vertigo episode. So I'd ignored the rules and taken a chance. It was all the more annoying because I'd written the damn procedure in the first place.

I looked around slowly and then back down at my hands. There were words on the stone beneath my white knuckles and clutching fingers. 'She bade me sing the loves, the joys, the rural scenes...' The following few words of the inscription were missing, but further down, it continued: 'I tuned my wild, artless notes as she inspired....' I was hanging on to what remained of a monument.

When I forced myself to look up, my head felt like it weighed as much as the stones around me. The sky was empty. No clouds, no Bugs. Just a fresh breeze on a sweet June morning and the waters lapping around the tall pilings close to the bank. Maybe everything would be ok.

It only took a moment to shrug out of my pack and unstrap the walking stick. It partly unfolded as I pulled off the restraints that held it together. I hadn't had to use the damn thing in almost a year. I shook it out, and the sections snapped into place. The sound echoed across the sea of rubble and through the crumbling buildings around me. I put the stick to the ground and tried to walk a few yards. The earth was not where it was supposed to be. On one step, my foot would touch down a fraction earlier than I expected; on the next, a fraction late. I stopped and stood still for a moment, trying not to sway from side to side. The tarmac was throbbing up through the soles of my boots, almost like a heartbeat.

It was going to be tough to get back to the Colony. The best way was to try and walk it off, but experience told me that the instability could last as briefly as a day or as long as a couple of months. There was no way of knowing. Typically, the episodes come in clusters, but several days, or weeks, apart, so I was under no immediate danger of another. And if you think that these attacks have some recognisable trigger or cause, then think again. I've never come close to finding one. It's all completely random.

My main priority was to get under cover and rest. That would help. I needed time to gather my strength before making a try for the Compound. It had to be somewhere I couldn't be boxed in, somewhere with a viable exit strategy. Of course, the idea of me trying to outrun anything while wobbling along on my stick was ridiculous, but some habits are hard to break. Usually, the Hexa ignore us, but after the action at the processing plant in Richmond Park, they were starting to take an interest. Air patrols had doubled, and we'd had to curtail some of our activities.

By the way, we call them the Hexa. I guess any other scrap of humanity still existing on this globe calls them something else. The Professor thinks

ours came from the word Hexapod, a general term for insect species. And before you ask, no, we've never seen one of them; it's just how their flying machines look. Like Bugs. The Professor is always bellyaching about how little we know about them. Knowledge is our most important weapon, he says, ignorance our greatest obstacle.

St James Park was a field of petrified stumps emerging from a sea of blackened earth. Despite the fall of years, the ground was still dusted with a thick layer of ash. Flakes coated the surface of the small lake where little boys had probably sailed toy boats on long-lost summer days. Pieces of rubble emerged from the black water like shipwrecks or the bones of prehistoric monsters.

The park's east end gave way to a large section of open ground surrounded by tumbled heaps of brick and stone. Parts of an old building still stood. Walls had been stripped away, exposing the inner rooms in cross-sections like a doll's house. The roof had collapsed, taking some of the lower floors with it on a quick trip down to earth. I saw the remnants of columns and pillars. Perhaps it had once been a museum or a seat of government.

A mini-mountain of glazed bricks and fragments of mosaic floor gave me access to the shelter of a semi-intact hallway. The interior was crowded with the wreckage of a large staircase, or perhaps it was several smaller ones piled on top of each other. It was impossible to tell. A patch of blue was visible through a jagged hole in a section of the roof above. I had the absurd idea that I could climb the broken steps up to it.

Instead, I hauled a large wooden panel over into the shadow of what remained of an old fireplace. Cleared of small rocks and grit, it made for a relatively comfortable place to rest. Just before I fell asleep, I saw a 'v' of birds crossing that torn teardrop of sky. It seemed a strange time of year for migration. As I lost consciousness, I was wondering what species they might be. One thing was for sure. They wouldn't be ravens. Those birds had packed their bags and left long ago.

## **2: The Dragonfly**

The moment I woke up, I knew that something had changed. The great silence still lay over the city, and the crumbling walls of my temporary refuge still stared back at me with no more stories to tell, but something had changed. Perhaps the senses collect signals from the surrounding environment too small for the conscious mind to appreciate, so they convey their message subliminally instead. Maybe that's what we call instinct.

I unholstered my pistol. It's a rusted-up Browning 9mm, old British Army issue. Our arsenal mainly consists of ex-military weapons harvested from barracks, museums, and police stations. Better ordinance probably lies deep beneath the London streets, but how can we hope to find it? All we have to

work with are tattered maps and faded memories. Not to mention that secret government bunkers didn't tend to advertise back in the day, and everything is sitting under several hundredweight of rubble anyway.

Nothing could have prepared me for what I found. A Hexa Dragonfly was sitting in the middle of the square. How had I managed to sleep through its arrival? Perhaps Bugs make as little noise going to ground as they do riding the updraughts above the city skyline.

I'm not sure how long I just stared at it, but I vaguely remember coming to my senses and putting my gun away. The last time I'd used it was to dissuade a pack of wild dogs from taking too close an interest in my activities. It seemed a little ridiculous to pit it against an example of the alien technology that had conquered our planet in less time than it takes to cook beans on toast.

I'd never seen a Hexa Bug up close before, of course. None of us had. Some still retained vague, jumbled memories of the processing centres that returned as night terrors, but that was about it. The Professor's words started running through my brain on a loop. Knowledge is our most important weapon, ignorance our greatest obstacle. From out of nowhere, I'd been gifted a golden ticket. I had to cash it in.

The first order of business was to secure the perimeter and check for hostiles. As far as anyone knew, the Hexa didn't have ground troops. The only man I'd ever met who claimed to have even seen one of the aliens was Crazy Old John and...well, I don't have to draw you a picture, do I? No, the Hexa kept to the skies and never touched the earth. At least, not until now.

There are several types of Bugs. Some are more commonly seen than others. This was one of the familiar ones; a Dragonfly. It looked much the same on the ground as seen in the air, a long thin body of dull, camouflage green, tapering off slowly from a fat, silver, spherical head. It had no wings. That was about all we'd been able to see over the years, even with the aid of telescopes and blurred recordings made on the occasions we'd had working batteries for camera equipment. Now, I had the chance to see considerably more. I folded up my stick and prepared to make a circuit of the square. I could stay undercover in the ruins most of the way and hang onto the crumbling walls for support.

On landing, the Dragonfly's body had settled into a long and lazy coil, the tail snaking out like the end of a giant question mark. This formation made it hard to estimate the overall length, but I put it around 200 feet, with a consistent height of 30 feet above the ground. It was constructed from twin rows of spherical pods, set side by side and joined at the hip. I counted around 40 on my side from head to tail. At that end, the construction transitioned into a long, vertical panel, which I took for a rudder or propulsion system. The Professor had often likened their flight motion to swimming through the sky, and it looked as if his description might be more appropriate than he'd realised.

There was no sign of activity around the craft. Closer examination revealed that none of the pods was perfectly spherical; all were unevenly shaped. No deformity was profound, and there was no recognisable pattern to their differences, but each had individual flaws. One was slightly flattened toward its apex; the next in line had a perceptible bloat in an area closer to the ground. Others had minor bumps and oddly shaped protrusions. All seemed unique.

The head of the vehicle was looking out toward the park, but the surrounding ruins began breaking into low piles of brick and stone. I'd have to start crossing patches of open ground to get a decent view. The Dragonfly still looked as if it had been quietly parked while the pilot nipped out to pick up a pint of milk from the corner newsagent, but I wasn't about to risk it. I decided to retrace my steps, circling back to examine the opposite side of the vessel.

It was hard to keep focused on the job at hand. There were so many questions. Why had the Dragonfly landed? Were there any Hexa inside? If there were, had they seen me? I couldn't help imagining an alien maelstrom of claws and fangs bursting suddenly from the craft, hideous creatures dripping slime from every orifice. Perhaps they'd incinerate me with an energy beam as a pleasant alternative, leaving just my black silhouette thrown across the brickwork. But I carried on moving regardless, and nothing like that happened.

On my sweep around the other side of the ship, I hit paydirt. One of the pods was severely damaged. It was about halfway down the length of the craft and looked like a burst balloon. The result of an explosion or a mid-air collision. Long chains of transparent goo dripped slowly from the ends of large ragged flaps of torn membrane. The interior was a collection of inviting shadows.

I moved quickly toward the front of the machine, anxious for more information. A low brick wall crowned with twisted railings allowed me a safer vantage point than I'd been granted on the opposite side. Everything was just as quiet.

The head of the Dragonfly was a large silver ball, rounded at the front but sweeping back like an elongated light bulb to where it merged with the first row of pods. The surface was uniform and made up of geometrical panels, each with six sides. That gave me pause. Maybe the name they had been given had nothing to do with insects, after all. Perhaps it had more to do with geometry.

There were other points of interest. There was a gradual blending of colour from the head to the body rather than an abrupt transition. The bright silver pigmentation did not fade but rather fractured into thick sweeping waves moving down the length of the craft. As they progressed toward the tail, they broke into small clusters that separated again and again and vanished long before they reached the damaged section.

"Colony, this is Scavenger Prime. Scavenger Prime. Request Professor, repeat, request Professor."

It's a stupid callsign, but I guess it has to be something. I released the 'press to talk' button on the walkie-talkie and got a burst of static in response. The stone and concrete around me were guaranteed to play havoc with the signal. Transmission was risky, of course, but if there was a day to take stupid risks, this was it. I had a chance to learn more about the enemy than we had been able to find out in more than twenty years. I had to take it. If the machine was occupied, I could only hope that the pilot was on the flight deck and too busy to be on the lookout for intruders.

"Colony, this is Scavenger Prime. Scavenger Prime. Request Professor, repeat, request Professor."

All around me, the afternoon was deathly quiet. A rising breeze stirred the ashes in the park and lifted dust from the ground. The radio suddenly barked a jagged response. A few minutes later, I had the connection that I wanted.

"Professor here, Scavenger Prime. What is your message? Repeat, what is your message?"

"East of St James Park, east of St James Park. Send backup immediately, send backup immediately. Small squad, repeat, small squad. Top personnel, repeat, top personnel."

Reception was patchy on both ends, so I had to send the request several times before he got it down and confirmed full receipt.

"What is your status, Scavenger Prime? What is your status?"

I could tell the Professor was worried, even through the crackle and interference.

"Status perilous, moving into jeopardy. Send squad immediate, repeat, immediate."

I released the talk button, turned the walkie-talkie off and put it back on my belt. There was no time for further discussion; I had to get on with it.

### **3: Permission to Come Aboard**

I tested the ground. It was still moving a little under my feet. Running didn't seem like the greatest idea I'd ever had, but the break in the hull of the Dragonfly beckoned to me like the forbidden cave in a kid's fairytale. I launched myself out of the shadow of the ruins. The landscape started bouncing around like I was on a fairground ride. Sweat burst from every pore in my body and soaked through my clothes in an instant.

When I skidded to the ground beside the body of the Dragonfly a few moments later, my head was reeling. My brain did not appreciate the multitude of micro-second adjustments required to make the sprint across the square, and it was letting me know in no uncertain terms. I had jagged considerably to the right as my feet had tumbled over each other. I remained motionless on the ground for several moments. I moved my head to look up,

and it felt like it was about to fall off. I gritted my teeth. There would be time to rest later. Much later.

The first thing that impressed me was the silence. There was no noise from the Dragonfly at all. Not of machinery, not of a power source. Perhaps Hexa technology worked with sound waves not audible to the human ear. Anything was possible. And, given that my medical condition has taken most of my hearing on one side, I'm not the best judge of such things anyway. No matter. I seemed to have reached the Dragonfly undetected. Using my elbows, I crawled through the dust and stones until I reached the damaged section of the craft.

Whatever had ripped the wall of the vessel open had travelled from the inside out at an upward angle. The deck and most of the lower section were still intact. Climbing to my knees brought the damaged edge close to my face. I didn't want to touch it. Germs and microbes unfamiliar to human biology were probably crawling across the surface, swarming, breeding, waiting to enter my bloodstream and attack my unprotected immune system. But what could I do? One sample might teach us more than we'd ever known about the Hexa.

The texture of the material was slightly coarse and possessed a consistency like thick rubber. It was flexible enough to retain the imprint of my fingertips for a moment before returning to its original curvature. I had never felt anything quite like it.

Yanking at the edge of one of the torn flaps, I put my blade to it and began hacking away. The serrated edge bit reluctantly at first, but I got things going with a sawing motion, pulling the piece as taut as possible with my free hand. After a few seconds, I felt it turning damp beneath my fingertips. Large drops of thick, transparent liquid began oozing slowly out. The piece started to tear and came free in a sudden rush.

To my surprise, both cut edges were masses of thin, fibrous threads, including some that were silver. The blast had probably burned them away from the exposed edges. I bent the separated piece between my fingers. The vessel was not made of metal at all. These were closely packed fibres, compressed into a rigid but yielding whole. I fished one of the collection boxes out of my pack, peeled back the lid and dropped the scrap inside.

Other pieces followed into the box. I used one of my water bottles to catch some of the goo as it dripped off the edge of a tattered flap above my head. It fell into the plastic canister in slow, giant teardrops and collected in a thick pool at the bottom. Sure, none of these containers was sealed or sterilised, but I hadn't come out that day expecting to collect scientific specimens. Like a lot of things we use, they would have to do.

There was no putting off the next stage of the operation. Whatever this pod had once contained had been pulverised or incinerated, but it was only one of many. From where I lay, I could see the jagged hole that opened into the next one along the line.

## 4: Belly of the Beast

The blast had ripped a hole in the iris of overlapping, triangular flaps that separated the damaged pod from its immediate neighbour. Similar arrangements on the other two walls looked intact. I wondered if I'd be able to open them. Success might mean complete access to the rest of the craft. However, whatever accident had befallen the Dragonfly, it was highly probable that help was already on its way. The clock was ticking. Getting the samples back to the Colony was vital, and my verbal testimony was valuable too. Whatever happened, I couldn't afford to take too many chances.

I took out my torch and thumbed it on as I stepped aboard. There was enough room in the pod for about half a dozen people to stand. The walls curved outward on all the remaining sides, with two feet of clearance above my head. Next to the torn-up iris, a few clumps of material hung from the wall on thick stalks. These glistened in the torchlight, soaked in the thick pus that leaked from their wounds. I removed one of them. I didn't have much capacity remaining for samples. I'd been scavenging for batteries and small machine parts, not pieces of alien technology. I stepped through the gap and into the next pod.

Apart from a few burn marks, there was little evidence of the disaster that had overtaken the Dragonfly. The interior was empty, but the surrounding walls were anything but featureless. Their fibrous material had been stretched and pulled in various directions by odd protrusions, bumps and shapes hidden beneath its surface. Some were larger than my fist and vaguely geometric, others small and irregular. My eye struggled to find any pattern or design in the arrangement. Were they part of the craft's operating mechanism?

My next objective was the triangular flaps of the intact iris on the far wall. I ran the torch beam across them, then reached out to where the points overlapped at the centre. I snatched my hand back at once. The flaps were warm. Not hot, but warm. Like a piece of idling machinery. Warm and more than a little moist.

Something repelled me about their touch, but I wiped my hand on my leg and tried again. Under a little more pressure, the flaps bent back at the point where they met, and I pushed my hand through with minimal resistance. My arm started disappearing toward the elbow. The thin wedges were warm and wet against my naked skin. For a moment, I had the ridiculous thought that something was going to grab my hand from the other side and yank me through. Instead, I forced myself to pull the flaps wide apart and drag my body through the gap. I closed my eyes as one of the thin points slid swiftly across my face, leaving a damp, sticky trail behind it.

The next pod was another empty interior with a random spread of nodules, bulges and knots emerging from its walls. The shapes were



different; that was all. One that I found low down in a dark corner looked like a wheel or a spigot of some kind, but when I gripped it, it did not turn. I faced another iris, one to my left leading into the parallel row of pods that ran alongside. I could probably work my way through the entire ship until I reached whatever passed for the flight deck.

That thought was both seductive and frightening. What secrets might I learn if I could stand in the control cabin of a Hexa Dragonfly? The benefits could be priceless. On the other hand, I might come face to face with the pilot. That wasn't quite so appealing. But it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and my luck had held so far. I decided to push it a little further.

The trip through the Dragonfly's body was a nightmare. Stumbling through a succession of dark, close chambers, lit only by the swinging beam of my torch, the wet, clinging flaps of one iris after another sucking at me every time I pushed my way through. It may have been my imagination, but it seemed harder and harder after a while. It was as if the wedges were starting to resist, working silently together to impede my progress.

I tried to count the number of pods that I passed through, but my brain soon fumbled the numbers. I hadn't made a precise tally when I'd examined the ship from the outside anyway. The air was terrible, too; warm, heavy and stale, almost suffocating. My chest began to hurt. The only sign of my progress was the growing iridescence from the walls as the silver threads increased in number, forming networks like spiderwebs, which quickly tightened into spirals and sinuous arcs.

Eventually, I no longer needed my torch, and I switched it off and hung it from my belt. By the time I reached the end of my strange journey, the shadows had melted away completely, and I was moving through something close to daylight. Along the way, the appearance of the interiors had changed considerably too. The shapes in the walls were fewer but much larger, more regular, and even geometric, with a tendency toward polygons and triangles. Now, they did look like the controls of a ship.

The final iris opened into a chamber shaped like a funnel where the twin rows of pods finally merged. This space narrowed down swiftly to a shallow opening about two feet from the deck. I got down to my knees and looked through. All the way along, I'd been telling myself that it was foolish to hope that I could remain undetected, but I saw then there had been no reason to worry. The flight deck was as empty of life as the rest of the Dragonfly.

It was a tight squeeze to get through the gap, and I had to strip off all my clothes after a first attempt where I almost throttled myself with my own vest. A strange, slight burning smell tickled my nostrils as I manoeuvred and wriggled through. Eventually, I got to my feet in the control room. The glare from the silver walls was so bright that I had to close my eyes.

## 5: Valuable Salvage

It was like standing inside a giant honeycomb. Large, hexagonal silver stared back at me, blank, blind and featureless, their fibres compacted so tightly that a heavy thumb press could barely dent their surface. A ledge, or crease, ran around the inside of the room, about three feet from the floor. It was roughly four inches deep, and busy clusters of nodules, bumps and cones crowded at irregular points along it.

But there was something that hit me harder. It felt like I had walked into a slaughterhouse. Everything was splattered with what looked like blood, a spray of thick, purple liquid that had hit the walls in huge globules and run down to the floor in streaks. There, its surfaces had dried into a dark, bubbling crust. A torn, untidy pile of identically coloured membrane lay in a coil at my feet, and another long scrap hung down from the centre of the ceiling. Whatever had grounded the Dragonfly had happened here. Violently.

The largest installation on the flight deck was directly opposite where I'd come in. Exactly where you'd expect to find the main steering array on a terrestrial craft. A thick, twisting vine emerged from that point on the ledge, supporting what looked strangely like a flower bulb. Suspended in mid-air, it hung about eight inches above my head. It had caught a great deal of the liquid splatter, and a tattered piece of membrane was embedded in the dried residue on its nearest face.

A crazy thought came to me then. What if I could get it back to the Compound? I made a quick inspection of the rest of the cabin. Some of the other installations were large enough to be significant, but, for all I knew, they might be masses of thick silver fibre and nothing more. My eyes kept returning to the Bulb and its crown of misshapen triangles. It was just about the right size to fit under my arm and probably wouldn't be heavy. My knife could make short work of the supporting vine. Reaching back, I pulled the blade from the sheath that lay on the floor outside the cabin. I knew that the idea brought considerable risk. A lot of time had passed since I'd entered the Dragonfly, and detaching the Bulb might even trigger some remote alarm. Even so, I was determined to rip out the Bulb and take it back to the Colony. Suddenly, it seemed very, very important.

The fibrous threads were coarser than those I'd examined back in the damaged pod. They were thicker, tougher. It was as if I was attacking the roots of a plant rather than the outlying growth. I pushed down harder with my blade. It was getting difficult to escape the conclusion that the Dragonfly was some kind of hybrid between a living creature and a machine. Or perhaps it was not a machine at all. Maybe it was simply one of the Hexa.

I had decided to reach up and cut the stalk as close to the Bulb as possible, thinking it would be easier to carry it afterwards. However, the sweat ran into my eyes, and staring up all the time made my head swim. I began to feel felt giddy and a little sick. My arms started to ache.

Switching to a lower point made for far swifter progress, but it was still a good quarter of an hour before I ripped the last few strands of the vine apart, and the Bulb fell to the floor. I had been half expecting to find that the fibres were a sheath for something else, like strands of electrical wire inside a rubber insulation cable, but that wasn't the case. The vine was just silver threads all the way through.

The next job was to get the Bulb out of the cabin. As I'd imagined, it was not heavy, weighing only a few pounds, but it was slightly warm, which was vaguely repellent. Some of the liquid residue got onto my body when I followed it through the narrow gap. I tried to be careful, but flakes of it had rubbed off against the edges of the opening and transferred onto me. They disintegrated and brushed off at a touch but left small violet patches on my skin. I redressed as quickly as possible.

It's funny how a return journey always seems much swifter than an outward one. It's because you know where you're going, I suppose. It still wasn't pleasant, though. Now, I was trying to shake the feeling that I was moving through the insides of some monstrous, sleeping beast. A beast that might suddenly wake with an ear-splitting roar and gnashing jaws. But, instead, it was just the same awkward push through one iris after another, the only sounds being my muted footfalls and the wet, slow drag of their clinging, triangular fronds as they scraped over my body.

I was exhausted by the time I saw the weak daylight coming through the damaged opening to the shredded pod. My head was still throbbing with the after-effects of vertigo. Breathing the air inside the ship hadn't helped. For a horrible moment, I felt the swelling in my head that comes just before another dizzy episode, but it was gone as soon as it came. I put the Bulb down and poked my head out of the Dragonfly and into the late afternoon. The temperature had fallen several degrees, and the breeze was cool and delicious against my face. A quick check found the sky empty and the ruined buildings still standing silent like monuments in a long forgotten graveyard.

Figuring that it would make carrying the Bulb easier, I sawed off the long part of the stalk from the bottom. More thick goo seeped out. I went to throw the spare piece away, but I still had one collection box empty, so I squashed it down in there as best I could and tied the result together with some plastic strapping. Next, I wrapped the Bulb carefully in a blanket. I always carry one. It can be helpful if caught on the streets after dark, and you can't risk a fire. Hauling equipment around for every contingency is impossible, of course, but after years of scavenging in the ruins, I've got it down to a fine art. I did a last, quick check, and everything was good. It was time to go. Of course, that was precisely when everything went to shit.

## **6: The Hexa**

A large shadow swept across the ground when I was only three steps out of the Dragonfly. I looked up. It was another Hexa vehicle: a Hawk. A rare sighting. It had come in low and silent across the black and stunted trees of the park, barely one hundred feet in the air. It was already banking over the ruins three streets away, preparing to return. It didn't matter whether I'd been spotted or not; I had to move.

There was no time to get my stick out, so I just threw myself into a wild, staggering run. As my boots hit the concrete, the world lurched at insane angles from one way to the other. My body jerked and swung as if operated by the world's worst puppeteer. I probably looked like one of those zombies in the old movies Sascha runs in the Rec Room on a Friday night. Not that there's much call for that type of film, of course. Who needs a fictional apocalypse when you're living in one every day?

Life became a thirty-second tornado of motion, light and desperate oxygen. The collection boxes hanging from my body struck each other in a pathetic, uncoordinated rhythm. My knees hit a low edge of broken brick, and I allowed momentum to carry me over it and throw me to the ground on the other side. Something dug painfully into my back low down on the right, but I rolled away from it without a second thought. I tasted grit between my teeth.

I struggled to my feet. There were clouds of dust rising over the skyline to the west. Something was coming from that direction too. The Hexa on the ground? As far as I knew, they had never left the sky. Not since the early days of the Occupation, anyway.

I already knew which direction to take; through the buildings still intact enough to provide some measure of cover. Unfortunately, that was the most predictable route. It also forced me back toward the river, at least initially. It wasn't easy travelling either, but the historical buildings along the west side of Whitehall and up toward Trafalgar Square had weathered the Hexa's attacks better than the shops and offices further inland. The streets in that area are minefields of burned-out cars, road signage and the skeletons of furniture, but the remains of ceilings and rooves did help to conceal my progress. I climbed on broken balustrades and pediments, over fallen columns and the bones of history.

The Hawk passed overhead again as I reached the edge of Trafalgar Square. Unlike the other Hexa craft, it was jet black and named for the swept-back structures on each side that looked a little like wings. It was unique in its resemblance to a bird rather than some kind of flying insect. It passed over the broken column that stood out of the rubble in the middle of the square.

As a boy, I'd wondered who had stood on that tall pillar. What deeds had he done to deserve such a memorial? But, of course, it didn't matter. All the merchant princes, kings, conquerors, peers of the realm and captains of industry were as faceless and significant now as those who had tilled the earth with horse and plough, built the railways, raised generations of scruffy kids or pulled pints of beer in neighbourhood pubs. All their separate identities and works had been collected together and consigned to the anonymous

dustbin of history, where they belonged. We no longer wasted our time venerating or celebrating the dead past; the present and future were what mattered.

The light began fading as I moved northwest from the square and into the bewildering maze of bombed-out streets. As far as I could tell, I was following St Martins Lane in the direction of the British Museum, but there were no landmarks to confirm it, only the wobbling needle of the little pocket compass I kept on hand. The crumbling walls around me masked any signs of a ground-level pursuit, but I saw the Hawk through gaps in the brickwork above me several times.

I considered using the radio again but dismissed the idea out of hand. If the Hexa could travel across the vastness of space and appear in the blink of an eye, weapons blazing, I was damn sure they could track a radio signal. And that thought reminded me of a sickening possibility. Perhaps the Bulb I had harvested from the Dragonfly was lighting up my position like a beacon. If so, I had to get rid of it. I couldn't take it back to the Colony and risk exposing our location. That was unthinkable, of course, but, on the other hand, I didn't want to abandon my prize without a fight.

My escape plan took a nosedive a few minutes later. The building next to the Tottenham Court Underground Station had collapsed during the weeks since I'd last been in the area. Piles of masonry, concrete and steel lay piled across the entrance, and my boots crunched on daggers of freshly broken glass. I cursed. The tunnels heading out from the station were impassable, but I'd counted on being able to wait the Hexa out in the warm darkness below.

The next station on the line was Goadge Street, but all that remained of that was a big heap of nothing, and digging through the rubble at either location wasn't an option. No, I had to get ambitious. Shoot for the whole damn game and head for King's Cross.

While standing there with my mind racing through the possibilities, I became aware of a faint sound. To call it a rumble would not be accurate. That suggests approaching thunder or an earthquake. Of course, the ground was still moving, but that was just the after-effects of the vertigo. No, it was more like a low rushing sound, not sharp enough to be called a whistle or a cry, more like the far-off boom of waves on a rocky shore. Instinctively, I knew it was the Hexa.

Trying to pinpoint the origin of the noise was near impossible in the echo chamber of the streets. Sound waves bounced off a million surfaces, all of which sat at crazy, ridiculous angles. I abandoned my intended route to King's Cross and headed directly north. The streets were emptier in that direction and more accessible. At that moment, I felt I had to move as quickly as possible. It was a decision born of an oncoming panic. It was not a good call.

## 7: Sanctuary

The Hexa caught up with me when I was only a few minutes shy of my destination. The pattern of devastation had forced me to the east again, but I had already turned back along the Pentonville Road when it happened. I could almost taste the security of the dark tunnels below my feet. Yes, King's Cross Station was little more than a random pile of aluminium and steel, but there was still access to the subterranean passages beneath and, from them, into the most extensive open section of the underground that remained.

By that time, the rushing sound was all around me. It felt like I was struggling in the shadow of a great wave ready to crash down on me, or I was already underwater, walking through the bones of old shipwrecks. The night was fast approaching, the earth cooling as the temperature dropped, the Hawk circling somewhere high above in a cauldron of clouds. I was forcing myself on, twisting through a minefield of rocks, the stick bouncing in my hand as it struck one uneven plane after another.

There was a sudden, ear-splitting concussion about a mile behind me. The wall of a building flew right across the street, disintegrating into huge, spinning chunks of steel and concrete. A dark shape burst through the falling dust. It was close to the ground, moving swiftly, like a ripple shooting blindly across a weed-choked pond. The rushing sound turned into a roar.

I caught a glimpse of the beast as I ran, a blur of black shapes undulating furiously, stick limbs windmilling in a furious cloud around it. The ground pitched like the deck of a ship beneath my feet. I almost fell. Once, twice. Then I was flying through the air in a vortex of exploding brick and stone. The Hexa blast gave me no chance. It wasn't as if the earth fell away beneath me, more like I was suddenly rushing toward it, throwing my arms over my face as I slammed into it.

For a few precious seconds, I lay there stunned, my ears ringing, my mouth full of dust and blood. The Bulb and my walking stick were long gone. I managed to get my head up, but I couldn't see anything through the rising dust. My feet were off the ground somehow. The air trembled with the roar of the Hexa machine as it closed in for the kill. They had fired some kind of weapon at me, trying to bring me down. They had missed, but it was only a momentary respite. I tried to move, and the ground shifted under me. Suddenly, it fell away, and I dropped into darkness.

I hit concrete almost at once. It knocked the wind right out of me. I was rolling downhill, tumbling down a slope with the edges of the collapsing hole sending pieces of wreckage plummeting alongside me. After a few seconds, the light from above was gone, and I was falling into a black abyss. There was nothing to grab hold of, nothing visible flying by, only the cold, hard ground pushing up at me.

It seemed like I fell for as long as a minute but later on, I realised it was probably half that, maybe even less. The incline began to flatten out, slowly at

first, then swiftly approaching the horizontal. Just about then, I crashed into a wall as the slope curved to the right, and I ended up in a tangle of cuts and bruises wrapped around what felt like a concrete pillar. I lay there for some time, just trying to breathe and fight the pain in my chest.

My eyes adjusted slowly to the darkness, but I still couldn't see much of anything at all. I took inventory. It was open for debate if I was still in one piece or not, but nothing seemed to be broken. The various aches and pains were nothing more than excruciating, so that was fine. Muffled noise filtered down from the street above, but it sounded far off. The Hexa, no doubt. It would be a tough job if they tried to dig me out. And why would they bother? They probably thought I was dead, and I'd lost the Bulb somewhere in the street anyway. They'd probably recover it and vamos back to their mining operations up north, their coastal emplacements, their goddamn candy apple factories, or wherever the hell they went on their weekends off.

I started to hear faint noises, scurrying, scratching sounds. Shit. I managed to get the pack off and fished out my torch. I snapped it on, standing with my back to the pillar. I had landed in an underground parking garage, tumbling down what remained of the exit ramp. Lines of cars sat in concrete bays like soldiers on parade, silent and frozen. The beam flared on windows and in wing mirrors draped with dust webs. It shone on paintwork that was fading a little more with each passing year. A ceiling beam had cracked in two in the shadows of the back wall. The end of it had punched into the vehicles beneath, flinging their innards across the concrete like the entrails of slaughtered cattle.

But none of that bothered me right then. I was more concerned with the tiny army squirming away from the light, regrouping in the gloom beyond where their evil, little eyes threw sparks of hatred in my general direction. Rats. There were thousands of them, a living carpet of fur and teeth that wriggled and writhed like one great, horrible beast. How long I could keep them at bay with just the light of my torch was a question I didn't want to be answered. Perhaps they were merely curious. Rats have never bothered us that much, and we're certainly not a regular item on their menu. However, it was unusual to see so many gathered together in one place at one time and looking so...focused. I wasn't going to take a chance on their goodwill, anyhow.

The nearest vehicle turned out to be electric, and the next one diesel, so I moved swiftly on, keeping my torchlight on the ground, sweeping it around. The rats held back, save for the odd adventurous individual I sent flying back into the pack with a well-placed boot. The black SUV was just what was required. It had a lockable petrol cap, but I just squeezed the sides real hard with a twisting motion, and it came off in my hand. I'd done it a hundred times. I thrust a piece of wood down into the tank, and it came back wet. I went down to my knees and shook a couple of drops off onto a crumpled piece of aluminium foil. Then I scraped a match against the tarmac and held it to the liquid. A flame blossomed immediately. Lighting petrol is a

tricky business, but I'd had plenty of practice. I'd rescued a chair leg from the debris that had accompanied me down the ramp earlier. I put the end of it to the fire, and after a few moments, it began to burn. It wasn't exactly a flaming torch, but then again, I didn't want to take my arm off. I stamped out the fire on the piece of foil.

My new furry friends didn't like the naked flame all that much and retreated into the shadows, where they kept a watching brief. Perhaps they wouldn't have attacked me anyway, but I felt better knowing they were discouraged. There were other reasons for satisfaction, too. Ok, so I'd lost the Hexa Bulb in the street above, but here was another treasure trove, ripe for harvesting. Fuel for the generators back at the Colony. Some of the vehicles might even run, provided they had escaped the rodent buffet. Of course, they'd have limited application in the jammed-up streets above, but the first thing you learn as a scavenger is never to leave anything behind. Somehow, sometime, almost everything ends up being useful. It's just a question of degree.

Out of the sunlight and the effects of pollution, the bodywork of the vehicles still looked in good condition, although there were tiny rust patches here and there. I guessed there were times when the rain worked through cracks in the concrete above. All the tyres had long been shredded, of course. The rats didn't eat them; the hard rubber was just a valuable way to sharpen teeth for their natural prey. They'd also found a way inside at least some of the vehicles, stripping upholstered seats down to their frames. That meant all the wiring would be chewed up, too; something else we could have used. I wondered how the little shits had managed it.

Cutting between vehicles from one row to the next and hopping a concrete divider, I made it to the deeper shadows of one of the surrounding walls. It seemed best to get far away from the ramp and the area where the ceiling had come down. A row of motorcycle spaces sat beneath a sign warning owners that they parked at their own risk. I wondered for a crazy moment whether any policy holder's insurance had covered damage from an alien invasion. I guessed not.

A hundred yards along, the floor display of diagonal yellow and black stripes ended, and a railing and a step led up to an access elevator. Of course, the floors above no longer existed, but I found four buttons for lower levels. Obviously, I wasn't going to trust my life to twenty-year-old, deathtrap machinery, but there had to be stairs somewhere. If those were clear, I would bury myself as deep in the artificial catacombs as I could. And pray the Hexa didn't get the bright idea to bring everything down on the top of my head.

My improvised torch illuminated a dirty green decal mounted high on a wall. It featured an arrow and a stick figure in motion. Close by was a door with a crash bar. I punched through it and found myself in a stairwell. As expected, the way up was blocked by debris, which had spilled down onto the floor, but the steps leading down looked relatively clear. The air was dry and thin, so I checked my respirator and found two hours left in the tank. I needed



to conserve the oxygen, so I opened the bypass valve only long enough for a quick shot before hanging the mask on my belt, swapping it out with the walkie-talkie, which went back in my pack.

The first flight led down to a short landing and a 180-degree turn, the second to a door. Wiping off the dust and cobwebs revealed a meaningless letter-number combination. The door resisted my efforts until I realised I was supposed to push, not pull. Even so, it opened only reluctantly, the bottom edge scraping against a layer of fragments and stones that had somehow worked their way underneath it. Beyond was a long passageway lined with more doors. The stairs had led me away from the parking garage and into another area.

The rooms were all small offices, filled with clusters of empty desks, dark monitors and storage lockers. One room was unique because it held the mummified remains of a plant, and its walls hid behind sheets of yellowed paper and faded maps. All of it had probably been crucial once upon a time. Perhaps I was standing in the emergency bunker of some minor government office. If so, it hadn't been used when the Hexa came. I guess 14 minutes hadn't been enough time for the powers that be to stumble into action and occupy these empty rooms. It didn't matter. The details were a story that would never be told.

I switched to my battery torch when the chair leg started to burn down. The wood was turning black and smelly, and the naked flame was using oxygen. The brighter beam threw the gathering shadows back against the walls where cheap, framed pictures stared back at me. These were mainly landscapes, but there were also a couple of busy street scenes. The unscathed buildings and crowds of people made them look very strange.

The final room along the corridor was walled with oak panels and empty, save for a long table lined with leather chairs. A large, dead screen hung on the end wall. A conference room. A place for self-important, little grey men and women to discuss and prevaricate. The walls seemed to groan with their pettiness and small-minded incompetence. If the Hexa hadn't destroyed our world, then the kind of people who had sat in that room would have gotten around to it. Eventually. When the attack began, they'd probably reacted by forming sub-committees and focus groups.

I only had eyes for the table. It was long and smooth and flat. A thin film of dust covered the surface, tiny fragments that had shaken free from the light fixtures and ceiling tiles above. I let my pack skip to the floor, followed quickly by my heavy belt and its burden of tools. I had stopped thinking by then. My entire body was one overwhelming ache of exhaustion and hurt. The chair squeaked as I used it to climb up and stretch out. I turned over on my back, and one last delicious wave of pain washed over me and dragged me under.

## 8: The Morning After

Waking up was agony, but I forced myself to move. My head was throbbing, and sharp needles of pain took my breath away. I swung my legs over the edge of the table in the darkness, kicking the closest chair to one side. I sat there for a while, breathing deep and slow, gathering my strength. The pain receded slowly. Gingerly, I let myself down to the floor and retrieved the torch from where it had fallen from my hand onto the table. It was dead. I'd probably left it on when I'd passed out. That pissed me off. It wasn't only that I had to spend a minute or so trying to find my pack in the darkness and then digging out a spare battery. It was wasteful. Batteries are a precious resource.

A quick circuit of the room allowed a thorough check of my physical condition. The results were favourable; no breaks, sprains or ruptures. My injuries were nothing worse than a varied collection of bruises, cuts and contusions, minor stuff that had combined with the after-effects of my vertigo attack to send my body crashing into temporary oblivion. A few more sessions with the respirator helped to clear my head, and I began to feel a little human again.

My stomach was empty, so I broke out some hard rations and what remained of my water. I wondered if I'd slept through the entire night. I wondered if the Hexa were still roaring through the streets above. Speculation was unproductive. I had to know. Still, a lifetime habit is hard to break. My scavenger heart wouldn't let me leave my overnight stay without thoroughly examining all its rooms, passageways and contents. Everything can be useful one day, remember?

It was a remarkably poor harvest. About a hundred yards further down the corridor, the ceiling had collapsed completely, letting in a solid wall of boulders and masonry, braced by a metal crossbeam that had fallen across it. The doors on either side had exploded outward into a lunar landscape of splintered wood as the weight had pulverised the frames and lintels above, driving everything into the floor. There was no way forward.

One of the rooms I'd already visited had a second exit, but it led only to a private washroom. To my astonishment, twisting the basin taps produced a reluctant stream of smelly, brackish water, so I could strip and wash my wounds a little. There was the possibility of infection, of course, as I had no way to review the condition of the water tank, but I decided to take the chance. Doc could fix me up with some of his homemade remedies when I got back if there was a problem. Or perhaps he'd treat me to some of the real stuff, pills we'd manage to collect from the wreckage of pharmacies, chemists and supermarkets over the years. Medicine will always be one of our priority targets.

The rodent population seemed to have lost interest in me, and I used the exit ramp without drawing their attention. The edges of the hole at the top

had collapsed into a heap of dirt and wreckage. Fingers of daylight struggled through from above. The climb was treacherous, but an exposed girder about halfway up provided a secure foothold. Finally, my head broke through. The world was still filled with the dust kicked up by the recent action, tiny fragments kept aloft by a fresh breeze. Smudges of cloud headed east across the sky, accompanied by a morning chorus of listless birdsong.

There was no sight or sound of the Hexa. They had remodelled the landscape into a range of slag heaps and craters, and I could see clear to the backs of the buildings in the surrounding streets. Many had been torn open to expose the rooms inside. The level of destruction on display was wildly disproportionate to any plan of capture. Had they simply intended to kill me and destroy what I had taken from the Dragonfly? It seemed a lot like overkill. I sighed. The Professor often said that trying to apply human logic and motivations to the Hexa was probably a waste of time. They were aliens. We'd likely never understand the way their minds worked.

I'd already decided to revert to my original plan; use the tunnels beneath King's Cross to access Euston and the old Northern Line. It was still open through Camden Town and up to Chalk Farm. Before the Belsize Park Station, it became impassable, but by then, I'd be most of the way home. I was going to sleep for a week when I got there.

But I'd barely fought my way to the first crest of fresh rubble when I heard it again. That awful rushing noise. For a moment, I tried to convince myself that it was the wind whistling through the ruins, but it was no good. It was faint, but it was unmistakable. The Hexa were still around. It crossed my mind to go back to my hole and try again after sunset, but they sounded far away. If they stayed that way, I could get to the station unharmed.

The ridge ran all the way over to the streets that bordered Liverpool Road. Following it would take me out of my way, but I could loop back toward Regent's Canal, picking up the towpath that runs alongside the section north of King's Cross. After all, as far as I knew, the Hexa couldn't swim. It was preferable to the direct route, anyway. That was now an open terrain of debris piled up into uneven drifts and rocky dunes. Even without my balance issues, crossing it would take a long time. Too long.

It was then that I got an outrageous stroke of luck. A scrap of cloth was sticking out of the rubble a short way along the ridge. I recognised the corner of my blanket. It only took a moment to dig it out. And it was still wrapped around the Bulb I had taken from the Dragonfly. Of all the wild chances. It lay almost in plain sight, covered only by loose stones and dirt. I picked up my prize, and with it came a happy thought. The Hexa couldn't track it; that much was obvious. It was safe to take it back to the Colony.

The echoes still made it difficult to track the movements of the Hexa as I worked my way along the ridge, but the sound of their passage remained distant. I caught a glimpse of something in the sky back towards the river that could have been the Hawk, but the sun was in my eyes, and I couldn't be sure. By then, I had made it into the area around Islington High Street, where

most buildings had escaped the worst of the devastation. I reached the station without any further incident. The passages to the tunnels beneath what remained of the littered concourse looked cool and inviting.

Of course, the smart thing to do was head straight down one of the frozen escalators and let myself be swallowed by the darkness. Especially given that the sound of the Hexa machine was rising. It was probably heading back in my direction. But then I had a thought. It was another golden opportunity. Knowledge is our most important weapon, right? I decided to stick around and see if I could get a close look at the enemy at work. Not too close, mind you.

The noise of the Hexa's approach grew steadily throughout the next couple of hours. I positioned myself in the station's ruins with a good view of the road and left my pack and the Bulb back at the head of one of the escalators. It would take less than a minute to grab them and disappear. My biggest enemy at that point was boredom. I was used to being on the move, and waiting around with nothing to do felt wrong.

Eventually, the rushing sound rose to a familiar roar, and the ground began to tremble and vibrate. Tiny stones danced on the jagged chunks of masonry strewn outside the remains of the station entrance. The sound got into my head, bouncing around the inside of my skull. My teeth began to hurt.

The Hexa machine finally burst into view, a stream of segmented sections moving up and down like a giant centipede. The body was coloured a deep red with purple flashes, the individual units mostly cylindrical, although some resembled bloated cubes and twisted cones. A thick, flexible spine joined them like a string of beads, and the head narrowed to a jagged spike. There was a blur of motion beneath the craft as it hugged the contours of the rough, uneven terrain, moving like a wave. Needle-like arms shot out constantly from various points along the body, bracing the vehicle against the ruined buildings and lifting it over the boulders and wreckage. Remorseless speed drove it on as walls collapsed in its wake and the rocky ground shifted. It went by so fast that I could see no more.

Afterwards, there was nothing to do but cough out the dust and head home. Of course, the air in the tunnels was stale. The pumps, water chillers and fire control systems haven't worked in years. However, some of the ventilation shafts are still clear, so I only needed an extra shot of oxy in a couple of places. Perhaps we could unblock a few more air ducts if we had a more capable workforce, but that's just wishful thinking.

By the time I emerged back into the daylight at Chalk Farm, I was covered in a film of sweat and grime. A wild dog was sniffing through the skeletons of the buildings on the opposite side of the road. An old traffic light stood out of the dust at a serious angle like a broken flagpole.

"Compound, this is Scavenger Prime, Scavenger Prime. Copy?"

There was a brief pause and then an explosion of static that almost took my ear off. I hit the 'talk' button again and repeated my message. The

reply came through loud and clear. It sounded like Persephone, who usually handles the radio when she's fit and well.

"Scavenger Prime, Scavenger Prime, are you ok? You've had us worried."

"Status operational. I would appreciate a pick-up, though; it's been a rough 24 hours."

"No problem, Prime. What is your location?"

"Rendezvous Primrose Gardens. Repeat Primrose Gardens."

"Copy that, Prime, copy that. Welcome home."

## 9: Retrieval

Primrose Gardens is a thin ribbon of lawn and trees that runs between two rows of Victorian townhouses and terraces near Belsize Park. The buildings are still mostly intact on both sides of the road, and the greenery has stubbornly refused to die. The trees may be sickly and ailing, but the canopy of leaves still provides some cover from the sky, and there are benches where you can sit and grass where you can lie down. There are even old-fashioned red telephone boxes at either end, although one of them has been scorched by fire. It must have been a pleasant place to rest on a warm afternoon back in the old times. I may have dozed for a while as I waited, but it seemed no time at all before I was staring into Portia's shrivelled face.

"You look like shit" was all she said.

I levered myself off the bench using a piece of debris that had taken the place of my walking stick. She did not comment. Every member of the Colony has medical issues of one sort or another, and a few do talk about them constantly. Most of us don't, however. The Professor says that was known as the British Stiff Upper Lip in the old days. I don't know about that; from my point of view, I just think dwelling on our ailments for the sake of it is pointless. Pointless and a bit depressing.

Silvio and Mary had taken point duty at either end of the street, and Portia waved the former back with the appropriate hand signals. I picked up the Bulb. It was still wrapped in the blanket.

"This may be the most important piece of salvage we've ever taken back to the Compound, so try to get me there in one piece, ok?"

"What is it?"

"Wait and see, but there's a slim chance that it may be the first small step in taking our planet back."

Her eyes went a little wide, but she didn't say anything. Silvio came running up, I gave him the hello sign, and we set off in Mary's footsteps. She had begun to scout ahead when she'd seen us form up. I don't know whether it was a desire to impress Portia, but I carried on talking.

“You never know, what we learn from this might lead to more than that action at the empty processing plant. We might even be able to take on a functioning station, free some of the prisoners.”

“Those fuckers? Let them rot.” She spat on the ground. “They never helped out the likes of us when they were running things. Treated us like shit. You’re too young to remember how it was.”

Her lined face had set a little harder if that were possible. No one knew how old she was exactly, but she was approaching late middle age. Rolled on by her horse at a showjumping event as a youngster, she’s grown up in the old world minus the lower part of her right arm. It hadn’t been a pleasant experience.

Suddenly she laughed, a harsh, brutal sound. If Silvio had been able to hear, he would have jumped as I did.

“That would be funny, wouldn’t it? The likes of us, pulling their nuts out of the fire. It might almost be worth it. But five minutes later, they’d be back to treating us like dogshit again.”

I didn’t say anything after that. It’s best not to challenge Portia on her politics. She was probably the only one in the Colony who would take the world as it was over what it had been.

It was a stupid thing for me to say anyway. The world has lain in ashes for almost a quarter of a century. Nearly all that remains of the human race is in thrall to alien creatures with unbelievable power and technology. And who are we? The rejects. The ones thrown out of the processing centres when the rest of the population had been put to work. The ones with physical impairments, lifelong, incurable medical conditions, and severe psychological problems. The Hexa had left us grovelling in the dust, useless, broken and pathetic. The orphans of the rubble.

For all we know, our small group may be all that remains alive and free. From the coast of England to the great American shores. From the mountains of Europe to the vast Asian plains. From the Arctic wastes to the bottom of the world. From sea to fucking shining sea. Just us. It’s kind of funny in a way. You see, we are the resistance. Yeah, us. Humanity’s only chance. The impossible longshot. The last, worst hope.

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