

Dread Singularity

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Stage I

Stage I – Chapter 1

Thousands of hours of military-grade cognitive programming, and still her hand shook. All the years, all the ops, all the confirmed kills and still the nerves crept, still the needles of adrenaline fired through her veins.

Two days of waiting, inserted on the roof of the skyscraper, watching, intent, precise. The programming kept her heart rate low, her eyes taut, that quiver always there, but so was the smile in the corner of her mouth, waiting for the moment her target would show.

This moment, she thought, as a voice whispered, “RECON TEAM: Movement tracking, scopes up, HUDs down, get ready,” through the speaker in her helmet. Eyes closed, breathing tempered, reciting their litany, getting ready for the moment, for her squad, for combat.

“Bang the drum; that’s what they say. Bang the drum; that’s how it starts...”

That line, *the* line, the beginning, the *litany* that it all starts with, all ends with. The one that kicks the adrenaline, thunders the heart, steels the mind. And now, with everything she has been through, with their new enemy on her doorstep, has primed her.

Another moment, another breath.

A bird glides overhead in the colossal wind tunnels between the towering buildings. Free, the opposite of her. Fists under taut leather.

“Bang the drum; that’s the key. Bang the drum, they say to me.”

Holding the fear close to her chest, the thing they erased, but she knows it is never gone. There is something primordial, something intrinsic they will never kill, even with all the training, with all the programming. She nods and watches the bird as her smile makes its way across her face, and she whispers another line, adding fuel to her fire.

“Bang the drum and we are one. Bang the drum and you are gone.”

“Unit Eight-Two, stand by for go. T-minus twenty seconds.” The voice in her helmet from the command centre, looking down from their satellites. Calm, but with a strength that

resonated through it, into her—her and the others in the unit, subsonic patterns readying their subconscious programming. But she still needed the words, the litany. Another beat, on top of the building. So, she whispers.

“*Bang the drum; hear our roar.*”

The line, the last words she might ever hear, the ones that bring in the fury. The ones that solidify everything.

“Hold...” the voice said, just as calm as before. “Hold...”

“Three.”

The count, her heart hammering, teeth gritted.

“Two.”

Muscles and neurons ready to fire.

“GO.”

“*Bang-the-drum. Prepare-for-war,*” she roars through the mic as the floor to her right explodes up and out, dust and rubble and soot billowing around her, before sucking down, collapsing into the building, revealing her entry point.

Everything, every part of her, released as she jumped down, storming into the building, ready for the fight.

Landing square on the floor, more soot, more rubble, three of the squad already in, guns up, programming aligned, letting bullets fly.

Their HUDs streamed info, showing each other’s positions, their target’s position, and the people and obstacles in their way. Sweep a room, fill it with bullets. Turn and push through the fear, through the explosions. They advance forward through each room, leaving body after body, getting closer to their objective, the Supplicant.

“Major, we have eyes on target,” one of her squad states. “Holding position.”

She turns and batters down a door, stomps into the room, bullets screaming through the air. Another battle, over in seconds. Her programming took its grip on every part of her and pushed her through to the Supplicant.

“Through here, Major!” a voice yells.

She springs through two more doorways, watching for bodies and debris as she goes, rounding another corner and then there he is. The rest of the squad surrounds the target, kneeling in the middle of the room with flashlights and guns pointed at him.

She walks up to him, lowering her gun, heavy breaths slowing. In through the nose, out through the mouth. Controlling her heart rate, her HUD showed all vital signs level.

The flashlights from her squad hold the dust and smoke in cylindrical motes of light all pointing down at the little man.

She steps up to him, pulling back her HUD to get a good look at him with clear eyes, his bald head, ratty face. “Not much of a man?” She pushes him. “No, not much to you at all. Hey!” she turns to the rest of her team, signalling with her arms. “We came all this way and spent all this time for this?”

“Stas?” The Supplicant looked up at her, a smile through the blood, small eyes trying to focus on her, squinting against the flashlights. “The Major? The legend herself for me?” he coughed and spat, swallowing back the blood in his mouth. “Another Supplicant, another minor cog in the grand machine, and yet? All this effort, for me?” the words pushed out, looking up from his knees with that smile again.

“That’s right,” she said, the butt of her rifle smashing into his face, splitting his nose, blood spurting a fine line across her gear.

His screams filled the air as two marines grabbed him, bracing themselves against his writhing, snivelling through the pouring blood.

Stepping up to him, a breath through gritted teeth, “Tell me what you know.”

“You think anything you do is going to matter?” he said, laughter pushing its way up his throat through a guttural wheeze. “We are the ones who know what is coming, Stas. Not you, not your military, not the government—it is us. We know what is coming, and it is for us to ensure that nothing can stop it,” he said, as he held his head up against the grip of the marines, meeting her eyes.

“Jones, isn’t it?” Stas brought her face in close to his. “Jones, look at me now. Look at me, or this is going to get very messy. Our countermeasures. What do you know?”

“Oh, Major,” he writhed in the grip of the two marines. “It is you—*YOU* have betrayed *our* God, and *you* have betrayed your brothers...These comrades of yours—all of us. Humanity, you have betrayed us all.”

One of the squad members walked over, pulling out a sidearm, shoving it against his head. “Let me kill him now.”

The target, the bleeding, laughing man, the Supplicant turned his head, faced the barrel and, smiling, placed his forehead against it. “What’s coming, what we have all seen, our eradication, our Doomsday—it is *His* will.” He smiled, blood dripping. He pushed his head harder into the gun. “My disciples and I are here to ensure that whatever weapon you have created to save yourselves against *His* might, will not work. Killing me? No, nothing you can do will stop us.”

“Stand down, private,” Stas said to the marine, turning and grabbing the Supplicant by his neck, dragging him across the floor, flinging him like a scrap of meat. “You fuckers are pathetic. *YOUR GOD!*” she roared. “Your God—that’s what you say, isn’t it? That’s what’s bringing this, that’s your belief? Well, Jones,” she came in close, steadyng herself against the lapse of composure. “Between gods and marines, I take marines every damn time.”

“*YOU DARE!*” Jones screamed, more teeth, more sinew, eyes blinking through the blood. “His word is true! We are here to—”

Stas's head came down to his face. His nose pulp. "We are done here," she said, turning and stepping away from him, wiping the blood from her forehead. "Bag and tag him. Get him back to base. We'll interrogate him there. We don't have time for this shit." She paused before turning back to him. "Listen, you fuck. Whatever's coming...we know what you want, we know what you all want, and I'm here to stop it, to stop all of you, you're coming with us now, a little trip to MIST HQ, how does that sound?"

"You think..." Breath heavy, consciousness waning, Jones looked up, gathering himself. "You think *I* know anything?" His eyes widened, raising his head to meet her eyes. "You think you could have captured me this easily if I had any actual knowledge? Do you think we're not one step ahead? No, Major Stas. You're here because we *wanted* you to be here. You are here because, as much as we believe in *His* divine might, in *His* all-powerful glory, despite it all, there's something about you that..." He paused, looking her dead in the eye with a tilted head. "...Worries us. You survived, Fina. You and only you survived on *that* day. We need to ensure that you cannot do it again."

"*Fall back!*" Stas screamed, gripping Jones by his skull, shifting both hands in one fluid motion and snapping his neck.

His body fell to the floor as she bolted away.

Through one door, through two doors, gun raised.

"*Bang the drum! Prepare for war!*" she roared again into her mic, gunfire erupting around her. "Immediate evac necessary. Lock down on our position. Target KIA. It's a trap. It's a fucking trap!"

The cognitive programming solidified and ripped through her as countless Supplicants began flooding toward her position.

HUD down, tear gas canisters fired, laser sights on, bullets screaming, the fight erupting around her as she moved through, room to room, sweeping, scanning, killing.

Powerful chopper rotor blades cut through the air somewhere outside, their *THUD*, *THUD*, *THUD* signalling a chance of escape.

“Lay down suppressing fire,” she shouted as members of her unit fell in around her. “Open up that wall and get us the fuck out of here.”

One Supplicant falls, then another and another. Bodies jarred with bullets. Blood exploded into the air, tinting the dust and smoke with its crimson hue. The wall next to her blows open, sucking the air back out in the flicker of a moment; the pressure flipping hundreds of feet high on the eighty-second floor of the New York skyscraper.

Another beat, another flash, more Supplicants hammering their position, too many bodies piling up, theirs and her squad. Everyone around her.

The air cleared, the soot and smoke disappeared through the hole in the wall, and another flicker, revealing the carnage. She saw them for a split second before the evac belt whipped itself around her and dragged her kicking and screaming out of the building.

“No,” she said, a whisper against the thundering helicopter blades as the harness pulled her up and into its hull.

“Major!” a voice crackled in her helmet.

She rolled over in the helicopter cabin, spitting out the filth of combat and pulling herself up against a wall. “What about my squad!” she said, raging, pulling the evac belt off her torso, steadyng herself against the chopper’s drift.

“Major, did you get what you needed? Stas, are you there?” Major General Ironhans came in over the comms link.

“The fuckers set a trap, baited us with false intel. I don’t think they know what we’re planning. They were there to—”

“—What, Stas?” the General said.

“Kill me, sir, they were there to kill me.”

“Stas, you disobeyed direct orders,” Ironhans’ voice was calm, strong, and not without a flicker of gratitude at her being alive. “There are millions of people counting—”

“General, with all due respect—” she said, bringing her breath back around, calming her heart, a medic coming to scan her.

“No, Stas,” he shouted her down in his thick Texan drawl. “No time for due respect, no time for arguments. We’re on edge here. There is no time for anything else. You know how close we are with the Sandman Protocol—a day, two tops, before we need to initiate. Even if the Supplicants *knew* how to hit us, we’ve got the numbers to hold them back now. You’re not there to fight them; you’re there to fight this thing. Get back to base immediately. That is a direct order. The MIST training, the effect it’s having on the troops is...” He paused.

“You’ve seen the initial reports. The sensory deprivation, the hallucinations. Christ, Fina, we’re on the edge and I need you ready to go, even if everyone else isn’t. Get back, get yourself strapped in and get it done. A very real clock is ticking.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, stoic, rolling onto her back and looking up at the ceiling of the chopper, the medic moving away, their task completed.

Deep breaths now. The Supplicant dead, her squad dead, the bodies forever piling up around her, the *thud, thud, thud* reverberating through her chest, the tremor in her hand still there, that quiver to remind her, she made it out alive, the same as every other time, while everyone else around her dies.

Stage I – Chapter 2

Bang the drum; that's what they say. Bang the drum; that's how it starts.

Bang the drum; that's the key. Bang the drum they say to me.

Bang the drum and we are one. Bang the drum and you are gone.

Bang the drum; hear our roar.

Bang the drum; prepare for war.

That's the litany, so that's what I, Fina Stas, wait for. That's the sign and the command, and it's the only order any of us can give to anyone else. There's the litany, from one to another, warrior to warrior.

Bang. The. Drum.

Prepare. For. War.

It's a part of me; it's a part of all of us. It's ingrained in us from thousands of hours of cognitive programming, and it switches us. It turns us from human into the warrior, into the fighter, that cannot and will not quit. Ever. It's what I wait for with each breath as I stand inside this carriage, aboard this fortified military train.

My senses twitch and align with the squadron of twenty-five marines in the next carriage along that I lead and who have made the same decision as I, Lieutenant Fina Stas: to support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic, and now, this new thing that has come for us all. There's something out there, something destroying our bases, something coming for all of us.

So I stand at the foot of a door, armed to the teeth—my muscles taut, my mind sharp. Years of cognitive programming that force-fed me everything from hand-to-hand combat techniques to field triage combine with my HUD and provide me with an acute awareness of my surroundings, and I wait.

I wait for the drum, for our litany. Alive to the moment.

Ready to protect my cargo and my squadron from attack.

I switch my HUD to outside and watch the world flying past. Cities, countryside, people, places. The strong and the sick, the poor and the rich. Every colour and creed and race and religion that makes up this great nation. All threatened by this new thing we hope to protect them against. This ethereal thing, this new enemy that has wiped out so many of us already.

Bang the drum.

Something is in the air. The one thing the drum is supposed to destroy. The one thing that should no longer exist in me, after all the training, all the programming, all the battles. But now it rumbles with the thought of the fight to come. It brings a shake to my hand. Fear—a genuine fear of something we know little to nothing about.

Something that's killed so many already. Something that we can only hope the cargo of this train can protect against.

This cargo on the other side of the door by which I stand guard. A bodysuit encased in a thick metal vault. The most advanced military technology in history. A second skin that is composed of a photonic metamaterial. "A periodic optical metallocodielectric nanostructure designed to influence the motion of photons." Some words a scientist said to me as we loaded it up. I don't know what it means, but I know it disrupts light. It makes you invisible, and it protects you from this ethereal enemy that's coming for us.

This suit. It is a flicker of success in the fight against the new enemy. That golden ghost. Some invulnerable thing that has wiped out tens of thousands of us in the last few weeks alone.

We got lucky. The Advanced Light Manipulation Experimentation Unit was operational on two bases when the attacks began—and the only part of any base that

had people survive the initial wave of attacks. Production of the tech they were experimenting with went into overdrive immediately. Now it's here—the product, one of a kind. A second skin. A suit that makes a human invisible. That's my cargo. That's my mission. To bring it to a five-star general officer in the United States Army, the first General of the Army to exist since World War II, stationed at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, fifteen thousand troops strong, all of them waiting for the next attack. Fifteen thousand may die so one can live, and so we will know we have a defence. Each waiting for the shout, for the roar. The litany.

Bang the drum.

I'm focused. I'm ready for this, but the shake in my hand remains.

Trained and programmed synapses are ready to fire off and give me an ultra-awareness—a place where time moves slowly—in this moment before the storm. The future is a quiet flicker, but it gathers.

Wait.

It's here.

The hurricane is here.

I draw a breath. “Warriors. Bang. The. Drum. Prepare for war!”

The train crashes. At the same moment, my HUD flashes red and streams an instant of data that engulfs my mind. The impact throws me toward the door at the end of the carriage. Protective foam fills the room, capturing me mid-air.

Compressed and cocooned in a white shell. There's a flicker, a moment when the fear raises its head, but I have the bang of the drum.

I am steeled against this. I am ready.

I fire off a few rounds into the foam and kick my way out. The train has toppled off the tracks, and the side of the carriage ripped open. I pull myself free and make my

way outside. I climb onto the side wall of the train and run along this giant, dead, metallic snake in the middle of the desert.

I survey quickly, reading the information from my HUD.

We rest a few klicks from the military base, now marked by billowing clouds of black smoke on the horizon, explosions erupting from within its walls.

I run, listening to the screams of my squadron still trapped inside. I look through a small porthole in the door of their carriage. The door has buckled and is impossible to open. They're surrounded by fire. Grenades and ammunition erupt inside as a hand reaches for the glass.

Brother.

The hand disappears into the smoke. I run as the explosions intensify and blast another hole in the train's side. I sprint back to the carriage, where we have stored the precious cargo. Throwing in a grenade, I crouch as it tears apart the protective foam inside. I rise through the smoke, jump back onto the train, and head toward the vault. The access panel is still operational. From my vest, I pull the code they gave me in case of an absolute emergency. I enter the digits and grab the payload.

The suit is taut against my skin as I bolt away from the train and race toward the towering columns of smoke coming from Fort Campbell up ahead. To where we were heading, to where I must now go, to complete my mission.

Death is here. She rides beside me as I sprint through the pain of my burning muscles and lungs. My heart screams under the pressure. My lungs suck and push the thick smell of kerosene from the fires as I enter the base. Men and women lie crippled all around, guns still held tight. These soldiers. Ready to fight, to bear everything, to bang the drum. Ready for war.

No blood, no evidence of a fight here. There are just piles of bodies where this ethereal being has come and gone.

The faint sound of automatic gunfire rattles across the fort. Some are still alive. I search through the base, looking for a sign. For anyone who might still be alive.

I see someone. His programming has failed him. He holds a jerrycan over his head, pouring kerosene, and he commits to the act with a lit match as I try to reach him. Rings of orange fire spiral up his body, billowing the blackest of smoke. We fall to our knees opposite each other.

My programming flickers, all those hours, days, years kicking in reflexes and sparking action. Trying to wake me, to push me on. But where's the strength now? Where's the anger that we grew so close to? Where's the roar? Gone. Just the orange flames that hypnotise until the charred body falls to the ground and only the smell and taste of his burnt flesh remain.

The programming grips me as I scream into the air and stand, ready to bang the drum. The programming comes in waves, pulling me tight, pushing me forward.

I sprint through the contorted bodies that lie all around. Backs are broken under the pressure of their own convulsions. Wide eyes staring into nothing. Only fire, the howl of explosions and the stamping of my boots on charred ground remain as I search.

Silence settles across the base as my programming crashes and my strength ebbs. All those years, all that pain, everything that was drilled into my mind, and here and now, when I need it most, it breaks. The beat slowly dies. I fall to my knees.

Too much. Altogether too much.

I see a woman in the distance, her arms raised to the heavens. She stands atop a pile of bodies set against a dark-orange sky that leaks through black smoke. Reality

flickers, and the ethereal being appears. Golden waves of light crystalise in the air, and the thing lowers itself onto her, down with its glow, and into her body. She convulses and snaps backward and falls.

I am in hell. Here on my knees under this orange sky I am in hell, and all I can do is watch, frozen, as it consumes this warrior, this woman, this human. Finally, it lifts out of her, her body convulsing on the ground as the ethereal emanation evaporates into the air.

I clench my fists, slam them into the dust, and scream at the world. “You leave me here! You make me watch and you leave me!” I bring my hands to my face and collapse, the fires burning, the piled bodies surrounding me. Lost and without hope.

“Save them!” Fina screamed as she cramped forward against the straps holding her down. Muscles bursting with sweat against the hallucination. No sound other than her breath from heaving lungs. Alone in a white cloud. Its canvas pulsating with waves of colour. Devoid of distance or perspective.

She heard a high-pitched whirring sound that sucked the fog out of the room, revealing the brushed metal walls of the small lab. A spotlight shining down, pushing into her eyes from directly above.

“Get these straps off me,” she coughed in a low tone, pushing against the tightness and trying to protect her slowly adjusting eyes from the light.

“Extraction complete, Major,” a voice said with a crackle through a speaker before a slight pause. “Major, save who?”

“What do you mean?” she said.

“Major, it’s just...” the young man’s voice said. “You shouted...well—” He cleared his throat and stopped.

“What happened?” Residual colours and images flashed against the back of her eyelids. Where had she been? Back at Fort Campbell? What had it been—five, six months? How was she just there? “Private, I’m a little disorientated.”

“That is a reported symptom. Please relax for a minute, Major. Your EKG readings skyrocketed for a few minutes. It’ll take you a moment to readjust.”

“How long was I immersed?” she asked as the straps across her chest released. “That was an exact one-hundred-eighty-minute immersion, Major. The research team will be with you momentarily.”

Three hours she’d been in that white cloud, inside a hallucination, a dream, a nightmare that showed her that day. She’d read the reports that were coming through, heard the General’s concerns about the MIST. The impenetrable white. The mind playing its tricks. She’d found it hard to believe, thought she was stronger than that. Just like the rest of them, she’d succumbed. But to what?

Every marine knew how the mind fumbled the display of reality. It was the first thing they taught you. The cognitive programming did its best to take care of that, to focus your version of consciousness. Years in the chair, the barrage of training—it took its toll, but the nanotech continuously fortified the brain. The result: neo-evolution that was primed to fight. Warriors with a thicker version of reality, fed by the HUD, all-absorbing and ready. But this white, this hallucination, it had pushed its way through. It had taken her away into something else, something outside the pure version of events they’d programmed her to see.

She shook her head and tried to push away the images that slowly faded as the cognitive training crawled its way to the front. *This white, she thought, this fog; it brought something back.* A battle she thought she’d already won. A battle she didn’t want to fight again. It brought out layers of her memory, made her feel, made the emotions come. The hallucination—a dream reborn in a projected nightmare.

I was there; she thought. Back to that day. But I couldn't change it. It was just the replaying of a memory. I knew what was taking place. I was conscious of it all.

She shivered involuntarily as a door slid open and two of the researchers heading up the experiments shuffled in, dressed in their lab coats.

She looked up at them, scientists through and through, one tall, one short, both with closely shaved heads and thick-rimmed glasses. Not warriors, but what the world needed if they were going to survive was coming. “A three-hour immersion? How long was I out? It felt like the entire time.”

“You were what we would consider unconscious for a very short amount of the time you were immersed, Major,” the tall one said. “For the record, you weren’t *out* as such. You fell into REM and your body engaged in sleep paralysis, but you were what we would classify as awake—conscious even. Your eyes were open, and your EKG and brain readouts showed you were even more than awake. The MIST, the hallucination—it activated your programming to full capacity, battle mode priority. We’re seeing the same in...” He stopped. “Can...can you tell us more about what happened?”

She took a moment to think. *Bang the drum.* That scene, that time, that place—not a battle...a massacre. The ethereal thing she’d escaped. Death was riding alongside her, ready to guide her. Death as her co-pilot.

“I saw something,” she said. “I had a memory, only more. A hallucination. As if I were there. It was real.”

“What was the memory, Major?” The tall one asked with a hint of nervousness. The short one held each of Fina’s eyes open as he flashed a small penlight into them.

“I can’t talk about it. I mean...it’s classified. Note that the Mobile Independent Survival Technology—”

“—The MIST, Major,” the tall one said.

“Yes, well, the MIST’s adverse effects studied in the lower ranks are also apparent in high-ranking individuals. Those with higher levels of cognitive training and programming.”

“We’re compiling the data now,” the short one said.

“I know. I’ve seen the initial reports and discussed them with the General. Just make sure you’re on top of figuring this thing out.”

The short one raised his eyebrows. “The only way we can find a solution right now is through the goggles we’re developing. They’re an adapted HUD that covers the eyes. They protect the subject’s vision from the MIST so that they can see the HUD display, which will map out the surroundings within the white. Like your current battle-grade HUD, Major, but sealed airtight around your eyes. However, we have no way of predicting the effects of prolonged *breathing* of the MIST.”

“The goggles? The prototype is being manufactured now?” Fina rose from the chair and rubbed her temples as she corrected her balance.

“It was on our team’s recommendation. If we need to initiate the Sandman Protocol....”

The short one paused.

“If we need to initiate, then what?”

“Major, there are close to a billion gallons of MIST in compressed form housed in giant tanker airships floating above New York City right now. If the attack comes as soon as we are predicting, we’re going to need to burst the tankers the way we’ve planned. The MIST will flood the city and protect us from the attack, but no one will see...well, anything. Imagine what you’ve just experienced—the hallucination—but with millions of people all experiencing the same thing at once.” He paused, rubbing his temples. “At a bare minimum, military personnel are going to need to see, or we don’t stand a chance, Major. We’ve had a few thousand of the prototypes delivered already. We received the first batch a few days ago.

They stepped up production. Major, we were hoping you might tell us a little more about how close we are.”

“Close?” Fina looked up at him and ran her fingers across the short hair on her scalp. “Gentlemen, the MIST is currently being deployed to all major military installations and cities across the US and to other classified areas globally. There’s a moment coming where this thing that has been coming for us will wipe away all previous lines drawn in the sand in one big flash. Humanity as we know it will have to unify against this thing, or we’re gone. The time is coming. Mark my words. Death rides high. The bang of the drum. You’ll hear it soon enough, and when it comes, you’re in what’ll be our base of operations for the entire country.”

The tall one shifted his feet nervously. “MIST HQ. We heard. Wouldn’t our positioning be better with NORAD or somewhere similar?”

“It doesn’t matter anymore. This thing, the patters of its attacks so far, seems to know all our major installations. *Everyone’s*—globally. We’re fortunate that One World Trade Centre has eighty subfloors, more than any of our other facilities, and we can hermetically seal them without too much extra work. That, combined with its proximity to a sizeable civilian population, makes it ideal for evacuation if it’s required. You’re standing in the part we’ve already commandeered for operations by your team, gentlemen. The construction of the sealed subterranean levels is being rushed to completion given how close we feel we are to initiating the protocol.”

“You’re certain it’s coming?” he asked.

Fina looked him over as she brushed herself down and straightened her uniform. “Past behaviour is the best predictor of future behaviour. It has already hit the majority of our bases, and we are now dangerously low on personnel. Our defences are low, but the MIST

looks like it might give us an advantage. If this thing really knows what it's doing, the time to strike is now. Before we're optimised. Before we can secure the major civilian areas."

"We're working around the clock, Major," he reassured her.

"I know you are. We are relaying your progress continuously to the General. You're some of our leading minds, and we're keeping you safe down here. When we initiate the Sandman Protocol, we're still going to need to understand what this stuff does to us. We've not had enough time. We all know that, and we are going to have to think on our feet, reverse engineer living and operating inside it as we bring our ability to create the goggles up to appropriate levels. Beyond that, we need to think if we can utilise the MIST as some form of tactical response, but for the meantime, we focus on defence and nothing else."

"Major, do you think we can fight back? You think we'll have enough time?"

"Well, this is why you're here, gentlemen."

"Major, we know. We're doing the very best we can. Right now, we're waiting for some high-priority civilian experts to be gathered for next-stage field testing and production research."

"I'm aware of the team we're currently trying to assemble. The process is underway. Gentlemen, thank you." Fina turned to leave. She took her HUD off the wall and fixed it over her head. She immediately began absorbing the stream of military intelligence.

The small one coughed for her attention. "Major, the scientist we've been looking for, Push Burrows—he's a key asset. I hand-picked him personally. We need him for the next step now that we understand how to sublimate the metamaterial into the MIST. We need a sustainable way to produce it based on the vast energy requirements of the sublimation process." He looked at her as she turned to him. "We think Dr Burrows should be able to create a way of doing this, given his areas of expertise."

“Absolutely,” she said. “You should know we are acting on your advice now. Dr Burrows is in Las Vegas, and we’ve got a team of our best searching for him. We’re closing in, and he’ll be with you by midday tomorrow at the latest.”

“That’s good to hear, Major. Did you have time to review his psych evaluation?”

“Yes,” she said, pinching the bridge of her nose. “We understand that without his wife, Ellen, he may find it hard to deal with the situation at hand.”

“We drew the same conclusions too.”

“Look, a lot of these civilians, they do not have our training. They are the normal mess any other human without cognitive programming might be. His wife is on the priority list as well. Without her, we know he will find it hard to operate. Through the good graces of whatever is up there looking out for us so far, we have found her here, in New York. We’ve scheduled to pick her up with other spouses and next of kin for the civilian contingent today.”

“Thank you for the update, Major. We understand the limits you have on sharing information right now.”

Fina turned back to them. “Look, we’re all in this together now. All of us, not only here, not in America, or the entire continent. The planet is in this, the planet. Any division of humanity you knew to exist only weeks ago—it’s going to fall. We have seen nothing like this before in our history as a species. A global attack is coming.” She paused as she saw the little colour they had left in their pale faces fade to pure white. “We’ll need the very best from you in the coming weeks, days, and hours. Look, you’ve got us this far, we can go further, concentrate, focus, be ready, and we will fight until there’s nothing left.”

“Yes, Major,” they replied in unison.

Fina turned to leave again.

“Major, one more thing?” the tall one asked with a shake in his voice.

She paused in the hallway and turned her head back an inch. “Yes?”

“What was it like, you know, to survive Fort Campbell, what—”

“—Good luck, men. I hope you make it through this.” She walked away as fear kicked her in the gut.

Death as my co-pilot. All of them wanted to know. Every single one of them. And every day, as she tried to forget, it was all she could remember. How she survived that day when so many died. Why she survived. It was all that pumped through her veins as they moved closer to what they all knew was coming. The programming tried to hide it, but it was taking her over. The only momentary relief she ever got came from pushing. From remaining as driven as she could be. From trying to save as many as she could before the storm came.

As Fina took the elevator up to the One World Trade Centre subterranean car park, she pulled herself back to the moment. She worked with her programming to focus on her endless list of tasks that the MIST immersion training had interrupted.

Six months had come and gone since the attack on Fort Campbell. She was the only person so far to stand and face an attack and survive. She'd gone in wearing the bodysuit, and as the ethereal thing lifted, taking with it fifteen thousand souls, she lay alone and waited for rescue. Six months of piecing her mind back together in the free moments she had. Six months of debriefings, training, psych evaluations, and interviews. She did everything she could to help the teams work toward a solution. Finally, now, they seemed to have cracked it—the MIST.

They knew they couldn't produce enough of the material for everyone, so they'd turned this peculiar meta-material into a gas. She didn't understand the tech. She just knew it worked. And now they were scrambling to produce it at as many sites as possible before the all-out attack they knew was coming. When the attack finally came, they would initiate the Sandman Protocol—the complete whiteout of all major military and civilian areas, the release

of billions of cubic metres of the gas on as many populations as possible. She twitched at the thought. A city under the fog, a population trapped in that impenetrable white.

“*Car Park Level One*,” the elevator said as its chrome doors opened onto the concrete floor filled with mobilising military personnel. Hundreds of them worked, setting up the system that would pump out thousands of cubic metres of the MIST into the car park for when the Sandman Protocol was initiated. The setup would provide a protected entrance and exit to the now nearly sealed off subterranean floors of the building that could house around ten thousand people. They had reserved a little over half for the civilians whom they could evacuate in time. They hoped they could save more by eventually sealing off and flooding parts of the city’s subway system.

Fina’s HUD pinged through the space, bringing up readouts and information on everyone within its range. Data scrolled down her vision in her right eye, giving her updates on the progress of the operation in front of her and across the country. Updates from all corners of the US, where securing as many high-priority locations as possible was under way.

“Major, how are your preparations proceeding?”

Fina heard the Texan drawl before the square head of General Ironhans overrode the streaming information and appeared on the right side of her goggle vision. “General, everything is well underway. I’ve just completed my MIST immersion training. I was about to file my report.”

Ironhans pushed out his signature grin from the side of his lined mouth. “And what did you think?”

“Something happened, General. I had an...experience.” She wasn’t sure how to put it to her superior. It had been six months since she had arrived in his office on the verge of madness, the solitary survivor of the Campbell Massacre. They’d formed an instant bond. A warrior of his calibre knew the face of terror. Death had toyed with him too and left him to

stand firm in the face of so many of those around him being taken. Ironhans had helped pull her back from the brink, had shown her what fortitude and duty were. He trained her against the fear, giving her something solid to rebound against that no amount of programming could offer, and, when necessary, he gave a hand to hold as the trauma crept up on her in the night.

The lined grin dropped as a serious tone entered his voice. “The hallucinations? Major, be frank with me now. What did you see?”

“The Massacre, General. As clear as being there. Every moment, every smell and sound. Every flicker of pain, every flash of adrenaline. Everything. And after—” It kicked at her gut. “I’m not sure I understand what happened, General. But it was as real as being there.”

“What do you think it means?” Ironhans asked, as if he knew the answer but wanted a second opinion.

“General, does everyone experience this? When immersed in the MIST?”

There was no response.

“I think it could be catastrophic, General. When we expose the public, there’s every chance it could cause as much damage as it prevents. Hell, how many goggles can we produce in the time we’ve got? Anyone, civilian or military, without having them to see in the MIST, anyone sat in this stuff, well...” She stopped, shaking her head.

“Our thoughts precisely, Major. Therefore, we are putting all available resources into the manufacturing of the goggles. When we initiate the Sandman Protocol, the need to navigate within the MIST is obvious enough, though now the need to prevent these hallucinations while within the white is without a doubt even more urgent—” His image flickered and disappeared.

“General?”

“—seem to—there for a second, Major.”

A hand attached to her programming reached out and plucked the heaviest string of Fina's soul. Its resonance swam through her. Thick and rich waves through every part of her and rippled back through every other soldier whose programming just initiated into battle mode.

The General's image flickered in and out, each time his eyes stretching wider and wider. The image steadied itself, and his stare remained fixed for a moment before he opened his mouth. "Major, it's here," he said, the emotion gone from his voice. The beat nullified his accent. It left only the pulse of his jaw and the flare of his eyes.

"Bang the drum," she said.

His voice faltered. "I thought we'd have more time."

"General, the Sandman Protocol. Now."

"Major—" His image disappeared again.

The drum, the beat, the universal thump, rising and rising. A breath and the high-pitched scream of her brain spinning and powering up.

The General's voice sprang back into the HUD. "We will initiate Sandman! Repeat! We will initiate—! Major, do not—she is the uppermost priority. You need to find her and bring her back—One World Trade Centre—Repeat!—is now alpha-one priority!"

Fina shouted down the mic. "Who, General? *Who?*"

"Repeat. Alpha-one priority. Secure Ellen Burrows. Psychological profiling shows Dr Burrows will not—without her. She cannot be—drone support if necessary—secure Dr Burrows' wife! Secure Ellen Burrows!"

Stage I – Chapter 3

The feed died. The stream of information rolling across the screen died. Pulsing dots reading the HUD signals from the other soldiers around her blinked, then turned to nothing. The screen cleared itself as she turned, stood and faced them all. That link between them. That peculiar resonance. The programming trickled down through them, readying them for the singular moment that was about to come.

Her vision tunneled. Any blur that may have existed, any fraction of doubt, any flicker of fear or grain of hesitation or indecision gone. Only the moment now, and her body and mind synchronised and tightened with every beat of every second that the bang came nearer.

Red flashed across her vision. It was here, and she roared with them all in complete unison:

“Bang the drum! Prepare for war!”

The red flashed again, and she bolted, searching for a motorcycle in the colossal basement garage of One World Trade Centre.

“Major, it’s here, it’s here!” a voice screamed out of the surrounding movement. “Marines!” Fina roared. “Sandman Protocol initiation sequence has begun. We are here, save as many as you can!” She jumped on the bike, kicking at the pedal as the engine roared and it flew forward.

“Search: Ellen Burrows,” she shouted at her HUD. “Citywide readout. Drone support alpha-one priority. Lt. Major Fina Stas. Pinpoint location and stream feedback live.”

Jets on the militarised drones around Manhattan Island fired into action hundreds of feet above the city. Shooting in and around buildings and skyscrapers. Searching as they obeyed Fina’s command, looking for the person she needed to rescue. Within seconds, they found their target and relayed the location back to Fina as she thundered out of the car park and onto the roads of Lower Manhattan.

The ethereal being was here, pictures and brief clips of chaos and confusion coming through her HUD. That thing, the golden ghost that had taunted her from its other realm, but that would wait. They had something for that enemy. Here, now, in this moment, there was only one focus: rescue Ellen Burrows. Death as her co-pilot, riding high alongside her, screams echoing across the city.

She darted through the terrified masses at speed, utilising her cognitive programming, HUD, and sheer speed to dodge the enemy that focused on the densest crowds of people it could find on the streets. All of them ran and dropped dead in convulsive spasms as their new enemy passed through them, the same as when she first saw them, leaving broken death in their wake.

Explosions rattled hundreds of feet above her as the Sandman Protocol initiated. The colossal tankers housed in the airships burst open, releasing the substance, sublimating from its original form to gas in an instant before falling, falling, settling over the city below. It would trap her in minutes, trapping the entire city in its opaque cloud, and then...the effects, that other world.

Civilians all around stood hypnotised as they looked to the skies. Paralysed by the sight of the floating ethereal thing in its ghost-like form, golden and translucent and terrifying, transfixed by it before their ultimate moment came and it passed through their bodies. Spines shattered, snapping under the pressure of their own muscles, leaving heaps of dead scattered everywhere. All disappeared from her vision as the cloud enveloped them all.

The screams gathered as she raced through the streets, combining with the sound of gunfire from her fellow marines trying to protect them. “It’s here! They’ve come for us!” hysterical cries from all around her as the MIST cloud began to settle and lay its protective whiteness over them all.

Swinging left and right. Skidding in and out of the bodies left by the ethereal being in the last moments of natural sight as the white swallowed everything. The unknown shook her. It gripped her fatigues with tight fists and screamed into her mind as a delusional silence followed the complete whiteout.

“All comms broadcast. Priority one, Lt. Major Fina Stas,” she whispered, unsure whether she was even broadcasting. “All personnel, we’ve briefed you for this moment. Use your tactical sonar pulse emitter to help yourselves navigate and try to keep the MIST from getting between your eyes and the screen of your HUD. This is it. Bang the drum and save as many as you can.”

She lost the last of her vision from her unpressurised HUD goggles to the white as she spun the bike around a corner. The back wheel kicked out, sending her skidding across the smooth tarmac. Tyre smoke crawling up through the white, burning her throat as she came to a swift halt. She shifted her weight and used the last of the momentum to rise to her feet in one fluid motion.

Paused for a second, wide eyes losing sight in the cloud of MIST, the white canvas it created already flickering with colour and memory. The cloud, more a cloak, a chamber, still and pure, covering everything, holding her within, deprived her senses with such terrifying speed. Her mind, the hallucination exploded, and she was back there.

I stand at the foot of a door, armed to the teeth—my muscles taut, my mind sharp. Years of cognitive programming, combine with my HUD and provide me with an acute awareness of my surroundings, and I wait.

She screamed, fell to her knees and shook her head, squeezing her eyes shut to block it out, to escape the white. Tearing the arm off her uniform, she stuffed it around the seal of her HUD with frantic hands, trying to seal it as tight as possible.

“HUD. Display tactical sonar. Ping surroundings at two-second intervals.”

The HUD let out a red flash. Her surroundings now alive with a pulsing wave as she jogged through a side street toward the area where the drones had tracked Ellen. The information from them that flowed into her barely visible HUD became erratic. Their AI overwhelmed by the thousands of orders coming from those trying to survive on the ground, held hostage by this impenetrable world now surrounding them.

“Stay low and slow, Fina. Slowly, slowly through this,” she whispered. “Remember why you’re here. Remember why you’re here.”

The HUD pinged as she moved around in silence, pushing her way toward Ellen.

She gritted her teeth, knowing there were bodies lying underneath the blanket of white.

She thudded against them as the sonar drew their outlines in front of her.

“Help...” A man’s voice in the white, reaching out in the fog. “Help me. Where am I?” he said, a weird horror curdling in his pleas.

“Try not to panic,” she replied into the nothingness. “Keep talking but close your eyes. Whatever you do, don’t look into the white.” The HUD pinged, and the buildings and cars and bodies came alive for a second. The sonar wave shot over them and showed her a singular figure standing in the middle of a road a few dozen yards away.

A round of gunfire screamed past her head, and she fell onto her side. Hitting the ground, the next ping drew out her surroundings as she saw the man take a series of shots to the chest and fall forward. She sat up against a car for a moment before taking another deep breath and continuing her crawl. Ping after ping drew out broken bodies until she reached the dying person shaking amongst them and pulled herself over to him.

“You’re okay. You’re okay.” Warm liquid passed through Fina’s fingers. Panting breath brushed across her face, and wheezing sounds pushed their way into her ears. There she held his body until the whimpers sank into nothing and left her lying there in the silence of the white. Death leaked over her from the badly rendered figure in her arms.

“Close your eyes,” she said as his body went limp. “Death as my co-pilot.” She pushed the body off her and picked herself up.

Bang the drum!

She stepped forward, each moment a lifetime, which she had to move into before disappearing again. Steps, slow and urgent, delicate but hard. Boots trampled the dead, clearing through rubble, through glass and brick.

A scream pierced the silence.

More and more followed, wailing and gathering into a wall of sonic fear that pulsed through the cloud.

Everyone left—everyone that had survived long enough—now trapped inside the cloud, drifting in and out of the hallucinatory state. The Sandman stalked their reality with keenness and a wry smile, flinging memories across the white canvas of the MIST. Enveloped in the fog, presenting to them a nightmare that something deep inside them chose.

“Grenade!”

The shout had come too late as the blast pushed Fina off her feet. Ringing ears and falling shrapnel, the smell of thick smoke, but paired to nothing but the white. Her goggles had cracked. The HUD leaked tiny particles of the MIST into her vision, each one projecting fragments of the past onto her. She knew this fight. Not against the ethereal thing now, but against herself.

Take hold against this white light, against its possibility.

Against all that it might present you with and all that you have endured.

Hold yourself.

Get to Ellen.

That is the mission.

She grabbed onto a car with torn and burnt hands, pulling herself up, smoke and soot burning her nostrils. The shattered ping still released a flickering vision for her to follow.

“Where am I?” a man’s voice shook from within the fog.

Turning full circle, she saw a soldier drawn out by the ping. Wandering, lost, gun dangling by his side.

“Bang the drum, brother,” she said, stomping over to him as he came alert, his gun up and level.

“Bang the drum. Identify yourself,” he said.

“Lt. Major Fina Stas. Where are your goggles, private?”

“Major?” his voice shifted in the MIST.

“Pull it together, marine. What’s your name?”

“Major! Private D. Scott. My goggles? They’re in my kit.” His voice was wavering but not lost. It held on to something. There was still strength held within.

“Put them on. Use some of your webbing to seal them tight around your eyes and some tourniquet tube to blow out as much of the MIST as you can. Once you’ve got some vision restored, use the tactical sonar pulse with two-second intervals to help you see.”

Fina walked up to him and placed her hand on his shoulder while she checked herself for injuries. She padded down the bleeding patches, rubbed clean the soot and debris from her nose and face.

“Sitrep, Scott.”

“Major, I got pulled away from my team. It overran us. Panic. Like nothing I’ve ever seen. Everyone went mad, you know? Insane. That thing—the enemy—it came down. People collapsed and died all around. Marines everywhere, we just started shooting at everything, anything. ‘*Bang the drum*’ over and over, but it didn’t help. Everyone lost it. Jesus.” He paused, kneeling to fix his HUD. “That seemed to go on forever. Fuck, it was probably only

ten seconds. The airships blew, the MIST cloud came down, and another type of madness seemed to get everyone. Then this silence, you know?” he paused again, and she could see him looking up at her as her own HUD pinged the slight frame. “Then I don’t know what happened. It’s hard to describe. I kept drifting away to somewhere else. Then the screams started, and I seemed to come around again. Now you’re here...” He drifted off as he secured his HUD tight around his eyes and started with the tubing.

“And now I’m here, private,” she said, putting her hand on his shoulder. “What you experienced, what we’re all trapped inside of now, this white—the MIST, it keeps them from you, but it also...well, like you said, it has some other impact on the human brain. Just try to keep the seal over your eyes or you’ll suffer from the hallucinations. The less of it that comes into direct contact with your vision, the better. If you can see your HUD, the sonar pulse will map things out, and you won’t...well.... You won’t go back wherever it took you.”

“Major, did it happen to you?” Private Scott asked.

“I don’t think anyone will escape this,” she replied as screams started rising through the air again. “You need to hold out against it. I need you to help me. We have a target.”

“Major, whatever you need from me,” he said, standing, his HUD secured to his face now.

“She’s half a klick from here. Alpha-one priority asset. That’s all you need to know. There’s going to be other people trapped in these buildings, but they’re not our priority. Stay close and stay sharp. Use your programming to keep your mind clear and...bang the drum.”

“Bang the drum, Major.”

A crackle came through Fina’s HUD as they set off.

“Search and rescue teams with MIST goggles are currently deploying from One World Trade Centre MIST HQ. Provide GPS positioning. Bang the drum. We’ll come get you.”

“Some good news.” Fina pushed the comms button on the side of her goggles as Scott followed behind. “Lt Major Fina Stas to HQ. Read. Immediate alpha-one priority asset imminent evac required. Do you copy?”

“Major, we have you,” said a voice through the radio. “Locking in on GPS ping now. Drones are useless in this stuff. Nothing works. Infrared is out. Heat signatures don’t read. As soon as we turned them to sonar, it overloaded them and wrecked their AI. They’re just hovering above the city. We’ll have a fully equipped APC with you when you give the signal.”

“Send it now. We’re here. This rescue and retrieval are of the highest priority. If you don’t hear from me, make sure the APC crew does everything it can to find one, Ellen Burrows. Bearing position from my last HUD GPS location. She is a key asset. Repeat. She is a key asset and is near my position.”

They came stomping up to the building where the drones had located Ellen Burrows, looking up through the MIST as their goggle’s sonar pinged the battered and collapsing shape of the building.

“You still with me, private?” she said as they came to a stand still, catching their breath.

“Never left you, Major.”

“Scott, the visions. How bad?”

“Major, I’m here, but there’s another place. It shoots in and out. I don’t even remember it. Maybe something from when I was a kid?”

Fina nodded. “Remember, use your cognitive programming. Stay here and stay with me, and we’ll get through this.”

“Major, how are we supposed to fight in this? Fight that thing?”

“The big questions come later. Right now, try to focus. There must be thousands of people trapped in these buildings all around us. We need one person. We need Ellen. You remember that.” She took a deep breath as the screams echoed around them.

Death as her co-pilot.

“Major, why her? Why is she so important?”

“You see this stuff we’re in now? This MIST? It is so hard to manufacture. We barely got enough together in time on a global level to save a handful of cities. The woman in here, she’s important to that process. For now, that’s all you need to know.”

“Fuck.”

Fina straightened herself, and they entered the building.

“Stairs to your left,” she said. “Elevators are out. Twenty-three floors straight up to the last known location.” She slid over to the stairwell. Her HUD still emitted its broken ping every two seconds. MIST particles painting colours over the little vision he had left.

They looked up at the task, Scott coming to her side, panting. “Major, it’s you, isn’t it?” he said, and she knew he needed the reassurance.

“What are you getting at, Scott?” she said, turning to the private.

“You’re the one. You survived the Campbell Massacre.”

She could hear the last of the strength in his voice quivering. “That was me, Scott.”

“Major, can we—?”

She grabbed him in close enough so she could feel his breath on her half-covered face.

“Ready yourself, Scott. This is the battle now. Here. Focus.”

“I’m here,” he said as she let him go, and they both turned as the wind howled around them. The screams of the lost and trapped echoed through them, over and above the sound of pouring water coming down from the floors above.

Breathe. She focused on herself.

Breathe the soot, breathe the smoke.

Breathe the MIST.

Charge the brain.

Feel it. Let it build.

She clenched her fists as the programming resonated through her mind.

“You think this water means someone’s alive up there, Major?”

Breathe. “If the system detects a life, it’ll use water to put out the fires until it no longer does. Now, are you ready?”

“Ready.”

One, two, ping. Stairwell, screams, choking smoke.

One, two, ping. Water, fire, tensing muscles.

They shot up the stairs against the flow of water. The sound and heat of the fire grew stronger. The screams below drifted away.

“Come on, Scott!”

Sixteen floors straight.

“I’m here. I’m here!”

Fina’s legs burnt. One, two, ping. Sweep, scan, charge up. Push through the pain, through the choking, through the visions in the MIST, through the howling fear.

Scott eventually stopped. “Major, we’re here!” he said, panting.

Fina jumped and slammed a heavy boot into the door, and it fell back and away as the fire in the hallway exploded out. Flames, boiling water, and debris blasted over them both as they grabbed onto the stairwell railing. The whirlwind of battle. Instinct and programming pulled her to her feet. Visions mixed in with her HUD readouts, the oil of her eyes, the smoke, and the MIST. A new blindness.

Momentary reality intersected with the flickering nightmare.

“Major, I can’t breathe, I can’t—”

“In there! She’s in there!” Fina screamed as they pushed through the doorway and into the floor’s main corridor.

Down the hallway, crawling through the smoke under the fire roaring over the ceiling.

“Major, I can’t breathe—” Scott shouted.

Fina turned to see him falling behind. “Scott! Brace!”

He shot off a volley of rounds into the ceiling. One beat and it cracked, another and water from the floor above came gushing through, taking him off his feet and pulling his goggles off his face as she held onto a guardrail.

“Find them, Scott! Your goggles!” The air burnt her lungs, the visions invaded and numbed all the hysterical reality.

“I can’t! I can’t! It’s happening. I’m disappearing. It’s happening...” the childish voice screamed as the MIST and smoke enveloped the mind it was attached to.

“Bang the drum, soldier! Stay with me!” Fina slid through the water and searched around for the lost goggles. “Close your eyes. I need you here with me, Scott!”

Scott’s voice sank into nothing as the fire fought its own battle with the pouring water. “I’m... not...here...”

“Fucking come back!” Fina pulled herself over and lifted the young soldier onto her lap. She cracked him across the face. “You’ll not take him!” she spat at Death as she slapped the boy. His body was limp. His mind gone.

“You forgot about me? You’re leaving me here?” she said, a whisper in the chaos, letting Scott’s body go as she waded through the water.

She readied herself and waited for what remained visible from the ping in her goggles to shoot out across the corridor. One, two, ping. Fire and smoke and water and MIST forced its way into her mouth, up her nose, into her eyes. Searing and scalding skin. She tensed and

pushed herself to her feet. She waded through the water, reaching out with torn, burnt hands, suffocating.

“Ellen!” she called out.

“You will not take her!” she screamed at her co-pilot. “You will not take her!”

She pushed, kicking in door after door, wading through apartment after apartment, blind and alone.

“You’ll not have her!”

She crawled out of the apartment, trying to stay in the moment. She tried to stay in the hell that surrounded her and away from the one that was in her mind, seeping through her goggles and through the crackle of comms.

“Major, APC nearing target destination—floor—know where—with you in—”

“Twenty-third floor! Now, now, now!”

Finia fell as the ceiling of the corridor split. A mass of water and blood and bodies and debris came crashing through. It picked her up and swept her down the corridor and into a wall. She struggled to the surface, driving through the water.

Not now!

She struggled through the bodies and the taste of death in her mouth. The whiteout enveloped every particle of her vision, submerging her mind.

The water receded, and she moved to the last door in the corridor. Its frame weakened by fire and water. She pulled herself up by its scalding handle and drove her shoulder into it over and over. Every fibre, every cell, every atom raged with one last push until the door gave way to the water. The gush sucked her off her feet and inside, smashing her up against another wall.

She choked on the water as her burning eyes stared into the endless white of the cloud. The wash of colours exploded with the raging fire.

“Ellen! Ellen Burrows!” Fina spat out into the white. “Ellen, shout if you can hear me. We need you! I need you, Ellen! I’m here because I need you!”

She pushed against it all, trying to lift herself up.

“I’m here for you, Ellen!”

She fell to her knees, pulling off her smashed goggles. Opening her eyes wide, she looked into the pure white as the barriers in her mind fell. The programming crashed, the fear enveloping her.

“Not again. Not now.”

She grabbed blindly and found a chair, hurling it up and running to the closest floor to ceiling window she could see through the thinned MIST. Swinging it at the glass and it popped and cracked. She dropped it down, pulled in deep and smoke-laden breaths, swinging it up again and smashed it into the glass. The window cracked and exploded under the pressure of water and heat and sucked everything out. She braced herself against a wall as the MIST drained. The smoke followed all the debris. The noise, the fear—all sucked away, releasing her vision for the briefest of moments. Waves of light breached the cloud twenty-three floors up and showed her the apartment.

A muffled voice screamed through the momentary silence. “Where are you?”

“Ellen?” Fina whispered.

She moved away from the wall and looked at her hands, her torn skin.

The woman screamed again from behind her. “Where are you?”

Fina raced through the apartment. Through its compact corridors. Darting in and out of rooms as the MIST started equalising in the room, bleaching her vision with every flashing second.

“Where are you? Help me!” the voice screamed.

The air pressure in the apartment equalised, and the MIST settled in as Fina smashed her way through a door and found Ellen in a small bathroom. Shaking, eyes wide with fear, huddled in the bathtub, but alive, their enemy focused on the colossal swathes of people caught in the panic of escaping the city.

Fina grabbed her. “I’ve got you, Ellen. I’ve got you,” she whispered. The white cloud pulled itself back around them as she heard the rescue team stomping up the corridor. “I’ve got you. We’ll get you out of here.”

“Thank you,” Ellen said, holding onto Fina. “What about, Push?”

Fina closed her eyes, resting her head on Ellen’s shoulder. “I’m sure we’ve got him, too.”