

FURNACE EPILOGUE

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EPILOGUE

It took me five days to tell my story.

Well, it took five days for my story to tell *itself*. I lay there, in that oversized bed inside the army base up in the mountains, and the words just came. They boiled up from my stomach like a geyser, I couldn't have stopped them even if I wanted to. I was so exhausted that I'm not sure I was even aware of what I was saying. I think I could have fallen asleep right there and that story would have kept on coming. Those words, they were like breaths. After everything I'd been through, everything that had happened, I needed to keep talking or I'd just slip away into the night. My story, it kept me alive.

General Hamilton didn't say more than a handful of words during those five days. He sat beside the bed, his digital recorder perched between us on the soft, lavender-scented sheets. His expression barely changed, although there were times when his mouth dropped open, his eyes widened and a sheen of sweat broke out on his sunburnt forehead. Once or twice, when I fal-

tered, he would reach out and lay his hand on my arm, squeezing gently until I found my way again.

Zee and Lucy listened in silence as well, drifting in and out of sleep on the sofa next to the window. Both of them had nightmares, I could see it in the way their faces creased, their bodies twitched. But every time they woke, and remembered where they were, they smiled at me. It was those smiles, more than anything else I think, that kept me going.

I dozed off too, on that first night, although I didn't dream. I don't think so anyway. I woke to pitch-black thinking that I was back in Furnace, the day I first arrived, pressed against the bars as the symphony of cries and screams rose up all around me. And for a second I thought I saw a wheezer there, its wrinkled face twitching, its piggy eyes devouring me. I lurched so hard I pulled the IV out of my arm, and even when the lights blinked on and the doctors ran in it took me a while to calm down.

'You sure you're up for this?' General Hamilton asked. 'None of us will blame you if you just want to forget.'

I didn't want to forget. Forgetting was the easy way out. And if I forgot about the wheezers, the warden, Alfred Furnace and the stranger then I'd forget about Donovan, Simon and all the others too. That wasn't a trade I was willing to make. I just opened my mouth and started where I'd left off – as soon as I'd made it clear that I never wanted the lights switched off.

To be honest, I haven't slept in the dark since.

I don't think I ever will again.



Each of those five days seemed to be brighter than the last, the sunlight like honey dripping through the room's only window. Each day was louder too as the birds continued to find their voice, singing like this was the first week there had ever been. I guess, in a way, it was.

People were the same. They stopped speaking in hushed, frightened whispers as the news they talked about got better and better. They would burst in with announcements like 'we've heard from second platoon' and 'the government are on the com, more of them survived than we thought.' By the end of the fifth day they were singing too.

I didn't really take it in. I was lost in my own world, my own story. And it felt so good to be telling it. I didn't miss a thing – every last event, every single emotion, every word and every action. I told it all to Hamilton. Only, I wasn't really talking to him. I was telling this story because I had to, because it was the only way to find myself again. My body was bent and broken out of shape, covered in a Kevlar-hard suit of nectar. And my mind, too, felt like it was entombed in darkness, buried deep beneath the residue of everything that had happened. But each word I spoke worked away at that filth, chipped off a little more of the nightmare. By telling my story, I was escaping from it. I knew that when I got to the end, I'd be me again.

It wasn't all easy. It didn't all want to be told. There were moments – when Donovan died, and Simon too;

no, let's be honest, when I *killed* them – that I couldn't speak. The words locked themselves in my throat, they just wouldn't come. On both of those occasions Lucy climbed onto the bed with me, holding my head in her hands and stroking what was left of my hair. I don't think I'd have got through it without her.

Remembering the good times was almost as bad. It was heartbreaking. It still is. That's the one wish I have. Not that none of this ever happened, not that my parents were still alive, or my old friends from before the prison. It's that Donovan and Simon had made it, that they were here with me now. I miss them so much. I thought that maybe I'd still see them, the way I had on the island, just before we left, the way I'd seen D back when I was locked up in Solitary. But they're gone. They're somewhere else now. I hope it's somewhere good.

God knows they deserve it.



The only thing that really stopped me talking during those five days was when the doctors came to check on me. They would barge in, shunting General Hamilton out of the way and pulling back the sheets to get a good look at me. I hated those moments, because I couldn't help but look too. My body was a wreck, every inch covered in scars and black scabs of nectar. My right arm was an obsidian blade that I didn't dare move for fear of skewering somebody in the small room. My left arm was distorted as well, the fingers too long, too many joints, like fat spider legs. They reminded me of the

stranger's fingers, and every time they twitched I wanted to scream.

For the first few days those doctors didn't say much. They barely even spoke to me except to ask me to move this or flex that. They took photos and x-rays and scans with the big shiny machines they wheeled in and out. They drew on me with felt tips like they were playing join-the-dots between the various grotesque injuries. Some even peeled pieces of me away with glinting scalpels, making me think of Colonel Panettierre, the butcher that she was. But none of them had the same sickening glint of excitement in their eyes. They looked at me with compassion, and with gratitude too, I think.

It was on the fourth day, as I was telling Hamilton about the burger we'd eaten in the City after we'd escaped from the blacksuits, that one of the doctors came in and sat next to me on the bed. She was old and frail and her greying blonde hair was pulled back into a ponytail, but her face was creased into a gentle smile. She told me her name was Lorna.

'We think we can fix you,' she said. 'Not everything, of course, but enough.'

I already felt like I was lighter, like I was floating out of this bent and broken body, laughing so much that I thought they would have to pull me down from the ceiling.

'Thank you,' I said. She took my hand, the one with fingers, and held it.

'You're welcome, Alex. It's the least we can do, all things considered. You saved us all.'



And my story kept on coming, unstoppable. When I woke up on the fifth day, after another dreamless sleep, Hamilton was waiting, pacing back and forth and chewing his nails with impatience. Zee and Lucy had both been given a room, but they still hadn't left me. I think they wanted to wait until I had finished, until every last word had been spoken.

I think that final day was the easiest. I don't really remember talking; I was in a trance, the words burning up my throat by themselves. By the time I'd got to the bit where we reached the island, Zee and Lucy were sharing the sofa with half a dozen doctors and at least twice as many more were packed like sardines around the General. They all watched me with open mouths and eyes like pickled eggs, waiting to hear what came next. I ignored them, closing my eyes and reliving everything that had happened with Furnace and the stranger until the last of the story tumbled from my lips and I fell silent.

Only then did it hit me, the sheer impossibility of what had happened. In those few seconds after my final words I felt the darkness slough away, the golden light from outside seeping right into my core, so bright, so warm that I thought I might just melt. The feeling was incredible, so overwhelming that I was crying before I even realised it – huge, heaving sobs that were half tears and half laughter.

By the time they had faded it was growing dark

outside. Zee and Lucy lay either side of me on the bed, but other than them the room was empty.

‘Sorry about that,’ I said sheepishly, wiping my cheeks against my shoulders. ‘Where’d everybody go?’

‘Got embarrassed watching you blub like a baby,’ said Zee. Lucy reached over and slapped him on the belly.

‘Shut it, Zee,’ she said, beaming. ‘They wanted to give you some space. You’ve been through a lot.’

‘Twice,’ I said. And it really did feel like I’d lived it all again. In telling my story I had locked myself back in the prison, in solitary, and I had fought on the streets and on the island. I’d felt every blow, every wound, for a second time. I’d experienced the terror and the hatred and the sadness and the desperation and the hope, *everything*, just the same as when it had actually happened. No wonder, then, that at the end of that fifth day I could barely keep my eyes open.

That night is the only one where I remember dreaming. I was inside Furnace Penitentiary, sitting on my bunk with Donovan and Zee and Toby. Simon and Lucy were there too, and Ozzie and Pete and Monty and Jimmy and Bodie and Sam the blacksuit and even the young Alfred Furnace.

‘You don’t just wanna go now?’ Donovan asked, and I knew that we’d put all the gas-filled gloves in place, that we were ready to break out through the crack in the chipping room floor. Even in my dream I knew that Donovan had asked me this before, for real, the night that he’d been captured by the blood watch. Back then I’d said no, and that decision had ultimately killed him.

There was no way I was going to deny him his freedom again.

‘All for one,’ I said.

‘Oh god, not this Musketeer crap again,’ said Simon with a laugh. But it didn’t stop him answering along with everybody else:

‘And let’s get the hell out of here.’

The walls began to expand, the red rock peeling away, crumbling until it was no longer a cell but a tunnel. A raging river surged along it, carrying us upwards through a mile of solid stone, pushing us out into the moonlight. We stood barefoot on the grass, the wind in our hair, the endless expanse of the stars overhead, and we howled with delight at our freedom.

I slept soundly inside that dream for nearly four days.



It’s been three months, now, since the island. Three months since it ended.

It’s a mess out there. Nobody is sure how many died, but the whispers that float on the wind say things like ‘two thirds’ and ‘tens of millions’. Most of those were ordinary people torn apart by the unrelenting fury of the rats and the berserkers and the blacksuits. Others were kids who’d been bitten and infected with the nectar, who had turned. Some of these had been killed by the army, but the rest died at my hand. I had executed them without a trial, without giving them any hope of a cure. And on the bad days I see them everywhere, crowds of angry faces like the ones in the dream of the

orchard. *My* dead. Their hate-filled stares are a promise that they will never let me rest.

I'm learning to deal with it, though, the guilt. What else can I do but say sorry? Take a life to save a life. It's not the first time I've done that.

The survivors are learning too, learning a new way of life. Everything has changed. No schools, no hospitals, no police, no television, no shops, no internet or phones – but slowly, very slowly, we're healing ourselves. There was a radio broadcast from the government the other day, the first one since the war ended. Zee and Lucy and I huddled in my room and listened to them talk about recovery and strength and perseverance. They're doing another one next week and they want me to talk about what happened – not everything, just the good bits. To be honest I'm bricking myself more about speaking to the nation than I ever was fighting Furnace and his freaks.

But if there's one thing I know how to talk about, it's hope.



There are bad days, and there are good days.

On the good days, I almost manage to forget. I can almost pretend that nothing ever happened.

On the bad days, I can't stop thinking about it.

I can't stop thinking about *him*. The stranger.

I'll never understand what he was. He was a crack in reality, a gaping hole in the world where something ancient and evil seeped through. *He's gone now*, I tell

myself. *He's dead.* But on the bad days, the *really* bad days, I wonder if there are more like him, if maybe a different stranger will appear, will plunge his hands into the ground and pull out another piece of hell.

Hamilton tells me there are people studying the stranger's remains, and the nectar, trying to work out what he was. They're looking for the orchard, too, the place where it all started. I don't think they'll ever find out the truth, though. There are some things that we just aren't supposed to know.

I'm grateful that I've had a few transfusions. The last trace of the stranger's blood, and the nectar that Zee and Lucy used to bring me back, has gone. What flows through my veins now is one hundred per cent human.

Even so, when I have bad days the world feels like it's paper thin, that everything in it – the ground, the sky, the people – is just a brittle skin plastered over a seething, churning, howling mass of darkness. When I have bad days I see that skin peeling away and the madness pouring through like filthy water, drowning us all in chaos and pain. When I have bad days I feel that I'm the only one holding it back, that if I stop thinking about it for a second then everything will be lost. When I have bad days I lie awake and see the end of the world played out again and again and I scream into my pillow. When I have bad days I wonder how life can be worth living when things like the stranger exist, when everything you love can be cut away from you at any moment. What is there to fight for?

But there *is* something to fight for, to hang on for.

There are the good days.

And there are more of them all the time.



My parents never showed up. I knew they wouldn't. I miss them, especially after what I found in my bedroom at home, the message they'd left me. One of these days I'll go back to my old house and sort through their stuff, but not yet. I'm not quite ready for that.

I do forgive them, though. I owe them that much.

Lucy was lucky, her mum made it. An army chopper brought her up to the mountains last month from where she'd been hiding – in a church crypt somewhere by the Lakes. I watched the reunion through the window in my room. The first half of it, anyway. My heart was so heavy I had to turn away after a minute or so, tears steaming up the glass. Not that I wasn't pleased for her, I mean I really was. I guess I just wanted to feel the same thing, you know, seeing someone I thought was dead stepping out of the helicopter and into my arms.

Zee's folks showed up about a week later. His dad's pretty badly hurt, lost a leg in the fighting, but they think he'll make it. I've seen less of Zee since they arrived, he spends his time down in the infirmary – no, the *hospital*, I never want to hear the word infirmary again – talking about the documentary he wants to make about it all. Zee and his bloody documentaries. He seems really happy, though. He deserves to be happy. More than anyone else Zee was the one who gave me the strength to carry on, who saved me. In truth it wasn't

really me at all who ended the war. It was him.

Seeing Zee chatting away at a hundred miles per hour, hearing Lucy's laughter, it makes me think that one day, if we work hard enough at it, things might just be normal again.

They found Simon's parents too, although they didn't come up to the base. From what I heard they decided to stay put, helping to clear the streets and pull survivors out from under the rubble. I'm not sure what they were told about their son, but I hope they know that he was a hero, that without him the war, and the world, would be lost. I hope they understand that his sacrifice was worth it.

The army has been back to the island to look for his body, but they haven't discovered it. I'll go back too, one of these days. There's still a chance we might find him.

But I'm not quite ready for that just now either.

General Hamilton told me that when things were better they would hold a ceremony in honour of the fallen, and that Simon and Donovan would have their place amongst the heroic dead. They're going to mark off a square mile of land in the City – an area of remembrance, they call it. Trees and lakes and stuff like that. They won't have much to put in either of their graves, but it feels good to know they won't be forgotten. It feels good to know I'll have a place to go and talk to them.

I hope for Donovan's sake they put a burger van there.



And me? They call me a hero too, wherever I go. They want to shake my hand – the one that still has fingers – they hug me and ask me to tell them my story.

I don't feel like a hero. What these people don't know is that I'm a killer, and a coward too. Like I told you, I'm not a good person. I did some awful things before Furnace, and I'm guilty of much, much worse since. But I'm starting to understand that you don't have to be perfect to be good. You can do bad things and still be a good person. And like I've said before, sometimes it's better to do bad things for the right reasons than good things for the wrong ones. Right?

So maybe I am just a little bit hero. I guess a little bit hero is enough. A little bit hero is all anyone really needs to be.

I've had my first surgery. I went in a couple of weeks ago and they took off my right arm, the blade. I can't tell you how good it feels not to have to drag that thing around with me – without nectar in my system it weighed a tonne. It's a little weird having an arm that ends at my elbow, but they're going to make me a military-issue prosthetic which is pretty cool.

'Man, I hope it has laser guns and stuff,' Zee said when I told him. 'Rockets, like Iron Man.'

I'd be happy with enough false fingers to hold a cup of tea.

They asked me if I wanted my other hand taken off but I told them to leave it. As hideous as it is, and as many bad memories as it conjures, it's still pretty useful – especially for scratching my back.

And the best thing about all this? I can eat again. Not much, just baby food really, churned into mush. But they tell me that sooner or later I'll be able to tuck in to burgers, mac and cheese, chocolate slices and all the other stuff I thought I'd never get to taste again. Man, I cannot wait. I'm drooling now just thinking about it.

I go under the knife again next Thursday. They're going to try and strip out some of the muscle tissue that got stitched in back inside the prison. It'll be good not having to look like the Incredible Hulk any more. They're working on a way to put my eyes back to normal as well. It's the one thing I want more than anything else, especially as without nectar they don't even work in the dark any more. I can't wait to see the world the way it was meant to be seen, not in shades of molten grey. Silver is a bad, bad colour for me now.

Piece by piece I'm getting myself back, I'm becoming Alex Sawyer. My body is getting repaired the same way my mind was when I told my story. I was never perfect, I was a hell of a long way from perfect, but it feels good to be me again. I think I can be happy with me now.

And I'm never going to be handsome, not with all the scars. But something good happened the other day. One of the volunteer nurses, her name is Mia and she's maybe a couple of years older than me, came to visit me when I was recovering from surgery. It wasn't even her shift, but she just sat on the edge of my bed and chatted – not about what had happened, but about TV and video games and how the things she missed most were

football and Monopoly and her DS. When she left she kissed me on the cheek, and I swear I can still feel her lips there.

Zee and Lucy didn't let up about it when I told them.

'Ooooo Alex and Mia sitting in a tree,' Zee sang.

'Getting M-A-R-R-I-E-D,' Lucy added.

'That's not what I was going to say,' Zee said with a frown.

'I know, your mind is filthy.'

'Nothing's gonna happen, guys,' I said when they had stopped laughing. And I honestly don't think anything will. But it's nice – it is *so* nice – to know that I have a future, to know that there is somebody out there for me, to know that I don't have to be on my own. It makes the days burn just that little bit brighter.



Sometimes I go for walks. We're in the middle of nowhere here, and I just like to get away, head up into the hills where the air is exactly like we dreamed it would be when we were back in the prison. I remember standing outside the boarded-up entrance to Room Two, feeling that breeze and thinking of mountains and realising for the first time that there might be a way out. Hope. It is the most important thing in the world. I believe that now more than ever. Hope is what saved my life, hope is what gave me the courage and the strength to carry on. Hope – that unshakeable, golden belief that things can get better – is why I'm here talking to you now. Without it, we are nothing.

I have hope. When I sit here on the roof of the world and look down I just know we're going to get through this. There has been so much death, yes, but with hope we can repair ourselves. With hope we can build a better world. How can you sit with the warm touch of the sun on your face and the gentle wind in your hair and not think that things will be okay?

Things *will* be okay.

Back in the prison I had that thread of silver light leading me to freedom. I still see it, you know, but now it seems to lead everywhere. I think that's a good omen. I can follow that thread to any place, and do anything. It makes me feel like I've still got a life to lead.

Oh, and I gave Lucy back her St Christopher medalion this morning. I thought it was time.

So I guess this is where I leave you. And it's a good place. Zee found a football in one of the lockers down in the barracks and he's organised a match later on this afternoon. I don't know who's playing, a bunch of soldiers I think, and General Hamilton said he'd get involved if he could sneak out of the command centre. Zee wants me at left back, and I know I'll be pretty crap – too big, too lop-sided, only one arm – but I don't care. I just want to get out there and mess around with my mates. I have a feeling it will be the best damn kick-around I've ever had.

I've lost a lot. We all have. But I've still got so much to be grateful for. I've got Zee and Lucy. I've got my life, and I've got my future. I've got my heart and my soul and my smile, too, and I want to use them all now to say

something important, to say *thank you*. Because without you all I don't think I'd have been able to tell my story, let alone live it.

And I've got something else, too. I've got my name. It's what kept me human. It's what kept me alive. *Just don't forget your name*, Monty told me, so long ago. And I didn't. I never lost that. Even now, on the bad days, it stops me falling back into the abyss.

So, from up here in the mountains, I say goodbye.

My name is Alex Sawyer.

And I am free.