

The Mad Man and The Dead Man

By Jasyn Turley

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“In the end. All I really remember, is the fire.”

The Mad Man wakes to a feeling of overwhelming pain. As if fire were consuming his body and millions of needles had been lodged into him. He cries out. But his screams are muffled. His jaw are restricted by something wrapped around his face. He pulls at it; it is a soft but strong fabric, and once his mouth is freed, he feels the same sensation as if rising to the surface of water. He gasps for breath before screaming, “IDRIS.” The name he knows not who or why he should have called out for it. Only that he needed help.

The Mad Man lies there till his breathing calms, but that never happens. The burden of immense pain hasn't left; that feeling of burning and needles was all-consuming. All he can see is the fire, a pillar of fire. He screams, but cannot hear himself. Inside, he is drowned out by the thousands around him whose screams echo from his mind. The thousands of voices that drown out all thought and reason, a chorus of misery begotten by that pillar of Red. Fire. And light.

Light. His memory is but a murky pool of black. But he has forgotten not the light. Not just the pillar of fire, but also a disk of white light. Not a raging inferno, but still. Above him as if to watch over him.

When his mind came to silence, and he was accustomed to the pain, the Mad Man saw the padded room he was in. He lay on a gurney with that constrictive feeling not just around his face but his whole body, down to the waist. No help came, not even at the continued cry for this “Idris.” He couldn't help but feel the odd sensation of something missing. A vital piece of his body that was no longer there.

“Idris?” he drifts in wonder, but his memory is gone.

When the Mad Man's strength came back, he raised himself from the bed. The cold of the metal rails contrasted against his warmth left on the padded bed. All four walls were padded, as if for...

A mental patient. The thought emerged from the dark space that was his memory.

His legs were weak, but held his weight as he found his balance. There was a single door and a small window at head height, and he peered through it. On the other side of the door was a small room. Inside was a bloody and grim scene. The room was torn apart, bloody smears and splatters painted the walls, but he saw no bodies. Only the ripped clothing, shoes, and accessories that lay in the pools of red long sense coagulated.

The door gave under his push, but did not fully open. He pushed again, and it gave a little more. But the pressure from each impact sent white-hot pain up his arm, across his shoulders, and down his spine. A madness overtook him. An angered response, and he snapped into a feral frenzy. Throwing the gurney upon its side, raging and screaming. He continued to throw himself against the door until it opened from his abuse. Numbing pain burned across his body, and when outside the maddening room, the frenzy settled. He stood up a chair that had been left knocked over and sat. The white-hot pain returned under the receding numbness. The Mad Man remained seated. Waiting and accustoming himself to the hurt.

To either side of the room he was in, there were two identical, padded rooms. The door leading to the hallway was straight ahead of him, with a desk to the left. On this desk, he found a used syringe, and upon his exit, he grabbed it. Second nature, that from which didn't come his conscious memory, worked, and he squeezed out the liquid inside the needle. Then he pulled back the plunger, filling the tube with air.

The Mad Man stumbled out of the room and into the hallway. He saw only more of the same. Signs of grim death that decorated the halls, but in greater quantity. Pools of blood, torn clothes, and shoes scattered and thrown about.

That murky darkness of his memory thinned, but a little. What echoed from the before was a scene of panic. People spontaneously combusting from the inside out en masse. Human burnings against the backdrop of a fiery pillar that rose into the sky. He laughed. Against the terror and cries of that memory, he laughed as he stumbled down the hall.

His mania abated when he entered a girls' restroom. The laughs stifled as he glared at a mirror. He saw his reflection, and more from that black murk of memory emerged. A flash image of the man he once remembered. That image of normality now replaced with this repulsive reflection he now sees. Naked and from the waist up, his body covered in wrappings. Like some *mummy* cosplay, blood-stained through the bandages and wrappings, and his hair fallen out. The Mad Man yelled at his image, as if a stranger had broken into his house. His yells turned to screams, and he punched the glass so that he could see more.

His breathing was rapid; he couldn't slow it. He felt as if he were falling backwards, but instead of hitting the floor, he felt the cold, hard surface of the partition door swinging inwards as he landed against it. Arms catching his fall against the frames of the partition. He stared at the wrappings around his arms. Found his balance once again and looked at his mummified chest and belly. From the waist down, he was covered in burns, horrible burns.

He pulled at the first end of the wrappings he could find, but barely saw the layer of under skin when something outside the hall stopped him. A scream. Faint and distant, accompanied by the heavy and fleshy thumps of *barefoot* against the muddied floor. The screams and footfalls get closer, portents of death.

The Mad Man opened the partition door, backed inside, closed, and locked it. He waited, trying to look through the cracks, but couldn't see anything. The screams got closer, bouncing off the walls of the restroom as the footfalls splashed inside. He held his breath hostage, waiting with the syringe in hand. The things crazed moans registered as a she, as if "she" were in pain. Her steps swashed through the crimson coat of sticky on the tile floor, and The Mad Man knew she was looking for the source of that which alerted her.

What will she do when she finds this door will not open? What will I do if she breaks through?

The Mad Man released his held breath in a slow exhale. He felt a tapping at the partition door, a soft racking of fingertips. He waited to see if she would ram into the door. But no. After a while, her crazed cries and the sounds of her searching stopped. He knew that sound. From the dark depths of memory, he knew it was the sound preceded by ensuing violence. The inhale of breath before attacking.

The door deadbolt gave way at her first bash. The Mad Man fell against the toilet, his feet pressed against the chest of the woman, thrashing against him. Only her chest cavity had been ripped open. Amid the torn open shirt, bra, ripped skin, and outward broken ribs, his feet pushed against her innards or what was left of them.

She pulled at his legs and chomped at them. Like some crazed bird pecking at worms, but couldn't reach. He dropped the syringe, and it rolled out of reach. The piping of the toilet pressed against his tender back. The same frenzy returned, and his anger set him feral against this ghoul.

He grabbed the first thing he could, a tampon box, and yanked hard. The box ripped off the bolts holding it to the wall. He swung the steel box against her face. She flinched, and he hit

her again, this time knocking her back. He pushed against what felt like the inside of her spine, sending her backwards.

The lady fell to the bloodied floor, and The Mad Man grabbed the syringe, fell on top of her before she could get up, and stuck the needle through her temple. He pressed the air into her brain and held her down with his weight. Her broken bones pressed against his wrappings and sensitive abdomen, but he remained on top until she stopped moving.

Heaving and gasping, he stood up and leaned against the wall. Staring down at the body. He thought he might puke, but instead felt indifferent.

That memory came back. The fiery pillar rising into the sky with masses of people crying in misery before spontaneous combustion. He now saw a wave of people, like this woman, crawling over cinders, bodies, and each other. He broke into another laugh, yelled “leave me alone,” and smashed the last of the mirrors with the tampon box.

The Mad Man waited some time for his laughter to cease, and when it did, he was struck by the following fatigue. The skirmish with the monstrous woman had taken a toll. He left the restroom and milled about the halls. For what or to where he knew not. All he knew was to keep moving, an instinct it was.

He came across more and more of the *Odd Ones*, who, unlike the woman, were in a state of idleness. He took great caution as he navigated the corridors. At one junction, he scanned the three halls, three options he could take. Two of the three were congested with more *Odd Ones* than the third.

In his study, he felt his knee press against something soft. A large yellow trash bag full of clothing. It was tied off and read “contaminated material.” But his needs were greater. Inside were several articles of varying sizes and fashion. Among the more practical and close to his size was a shirt & vest, a pair of pants, socks, and boots, and finally a fedora. Wondering the whole time who this “Idris” was? Why should he have cried out to him? What was that disk of white light that burned into his memory? Idris and the white light conformed into a conundrum that pruned his thoughts.

Dressed, he took to the hallway with the least resistance. The path led to an atrium. On the far side were doors that he felt teased him. For beyond those doors was the promise of the outside. But between him and those doors, the atrium was a labyrinth of medical lots and filled to the brim with *Odd Ones*. Yet, with that pillar of fire still in his mind, he felt all the more teased and didn’t think he should want to venture outside. He didn’t want to face what inferno still burned outside, and he couldn’t stay inside.

In the shadows, the Mad Man studied the many rooms sectioned by curtains and all manner of haphazard and quickly erected stations. The place was a mess; some scourge of nature, perhaps a tornado, had torn through here. Sheets were shredded, tables and beds overturned, and boxes with their insides scattered. And the blood, there was more blood painted everywhere, the old & dried, and the not so old & sticky.

The nearest medical station wasn’t for the sick at all, but a dispensary. It came at the cost of detection, but his gamble was rewarded. The dispensary was still stocked, well, partially, but for one man, it was a cache. Silent as a mouse rummaging through cabinets in a kitchen in the middle of the night, he found items of sacred value: gauze, wrap, morphine injections, epinephrine, salves & other ointments, and more.

Within the dispensary section was a puddle of blood, torn clothes, and bloodied shoes. He connected the many blood spills and articles with that chomping mouth of the Odd One who assaulted him in the restroom. *They're feeding.*

Among the articles was a sandy-colored bag. He grabbed it and, with silent care, set it on the nearest table. He began stuffing as many medical supplies as he could. Zipping the bag was a labor of commitment; a pen drop could be heard with each tooth of the zipper chained to the other.

Once finished, he slung the bag over his shoulders, gritting his teeth against the burning discomfort, and turned to leave before taking note of a map.

The map was pinned to a pegboard beside the cabinet. It was centered on Cheyenne, Wyoming, with the Wyoming-Colorado border cutting it off to the south. Locations were dotted and connected by dotted lines. Transit routes. The tristate border of Wyoming, Colorado, and Nebraska was all shaded in yellow. Diagonal lines, as if marking wind currents, reached up to the northeast, further into Nebraska and South Dakota. There were many shades of orange within the yellow. Smaller in scope. And within those oranges were smaller sectors shaded red. He studied the map for some time and held his hand inside one of the shaded orange sectors. Where the orange bordered the red. Under the transparent colors, he read "Chugwater" and realized that he knew this place. A word emerged from the coagulated tar of his black memory; he somehow knew it as "home."

A note was pinned next to the map, dedicated by a "Captain Merdock." It read: "... location has been compromised, immediate evacuation has been issued to the outer jurisdictions. Inform all civilian and non-civilian personnel. Extract ambulatory patients only. Hostiles are en route and are to be considered dangerous. Shoot on sight."

"*Hostiles?*" The Mad Man mouthed and looked out at the many Odd Ones walking in a vegetated state.

A group of Odd Ones converged on an operating station, the curtain stands were toppled, and the sheets were ripped apart. The operating table was sticky with blood under the bright light of a disk above it. The lamp averted away from the bed as if struck by a flailing hand, and facing in part towards the Mad Man.

The disk of white light. An operating lamp. Bright and blinding and beside it? The face of a friend, surfacing from that black pool of memory. The face to whom the mysterious name belonged. He saw Idris, *who operated on me*, but when looking down at his wrapped body, he now understood. Idris had *not operated but experimented on me*. Idris, *who did this to me*.

Heat burned in pounding rhythms against his chest. Not the white-hot burn as he felt from his injuries. No, a red burning like that fiery pillar he remembered all too well. The top of the inferno that burned into the sky and behind which all former memory was barred.

It took all his restraint not to yell. He choked the screams before they could pass up his throat with a steel grip of his hands. The pressure burned and stabbed under the wrappings of his neck. He needed to find Idris. He needed to ask him "why?" He needed to know if his old friend was still alive and, if so, where he had gone.

When his nerves had settled and his steel grip left his neck, something of the map caught his attention. In the periphery edges of the maps southwestern side, in the white margins, a handwritten dotted line continued. Ending with a bold dot and handwritten next to it "Fort Collins, CO," and was designated as "emergency fallback/rendezvous."

It took The Mad Man some time in back tracking through the corridors. Like a mouse skittering around traps, and avoiding detection until he was back at the junction of corridors. One of the alternate paths was marked with 'emergency exit.' And the congestion of Odd Ones had dispersed there.

He made a gamble, when the corridor took a turn, that he would run into a horde of the Odd Ones. Shuffling in and out from classrooms, like sentries on lethargic patrols, they went with no discernible cause or purpose. Halfway down the hall, an Odd One emerged from an alcove where a fuse box sat. Detection was inevitable had he not seen the open closet to his right and stolen himself inside. It was a janitor's closet, with a ladder rising into a tight square tunnel through the roof and a hatch to the above. His feet bumped against something soft and yielding. Looking down, he saw the body of a young man, and he couldn't be more than fifteen, with an ax lodged into his forehead. Across was the body of a fireman, pale as the dead, with a chunk missing from his throat.

He forced and pried the ax from the skull and in the silence, waited. He dared to look out through the crack of the door and saw an Odd One shuffling through the debris, clothes, and clutter. Dressed in doctor scrubs, and familiar. When the thing turned around, did the Mad Man recognize Idris, wailing that godawful cry? He couldn't contain himself; all he saw was that burning pillar of fire consuming all that he was. The Mad Man busted out the door and yelled as he brought the axe down into Idris's head.

The whole corridor was stimulated and started to swarm. He heard the piercing cries from dozens of Odd Ones. Heard the idle shuffling now, a desperate sprint in search of the noise. He looked down at his slain enemy. It was not the face of Idris, but that of a woman dressed. A name tag over her breast read 'Boren' as she lay spread out and motionless. The silvery pupils under the fog of dead eyes seemed to look at him. Some possession of eldritch evil staring, through a conduit of dead and decomposing flesh, right at him.

He had a second, a split second of clarity when seeing the slain, and put his boot to her throat. The Mad Man pried his ax free and retreated into the closet. It wouldn't close, and from the closing distance of the Odd One's, there was no time to fix the jam. He turned and scaled up the ladder into the narrow tunnel, the walls pushed in at his shoulders as he reached for the release lever to the hatch.

The lever was stiff and unyielding. The door below opened in a violent pull that reverberated up the steel ladder. The Mad Man pulled harder. Elbows and arms smacked against the tunnel walls, its abrasive surface ripping his bandages and the skinless tissue underneath. He could feel the movement of arms and fingers just below his boots. The lever gave and moaned in a protest of rust as it lifted open.

The Mad Man climbed out and rolled off onto the roof. A second later, a face emerged from the opening. He kicked against the nose and forehead of the hostile with his boot. Again and again, he kicked until knocking the thing back and casting its weight on the others below. The roof access was now congested just enough for him to stand and slam the hatch closed. The rusted hatch locked into place before a pair of hands pounded from underneath.

For some time, The Mad Man stood there. Waiting for the pain to taper. He sat on the hatch, vibrations of hungry rage labored from below. From his bag, he took out an auto injector with "Morphine" labeled on it and gave himself the shot. The pain subsided, but didn't disappear. He considered another dose, but from that black murk of memory, something told him not to.

He undressed his upper body and removed the old wrappings and paddings in slow agony. The blood had dried and clung to the gauze and wrap like adhesive. Each peeling felt like the peeling of skin, where the cold air struck him like a sand blaster. He worked chattering haste to dress his wound and redressing the shirt and vest. The cold temperatures stiffened his limbs as he took out the map and unfolded it.

The Mad Man studied the routes of travel south. He oriented himself facing south, and when he felt satisfied with his next goal, he folded the map into his vest pocket. Shouldered his bag and searched for a way off the roof.

He found more remains of firemen, policemen, and civilians on the roof. A trail of human breadcrumbs that led him to a ladder. The bottom steps fed down into a half-full dumpster. Around the dumpster and beyond, to where he couldn't see, languished many more Odd Ones. He climbed down the ladder and into the dumpster and waited to hear if he had alerted any of them. But there came no running, or horrid screams, or even the bashing against the steel wall. There was only the wailing cries and shuffling of unstimulated freaks.

The dumpster gate was unlatched and left cracked open. Heavy to the push, it yielded under his force. The metal hinges squealed from their grinding swings. A crack just big enough to slip through, and he was outside through. He took stock of his surroundings. All was still. No threats coming his way. The Mad Man found his bearings and started southbound.

“Bullets, bullets everywhere. But I can't find him, anywhere,” the Mad Man sang in a low monotone as he passed more and more of the failed defenses. Several last stands of men or women cornered by the Odd Ones. Vehicles, barricades, and all manner of improvised barriers were erected in an evident haste against time, for a failed fight for survival. The only proof that people had recently been behind these defenses was the pools of dried blood and the rubble painted in crimson gore; torn articles of clothes and shoes; and weapons, everything from rifles to pipes. Each step through these failed defenses sent spent cartridges skittering in soft, metallic clatters across the ground. He'd stopped to check on the magazines or ammo boxes and, after so many failed hopes, gave up on the guns.

The Odd Ones showed no case of awareness when he passed. The Mad Man kept his presence secret as best his injuries allowed. He moved through the shadows, and when no shadow could avail him, he shimmied through the corridors between the cars and rubble.

At one junction of streets, he was cornered by a coming horde of Odd Ones. A trash truck and two other vehicles formed a triangle in the middle of the intersection. In here, he wiggled his pained body through, venting his pain in low grunts as his back and abdomen brushed against the vehicles. The horde now upon him, The Mad Man dropped to his throbbing back and felt the grit and pebbles chew through his bandages as he did so.

The horde shambled around the vehicular triangle, like water around a rock. The Mad Man had just enough of an angle to look up and see through the windshields and door windows at the faces, the human faces these things wore, as they passed. None he saw was the face of Idris.

When the horde was behind him, the Mad Man dared to his feet and looked back. The horde continued in a directionless migration. They followed the path of least resistance through the ruined street. Further beyond, a figure scurried into view. Four-legged, spotted fur, and sickly looking, a dog crossed the street. First one of the Odd Ones cried out, a mournful cry that managed to sound hungry at the same time. One by one, the entire horde seemed to wake into a feral frenzy. As if waking from some rabid nightmare that infested their minds and manifested

into their mournful and hungry madness. The horde went after the dog; some ran, and the others walked with a grotesque pace.

The Mad Man thought of the woman who attacked him in the restroom. She hadn't sought him out till the breaking of the mirror. The loud shattering of glass that stimulated her from what he suspected to be a state of idleness, as he now witnessed this horde. He understood then that less something should provide a purpose for them, the Odd Ones, as if in a state of sleepwalking.

And to himself he sang, *bodies, bodies everywhere. But I don't see him anywhere.* Turning back the way he intended, south, and continued.

Outside the city, the Mad Man found it to be very much the same as what he saw inside, only there was less of it. Neighborhoods, shopping centers, and other zones of business were cluttered with the masses of the Odd Ones. Instead of defenses erected on the streets, homes and businesses were boarded up.

But these two had failed to save their inhabitants. The boards were broken through, and the Odd Ones freely shambled in and out from each location. The loud cries and wails that died down to whimpers echoed through the vacant streets.

The Mad Man stuck to the main streets. The map informed him that the city streets would take him to the interstate and the interstate would take him to the nearest "fallback" marked at Fort Collins. The further from the city he walked, the fewer Odd Ones there were. Until finally, he put the urban behind him. Alone at last, under the haze of a gray sky and even a grayer scape at his flanks, he was closer to Idris. Closer to his—

And what will I do if I find him? He wondered, "When I find him." The words grated through his dry throat. Thoughts that could only best be summed up in a single word, "red," came to mind. Thoughts that at first clouded his mind and filled him with a certain bloodlust that felt foreign to him.

After some seconds, the cold breeze he cooled from those murderous thoughts, and a more *civilized* course of action came to him. He could knock his traitorous friend unconscious and tie him to a chair. Only when Idris woke and was aware would The Mad Man show his friend what he had done to him.

Or he could perform the same operation on Idris. Flay his skin off, ensure, by whatever standards Idris had performed unto him, his survival, and leave him in a padded room.

"So many ideas and so little Idris's." The Mad Man both laughed and cried.

His arms grew tired of the axe's weight. He lowered his head to the pavement and raked it across the ground. Glimpses of memory continued to rise from that black myre of memory. He knew, though without vivid clarity, that he had been a fireman for the F.E. Warren Air Force Base.

With this revelation, he paused and lifted the ax head so that he could stare at the charred steel. He found comfort in it. As if the weapon knew him better than he knew himself. The holder of his memories.

"My old friend at long last." He nearly cried and would no longer drag the axe head.

Day turned to evening, and evening into night. When the freezing chill of the winter night settled, the Mad Man took refuge in a wrecked car. The sedan was off the interstate, at an angle within a ditch. It teetered upon his entry and balanced. The engine wasn't operational, so he

couldn't get the heater on. But inside the car, the Mad Man found some blankets, and though the night was met with severe discomfort under his bandages. He rested.

Come morning, he searched the car for what he could salvage. A half-full bottle of water and some granola. The only sustenance he had in... *how long now?* When he drank the water, nothing had ever tasted sweeter, so fresh to his mouth that he savored the final drops from the plastic. The granola woke his mind to his stomach, making him feel the same hunger as he heard from the Odd One's cries.

Come evening, a military jeep assailed him, soldiers climbed out from the vehicle, and he stopped. Enshrouded by a black silk blanket, he awaited instructions. But after dropping his friend the axe upon command, they didn't harm him. Despite his reservations, being that he was certain these men were harbingers of Idris and Lord knew who else. One man secured his friend of steel. Two more came to him, while one checked on *my vitals*, the other remained cautious.

The CO of the squad grabbed his radio and said, "Bravo One-Three to Command, tango is not a hostile. I say again, tango is not a hostile but a civvie in need of medical transit, how'copy?"

"Command copies Bravo One-Three. Medi'vac is enroute. ETA five minutes, over."

"Copy that, Bravo One-Three out."

He had been given food and water on the ride. Though there was little of the food, he thought it was enough to fill his stomach. How long had he been without something to eat that his stomach should shrink so small? But at the same time, he wanted more. Needed more; the cravings that he had seen in the Odd Ones were his as well.

Medical stations, four in all, that looked like very large and sturdy tents, were erected outside the main hospital. The main building itself had a sign above its front doors reading 'IMMEDIATE, LIFE THREATENING.' And the four tents were labeled for the other levels of triage: 'EMERGENCY, COULD BE LIFE THREATENING. URGENT, NOT LIFE THREATENING. SEMI URGENT, NOT LIFE THREATENING. AND NOT URGENTS, NEEDS TREATMENT WHEN TIME PERMITS.'

Before the hospital, a massive pool of people filled the majority of the parking lot. A funnel where injuries were filtered at the many check-ins, one that he was brought to after what felt like an endless wait. There, a medic looked him over.

"Dear Mary other of Christ." The medic said after looking under his bandages and labeled him as "Immediate, life threatening." She communicated something over the radio, and the escort who had brought him this far disappeared into that massive crowd.

A golf cart pulled up, and The Mad Man was loaded, driven to the front doors of the hospital, where a cot and two men waited. One looked like a construction worker who never got to return home, and the other a barista from some coffee shop. The cot was repurposed as a litter, and he was forced to lie down. A nurse came to him with some kind of needle, and seeing the needle poised for him, he felt a wild fit of fear and struggled. Soldiers at the door rushed to hold him still. Under their hands, he felt that white-hot burn and a thousand needle pokes ravage his skin. The nurse gave him the injection, and his resistance swooned.

When he awoke, he saw others who were like himself. Men & women, young & old, with skin burnt in some places, and in others, there was no skin. The doctors working from patient to patient, nurses providing support, it was like a well-oiled machine. But the injured, *there are so*

many, and he thought of that burning pillar of inferno rising into the sky. Thought of the poisoning that came from such an event. If, for a moment, he thought *what if?*

What if he wasn't the product of some malign intent from Idris? What if Idris hadn't experimented but operated on him? What if Idris tried to save his life? If he had his memories, he could rejoice in such a thought, holding to the friendship he couldn't remember. But he had only the knowing of his relationship with Idris; no memories were rising from the murky blackness. And just as soon as his ponderings of "what if" were gone, when looking into a mirror at a washing station. His breathing escalated as if, for the first time, he were looking at the product of Idris's work. Medicinal or experimental.

He saw the deformed person, veiled in the wrappings and binding, a mummified madman who couldn't remember the image he used to have. His mind returned to that maddening firestorm that seemed to burn into his memories and stain his very soul. All he could do was rage, and in silence, he did just that.

He lay there for some time, still and motionless. Listening to the nurses who came by to check on him. What passage of time had transpired, he didn't know. Only that it was dark outside, so dark in the wintry night that the sky seemed to fall below the horizon. The world was forever a darker place.

Sometime before the twilight hours, he heard a voice. The familiarity of it seems to harken memories from the black murk inside his head. He only knew it was the voice of Idris, and sitting up, he looked to the waving flaps of the tent. The wind moved them, so gentle and yet he got the impression that it was some calming wind before a coming storm. Ill portents of a greater calamity inbound, and with this impression came all the impatience for the perception of a lack of time.

Then he saw him, Idris, walking across the tent with a little girl in a wheelchair. Her legs were gone, charred fleshy stubs poked below her knees. The pillar of fire burned all the hotter when seeing this. And The Mad Man choked a laughter inside himself, a laughter that made him remorseful as he stood from his cot.

No one seemed to notice his movement; the doctors were busied with other patients. But the nurses, he moved fast to the flap before a nurse could discover his flight. He stumbled and fumbled with each step. That lethargic-inducing drug still clung to his arms and legs. People around looked at him, some more suspicious than others. But none stopping his flight, what was one empty bed that was readily occupied by another wounded?

"People, people, everywhere. But they don't see anywhere." He sang to himself, forcing through a crowd of wounded waiting in line. White-hot pain at his shoulders and chest as he did. But through the crowd, he saw Idris, pushing the wheelchair towards a street, and across the street, a hospice building.

He hurried in his pursuit, raging *what have you done to her!?*

Idris and his next victim arrived at the hospice before The Mad Man could him. At the front doors, two soldiers looked at him, suspicion plagued their faces, but they didn't stop him. Why wouldn't a dying man go to such a building? Only inside the hospice, he discovered it was very much a place of dying, but not for the elderly. People of all ages lie about on cots and makeshift beds.

People, people, everywhere. They are dying anywhere. He thought he might cry at the sight, and yet no tears came.

He searched among the dying, looking for the wheelchair and finding among the collective flesh no Idris or the youth. When he came to a corridor, he saw the wheelchair among the moving bodies of nurses and volunteer civvies. Only it was empty next to a door, and as he approached, he peered across the frame and into the inside. There stood Idris, and inside the room, the little girl.

His old friend laid his hand over the girl's forehead, while beside her, an ECG read faint heartbeats.

"Am I going to be alright?" the girl with no legs below the knees asked. A mournful smile came to Idris, and the Mad Man's fists clenched at the lie he heard, "You'll be just fine, sweaty."

He left before Idris could see him. Signs reading 'EXIT' led him to a fire extinguisher and a fire ax inside storage compartments in the wall. The Mad Man ignored the former and took the latter, "my old friend." He cradled the steel and went outside.

He procured chains and padlocks from a construction truck parked a few blocks down. From the road works, he obtained gasoline. When he returned to the hospice, he stalked about the exterior, sealing off the exits all but two. The main entry where the guards would've shot him on sight for such an act, and the emergency exit nearest Idris.

He doused the place in fuel and was standing there with a box of matches in hand. He lit the first, but hesitated. The fire of the match burned like that which was inside his head. But he waited too long, and the flame licked against the bandages of his fingers. Setting them ablaze, and as he put the fire out, he took a step back. Peered into the window where Idris still sat with the dying girl.

They're dying anyway, put them out of their misery and HIM!

He lit another match, but again. The stick burned down to his fingers.

"Dying, dying everywhere. But I can't kill them anywhere." He didn't notice his breathing, only the heavy rise and fall of his chest and shoulders.

DO IT.

He lit another match, but this time he put it out against his leggings before it burned down. Fire, that burning pillar of fire, was all encompassing; it burned above that black myre of memory. Nothing, nothing else was to be found inside himself. He about cried when the rising crescendo of sirens pulled him from within.

Through the window, he saw Idris, now alert, look up from the sudden wailings of the sirens. Idris fled into the shadows when the warning system reached its crescendo and dipped. From the main parking, a chorus of fear erupted. Chaos, he felt only chaos like that burning pillar inside him, like that which he remembered so vividly burning and destroying that which he couldn't remember.

Inside, he saw not the little girl, only the man who had done this to him, and so The Mad Man lit the match.

<O>

He smelled the smoke before the sound of panic filled the hospice. People raced to the exits, clogging their escape and bottlenecking the doors. This place of recovery was now a place of death. Idris looked down at the little girl, determination filled him. He would not let these people, who were so close to death and brought back from that brink, burn to death. But the siren's outside? The coming hordes of the maniacal dead.

He picked up Rachel and carried her outside. The wheelchair was gone, and so he set her on a countertop. Spun around and hunched his back, the little girl, *this brave girl*, knowing what he meant, wrapped her arms around his neck, and he held the bend of her knees with his arms.

“Hold on.” He told her and forced his way into the current of hysteria, pushing and pulling at each other.

The fire was burning inwards, and smoke veiled the ceiling tiles above. One man took a chair and was about to throw it at the window, till Idris yelled, “NO. You’ll only feed the flames. Follow the exit signs.”

The current, now with some sort of direction, moved. People pushing and pulling at each other in the direction of the nearest exit sign. Rachel, still wrapped around his neck, squeezed tighter, “I’m scared, Doctor Hudson.”

“I know, darling, just hold tight.”

Her arms were beginning to choke him, yet he could still breathe.

The exit door came into view, and the people fled outside. Like a wave of water storming out a drain channeling it into the darkness, the people fled. He reached the doors, and when he stepped outside, his next worry was where to go from the incoming hordes. So much worry that he missed the swing of steel and stopped only when the mass of sharp metal sank into his gut.

Rachel screamed. His ear was now ringing. His eyes traveled up from the axe, up to the horribly wrapped face, and settled into eyes under those wrappings. The mad eyes of the friend he had failed and left for dead.

“Max?”

<O>

Max? The Mad Man stared into Idris’s eyes, sinking the ax head deeper into his gut. *Aye, Max.* From the chaos of his raging mind, his name returned to him. He thought he should feel some joy from the revelation and some joy from the fulfillment of his quest. But as he stared into Idris’s look of shock and pain, pain that wasn’t just physical but mournful, he felt a benign guilt. *But why?*

He took a step to the side, freeing up the blocked channel of fleeing people, and ripped the ax from Idris’s body. The little girl mounted on Idris’s back cried out as they fell to the ground. Without legs, she only crawled back against the wall and watched. Abstract terror etched onto her face as she cried out to “Dr. Hudson.”

But The Mad Man, Max, cared not for her troubles. He knelt beside Idris, his friend lay spooling in his blood. Choking on it. Max began to unwrap his face, and with the strands of gentle cloth dangling around his neck like some obscene garnishing of jewelry, he stared into Idris’s face.

“Look at what you did.” The Mad Man commanded.

Idris looked up at him, but there was more than guilt in his features. Max saw the pain and confusion, the latter of which forced him to stop. Recent memories of the other patients inside the ‘Immediate, Life Threatening’ triage tent. Reconsideration of a recent thought he now feared to be real.

“It was the radiation Max...” Idris managed through the blood choking his throat, tears now down his face, “I was trying to save you.”

Max didn’t respond; he just remained kneeling, staring at Idris, who lay dying. Max noticed a glimmer of metallic shine on Idris’s ring finger. Something emerged from the torrent of burning fire and myre of black memories. An image of his sister, whose name he couldn’t remember. But her marriage to Idris became all the more clear.

“No.” The Mad Man shook his head and stood. He took a step back as Idris faded and the girl with no legs wept over him. The little girl he saw now had the same injuries as he did. Burnt and missing skin across her body, though not to the same extent. The little girl who was a *test subject, no... patient*, of his now dead brother-in-law. His best friend.

A truck arrived, and he saw the firemen rush to evacuate the people to vehicles. Other trucks and vans arrived, being filled beyond their maximum capacities. Firemen, like the Max he used to be, trying to save lives. As the hospice was fully consumed by fire, gunfire joined the chorus of sirens.

Over the radios of the firemen, he could hear soldiers crying over the radio, “We’re running black on ammo here, get the civvies the fuck out of here!”

The response of some COs commanding them to “Hold the line for as long as you can.”

Soldiers and firemen, fighting among the inferno and unending hordes of the Odd Ones. Staring down at his ax, he stared at his betrayal, the steel no longer brought comfort, but the weight of a steeled cross forever tied to his shoulders.

Then he did the only thing he thought was right. He scooped up the little girl, who fought and kicked at him with the stubs of her charred legs. He ran with her, tightening his grip with each strike she laid against him. He brought her to a truck.

“There’s no more room,” he heard shout from inside the cab. But from the bed, a man jumped off, and in his place, the others took the little girl from The Mad Man. The tail gate was closed, and the last he saw of the little girl, of innocence, was it weeping as it disappeared into the darkness.

The Mad Man went back to Idris’s body, where he thought about trying to save his old friend's remains from the Odd Ones. His friend, whom he betrayed. Scooping his arms under Idris’s shoulders, he pulled and dragged till they were across the street. The sounds of gunfire ceased, the sirens continued in their unending eulogy, and the cries of mass hysteria began to die out.

The Mad Man dragged Idris’s body across the street when the full front of the hospital lit up in gunfire raining down into the tents and parking lot. The firelight that consumed the hospice showed the shadows of running figures. They were in the front yard of a house with a couple of Odd Ones, assailed him, and Idris.

The Mad Man brought his ax down into the skull of one. The other Odd One fell over Idris’s guts and began chewing. But The Mad Man laughed, not of pleasure, just simple laughter as he brought the ax head down onto the back of the Odd One’s skull. He picked up his friend's body again and dragged, a detach garage was left open, and inside, he found refuge. Running to the door, he removed it from the automatic opener-closer and manually closed the door.

A pack of Odd Ones converged on him and rammed into the door as he closed it. The Mad Man managed to charge the lock before the Odd Ones tried to lift it. Through the window, above the weeping and hungry faces focused on him, he saw the upper levels of the hospital. Saw the broken windows, and the people jumping out of their ends.

Something pulled at the side door, and the Mad Man ran to it and pulled it shut when it started to open. Outside, he heard a man screaming as Odd Ones fell over him, and his screams died out to the sound of ripping and tearing. The Mad Man charged the dead bolt and lock on the knob before falling next to Idris.

He stayed there for some time before looking at his friend. His sister's husband. He patted Idris's shoulder, wordless and in contempt. Under the shirt, he felt something square and firm. He searched inside and felt the leather binding of a journal, which The Mad Man removed. He waited some time before opening the leather. The pommels of flesh pounding against the garage door and burning fire illuminating the dark through the glass. Max, the Mad Man, read Idris's account.

What follows is The Account of a Dead Man.

January 2nd, 2017

I'm writing this, nearing the end of the bus ride to Laramie, WY. I am certain I will not have time later, and wish to record my last memories of home. So that I, in the troubles to come, may have something to tether myself to. To help me with the troubles, I will undoubtedly toil with in the coming days.

I remember the morning of January 1st, ~~when the day started cold,~~ *when the world stopped.* I woke up to the sight of my breath rising in the cold. At first, I thought our furnace had broken down. The only warmth was Rosan next to me. She trembled under the covers. Her shoulders, visible above the covers, were covered in goosebumps. The fog of sleep was thick this day, but swiftly thinned when I heard Alli's cry from the other room.

Just hearing her cry... It wasn't her "I need a diaper change" or "I'm hungry" cry. Those I could handle. This was a cry of pain. God, I wished I could take it all away, and she'd never feel pain again.

I am ashamed to admit it, but my first thought wasn't about Alli. It was wondering why the baby monitor didn't wake us. Rosan? She was out of bed and racing for the door. I was right on her heels, but there is no outpacing a worried mother. "Momma Bear," I always called her.

In Alli's room, Rosan scooped her out of her crib, soothed her with lulls, and kissed her as she rubbed warmth back into her. And I? I was two for two, trying the light switch and confirming that the power must be off. I guess that when seeing Rosan tending to Alli, subconsciously, I was concerned about our next worry. If I knew I would've been gone no long after that, I would've spent every second with my two girls.

It didn't need to be asked, only spoken to communicate to Rosan I wasn't abandoning them as I left, "You got her?"

She nodded, and I went back to our bedroom and got dressed. If the power was out, then we had no communication. Tying and blousing my boots last, I went for the garage. Passing the kitchen, where Rosan now cradled Alli, a saucepan filled with formula, she looked at me. Worry on her face. The stove wasn't functioning either, "even the gas is down," she said.

I walked over, kissed her and Alli, and said, "I'm gonna head over to my CO and see if he knows what's going on."

"Idris, I need to warm the milk!"

I stopped and thought for a second. Then recalled something from a long-ago survival and improvising course I took outside the army. "Go get some candles," I said to Rosan. With Alli still cradled, she disappeared into the living room.

I rummaged through the pots and pans, finding what I needed: a wide pot. From the oven, I procured one of the wire racks and laid it over the wide pot. Rosan returned with some candles, tall and small ones. I took the small ones and laid them inside the pot and lit them. Rosan understood the rest and took over. Setting the saucepan over the rack.

I kissed her and Alli goodbye and went to the garage. I don't know why, I guess just muscle memory and second nature, but I became frustrated when the garage door opener didn't function. So I opened the garage door manually and climbed into my truck... only it too didn't work. It's not an old truck, a newer model. I guess this was when I started to understand what may have happened, but I sure as hell didn't want to believe it.

I heard a knock from outside. Not someone knocking on the garage door. This came from the front door. Rosan came into the garage and said, “MP’s are at the door.”

Hindsight is twenty-twenty. I didn’t know it at the time, but my fears would soon be confirmed. It wasn’t the presence of the MP that had me nervous, but what I saw outside. Behind him on the street idled an HMMWV. The MP, along with three others were going door to door. Everyone dressed in hazmat gear, looking like the soldiers of some post-nuclear Armageddon.

They actually did it. I remember thinking. I had no evidence of believing it, only the impulsive thought. President Trump and Putin exchanged Mutually Assured Destruction upon the world...

“Sergeant Hudson,” the MP read from a clipboard, and I nodded. It was rhetorical, of course, but formalities were formalities. I already knew why he was there. Whatever occurred, medics were needed. “Sir, Ma’am, we have confirmation of a local NUCFLASH occurring at Warren AFB.”

I expected him to say that we were at DEFCON One or something like that, but a NUCFLASH? That hit differently. A NUCFLASH was a detonation, or possible detonation of a nuclear weapon, that creates a potential outbreak of nuclear war.

I didn’t know if I was relieved or not. Probably so, but not Rosan. She took a step back, her hand on our baby as she looked at me. I doubt she knew what NUCFLASH was, but with the power & gas outage, the MP, and the phonetic expression of “NUC” which was basically the same as “Nuke,” she was on the money.

I wrapped my arm around her.

“We are outside the Light Damage Zone. Right now the Dangerous Fallout Zone is being blown northeast. But in the event of a shift in wind blowing fallout and radiation eastwards. All personal are ordered to remain indoors for at least forty eight hours. Seal off your windows and doors and cut off all ventilation and air intake systems and await further instructions.”

“What about NEST and FEMA?”

The MP nodded, but when he spoke, he looked only at Rosan. I doubt she understood I would be leaving her. That is, until he gave her a radio and a charging port, that I could see the realization hit her as it had me. I was three for three then.

“Federal responses are enroute and you must be ready to receive and integrate with the states response upon arrival. Be prepared for power restoration and an influx of evacuee’s that’ll be overwhelming to your local jurisdiction. Be prepared in the event of an evacuation. If you have nonperishables, use those only. If you lack adequate food and water, tune into channel seven and relay your needs. A supply cache will be set up in this jurisdiction for emergency rations only. Dispose of any conditioner products, fresh meat and produce.”

“I.. I, I can’t... this is all too—,” she held her forehead, and Alli started a whimper. Rosan shushed her and hugged her. For her own comfort as much as to give it.

“And Military Personnel?” I asked, it was the elephant in the room. I already knew, the MP knew, but Rosan needed to hear it.

“Base Command is working with NEST and FEMA officials to organize and prepare lifesaving efforts. After the forty eight hour quarantine a shuttle is en route picking up personnel essential for relief efforts. Area of Operation will be at Laramie outside the radiation and fallout zone. Shuttle ETA isn’t confirmed but takeoff from the nearest bus stop at...” he looked again at his clipboard, “81st and Main is scheduled at oh-nine-hundred two days from now so you need to be there before then.”

I nodded, looking at our analogue clock. It was already a quarter past eight. I gave my understanding to the MP, and he took his leave. Closing the door, I guess my only regret at the moment was the little time I had to say goodbye. Feeling light, almost as if floating on water, none of this felt real. Yet it was and is. My wife leaned into me, and I held her tight and kissed Alli's head. That soft, thin-haired little head. I can still feel the strains of hair against my nose and cheek.

Rosan's question shocked me; I think it was more of a distraction. To prolong the inevitable acceptance of the situation, she was alone in this: "I know what FEMA is, but what did you mean by NEST?"

I held her tighter.

"Nuclear Emergency Support Team, the NNSA's response to such an event." I replied.

I laid a hand on Alli, and she leaned into me, and Rosan gave her up. But it would last less than a minute before she needed to hold Alli again.

I cherished those precious two days. The bitter cold of the outside, the huddling for warmth, the hunger of it, all the struggles paled when I looked back to the last two days of holding my girls. But the morning of the third, I had to say goodbye. It wasn't fair to leave. I didn't want to leave. Right now, I wish I could go back to them after what I would experience later this very day. God, how I wish I had more time. Alli's slobbers, what I used to think of as a minor inconvenience to clean, has now become something I would give anything to have to clean up again. Just one more time before turning in for the night.

I go on in the comfort of knowing the friend group of other service wives, Rosan is a part of. Women whose husbands, like mine, would fall into the essential personnel to offer help. Women who support each other, including my two girls. Before I left, I told her to go to Marsha's house. That was their normal meet-up spot.

I remember her head nodding against my chest, her assent. But also her worry, "I'm scared, Idris."

"So am I." I confessed, but we both knew, "I have to do this?"

"I know, and if you find—" She cupped her mouth, "—when you find him, bring him back to me."

A tinge of guilt, for I hadn't even thought about Max for these two days. Her brother, my best friend, and Alli's godfather. He would've been on base when the event happened, more specifically, he was stationed nearer to the nuclear armament storage and silos as a 12M for his MOS, or Army Fireman, and I never once thought of him. But now, he has been all I can think of, outside of recording this account.

We don't make promises in the medical field. But I did promise the only thing I could, "I'll do my very best." But the chances of him surviving, let alone finding him if he did, were slim.

Late Evening

The moment the bus arrived at the EOC, Emergency Operations Center, we were separated by MOS. The medics, like myself, were pointed to a schoolhouse. Laramie High, their mascot of choice? The Plainsman & Lady Plainsman. The National Guard has been brought up, though the soldiers are few; their presence seems enough to keep the masses from a full outbreak of panic.

For the moment, a minimal sense of law and order is maintained. That is good, that'll improve with the further arrival of outside help.

Laramie High was now a place of medical care for survivors, and my area of operation. Triage was given outside, and from my perspective, it was obvious who they were letting in. Only those who could be saved. Those who were beyond saving? They congregated in the parking lot, on the turf and grass, and they lay dying or had already died. Covered in burns, some missing skin, limbs, or both. There was no time for a proper introduction, only the bare essentials, as no room was left for questions.

The CO of Laramie High came outside, and we new arrivals, were few enough that he could project his voice and be heard. With the wails of the non-salvageable behind us.

“Gather’round and listen up. I’m only going to say this once and no questions. NEST has already gathered information and organized our response. We are outside the Lethal Radiation Zone, as such we are safe from the fallout. Laramie’s High School is to house and treat the survivors symptomatic of radiation poisoning that can be saved. Those asymptomatic are to be discharge and sent to The University of Wyoming a few clicks east, unless their injuries require immediate intervention. There are other locations being used much the same way, but for our purposes, these two locations are the ones you need to remember.”

“Triage is conducted outside the front doors as you can see. Survivors from the Severe Damage Zone of the NUCFLASH event are non-priority. Survivors from the Light to Moderate Damage Zones are for the first three days to maximize the lives we can save. At which point we will transition to a prolonged response when FEMA and NEST efforts arrive.”

“Not all your patients have been triaged or decontaminated yet. Triage, stabilize, and support, in that order. Radiation is not the immediate priority here, overt injuries first i.e. burns, trauma, broken bones, etcetera. Treat severe injuries that may lead to death w/out medical care but who are likely to recovery with treatment. Those with severe injuries that may lead to death without care and aren’t likely to recover, are the men and women you see outside. It sucks, life sucks, and there is nothing we can do for it.”

“If no treatment is needed, then the patient may be evacuated, if not recruited to assist in efforts, to outer social services for minor medical care and reunification.”

“Decontamination. Fallout particles are similar in size and shape to fine sand or table salt. Shaking or changing outer layers of clothes, dry wiping skin with a brush, adhesive tape, or moist towelettes is the name of the game. We also need to minimize the use of limited resources i.e. water.”

“We are the Supporting Jurisdiction response people, so expect a shortage of supplies because we’re already short on everything. People are working to restore critical infrastructure i.e. water supply, power, electricity, communications, road and highway clearing.”

“Expect spontaneous evacuee’s to and from Laramie High. Do not impede those leaving but facilitate if able. We can expect outer jurisdiction response arrival at three days plus time. Should the radiation doze exceed fifty per hour, then we will relocate to where it falls below ten.”

“I want regular reporting on operating status i.e. beds, staffing, etceter. Resources needed, i.e. water, food, medical, etcetera. Even if we are in shortage. I want reports on the structures integrity and glass status, number of casualties, types of injuries, and triage.”

“That’s all I have for you. Get inside and you’ll be fitted to your station. Nurses are stretched thin, so you’ll have to pick up more slack. Get it to it people.”

It was a lot to take in, but oddly. He said it all in under two minutes. He's probably said it many times by that point.

Walking past those who wouldn't make it was the hardest leg of the journey. Men, women, children, and the elderly. All were left outside, without any efforts to make them comfortable for the coming inevitability.

It was a short walk, but long. I came to the point where I had to treat them like I did the homeless at a stop sign. Don't look at them, stare straight, and keep walking. I hate myself for doing it, but it was the only way to make it inside.

I relieved a doctor, Boren was her name. She looked like hell. Ten classrooms were under her care, now our care, and each room was packed with people. All the major injuries had been tended to, or "at least until more are packed inside." She said. So it was a lack of treating the serious injuries and then progressed to the less serious and more of the back and forth to check on new patients being brought inside.

By the time I ran the circuit of checking each of the ten rooms, twenty had already expired. Their bodies? Taken outside and more injured brought inside. When Doctor Boren returned, not even four hours later, with bagged eyes, I would lose an additional seven patients.

Rosan, this is hard.

January 3rd, 2017

It wasn't even four hours of sleep I got. How can I sleep with the wailings and screams? I couldn't. Already I feel stretched thin, after yesterday's crucible, I am burnt out. Checking the time didn't help either. When I woke up, it was half past two in the morning.

When I returned to my station, I guessed some part of me had hoped we put a dent in the number of people requiring help. That the day would begin to slow from the tribulation of yesterday. As I sit now, writing and reflecting on today's events, I understand it was a naïve presumption. The candlelight by which I write reminds me that the casualties of just one bomb going off, even on a military base, are catastrophic.

Dr. Boren and I worked together until dawn. Then she left, in a spell when it seemed we had a break from the continual influx of survivors in need of care. But once she was gone from sight, more came to me for help.

Thankfully, and I mean thankfully, it was around this time, and for the first time since starting, a nurse was at my disposal. This poor girl, who looked to be fresh out of med school, no more than twenty-two, I'd say. But she had a fortitude about her, a will perhaps, maybe one brought about by a strong upbringing and good parenting, I imagine. I could be wrong. There is a book I remember reading, 'Too Soon a Woman.' The author I cannot recall, but the title says it all. I believe this to be a similar case with my nurse's performance.

In any case, there was a profound shortage of tourniquets. I had resorted to taking other fabrics, some of an unsanitary nature, and ripped them for improvised tourniquets. It was not ideal, but the bleeding of several patients wasn't going to wait. Even these improvised supplies dwindle at an accelerating rate. So I sent the nurse in search of more. I went back to my operations. I never saw her again. I can only assume that she was issued new orders by someone else. Some other doctor in desperate assistance in preserving their patients. I never even got her name, ~~but God bless her.~~

I can't say I am happy with what I did in the end, which was removing socks, shirts, and other abdominal clothing. I also located bags marked off as "contaminated fabrics." These were filled with fabrics that were exposed to fallout particles. But the CO was right, Radiation Poisoning was not the priority here; immediate life-threatening injuries were. So I ripped open these bags and procured what I could only deduce were the least contaminated fabrics.

Each of these contaminated fabrics, I took to a cleaning closet and shook them off vigorously. I myself layered my body in trash bags to protect myself from the particles. Then I had all the fabrics I needed for tourniquets, so I could attempt the operation. When about to use a contaminated fabric for a tourniquet (never a bandage), I taped each side with duct tape and used the adhesive to remove additional fallout particles. It added time I did not have in my efforts, but I was desperate.

As I noted above, mine and Doctor Boren's stations consist of ten classrooms. Each room is equipped with what you'd expect from a classroom: tables, chairs, filing cabinets, etc. All the furniture was rearranged and organized to make as many haphazard beds for patients. Other patients had no alternative but to lie or sit on the floor.

In total, our station has approximately seventy makeshift beds. For two doctors and seventy beds, we are overwhelmed with a fluctuating number of patients, never under sixty, and spiking to at most one-twenty (before triage). I have sent requests to the CO for additional

assistance, but don't expect any to arrive. It is just Dr. Boren and me, with the occasional nurse available for a limited duration of time. At one point, right before Dr. Boren's return around 1300 hours, and my subsequent relief, we had two nurses. I figure this to be a rarity.

Today, after triage, I have sent around fifty people back outside. These people, God help me, they knew what that meant. They had somehow gotten past the triage at the front door and came to me for help! Some became hysterical, others hostile, and with the help of soldiers and policemen, they were taken outside.

One of them was an elderly woman, the spitting image of my mother, ~~God rest her soul~~, but my mother never looked at me the way this woman did.

Another was a mother and her son, both of whom had sustained significant blunt trauma to their abdomens and heads, along with second and third-degree burns, and symptoms of radiation poisoning. 400 Rads is the point at which, without treatment, people'll die. The mother measured over 400 Rads, her son a little under 400. If I had the equipment, assistance, and time, there might be some intervention I could perform on the son. But I had none, we had none. If I neglect the many other patients to their doom, there is nothing I can do.

Saying that did not absolve me of conviction. It was just a fact. After triage, I determined forty were inflicted with injuries that I could intervene in and so sent four to each of the ten rooms. An additional twenty-two people were asymptomatic of Radiation poisoning. After ensuring no injury required immediate medical intervention, I rerouted these people to the university. The looks on their faces, through the soot and the bruising and the blood and ash, they despaired at the extended journey. At least they have hope.

As for resources, we are in dire need of water. Surgical devices and consumption take up the greatest use of bottled and/or uncontaminated water. I had been informed by a Corporal that the tap water has been tested and confirmed to be contaminated.

Food is also low; we're looking at one meal a day, and today my ration was a single can of Vienna sausages. Medical supplies aren't stocked either. As noted above, there is a profound shortage of tourniquets and clean clothes. Lord knows how many people will have blood disease, gangrene, and other infections from a lack of sterilizing agents. I must remind myself that the focus is life preservation until higher medical care arrives.

As far as the structure's integrity is concerned, I don't think Laramie received much damage, if any. Perhaps the stockpile was far enough removed from this place, and the blast waves didn't reach or harm, i.e., all the glass pans are intact. At least at the school.

But the hardest part of the day? Eighty-plus additional casualties. The biggest reason I can surmise? Because one-to-two doctor(s) for these ten rooms is not sufficient. We can't get to everyone fast enough, nor can we return to each patient to check in on them with adequate time. Not to mention the hands and faces reaching out to us for help along the way.

Not among any of these people have I seen Max.

Rosan, I am trying.

January 4th, 2017

This morning marked the forty-hour mark, the quarantine back home should've lifted, and the Fallout trajectory remains northeastwards. I take comfort in the hope that Rosan and Alli are at Marsha's. They're not alone. I've never cared for her friends; I find them arrogant and annoying. But they are good to Rosan and Alli, and now they are the only mental refuge for my worries.

I don't think I see the benefit in documenting all this. I don't want to remember any of this. I wish it were all a dream. But something odd happened later in the evening.

As far as the morning and afternoon. Things were like yesterday. Only the number of survivors at the High School dramatically increased. Dr. Boren left for her "break" around 1500 instead of 1300. Only when there was a brief lapse in patient care did I tell her to "go while you can."

There was little time to catch my breath. Barely any time to eat the little rations I received for the day. More than just a single can of Vienna Sausages. I received three cans of potted meat with graham crackers. The dinner of champions. Though my appetite is nonexistent. I eat only to keep my body going.

As far as a daily report. The number of beds hasn't changed. I saw only one nurse today, and it was brief. Resources are steadily dwindling, and I'm again running low on tourniquets.

Fifty-plus patients died today under my care. Much for the same reasons as yesterday. Too many patients and not enough doctors. Some died of hemorrhaging, others of radiation poisoning, and the rest of unknown factors that I had no time to deduce the cause of.

I found out today that the corpses are being stored on the school's football field. Away from the building. Out in the cold winter elements for preservation.

As previously mentioned, casualties have increased. The injuries, ~~God~~, the injuries are getting worse. I suspect search and rescue are digging closer towards the inner limits of the Moderate Damage Zone, where the blast wave(s) did greater damage. Third-to-second degree burns on most everybody, concussions of varying degrees, physical trauma, and broken bones, on and on. Many patients are vomiting, and as a result, other patients, of lesser stomach fortitude, vomit as well.

I can deal with the slipping and sliding of vile and other bodily fluids on the floor. But the smell, oh the smell, is torture. I called for custodial services to clean the floor, but I suspect even the janitors are stretched thin. Around this time, I encountered the one nurse I saw for the day. ~~God~~ bless her for how much and in how many rooms she had to clean. There was no mop bucket.

Thirty-plus patients from yesterday were stable enough to be moved to higher care. There is a line at the High School's parking lot for symptomatic patients of treated injuries to be taken to another intake location. To where, I have no idea.

An additional ten to twelve, I can't recall, were asymptomatic of radiation poisoning. Most I sent to the university. The looks they gave me, refusing to offer aid to their minor and non-life-threatening injuries, while I treated a couple of people in need of bandaging and fracture fixation. I can't expect them to understand, not with what they had been through and then legging the journey through rubble to get here. Their hopes and expectations were shattered, and the anxiety of continual travel to the university was added on top? No, I can't imagine how heavy that must be. Nor can they imagine the priority of my station, and I am ashamed to admit

my nerves got the best of me, and our feud heated until soldiers arrived to escort these asymptomatic survivors out.

Of the few asymptomatic survivors I rendered aid to. One had an oblique fracture, and as such, I kept him under my care as the fracture was at his thigh and he was non-ambulatory. The fracture barely missed his femoral artery. ~~God~~ bless this man, for he resolved to help me at my station.

Yesterday, the number of casualties I turned away back outside was too much to handle. That number surely was tripled today. I stopped counting after fifty. All those people were going to be just bodies lying outside the school. I dared a look out the window, and there were piles of them. Soldiers are working to move the bodies to the football field, but there are just too many.

I do remember that exactly fifteen patients self-evacuated, and I let them go. Partly to my dismay for their own sake, and partly to my relief.

A survivor was brought in. No clue how he is still alive. He must've been right inside the firestorm when it occurred. I can't imagine the Infernum he must've witnessed. Why I say this specifically will be clearer down below.

His skin is completely gone, melted and peeled away. The exposed muscle tissue, cartilage, and other tissue have been cauterized to prevent massive blood loss. I don't know how this is possible, but he isn't hemorrhaging to a severe degree. He has suffered blood loss that much is clear. His right hand is gone, and the bony protrusions of his ulna and radius are poking out through the charred stump. I expect him to expire soon, but when I attempted to send him outside with the rest of the Expectant Survivors. But he grabbed my arm, and he looked me in the eyes. I saw only fire and rage inside, as if the firestorm was still burning, but inside his very soul.

I can't get his eyes out of my thoughts.

I tended to him as best as I could. While in a different classroom, this man became quite active for patients with injuries such as his. He turned violent. Soldiers arrived, and the sight was incomprehensible. A skinless man with one arm attacking defenseless patients. His face... oh ~~god~~, his face. He appeared as some maniacal psychopath, wide eyes because he had no lids, and a maddening grinning look because he had no lips or cheeks.

Luckily, whatever energy this survivor had was quickly spent as he soon fell faint and collapsed. There was no choice but to restrain him in a scream room inside the school's Special Education Room. It was complete with padded walls and a sturdy door that opened from only the outside.

My patient, who was attacked, didn't survive the incursion. I had strong confidence in the chances of his survival up until that point... ~~God dammit.~~

Later in the evening

Help arrived, that's what I thought at first. Looking back now, today still falls under the seventy-two hour mark before the expected federal response. Hell, it could take up to a week before adequate aid arrives. But when seeing these fresh, and non-burnt-out men, I had my hopes.

They weren't soldiers, so I then assumed they were government-sponsored, FEMA, or NEST, or some other agency. But whoever that agency is, these men bore no label or symbol of it. Nothing to denote their affiliation, dressed in all black. I later learned that a team of these men visited each doctor of the High School, but none went to the University. The same question is

presented to each doctor and nurse, about “patients suffering the most from nuclear radiation to a significant degree.”

Well, that’s a dumb question. Everyone here is suffering to a significant degree. Why focus on only those with radiation poisoning? I ask this much, and my response felt almost rehearsed. “We have sites situated in nearby jurisdictions to treat those with significant radiation poisoning. But we are limited to only fifty-one patients, so only those who would perish from radiation poisoning.

Well, this contradicts triage. The people they were looking for were right outside, the Expectant according to triage. According to triage, they were unlikely to survive because of the severity of their injuries, along with the available care. We were attempting to save those who wouldn’t perish from radiation poisoning. And fifty-one? What kind of outer jurisdiction sites had only room for such a small number?

I ask that as well. My response? Felt again rehearsed, “other sites are being set up for the intake of additional expectant survivors.”

Again, they were all outside. I got the sense they were looking for something more in particular.

But I sensed also the sternness of their mission. I sensed their allegiance to whatever cause was behind their presence. None of this felt right, but I complied for the sake of time. So many of my patients had none to spare. There was only one patient of mine who fit their bill, an expectant patient who was detained in that scream room.

My assistant in the wheelchair assisted in escorting the men to the special education room so that I could continue to aid my patients.

More people had gotten through the triage at the front doors and to my station. They were symptomatic survivors with minor injuries that were not life-threatening. I made sure there was no arterial/venous bleeding before discharging an additional five or six patients to another intake location near Laramie’s Post Office that was all the information I had. But they were “healthy” enough to leg that journey, and I desperately needed to begin filtering out patients in need of traumatic care from those of lesser needs.

My new assistant was assisting in decontaminating efforts. Using tape adhesive to remove particles from exposed skin. Shaking and brushing of external clothes. Shaving people's hair and dry wiping their scalps when an order had been received by the CO. All ambulatory and non-ambulatory survivors, with moderate-to-uninjured survivors, were to be taken to a different intake location. The purpose of this? To thin the intake of current patients at the High School and preserve available treatment and supplies for those for whom this location was meant.

My assistant was one of those wheeled away by a soldier. I’ll never forget you, Jeremy.

When Dr. Boren returned, and I informed her of everything that transpired, including the odd presence of these men in black, I was then relieved.

Rosan, I hate this.

January 5th, 2017

Rosan, I found him! By some stroke of coincidence, I found Max.

Your brother is not, and I fear will not, be the same. I could only recognize him by the feather tattoos above his ankles. The skin from his waist up is peeling off, and in other areas appears to have melted off.

He was turned away at triage at the front doors. Lying on a stretcher hoisted by two search and rescue personnel. The moment I saw his ankles, I intervened and got him under my care. I was able to stabilize him, but at the cost of time. Time I selfishly took from other patients.

It is a difficult thing, dealing with so many patients who've suffered massive or even moderate skin loss. The best I can do for his bedding, given the sensitivity of his upper body, was to procure 100% clothes sheets, and even procured low-adherent dressings. The latter, I used only the most severe locations of excessive skin loss. But I was still lacking in adequate dressing for the massive loss of skin. Ideally, I'd need some kind of dressing that can maintain high humidity, but that is also able to protect the wound from, and can be removed without causing trauma. There are other factors to consider for ideal wrapping, but in my present circumstances, I know I can't be too picky.

Once I had done all I could, and with a roll of pure cotton, non-adhesive wrap, Dr. Boren and I proceeded to wrap Max's upper body. With a non-contaminated cloth, I damped it with my own bottled water supply, and I patted down every square inch of the wrapping to assist in maintaining humidity. It is rudimentary at best and hardly efficient in stabilizing and supporting recovery. But it was the best I could do.

Day three has passed, and while it may not be today, nationwide responses just might arrive in time. I doubt it. But it is still a possibility, and a possibility for the arrival of adequate resources, manpower, and everything needed to save these people (amendment. I fear Max has gone mad).

Evening

Max woke while Dr. Boren and I had unwrapped his upper body so that his wounds could get air. He was maniacal, inconsolable. He recognized me after a few seconds of eye contact, and I saw only confusion. This is to be expected and normal for a patient whose suffered massive physical and psychological trauma. But there was also pain in his eyes, as if I had been the one to do this to him. That pain turned to hatred, and he lashed out.

We had to restrain him, and with the sensitive upper half of his body, I worry that the restraints will only cause additional trauma to his exposed underlayer of skin and muscle tissue. I sent an emergency request for sedatives to the CO. As medicine is in short supply, it needs to be used sparingly. He approved my request, and we sedated Max before the sedations fully kicked in; his madness regressed to mumblings.

We left the restraints on, but with enough slack that we could provide a median layer of cotton between his body and straps. Hoping this will reduce additional irritation and/or trauma to his upper body.

In case of another maniacal episode, Dr. Boren and I rolled him into the scream room. It is a cautionary measure, but one that makes it difficult for me to monitor the godfather of my Alli. He could expire while in seclusion and away from medical monitoring. But when emotional

response overwhelms one's rational response, it is best to listen to the one speaking from a place of grounded logic rather than your own heart.

When we returned to our station, forty more patients had arrived. Dr. Boren and I have been, literally, elbow-deep in rendering aid. There is not enough space in our classroom for the masses coming in. There is hardly enough space to stabilize and support. That is not even taking into account the disease and other ailments that may develop as a result.

But triage, stabilize, and support. We go on. And now, with Max's madness overwhelming that sense of relief I only briefly had... I am overwhelmed by bleakness. It feels hopeless. Hell, even doctors are helpless to do anything but watch our patients die one by one. When a corpse is shipped out to the football field, and now I learned that the baseball field is also being used to store bodies, two more survivors take its place. Two more people to expire and take up room as another corpse before we can stabilize them.

Most of these people are going to die of exposure, gangrene, septic shock, pathogens, or viruses. That's if the radiation doesn't kill them first.

I can still hear Max's mumblings before the sedation took over... He promised to kill me "for this."

I don't know what impression Max is in. I am no psychologist, but I expect some sort of shock-related amnesia has him convinced that I have done this to him. Confusion and hysteria, pure and simple.

Rosan, I found your brother, I have stabilized him, and now I fear that if I do bring him home to you, he will not be the man you remember.

Today was day four, the seventy-two hour mark has passed, and no aid or supplies have arrived, but the little that local jurisdictions have sent. We are drowning here.

To hell with reporting. The only thing worth noting is the obvious. Several more, dozens more, patients died today. I didn't count. The numbers are always stacking, always increasing. The dead outnumber the living, and there is nothing I can do but be too late to intervene.

January 6th, 2017

Morning

The CO said from the start to expect spontaneous evacuees. People are either coming to our location or going away from it. So far, there had been several cases of that occurring. What we did not expect was the news of people evacuating from the Severe Damage Zone towards us.

I had given up hope for anyone in that zone. But I guess enough people found adequate shelter from the blast and/or radiation? What is hard to swallow is that it doesn't matter if they arrive for medical assistance. The r/h is too high in that zone; if they don't die in their evacuation, they'll die soon after arrival.

I don't understand why High Command dispatched teams to the edge of the Moderate Damage Zone where it meets the SDZ. Those people are not a priority and are certain to die. But could I give a different order if I were in charge?

Still, no reinforcements or supplies arrived. No FEMA or NEST, only what little supplies have been sent from local jurisdictions. And I mean little. I suspect they have their own ends stretched thin. I haven't documented how many patients with non-life-threatening injuries I have discharged to the shuttle stop for extraction. But a great many I've sent away.

I know we were aware that the seventy-two hour mark was the least minimal time we could expect significant aid and supplies. To "hang in there" until help arrives. But this is too hard, we can't hold out like this much longer.

Yesterday, we were supposed to receive orders for transitioning to a prolonged response. We never did. Something is off. I tried to relay my concerns to my CO, but he hardly afforded me the time to listen to me. To his credit, I know from the bags under his eyes and the dirt and grime that he, too, is burnt out. He only told me that "comms are operational, but high command hasn't been responding. Stay the course, I'll update everyone as soon as I hear something."

Afternoon

Max is still the same. He became responsive while I checked on him, but his madness remained. I tried to reason with him, to speak with him. But there was only hate in his eyes as if the fire he had seen was somehow imprinted on him. Just like that other patient who was taken away by those men in uniform without showing identification.

There was no approval for a sedative to administer to him. I could only replace his bandages and make him as comfortable as I could. All the while, his hate-filled eyes burned into me, and I swear I could see the hurt underneath it all. I can't imagine what he saw, what he went through. I try to remember that, but after everything, I don't have the wit to ignore it. I can't see anything else besides my dying patients and Max's eyes.

I have a picture of Rosan and Alli for the brief moments where I might find respite from these images in my head. And Dr. Boren, who somehow remains hopeful (yet grim) through all this. She offered to make the next round to check on Max.

More survivors have been delivered to our station. More people to perish under our care. I can't take much more of this. Over half my patients died since morning. When I called for body removal, the men asked me if I was sure they were dead! Sure? I am more than certain.

Heard news that none of the teams sent to the border of the MDZ and SDZ returned. Wonder if they've taken the patients elsewhere. Sure as hell isn't the asymptotic medical facilities at the university.

Evening

Every time I call for corpse removal, the men keep asking if “I’m sure they’re dead?” I broke down and yelled at a lady, and felt bad afterwards. But I asked her why am I being asked this constantly?

She had a temper about her and something of an attitude that makes a person strong to deal with the grim work she’s been doing. After my apology, she informed me why. “People presumed dead and discarded in mass grave on sporting fields have been reported animate (her words not mine).”

~~God~~, I can’t imagine. Waking inside a mound of bodies, to the sight and smell. Crawling through flesh and decay.

Over the radio, I asked my CO why “those presumed dead haven’t on the sporting fields haven’t been brought up for medical care.”

I never received a response. Command seems to have gone radio silent. I scanned the other channels and found my CO along with High Command on a different frequency. This isn’t an uncommon thing; often, channels will get cluttered with all the chatter. With how essential communication is during any operation, it makes sense for the chain of command to have a clear line of traffic. What worried me is the fact that there is a chain of command. In that chain, a lesser rank officer would be in charge of relaying essential communications from the cluttered channel and that used by High Command. Did some Lieutenant fall asleep on the job? I don’t know. But that kind of negligence leads to a significant impact on the overall mission.

They’re shooting the people on the sporting fields!

I thought it was a miracle, but I heard reports about those presumed dead attacking the soldiers trying to help them. And... I don’t know if I heard this right, eating the corpses of the dead?

I should’ve known better than to hope. My intake of patients turned from survivors of a NUCFLASH to soldiers and policemen who have been bitten or missing chunks of flesh. The place is a madhouse. When Dr. Boren arrived to relieve me, I didn’t waste any time finding a place to hide. I’m losing my cool. ~~God, oh God~~, Rosan, I can’t stay here.

Sirens are going off now, down the hall, I can hear pounding on doors and muffled orders for mass evacuation. There’s no time to go get Max, but I must try—

Late Evening

I don’t know what time it is. I am back home in Fort Collins, CO. The entire place is livid, the air is electrified! Defenses are being built along the perimeters, civilians are being evacuated, and it’s madness here, too.

I made it back home to find it empty. I looked for Rosan and Alli at Marsha’s, but I guess they’ve already been evacuated. I don’t know if that comforts me or not—~~God~~, I just want to hold them again.

We were not prepared for what came; the soldiers weren’t equipped to handle it, but they held out as long as they could. The mass of evacuees from the SDZ came in hordes. Thousands of them, from the direction of the bomb crater. They didn’t come for medical aid. They attacked, they killed, and then they ate.

Our perimeter and defenses weren't built to resist attack, but to maintain order and prevent civil unrest. Lifesaving efforts was the primary goal, not defensive/offensive measures.

There was so much shooting and chaos. I think, in the end, why our defenses were overrun was because we ran out of ammo. And when those defenses failed, there was no telling the survivor from the maniacal cannibal. People ran every which way, and many ran into the arms of those maniacs. And... when those on the sports field had cleared the bodies, they attacked from the inside.

I managed to get to a shuttle with one of my patients. I wish I could've carried them all. I haven't seen Dr. Boren. I can only pray, hope, she made it out.

I never did get to Max in time. It all happened so fast. Soldiers rushed me out to the nearest exit on the other side of the school from the Special Education room. In the evacuation, I crossed the corridor leading to my section of patients. One of them, a little girl, was out in the hall. Scared and confused.

I could choose only one, and ~~God help me~~, there was so little time.

I'm sorry, Max, I'm sorry, Rosan, and I'm sorry, Alli.

Max, I hope that if you wake up, you're fit enough to survive and your instincts keep you safe. I can't keep writing anymore.

Sergeant *Idris Hudson* signing off.

God help us all.

A note from the author:

Special thanks to my friends and family who beta read this short story. And a special thanks to you, the reader. I hope you enjoyed this installment of The Dead World narrative. Please Share with your friends, like, and share your thoughts in the Leave a Comment. If you want to keep up with the latest of the Turley Book Inn make sure to subscribe to my Newsletter!

-Jasyn