

TEARS OF BLOOD

IN THE SHADOW OF THE STRANGER

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Vale spotted the stranger cutting the blazing horizon like a black blade, a tall man striding unaccosted through an amber-tinted orchard of restless corpses. Sunset made a mad jumble of the shadows, but where the stranger walked there emerged a sort of order. The dead made way for him. They fell into ranks like rough soldiers at attention, framing serrations against the fiery sky before drifting back into lethargic chaos after he passed. A hundred yards out from the barbed-wire perimeter, the stranger shifted toward the airport and crossed through the overgrown grass. Gazing down from the air control tower, Vale watched him through binoculars.

The stranger looked like a weary traveler coming to the end of a long, grimy trail, a wanderer in black, mud-spattered slacks and a threadbare, white shirt. His torn leather jacket flapped from his narrow shoulders like a battlefield standard. Vale thought he must be dead to walk through a field infested with wormfeeders without igniting a feeding frenzy—but he didn't look dead. He didn't move like the dead—stiff and aimless—nor did he resemble them—gray and blemished with rot. His bright eyes were focused on the path before him, and his cheeks burned red in the dry, gritty wind.

He stopped at the barbed-wire coils staked to the ground. The low sun cast his silhouette through the loops of razor-edged steel, through the chain-link fence behind them, and onto the high, dusty grass between the runways. When the stranger raised a hand to push the hair from his eyes, the shadow of his fingers reached for the terminal like a crow's beak. Then, with a shrug, he resumed walking along the perimeter toward the makeshift guardhouse, where Duncan and Tomaselli were on duty.

Vale snatched up her walkie-talkie to warn them but then hesitated. She didn't know what to make of the stranger. Tourists simply didn't exist these days. The last had come more than nine weeks ago, driving a beat-up U.S. Postal Service delivery truck; sick, starved, and dehydrated, he'd died the same day, and they'd burned his corpse so he

wouldn't become a wormfeeder. Since then, only the dead came. They looked through the fence with inexplicable eyes that stared from their arms and legs, from their torsos, necks, and hands. Their idiot moans chased the quiet from the night, and their stench poisoned the air. Most of the people sheltering in the airport believed they were the last of the living in the area, and Vale couldn't imagine where the stranger had hidden or how he'd survived on his own. Maybe he was really dead, she thought. Maybe her eyes were tricking her in the twilight. But, no, the way he'd stopped and pushed the hair from his face—that was a gesture only a living man would make.

She raised Tomaselli on the walkie-talkie. Standing orders were to burn any of the dead who strayed too near the gate, and with the setting sun at his back, the stranger would easily be mistaken for a wormfeeder.

Tomaselli's voice came back: "We see him, Vale. We're not blind."

"Don't cook him," she said. "He's a tourist."

After a pause, Tomaselli said, "You positive?"

"I didn't take his pulse," Vale said, "but he sure as hell looks it."

"Why aren't the dead tearing him to pieces?"

"I don't know."

"Doesn't matter," Tomaselli said. "Alive or not, no one's coming through that gate except Campbell and his team. If they ever make it back."

"When they make it back," Vale said.

"They should've been here already. Dark soon." Tomaselli gave a humorless chuckle. "Only people outside after dark are fools and the dead, and all the fools died a long time ago."

"Anything on the radio?"

"Nothing but dead air and static."

Vale grimaced. The prospect of losing Campbell, of him becoming one of the walking dead, disgusted Vale. He had pulled the surviving airport people back together after Morgan almost destroyed them, and they were counting on him to lead them through the worst of what was to come. If Campbell didn't return, the little hope left among them would falter and die. Vale didn't want to even contemplate who would fill the vacuum Campbell would leave. She whispered a wish for his safety, but the stranger's arrival was a bad omen.

"Vale? You got us covered?" Tomaselli said. "He's almost here."

"I'm on him," Vale said. "You'll get a closer look than me. Do what you have to do, but keep in mind if you torch him, you're probably burning him alive."

“Don’t get your panties in a wad. We won’t be inviting him in for dinner, but that doesn’t mean we’re going to roast his ass.”

Vale signed off, set down her walkie-talkie, and swapped her binoculars for the scope on the .50 caliber rifle mounted in the tower. Wind whistled across the open window in front of the gun. Vale placed the stranger in her crosshairs and rested her finger on the trigger. The rifle felt like an extension of her hands and eyes, like she could reach down through it across any distance and touch the stranger or anything else she saw. At her best, she could take the man out with a single shot to his spine, immobilizing him, her aim so accurate and sure she sometimes spooked the others, which was why no one minded how much time she spent in the tower. She settled into the shooting nest and tracked her target as he moved into the glare of the guardhouse floodlights.

The stranger cupped a hand over his eyes and stopped outside the gate. The chain-link barrier was mounted on wheels and reinforced with sheet metal and fuselage scraps torn from the dead, metal birds that littered the airport. The ground before it was a black wash of charred earth. The stranger stood at the center of the dead zone. Wind snapped the ragged hem of his coat. He glanced over his shoulder at the charnel mob then heeled around and peered through the chinks in the barrier. Nothing else stirred but the biting wind and the restless dead spread across the darkening meadow.

When Duncan emerged from the guard shack with a shotgun braced against his hip, Vale exhaled and caressed the trigger, ready to fire. Duncan, his cap pulled low over mirrored sunglasses, approached the gate. Vale knew he would turn the man away. Everyone at the airport had agreed they would take in no more tourists, not after what had happened back before the perimeter was erected — back when there were more than a hundred of them instead of only eighteen. That was Morgan’s fault, and now Morgan and so many of the others walked with the dead. Some days, Vale saw Morgan in her sights and thought about putting him down, but she preferred not to waste the ammunition. She wouldn’t hesitate, though, to spend a round on the stranger if he became a threat.

Vale read Duncan’s body language: *Go away. You’re not welcome here.*
The stranger stayed.

He looked at the fading sky then turned back to the gate, waiting. A ghost noise hummed in Vale’s ears, a phantom vibration that ran through the tower and into her body. She risked a glance east toward Actsburg.

Beyond the runways and the meadow, on the far side of the concrete loops of the highway, lay the dim and lifeless city, sprawling like a spent lover between the airport and the wild, gray ocean. Vale saw nothing there. The hum became a buzz, then a faint rumble. Vale snatched up her walkie-talkie to check in with Tomaselli, but the crack of gunshots snapped her attention back to the meadow. The rumble became the growl of a motor, and Vale sighted on the airport access road. Cresting a hill, an armored pick-up truck sped into view, jolting over cracked pavement as it slalomed through rows of shambling corpses.

Campbell was back.

Vale watched him through her scope. Hunched in the truck bed amidst crammed-in boxes and packages, he clutched a rifle and fired at the dead swarming toward him.

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Putrefying wormfeeders ruptured when the truck smashed into them with the metal T-bar affixed to its front bumper. The ram bristled with jagged bits of scrap metal welded onto it. Blood and entrails painted it black and purple. Torn-flesh streamers flapped from the fenders and a scalp—dangling by a thread of knotted hair and leathery skin—bobbed in front of the license plate. The body of the truck, armored with pieces from a 747's skin, was mottled with smears of blood and clumps of gore. Dawson would be pissed when Campbell returned it to the garage, Vale thought. It would take days to clean. But that didn't matter. *Campbell was back.*

His rifle popped with a sound like hail pattering on a car roof. Vale felt the urge to open fire on the dead in the truck's path, but her duty was to cover the gate. She couldn't risk taking her eyes off the stranger for more than a few seconds. He was inching closer to the entrance despite Duncan poking his shotgun through a slit in the armor and yelling at him to go away. Tomaselli came from the guardhouse with a flamethrower strapped on his back and climbed to the top of the fire post—a ten-foot-high scaffolding. He crouched there behind a sheet metal barrier topped with barbed wire and lit the flamethrower's nozzle. Its fiery tongue lashed the dusk.

The truck jounced off the road into the well-worn ruts of a shortcut across the meadow. Excited by the activity, the wormfeeders were converging fast on the pick-up. It wouldn't be long before enough of them gathered to stop it. The truck surged past them, ran over them, and Campbell shot. Here and there, the dead fell. A single bullet

couldn't destroy them, but Campbell tried to hobble their feet and legs. "Kneecapping the dead," they called it. Firing from a moving vehicle, he was lucky to hit the very few he did, but how the dead mobbed together made it hard to miss completely as long as he aimed low and fired often. Vale wondered why only Campbell was shooting. Burnett was probably driving, so Reading should've been riding shotgun.

The dusk flared as Tomaselli triggered the flamethrower and burned the first of the wormfeeders to approach the gate. A few always came in close when they sensed it was about to be opened. The flame ignited them and drove them back. Vale thought, if it came to it she might shoot the stranger to spare him being eaten alive, but the dead passed him by as if he wasn't there. Even as smoke spiraled around him, rising from the dead zone, where the cinders wouldn't ignite, the stranger stood his ground, serene, unshaken. It was as if he were somehow immune to the chaos all around him. A chill ran through Vale, and she wondered if this was how she looked to the others when they saw her shooting the dead with cold, mechanical accuracy.

The truck zigzagged around the thickest groups of wormfeeders, bounced hard over a low hill, and Campbell tumbled out of sight in the cargo bed.

Moments later, he was up again, hanging onto the side, struggling to get back into shooting position. The truck swerved toward the gate, sending him off balance again. Smoke from the burning wormfeeders corkscrewed in its wind as it crashed the last line of the dead and broke clear for the entrance.

Vale refreshed her aim on the stranger.

In a flurry of motion, Duncan raised the bracing bar, withdrew his gun, and rolled the creaking gate wide. The truck sped through. Rubber bit pavement and brakes screeched as the vehicle skidded to a stop. Duncan slammed the gate shut behind it and clasped the lock. The routine was well practiced and there hadn't been a wasted motion—but still Duncan had proven too slow.

The stranger stood inside the barrier.

Vale blinked.

She had seen the man in her scope one moment, gone the next, but she hadn't seen him move. She put him back in her sight, and she ought to have fired then, but an overwhelming feeling that it would be a mistake stayed her trigger finger. The stranger didn't present any immediate threat. He only stood still and watched the other men with calm, fearless eyes until Tomaselli aimed the torch at him, and then he simply sat cross-legged on the concrete, placed his hands palms-up on