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# The Undiscovered

Paul Hinton

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To Jenny, thanks for believing. To Sara,  
Samantha and Shannon, thanks for  
knowing how to react when Dad had the  
'Do not disturb' sign on his forehead!



# Foreword

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The war was over, peace had finally been declared!

The few remaining survivors had decided enough was enough. Nobody was sure which government had fired the first missile, released the viruses and poisoned most of the planet. Only one thing was certain, mankind had lost. From the original seven billion inhabitants, only a few million were left alive world-wide, the decimation completed in under two years! Scattered over the continents, the survivors may have felt lucky at first, Governments were quickly reformed, law and order re-established, communications between countries re-built. Every society newly formed was fully based on democracy. No one person would ever be allowed to decide anything again.

For a while everything had gone well. Villages were re-built, cities began to grow out of the rubble, the people left alive carving an existence out of an abused planet. Scientists worked to improve farming techniques, so mankind could feed themselves again. Trade began between communities, eventually between lands. Life was returning to normal, the planet was recovering, they had survived.

No-one could have imagined what was about to happen.

In the year 2016, three years after the war had ended, the first incident took place. Contact with a small farming community in France was lost. After a week of silence, soldiers were sent to investigate. What they found, horrified the world. Over two hundred men, women and children had been killed, no apparent cause. Once again talk of war surfaced!

Scientific teams were flown into the area to establish what exactly had happened. After weeks of apparent tests and autopsies, it was reported to the public that a virus type weapon, left over from the war, was responsible for the tragedy. The world breathed again, but one week later a second incident took place, this time in Germany. As this was being investigated, reports came to light of similar incidents in Spain, Belgium and England. Once again the world stood on the brink.

Eventually Scientists announced that the use of weapons could be ruled out in every case, a more sinister explanation was suggested. Facts held back from the initial investigation of the

first incident, led the Scientists to believe the people had been killed by something non-human. Unknown DNA samples collected from the scene of the first massacre had been tested and seemed to confirm this theory. The evidence even suggested that some of the victims had been partially eaten! Rumours of cannibals or mutants circled the globe, panic ensued, communities were reinforced until the truth started to surface. During an 'attack' on a small village in Belgium, one of the villagers had managed to radio for help. Before being killed he had told of an apparent raid by, what he described as, monsters! The attacks became more regular, what few soldiers that were left were deployed to combat the problem, but more often than not they too came under attack. The facts were slowly pieced together. The creatures, now attacking them, had been on our planet for centuries feeding!

Every year before the war, tens of thousands of people had disappeared without trace. Flimsy attempts were always made to find them, but usually without success. The reasons why, now slowly became clear. They were all victims of these monsters. With the population of the planet around seven billion, the vanishing of a few thousand had never seemed important or mysterious enough to worry about for long. They had learnt to ignore it! Now with the population decimated, every death or disappearance would be investigated, they could not ignore it any more.

They had survived the last war, but would the rest of mankind survive this one . . .

# Chapter One - Ambush

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“I heard that noise again, John,” Stephanie whispered.

“Shit! Head for that house. Until we know what it is, we’d better play it safe,” John said, a sense of urgency unmistakable in his voice.

They ran the fifty yards up to the house door John had pointed towards but it was locked. John took a step backwards and kicked as hard as he could, the door giving a little but staying closed. He kicked again, this time the door exploded inwards. They ran inside.

“Do you think it’s them?” Stephanie asked, sounding a little panicked. “Or something else?”

“I’m not sure, keep your head down,” John replied, re-closing the door he had just destroyed. “If it is them, try to keep calm and don’t waste your shots. If there are too many, get away as best you can. I’ll be right behind you.”

“If there are too many, we won’t have that many places to run to, they’ll be all over us in seconds,” Stephanie argued. “Out in the open we don’t stand a chance, especially if there are more of them in the area.”

John stared at her, knowing she was right. Getting caught inside the house he had singled out, by too many of the creatures, might prolong the inevitable but it wouldn’t change the end result. He had been careless and that annoyed him. In his haste to reach the castle stronghold they had been told about, he had pushed their luck. He knew very well that travelling at night was dangerous, that was the creature’s time! That’s why the couple had mostly rested at night, hidden away somewhere safe from the roaming groups of creatures but he had felt the gamble this time was necessary. Now it seemed they might have to pay the price for his stupidity. Suddenly unsure about what to do, he was about to suggest they move when the reason for their hiding appeared at the end of the street. It was too late, all they could do now was wait.

There were twenty of them that John could see but he knew there were probably more hiding nearby. They were bigger than people, on average over seven feet tall, powerfully built, with an almost lizard-like appearance but lizards that walked on two legs.

Each of the creatures were equipped with razor-like talons on both their 'hands' and 'feet' and an impressive jaw full of lethal looking teeth. They were formidable-looking. Whenever they stopped to taste the air with their snake like tongues, they blended to the background, making them almost invisible. This chameleon-type camouflage had tipped the balance in their favour during the last few years of fighting and had helped them to remain undiscovered in the centuries before. John had often wondered what naturalists would have made of them, all those years ago when such programmes had been popular on television. The thought of Steve Irwin chasing and wrestling one of them to the ground, always brought a smile to his face. As the creatures ambled down the street, it reminded John of scenes out of the old zombie films from the 1990s. Their movements were slow, almost comical looking but both John and Stephanie had witnessed this behaviour before. They were searching for evidence that people were still hiding in the area. Anybody found would be in immediate danger of becoming food for these deadly predators, the comical looking parade suddenly turning into a lightning fast attack.

"Oh, shit," Stephanie whispered. "If they pick up our scent, we're in trouble."

"We're lucky they haven't picked it up already. The next time I suggest travelling at night, kick my arse, will you," John said, not taking his eyes off the gathering creatures.

"I will do that, Mr Stewart, with pleasure," Stephanie whispered. "That's if we live through this."

He turned to look at her, worried about her comment but she was smiling.

The creatures had stopped twenty yards from the house, John held his breath. If any of the monsters realised they were there, the attack would be ferocious. They both quietly checked their weapons, realising the next few seconds would be critical. Neither of them carried a rifle because the fighting was always at close quarters, instead they were both armed with automatics. John had always considered the nine millimetre Beretta to be one of the best handguns ever produced. He carried two of them, one in a shoulder holster, one tucked in his waistband. Stephanie also had two of the pistols. Fully loaded each weapon had sixteen rounds. Normally speaking it was enough firepower and the two of them were very adept at fighting with the powerful handguns but they both carried Japanese Samurai swords as back up. These were sheathed safely on their backs but always within easy



reach. Both of them had been martial arts instructors, working with and training members of the Special Air Services in the handling of edged weapons before and during the Third World War. During the very first years they had spent training the elite fighting force, they had met and fallen in love. They had been inseparable ever since.

After the war against these marauding bands of monsters had started, they had witnessed a steady increase in the number of attacks being made. The country was once again a battlefield. People had tried to fight back but, against the massive numbers of attackers, the fighting had not gone well. What was left of the military had greatly underestimated the capabilities of the creatures they were fighting on several occasions and had suffered disastrous defeats. At that point, John had decided it would be better for them to head out on their own. They had been travelling the country ever since, trying to find a place where they might be safe but it was proving harder than he had anticipated. Through careful planning sometimes combined with luck, they had, more often than not, managed to avoid the monsters that were systematically wiping out the human race. On the few occasions they had encountered the creatures, they had managed to fight themselves out of trouble but the group standing in the street outside was too big for the two of them to handle, especially in the confines of the house. John was trying to find a way for them to survive the attack if it came, when the creatures passed by the house, going further down the street. They had not picked up their scent.

“John, they’re leaving,” Stephanie whispered.

“We were lucky. We’d better stay here tonight. You get some sleep, I’ll take the first watch. Wake you in four hours,” John said.

“Okay, but call me if anything happens,” Stephanie replied.

“I will,” John said, already going to check the back door was secure.

She went upstairs and, after checking the rooms, picked one and tried to sleep. She could not remember the last time she had really slept, every night the same nightmare, that night would prove to be no exception.

They were cornered, she was wounded, John hopelessly outnumbered. Unable to help him she must witness how he is killed and partially devoured. Terrifyingly, the creatures then turn towards her and start to advance. Usually at that point she always woke up but that night, for some reason, the nightmare

was lasting longer. The creatures were almost touching her as she screamed and awoke!

She heard him rushing up the stairs to rescue her, the thought warming her. He strode through the door into her room, his Berettas in his hands, ready for anything.

"It's alright, I was dreaming again. Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you," she said.

"You didn't," he replied. "But the thought of something happening to you terrifies me."

She kissed him, he responded at first but quickly backed off. She understood why. It had been three weeks since they had last felt secure enough to enjoy each other. She secretly wondered if a time would ever come again. Making love to him was something she missed terribly but the danger of being surprised whilst doing so was too great.

"What should we do now?" she asked.

"First we'll try to find something to eat, then we'll keep heading north," he said.

"We're still trying to reach this castle then."

"If it exists, yes. Maybe we'll find our own - I'm tired of running," he said.

"What's the matter?" she asked, worried about him.

"I'm alright, I'm just tired."

At that moment she realised it was light outside, he had let her sleep all night again.

"John, I thought we'd talked about this. You need your sleep as well," she told him, slightly annoyed.

"I'll get a few hours later, don't worry about me," he argued.

"But I do worry, John. You're always going without, making sure I get enough of everything. Answer me this, who is going to do that when you're dead?" she asked.

"I've no intention of dying just yet," he argued.

"Lack of food and lack of sleep will dull your senses. You've read the manuals, you know exactly how dangerous the game you're playing is. You can't keep doing this, it's stupid. If anything ever happened to you, I'd hate myself and I certainly wouldn't want to go on on my own."

"Okay, okay, you win," he said, smiling.

"Good. We eat and then you sleep. We'll leave at midday, that still gives us a good five hours daylight. I won't take no for an answer," she said, firmly.

John laughed. "What made you so tough?" he asked.

“You did, John Stewart, just you,” and she kissed him lovingly on his cheek.

They went downstairs and found a little food in the kitchen, tins of baked beans, peaches and carrots. The tins were out of date and it made a strange meal but it was the first food they had had in days. Afterwards John slept, just as he had promised.

At midday they left the house as planned. Everything was quiet, almost too quiet. They had walked for a couple of hours when they came across a farmhouse with a barn and a garage. John decided it was worth a look, maybe they would be lucky and find something useful.

With Berettas drawn they approached the garage first, both knowing that what they were doing was highly dangerous. The creatures mostly seemed to hide during daylight hours and empty buildings offered them the security they sought. If any of them happened to be hiding in the garage then, as soon as the door was opened, they would attack. This in turn, would bring any others in the area running but the remote chance of finding a car seemed worth the risk. A few miles travelling in relative security was a luxury they had seldom had.

“You stay back,” John said. “I’ll open the door and jump out of the way, you nail anything that moves. If there are too many of them, then get as far away from here as possible. Don’t wait for me. Don’t hesitate, just run.”

“I won’t leave you, John!” Stephanie said stubbornly.

He could tell by the look on her face he would not win the argument.

“Okay. Are you ready?” he asked.

She nodded, both her pistols aimed at the garage door. She was as ready as she always was.

He turned the door’s handle slowly, from experience knowing the noise would cause any hiding creatures to react. As the door swung upwards, he dived to his left out of the way, rolled and came up on to his knees poised for action, his Berettas seeking out a target almost independently of him but the garage was empty. Empty apart from the almost antique Landrover Freelander parked within it. A stroke of luck, they held hands for a second but would it run? Luckily the four wheel drive was open but there was no key in sight.

“Can you start it without a key, John?” she asked, half expecting the answer to be no, frightened their stroke of luck would be short lived.

The answer was yes, he could start it, no problem. John checked the fuel tank. There was petrol, not much but enough for a few precious miles. After ripping out the necessary wires, John started the engine. It coughed and spluttered into life. Stephanie beamed, the idea of driving for even a short while was a luxury she had never expected to experience again. With the engine running, John was checking out something on the dashboard.

“What are you doing?” she asked, worried that his antics might kill the battery.

“Checking if the navigation system still works,” he said, a smile appearing on his face. “If it does, we might be able to find this damned castle on the map. It might make all the difference.”

Understanding straightaway that he was right, Stephanie held her breath. After a few seconds John disconnected the wires he had used to start the vehicle, a disappointed look on his face.

“What’s the matter?” she asked.

“It doesn’t work,” he answered. “Either it’s knackered or the satellite system that it requires to function was damaged or destroyed during the war. We’re on our own.”

She leant over and kissed him on the cheek.

“We do alright on our own anyway,” she smiled. “We’ll find what we’re looking for with or without help. I have faith in you, John Stewart.”

He smiled. She always found a way to make him feel better, always had.

“Okay, what about the house?” John asked.

“What do you mean?” Stephanie said.

“Do we cut and run or push our luck? There might be supplies, guns, who knows what in there. Granted there could also be creatures but I don’t think so. We go in quick, look around, take anything useful and leave. Ten minutes tops, what do you say?”

“Okay but ten minutes, not a second longer. I want to get as far away from here as possible. In a couple of hours it will get dark. They’ll come!” she said, giving in.

The house had been deserted and after a short time they left, having found a shotgun, several cartridges and a small amount of food.

As they drove along the narrow country lanes, it was hard to believe what was happening. They could have been a normal married couple out for a Sunday drive, except they were not married and nobody could consider anything about their situation normal.

After about twenty miles the car ran out of petrol. Taking everything they could comfortably carry they continued on foot.

"It will be dark in about an hour, we need to find a place to rest up," John said.

"Yes, I know but where?" Stephanie asked. "We haven't seen a house or anything suitable for the last hour and out here in the open, our chances aren't exactly good."

"We could try the radio. Maybe there are people out here hiding who can help us or even a village or settlement we can reach in time. What do you think?" John asked, trying to sound optimistic.

"Okay," Stephanie replied. "But hurry. If there's no answer, then we need to get out of here quickly and find some kind of defensible shelter for the night."

John took his pack off and quickly assembled their radio. Because of the amount of fallout after the Third World War, communication had been a problem. Without the help of very powerful radio equipment, it had been almost impossible to set up a communications network. The survivors had eventually mastered the problem but the resulting size of the equipment needed to do so had made it impossible for John and Stephanie to take a reliable radio along with them. The only realistic option had been a short wave radio. This fact naturally limited the range of the signal they could send. John had, from the beginning, understood that this problem could prove deadly for both of them, especially if they found themselves in a desperate situation. The situation now was not desperate but if they could not find shelter for the night it would very quickly become so. He smiled at Stephanie, trying to appear calm and confident that they would be alright, but the look on her face told him she understood exactly what the next few minutes might mean.

"Can anybody hear me? Is anybody receiving this signal? We are travellers in need of shelter. Over."

Only static came back on the radio and Stephanie sighed. It seemed they had pushed their luck with the farmhouse too far. Now when they really needed a break . . .

John tried again.

"Can anybody hear me? Over."

Static . . .

"Forget it, John, there's nobody. Come on, we need to move fast, otherwise . . ." she let it hang.

Suddenly the radio came to life.

"Identify yourselves please. Over."

Startled for a moment, John and Stephanie just stared at each other, the radio speaking again.

“Persons who just radioed for help, please identify yourselves. Over.”

“This is John Stewart and my fiancée, Stephanie Jones. We are travelling northwards, trying to find a castle supposedly in this vicinity. I’m afraid we’ve misjudged daylight hours and run the risk of being caught out in the open. Could do with a bit of help, mate. Over.”

The radio stayed silent for what seemed like an eternity but, after a few seconds, crackled into life again.

“Mr Stewart, how do you know about the castle? Over.”

John looked at Stephanie and whispered “The castle’s real.” She smiled and kissed him.

“We’ve been on the road for months now, just wandering really. About seventy miles from here, back down the country in a southerly direction, we came across a number of soldiers who had been ambushed by the creatures. As we arrived two of the men were still alive and fighting, we went to their aid. We managed to fight off the attacking creatures but only one of the soldiers was still alive at that time, a Sergeant-Major O’Connell. We tried to help him but he was severely injured. Before dying he told us of the castle, where it was approximately located and suggested we’d be safe there. Over.”

The radio was again quiet for a few seconds but then it spoke with a new voice.

“This is Major Robert Jones, commanding officer of the castle you’re looking for. Can you tell us where you are, we’ll try to get to you. Please be as specific about your current location as possible and please hurry. It will be dark in forty-three minutes, I expect you know what that means. Over.”

“Major, I’ll be as specific as I can be. We found an abandoned farm about twenty five miles back down the country, eight miles north of a small settlement called Churchtown, where we sheltered last night. We liberated a vehicle there and travelled due north. It ran out of fuel about an hour ago. At this moment we are in a wooded area still travelling northwards. Over.”

“That could have been the Lewis’s farm, they are amongst the survivors here. The son had a four wheel, a Landrover I believe. He’s moaned about leaving it behind often enough. Was the vehicle a Landrover? Over.”

“Yes, yes it was,” John said, excitedly. “But as I said, it ran out of petrol a few miles back, we are now on foot. Over.”

“That should put you south-east of us, maybe not too far away. We’ll try to get to you. I suggest you change direction, head North West, but be advised this area is seriously compromised. There are creatures in significant numbers surrounding us at all times. I won’t compromise my men or our situation here. If we have difficulty getting to you then we’ll break off the attempt and you’re on your own. Is that understood? Over.”

“Thanks, Major, we’ll start moving towards you. Hope to see you soon. Over and out,” he turned to Stephanie. “Come on, we need to move fast.”

With John reading his compass and their weapons at the ready, they started off in a north westerly direction just as the Major had suggested.

“Do you think they’ll reach us in time?” Stephanie asked, obviously worried.

“They are military, that much is obvious. If we can stay alive long enough, I’d say yes, they’ll find us. They must have experience in dealing with these things, otherwise they wouldn’t have survived this long. It’s down to us, we have to stay alive as long as possible to give them a chance, okay.”

“John, if it’s a choice between you leaving me and living or us both dying, I want you to go,” Stephanie said, seriously.

John stopped, turned and looked at her. He reached out and gently took her by the hand.

“Listen very carefully, I won’t leave you. Either we both make it or nobody gets to go, do you understand? If you were killed, then I wouldn’t want to go on. God knows how sick I am of running from these things but as long as we’re together, it’s bearable. We’ve lived through everything they’ve thrown at us up to now and we’ll get through this. I won’t die and I sure as hell won’t let you die either. Do you understand?”

She looked into his eyes and noticed a tear running down his cheek.

“God, I love you,” was all she could manage to say.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s keep moving.”

They moved off again, John wondering if the soldiers would reach them in time.

It happened just as it always did. In the forest that was now surrounding them, they could hear the creatures moving through the undergrowth. They had picked up John and Stephanie’s scent and were closing in on the couple. A look of panic took over her face, she knew this time everything was

different. They had killed the creatures before, plenty of them but they had always been able to control the situation. Out there in the woods they would be attacked on all sides. Who knew how many creatures would be involved. What had the Major said, 'considerable numbers'. What did that mean, tens, hundreds or even thousands? She shivered at the thought.

Suddenly, there was a loud noise and she realised John had already opened fire, his pistols barking, dispersing death towards the creatures now attacking them. She looked in the direction he was shooting and almost screamed. They were moving too fast for her to be sure but there were a lot of these things hunting them. She stopped counting at thirty. She checked behind her, on the other side of the track they were following, creatures were there as well. She opened fire. 'Control, breathe' she kept whispering under her breath. The Beretta in her left hand came up empty. She reloaded, the empty magazine falling to the ground, lost to her. She continued firing. They had learnt how to kill the creatures early on in the beginning of the conflict, wounds to the head area always proving effective at stopping them. She concentrated on that now, aiming for their heads. She had always been a good shot, with any weapon but the speed at which the creatures moved sometimes made accurate shooting difficult. She was firing constantly in an attempt to keep the attackers at bay and could not help wondering how long their supply of ammunition would hold out.

"John, what about ammunition, we haven't got that much?" she shouted out above the noise of battle.

"Don't worry," he shouted back. "Go on the assumption the soldier boys have got plenty. We just need to get through this. Watch it to your left," and he turned and fired.

The creature was only hit in the shoulder with his first shot and kept coming. John's second shot though, a head shot, dropped it.

They were killing creatures on both sides of the track but there were too many and their ammunition supply was already getting low. She heard John unsheathing his Samurai sword; she looked over in his direction. With a pistol in his left hand and his sword in his right, he was holding the attacking creatures at bay. She wondered how much longer they could survive against such odds? She drew her sword. She was also down to her last few magazines and realised they would go quickly.

"I'm out," John shouted.



They both had reserve ammunition in their packs but could not reach it at that moment, it would just be the swords. They had mastered this art of fighting during time spent working in Japan, had gone on to teach the Martial Art during and after the war, mostly to the military. The skill had saved them on numerous occasions but, against this many creatures, Stephanie wondered if it would be enough?

She fired her last shot, a kill, one less of the monsters to worry about but already more were coming, the noise of battle drawing them in. She holstered her pistol, the sword coming alive in her hands. With well practised Katas, she began to eliminate the creatures, John already doing the same but she quickly realised there were too many this time and although her arms were working like pistons, they were losing the fight. More and more of the creatures were appearing out of the darkness, the odds terrifyingly high. Suddenly she stumbled, having missed her step and fell, screaming John's name, as the creatures pounced. She closed her eyes expecting the worst but shots rang out! She searched for the source, the heads of the attacking creatures exploding around her. She looked behind her where John was standing with one of his Berettas again drawn.

"Found a little ammunition," he shouted, shooting again as two more of the monsters lunged at Stephanie. "Are you going to just lie there and let me do all the work?" he shouted, smiling.

She got up and moved towards John who, panting heavily, shouted, "Run for that outcropping over there, at least then our backs are covered."

Without hesitation she started to run, at the same time reaching for her pack. If she could just reach the spare magazines they might stand a chance. As she reached the outcropping she had found eight fully loaded magazines. Quickly reloading her pistols, she turned and started to fire, peeling the creatures off John, giving him the chance to run to her. Already the creatures were massing again for another onslaught.

John was almost to her when he slipped and disappeared from view, her heart almost stopping but then he was up again, blood pouring from a wound to his head. He limped towards her, one of the creatures reaching for him from behind; she shot it just as it was going to strike. Another jumped for him; she nailed it in mid-air. The spare magazines were almost spent, another minute or two and it would be the swords again. John was by her, dazed but okay, still able to fight. He had also found a few more magazines in his pack but in her heart she felt it would not be

enough, not this time. As he opened fire, she thought she heard something but was not sure.

At that moment somebody shouted, "Get down!"

She knew better than to hesitate. She dived for cover, dragging John down with her. Suddenly, there was gunfire all around them and explosions, grenades, she thought but not certain. The gunfire was deafening, M-16 fire and heavy.

After what seemed like an age the gunfire stopped. As she looked up she saw the creatures, those still alive at least, withdrawing into the darkness. At that moment three fatigue-clad figures came running up.

"Can you move?" one asked, the others keeping watch.

"Yes, we're okay," she replied.

"We have to go now, they'll be back in minutes once they've re-organised," the soldier said, urgently.

She got up and helped John who was still a little dazed and they followed the men up the trail. As they moved, she noticed at least another four fatigue-clad men, also heavily armed, guarding the way. After about two minutes walking they reached their obvious destination. Helicopters! She could not believe it; she had seen nothing flying for months.

"Get in quickly," ordered the soldier accompanying them.

Already from behind she could hear gunfire, the creatures had regrouped quickly and were again attacking. The three soldiers who were providing the rear guard were already retreating towards the helicopters. As they approached, she wondered how they would manage to board the waiting aircraft. Then, as soon as they stopped firing, the creatures would rush the helicopters and nobody would get away.

As the three soldiers made it into the clearing where the helicopters had landed, the soldier who had done all the talking up to then, shouted "Cover!" The three men dived to the ground as the last ten yards of the forest surrounding the clearing erupted into flames.

A second later the three men were up and running for the helicopters. Fires were raging all around the clearing where they had landed, the take off proving easier than she had anticipated. When they were in the air she looked down, the fires already starting to die back. The creatures were appearing again but, seeing that their prey had escaped, they were disappearing back into the forest.

"You're okay now, miss," the soldier shouted to her over the noise of the helicopter. "How is Mr Stewart doing?"

“I don’t know,” she replied. “He got a knock on the head during the fight.”

“He’ll be okay, our Medic will fix him up. You guys were doing okay, you’ve obviously had a lot of experience fighting these things,” the soldier said.

“We’ve held our own for a long time now,” she replied, thoughtfully. “But today was a close call, too close! If you hadn’t come along when you did . . .” she paused. “Where are we heading?”

“There,” the soldier replied, pointing out of the window.

As she looked, she realised they had found exactly what they had been looking for. Hopefully it would be worth it, for coming into view below them she could see a castle.

## Chapter Two - The Castle

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As the helicopters touched down in the castle compound, Stephanie realised how enormous the place was. There were vehicles parked everywhere, several of the ones she could see were armoured. There were at least two more helicopters, one of which appeared to be an Apache attack helicopter. Hidden amongst the vehicles in view was at least one huge tank and a couple of fuel tankers.

Upon landing the soldiers vacated the helicopters, medics approaching to treat any wounded. John, being the only person injured, was examined quickly and then carried off on a stretcher, she presumed to hospital. She wanted to go with him but her attention was drawn to the friendly soldier who had done all the talking during their short flight. He was apparently making some kind of a report to an officer. After giving a short salute, he disappeared into the main building of the castle, the officer then walked over to where Stephanie was standing.

“Miss Jones, I’m pleased you and Mister Stewart made it. My name is Major Robert Jones,” he said smiling. “I’m the commanding officer here.”

“Major Jones,” she began. “Thank you for rescuing us. If your men hadn’t arrived when they did, then . . .” she paused, again realising just how close they had been to being killed.

“We can talk later. I dare say you are worried about Mr. Stewart’s condition,” he said. Calling over a nearby soldier, he continued, “The Corporal will escort you to the med. tent. Please give Mister Stewart my compliments. We’ll continue our conversation in the morning, when he’s recovered.”

“Thank you, Major,” she replied and followed the waiting soldier.

As she entered the medical facility, she could see John sitting up and talking to a doctor. His face lit up with a smile as he saw her walk in.

“How are you feeling?” she asked, showing her concern.

“I’m fine, no concussion, nothing. It just dazed me for a minute. You saved me again, didn’t you?” he asked, smirking.

“They saved us both! I’ve never seen so many creatures working together. What do you think is going on?” she asked.

“It’s this place and the people hiding in it. I should have known better than to bring you here,” he answered.

“Why? I’ve seen some of the equipment they have. They are well armed, they have helicopters, armoured vehicles and, as we touched down, I saw considerable numbers of soldiers. It has to be one of the biggest military units left in the country. The castle itself is massive! We are a lot safer in here than out there on our own.”

“You’re probably right but those facts will keep the creatures very interested in trying to get in the place. The people here will never be allowed to leave. That probably means we can’t either.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“There’ll be enough of ‘them’ to make sure we can never get out and there’ll be more coming every day. You’re right, this place is without doubt, one of the last strongholds in the country. That fact alone will make the place irresistible to the creatures. It will attract them like a magnet attracts iron filings. Hey, don’t worry about it, we are safe for now. We’ll find out more in the morning. This will be the first good night’s sleep we’ve both had for ages. The doctor said I’ve got to stay here tonight for observation but I’m sure he’ll allow you to join me in the next bed. Tomorrow we’ll go and see the guy in charge.”

With that they had slept long and sound, both of them having been exhausted.

After they had woken they were amazed to find they could shower and were even more impressed when one of the nurses brought them both breakfast. Feeling almost human again, they walked out into the castle grounds and were approached by the soldier that had led the rescue mission the night before.

“Major Jones’s compliments, would you please join him in his office for debriefing.”

“Certainly, Sergeant Major,” John replied, noticing the soldier’s rank.

“No need for that, Sir. My name’s Mark, Mark Roberts to be exact. Me and the boys were very impressed with the way you handled yourselves on the outside last night.”

“Thanks, Mark,” John replied. “But I’m pretty certain if you hadn’t come along when you did, we’d have wound up as a snack for those things. What’s your situation here?”

“It’s better you speak to the Major, we can talk afterwards. If you’d follow me, please,” and he led them to the Major’s office.

After knocking, they followed Mark in and found the commanding officer sitting at his desk, going over a report of the rescue mission.

“Major Jones, we spoke shortly on the radio yesterday, my name is John Stewart. Stephanie, I believe, you met last night. Thanks for the cavalry, I realise it was dangerous for the men you sent out. I’d like to thank them all if that’s possible.”

“Certainly, John, the men will be eager to talk to you as well. We’ve had no contact with the outside world for some time now. Any news on the war will be welcomed.”

“The news isn’t good, Major, we are losing! The creatures seem to be getting stronger, while we are definitely getting weaker. Looking at some of your hardware here, I’d say yours was one of the strongest military units left on the face of the planet. You might make a difference out there, the forces that are still fighting could definitely use your help.”

“John, we have two operational helicopters, three armoured personnel carriers, six sixteen toners, a handful of jeeps and a bridge repair crane. At the moment, we have fuel enough to be able to keep small operations going. Other equipment you might have seen here is, at this time, non-functional. I have one hundred and sixteen fully fit soldiers and a medical unit consisting of three doctors and six nurses. I also have two hundred and thirteen civilians, villagers, farmers and locals. Some we picked up on the way here, some were already here when we arrived. Even if we wanted to leave, we haven’t enough transport for everyone. I can’t expect these people to walk, not with those monsters out there. So you see John, we are stuck here, just like you are now. Finding enough food to keep everybody fed is difficult enough, finding a way for everybody to leave here safely just isn’t feasible. Taking my men out of here and leaving everybody else behind, is something I won’t even consider. I’m afraid our contribution to the war effort is over. We did our bit.”

“I apologise, Major, I didn’t mean to imply anything. I had no idea of the situation here. Up to now we have only seen military personnel.”

“The civilians stay indoors at night, for obvious security reasons, no doubt you’ll meet some of them today. Now, have you heard any information about how the war’s progressing in other countries?”

“Not really,” John replied. “We’ve just been trying to stay alive. The last news on the war from abroad was months ago. France

was basically lost, Germany as well. From the smaller countries nothing has been heard for months. Russia, America and China were still fighting but struggling. More and more of the creatures appear every day, the odds are greatly stacked in their favour. In America they apparently managed to catch a couple of the creatures. They wanted to know more about them, feeding needs, how their camouflage works, how we could better combat them but, before they could even begin, the things killed themselves somehow. They learnt nothing! We are fighting a war against an enemy we know practically nothing about. I'm sorry, Major, we can't help you that much, we could barely help ourselves out there."

"From what I've been told, John, that's not exactly true. What about your journey up the country? Did you travel through any towns or cities that hadn't been destroyed or looted? Any information along those lines could be of great help to us. Please take your time and think carefully."

Stephanie spoke for the first time since entering the Major's office.

"John, the town where we found the soldiers, the ones that told us about the castle. It was deserted but basically intact. If I remember correctly, we passed a huge looking precinct and at least two smaller supermarkets. They all appeared to be untouched."

"You're right," John agreed. "Major, that was a town about seventy miles away, almost due south of here. I can't remember its name but it looked as if it had been evacuated early on. No looters had been there at the time we passed through but that is almost a week ago. The situation could be different now."

Looking on a small hand drawn map of the general area, the Major suggested the town in question could have been Hadlee, a large trading centre built shortly after the end of the war. John said he was not sure but after checking on the small map, agreed it was the only town in the area big enough.

"Why is it important for you to know that, Major?" John asked, puzzled.

"Food, John. Quite simple really. I need to find food for three hundred and thirty nine people every day. In fact, now with your arrival, it's three hundred and forty one. As you will appreciate, we can't just wander around outside the castle walls. That gives us limited space in here to grow our own food. We have a small garden and do produce, quite successfully, a small amount of fresh vegetables but nothing like the quantities we actually need.

We have only one option open to us; every so many weeks we have to go on a food raid. We have enough supplies at the moment for the next week, maybe ten days but then we'll have to go shopping again. Surrounding towns have already been visited and stripped of everything we can use. The longer we stay here, the further we have to travel from the castle to find what we need. Your town could give us the opportunity to re-supply for a longer time. The only hiccup, it's a long way away. Any problems that crop up have to be dealt with by the raiding team. Because we only have two operational helicopters at the moment, the number of personnel we can send is limited. Even transporting the supplies back to the castle, once they're secured, isn't as straight forward as one might imagine. All told, it's complicated and very dangerous for my men."

"I can appreciate that, Major. Why don't you send the helicopters, enough firepower and scout the area first?" John suggested. "It would limit the danger and maybe forewarn of any unexpected problems."

"The tactic's sound, John. Have you got a military background?" the Major asked, suddenly very interested.

"Yes," replied John. "Both of us have. We have been involved a lot with the military, usually as instructors but sometimes as operatives. The last few years, up until we left, we were mainly with Special Services, working as martial arts instructors and weapons specialists, specialising in edged weapons. Since we've been on the road, that particular skill has saved us on numerous occasions."

"Yes, I noticed the swords, John," replied the Major. "Very interesting. This castle, being as big as it is, had a small museum before the war and a considerable collection of edged weapons. The museum area has been turned into sleeping quarters now but the weapons are still here, stored in the castle's cellars. Maybe you would both like to examine them, in fact come on, we'll talk more later. Let me give you a guided tour of my castle."

With that the Major led the way out into the courtyard.

"These are some of the vehicles we came here with. Over there we have two fuel tankers, so for the moment at least fuel is not a problem."

"What about ammunition?" Stephanie asked.

"When we decided to head up here from our base, we spent weeks flying up equipment. During that time the castle was manned by a small complement of my best men and sealed from the outside. We were constantly flying in supplies, so it was



important the place was secure. Survivors started arriving soon after that, they were obviously allowed to enter but my men did a good job of keeping any creatures out. When we finally got here we also brought a small convoy of supplies and equipment with us, so from the point of ammunition and explosives we have more than enough. Feel free to take what you need to re-supply. We have installed generators, so power's not a problem, at least as long as we have fuel. We've installed pumps and filter systems, meaning we can use the castle's underground springs, so water isn't an immediate problem. We had stored tons of food, but we didn't reckon with so many civilians being picked up on the way here. It went quicker than expected, now it's our only problem."

"Impressive, Major," John remarked. "How many of these creatures are now in the area? Up until last night, we'd never seen so many grouped together."

"We don't know exactly. We used to send out reconnaissance patrols but they came under attack more and more. We lost quite a few good men in the early days of being here. The only reconnaissance performed now is with the helicopters but we don't bother that often. I know more and more creatures arrive every day; we seem to attract them but as long as they can't get in here, it doesn't really matter."

"How can you be sure they can't get in here, Major? We've found they can solve problems quite successfully. I'd be worried they were trying to find a way in. Old castle's have secret tunnels, who knows?"

"John, please call me Robert. I play down the rank situation nowadays, there doesn't seem to be much point. Let me show you why they can't get in here," and he led the way up on to the old battlements.

On the top, Robert showed John and Stephanie the layout of the castle.

"First," he started, "we have cleared the ground for two hundred yards all around the walls; that gives us a good killing zone. On every wall, at all times, we have snipers positioned. They are excellent marksmen so nothing approaches the wall. We have a moat around the entire castle, it is twenty five feet deep and forty feet wide. Tunnelling underneath it would require machinery, which they don't possess, so they aren't getting in that way any time soon. We have a drawbridge and a working portcullis but, just in case, we have added inner doors. They are made from wood reinforced with steel and are over one foot thick. These are barred at all times. As to tunnels and the like, the soldiers who

originally took the place over checked it with ultrasonic, radar, in fact everything we've got. They found one secret passage leading down under the moat, with an exit coming out in a cave system to the north of the castle. It must have taken years to dig. The exit is hidden, difficult to find. We have modified the tunnel by building, every thirty yards or so, steel doors into the walls. The passageways between the doors are monitored by cameras at all times. Altogether there are ten sections built into the tunnel, the last five of which are fitted with robot sentries. They are something we brought with us, left over from the war. They have one thousand rounds of armour piercing ammunition each, are censor controlled reacting to movement. They are battery powered and work independently of us. They'll kill anything that's moving through the tunnel. As extra insurance, we've planted explosives in the section of the tunnel running under the moat. They can be detonated using remote control if at any time the tunnel defences fail and creatures are moving through. The sender is always in the control room where the monitoring equipment is installed, the soldier in charge there is under standing orders to blow the tunnel if the need arises. One second after the explosives are detonated, the tunnel will be filled with water, drowning everything in it. The door at the castle end of the tunnel is solid steel, two feet thick and built into the castle walls. It can easily withstand the water pressure after the moat is blown, so there's little or no danger to us. We thought about blowing it when we found it but decided having a second exit could prove useful at a later date. I think you'll agree, John, we're perfectly safe here."

"Impressive, very impressive," John stated. "They can't get in but it seems we can't get out. It's stalemate. Don't get me wrong, Robert, we are very grateful that you rescued us yesterday but I can't help wondering how our lives will be locked in this prison, because, whether we like it or not, that's what it will become."

"What do you suggest, John?" the Major asked, seeming a little annoyed by the statement.

"I don't know, I just don't know," John replied.

## Chapter Three - Settling In

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The Major left them standing out on top of the castle battlements. Stephanie turned to face John.

“What are we going to do?” she asked.

“We are going to enjoy a few days of sleeping, without having to keep one eye open. We are going to eat regularly, without having to wonder where the food is coming from, at least for a while. We are going to make love,” he said, his eyes sparkling, “all night! Then we’ll see. We need to re-supply anyway, ammunition at least, before we decide anything. Whether we stay here or try to leave, is a question I can’t answer at the moment. We could stay here forever but I’m not sure we’d be happy. I don’t think the decision will be ours to make, the food situation will eventually dictate the way this plays out. Eventually we’ll all have to leave, either that or starve! It might be months or even years from now but at some stage we’ll have to travel too far to find the necessary supplies. At that point, there will be no other option available to us but to leave. The only trouble is, by then, they’ll be so many of these creatures gathered outside the castle walls, leaving might not be possible.”

“I’ll stay here with you, John. I’ll leave with you, if that’s what you decide but we can’t run forever. At some stage we will have to find another alternative. I don’t know what but, if we give it a little time, maybe an answer will come to us,” she suggested.

“Time is something we’re going to have a lot of, at least for now,” John said, smiling.

He leant over and kissed her on the mouth.

“What do you say? Let’s see if we can get a room in this motel.”

After finding a room, they made love, showered and then made love again. Afterwards they both slept deeply. It was the first chance in months for them both to completely relax and sleep, without the risk of being discovered and attacked. As John awoke, it was four o’clock in the afternoon. He showered again, enjoying the novelty. It had been weeks since his last shower and that had been cold water. The opportunity to wash under warm water was a luxury he could not refuse. After dressing he left Stephanie still sleeping, confident he could leave her without worrying for the first time in months. He went outside to get some

air and have a look around the compound, the castle and its inhabitants intriguing him. After only a few minutes, he bumped into the Sergeant Major who had led the rescue team the night before.

“How are you feeling, John?” Mark asked.

“Fine thanks,” John replied. “Have you got time for that chat now?”

“Time is one thing we’ve all got plenty of, John. There’s never a great deal to do here. How do you fancy a coffee?”

“Love one. Lead the way,” John said.

“We’ll see if the canteen staff are in a good mood today,” Mark smiled. “That usually dictates the flavour of the coffee,” he laughed.

After fetching two cups of the normal looking coffee they sat down together.

“Well, what do you think of our little set up?” Mark asked.

“I don’t know enough to be able to comment. You certainly seem organised enough. Stephanie was impressed with the way you and your men handled yourselves last night. One thing worries me though . . .” John said.

“What’s that? Your fiancée’s attraction to me!” Mark interrupted.

“Not exactly,” John smiled. “I’m wondering how long we are going to stay here. The longer we stay here, the more creatures are going to gather outside the walls. If at any stage we were forced to leave, it might prove to be impossible to break through their lines.”

Mark considered John’s question for a second, before telling him about the soldiers that he and Stephanie had tried to help in Hadlee. The Sergeant who had told them about the castle before dying, had been a good friend of Mark’s. He had also expressed concerns about their future locked inside the fortress. He and a group of his friends could not stand the thought of being prisoners for the rest of their lives so they had asked for permission to leave. The Major had allowed it, had even flown them out of the immediate area by helicopter. Twelve soldiers had gone in total, all of them heavily armed. They had wanted to know what it was like, out beyond the castle walls. The castle occupants had heard from other survivors how bad things were supposed to have become, the soldiers wanted to know for definite. If possible, they wanted to return and let the Major know the real story. It had been a massive disappointment to everyone in the castle to hear that they were dead. Mark explained that with everybody locked in the castle twenty four hours a day,

under no real threat, it was easy to forget how desperate their situation was really becoming. The news about the soldiers' demise had spread through the castle's population like wildfire. It had brought home the truth. Up until that point, many of the castle's occupants, soldiers and civilians alike, had expressed an interest in leaving. Since the sad news of the deaths of the soldiers had spread, a lot of the civilians who were unhappy with their situation, had resigned themselves to the fact they would probably never be able to leave.

John explained in detail what he and Stephanie had witnessed out on the road since beginning their travels. He suggested that whatever horrors the people in the castle had heard or imagined were, in fact, more than likely true. He went even further, explaining that even if they managed to break the siege, a large number of people travelling across country would be an irresistible target for the creatures. It would be a running gun battle that, without adequate transport, would result in extremely high casualties.

Mark agreed but added that certain units from the garrison stationed there were still willing to try. The civilians were frightened but he was sure, given a realistic chance, that most of them could be persuaded to consider another option.

After talking for an hour they both agreed that without the right plan and enough transportation, an attempt to leave at that time would prove as fatal to them as it had to the soldiers who had already died in Hadlee.

Other personnel had joined them in the meantime, the conversation becoming a little more relaxed. Many of the men asking John about what he had done before the war, his training and his martial art skills. Theories about the creatures' origins were also hotly debated, ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous. Time passed but slowly. Although John enjoyed the debating, sometimes even laughing out loud, a thing he rarely did, he could not imagine living that kind of life for years or even decades. He was sure it would drive him quite mad.

At that moment Stephanie walked in, looking totally refreshed and beautiful. Some of the soldiers sitting around the table moved to make room for her. She had barely introduced herself when an alarm bell started to ring. The soldiers sitting around in the canteen sprang into action. They were grabbing weapons and heading outside.

"What's happening, Mark?" John asked, standing up.

“It’s dark,” he answered. “The creatures are coming out of the tree line. Usually nothing happens but we like to let them know we’re still here. Breaks the monotony.”

Mark led them outside and up on to the castle battlements. As they reached the top, John spotted Major Jones on the wall.

“What’s the story, Major?” he asked.

“Take a look,” the Major replied, handing John a pair of night vision binoculars.

Looking through them he could see the reason for the excitement. There were creatures surrounding the entire castle, hundreds of them! He realised there were probably hundreds more hidden, maybe thousands. The sight of so many gathered together was scary and it proved to him how desperate their situation really was. Outside the castle walls they would be dead within minutes. Now he understood Major Jones’s decision to stay put, anything else would be crazy.

One or two of the soldiers opened fire, Sergeants shouting orders to cease fire immediately. John looked at Major Jones, a puzzled look on his face.

“Unless they approach the castle walls, John, we don’t open fire anymore. We let the snipers practice now and then but otherwise it’s basically a waste of ammunition, they can’t get in,” Major Jones explained. “When we first occupied the castle we killed anything that moved out there, in the meantime I consider it unnecessary.”

“Major,” John said. “I’ve been talking with some of your men and it would seem many of them would still be interested in trying to leave here. Some civilians also. Would you be prepared to consider our options?”

“In my office, please,” the Major replied abruptly and walked off, John and Stephanie following.

As they sat down, Major Jones closed the door behind them. He sat at his desk and stared at the couple.

“With all due respect, John, Stephanie, what I don’t need here is a pair of troublemakers. I can understand my men unloading on you, they’ve been here a long time. I fully accept that some of them are unhappy with our situation. I’ll go even further and say that if we’d have known beforehand that coming here would be the equivalent of a life sentence for all of us, we probably would have reconsidered. Unfortunately, we didn’t know and the rest is history. Whether my men believe it or not and frankly I don’t give a shit either way, I have considered trying to leave here many times. As I explained to you this morning I am not prepared to

leave anybody behind. Now, until somebody comes up with a realistic way of transporting everybody safely away from here, we are stuck. Don't misunderstand me, I hate it as much as the next man but I am responsible for the lives of every man, woman and child living here. I take my responsibilities very seriously, John, you should remember that. The twelve soldiers you came across in Hadlee were my men, my responsibility. I let them go with the hope they could bring back information that might enable the rest of us to leave. Now they are dead and God knows how much they suffered before they died! I will not risk another life without knowing our situation warrants it, or we have a damn good chance of succeeding. Do I make myself clear?"

"My apologise, Robert. I can see now I've misjudged the situation. I thought everything here was stagnating but after what you've just said and what we witnessed outside the walls tonight, I realise you are absolutely correct in your assessment," John replied, humbly.

"When you were both serving in the military, what ranks did you have?" Robert asked, his tone friendlier.

"We were both Captains," John answered.

"Good. Apart from me you both have the highest rank here. I would appreciate your help in any matters concerning the safety and well-being of the castle's population. However, I must insist we follow the normal chain of command. I might play down the rank situation but I am in command nevertheless. Anything on your mind, you come to me first, we will discuss it and find an answer between us. I know the enlisted men here are desperate to do something but talking about impossible escape plans will not help their situation or ease their suffering. It only makes it worse. We have had enough trouble with the rumour wagon running wild in the past. I would like to avoid such incidents if it's at all possible," Robert said.

"We'll be pleased to help where we can, Robert," Stephanie said.

"I'm not sure we're the right people for the job," John added, his days of responsibility for others, apart from Stephanie, well and truly over as far as he was concerned.

"With your experiences on the outside and your backgrounds, I'm sure you are," Robert said. "Now, I think we've all had enough excitement for today. We'll have plenty of time to talk more over the coming days and weeks. I don't know about you but I'm starving. I believe the cooks have excelled themselves again and have concocted some kind of dumpling stew for this evening. Personally, I can't wait. Would you both care to join me?"

“Certainly, Robert. It sounds interesting,” John said smiling.  
“Oh it will be that, I can assure you,” Robert laughed.

They walked to the canteen and ate together, the meal proving to be quite edible, the mood at dinner relaxed and enjoyable. Afterwards John and Stephanie went back to their room and made love again, this another one of their new-found luxuries John could not get enough of. Spent and exhausted they had eventually fallen asleep in each others’ arms.

This time the dream was different. They were still fighting against high odds but no longer alone. Surrounding them were also numbers of soldiers locked in combat with the creatures. She even recognised one of them, it was Mark, the Sergeant who had befriended them. He was wounded but still in the thick of things. They were all in some kind of a building she did not recognise but in the confined space the noise of the gunfire all around was deafening. She awoke, sweating. John was still asleep. She leant over and kissed him gently on his cheek. He murmured but slept on. She showered again, the luxury she had also never expected to be able to enjoy again. Mark had explained that everything was powered by the generators. Electricity and running water again an everyday thing, showing how adaptable the soldiers had become. The engineering skills needed to accomplish this feat something normal military personnel were not capable of. She dressed and decided to go exploring, leaving John to sleep. She left their room and noticed straightaway there were people milling around all over the place. This time there were not just soldiers but civilians as well. Three children in particular caught her attention. They were staring at her, obviously wondering who she was. She smiled at them, one of them smiling back. The other two seemed a little unsure of the stranger who was confronting them.

“Hello,” Stephanie said, quietly. “What are your names?”

The biggest boy, seemingly the bravest of the bunch, spoke first.

“I’m Billy, this is John and that’s Sarah,” he said, pointing to the other children in turn.

“My name’s Stephanie. What are you doing?” she asked.

“We’re going outside to play,” the boy called John said. “Hide and seek. Do you want to play with us?” he asked, hopefully.

“Maybe later,” she said. “I have to go somewhere now but you play nicely and be careful.”

They smiled at her and ran off laughing.

She could also understand Robert now. How could anybody risk the lives of such adorable children, so innocent and trusting.



She walked to the canteen and was sat drinking her second cup of coffee as John joined her. She told him of her chance meeting with the children. She desperately wanted children of her own but accepted that bringing children into the world, as it currently was, would be irresponsible. Helping to protect those that were already there would go some way to making up for her not having any of her own. John promised her they would do whatever was necessary to ensure the safety of everybody living in the castle, especially the children. Whether he liked it or not they were, as of that moment, part of the castle's community and he knew their fate would be linked with the fate of everybody living there.

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