



FINAL DAWN

The Thrilling Post-Apocalyptic Series

Season 3

MIKE KRAUS

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Season 3

By

Mike Kraus

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Dear Reader,

The last year has been an incredible journey. I've gone from being a hopeful writer to a bestselling one, with over 70,000 copies of *Final Dawn* sold to date.

This book, *Final Dawn: Season 3*, marks the end of the *Final Dawn* saga and the tales of Rachel Marcus, David and Leonard. Writing the appropriate ending to this story was incredibly difficult, both because I didn't want to let these characters and this world go and because trying to write a proper ending is just plain difficult.

It's my hope that you've not only enjoyed *Final Dawn*, but that the conclusion of the story is both enjoyable and satisfying, and that it makes the journey you've taken into this world worth the time you spent on it. For your time, I am incredibly humbled and grateful and thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Though this is the end of the *Final Dawn* story, it is not the end of my writing career. On the contrary, now that *Final Dawn* has ended, I'm able to expand my horizons and devote myself full-time to a new, major writing project that I've been working on slowly for the last six months. Comprised of a series of standalone novels (as much as I enjoyed writing *Final Dawn* in a serial form, the short book format will be far too constricting for this new project), you'll be entering an entirely new world, with characters and stories that I'm sure you'll enjoy and adore just as much—or more—as those found in *Final Dawn*.

Thank you for believing in me and taking this journey with me. Though this chapter has come to a close, there are many more to come.

Sincerely,
Mike Kraus

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Have you enjoyed *Final Dawn*?

If so, you might enjoy [Prip'Yat: The Beast of Chernobyl](#), available from [Amazon.com](#).

Rachel Walsh | Marcus Warden | David Landry

9:17 AM, April 21, 2038

A light wind blew through the air and the smell of honeysuckle was interspersed with that of pine. Both scents were thick in Marcus's nose as he sagged back against a control panel inside the locomotive, staring blankly at the wall in front of him. Other smells joined that of the plants, coalescing into a dystopian symphony. Blood, sweat, gunpowder and earth were close at hand, flooding his nostrils. Marcus wasn't sure if it was the aroma that made him dizzy or the matter-of-fact way in which Rachel had answered his question.

Marcus had never met the infamous "Mr. Doe," but his invisible hand combined with Rachel's ominous descriptions left little to the imagination. Cold, calculating and merciless, Marcus instinctively knew that the man would show no mercy and accept only death. And here he was, finally showing himself after weeks of struggle had passed, preparing to cut them down like wheat under a scythe. Seated in his helicopter, Doe was nigh-untouchable, and it would only be a matter of time before he found and killed them.

Another explosion echoed through the train, sending Marcus diving on top of Rachel and Sam to protect them. Rubble showered down over the train, along with bits of steel, iron and wood. Marcus peeked through the front of the train, looking at the crater that sat a hundred feet up where the tracks used to be. A ten-foot section had been blown out of the track by the powerful missiles of Doe's black craft which was slowly drifting back down towards the train, no doubt searching for the survivors.

A pounding from the bottom of the locomotive caused Rachel to jump, pushing away from the center of the floor where the noise emanated. A muffled voice followed the pounding and a square section of slats rattled under the blows. "Open the hatch! Hurry!"

Glancing up at the sound of the helicopter circling overhead, Marcus crawled to the center of the locomotive and slid a latch to the side. He pulled up on a small handle, revealing a hatch through the floor straight down to the ground. Bloodied and caked with dirt and grease, David smiled weakly as he saw Marcus and Rachel peering down at him. He held his good arm aloft, reaching to Marcus who grabbed him, pulling him through the hatch and propping him up against a console. Another explosion echoed from far behind the train, followed by an intense rocking of the locomotive. Rachel stood weakly to look out the window and spotted a plume of smoke and dust in the distance.

"He just destroyed the tracks behind us." Sitting down next to David, she looked at him and Marcus, her face pale from shock and exhaustion. "We're trapped."

Clutching his injured arm, David leaned his head back against the console and closed his eyes. "So much for that plan. It was a good one, though, except for when Doe found us."

"How did he find us, anyway?" Marcus kept his voice low. "It's pretty strange that he just showed up. It happened to come across us now, isn't it?"

David pushed at the skin around the metal in his arm, wincing in pain as he considered pulling

out. “I don’t know; the only way he could have found us is if he intercepted a signal between us and the satellite. But I have safeguards for that on the computer. Whenever I’m connected, I have a reminder set to warn me to change frequencies, just for this sort of thing. I wouldn’t have thought Doe would be able to break into it, but I guess he did.”

Marcus was looking at the floor as David spoke, and his eyes widened. Without lifting his head, he swallowed hard and tried to keep his voice calm as he spoke. “Reminders? Like warnings on the computer?”

David nodded, grimacing as he pulled lightly on the shrapnel embedded in his arm. “Yeah, it’s pretty hard to miss. That’s why I don’t understand how I could have let this happen. Ah, damn! That hurts!”

Rachel examined David’s wound, though there wasn’t much she could do about it without access to their supplies. Thankfully, they had unloaded most of their gear from the APC and put it in the train, but it was several cars back, with no easy way to reach it without being spotted by the helicopter. As she and David talked about the best way to get the metal out of his arm, Marcus’s face contorted. He remembered when he was on David’s computer in the back of the APC. *There were the satellite images, which were easy to download, but then there was that alert or something that appeared...*

Glancing up, Marcus saw that Rachel had taken her rifle off of her back and had laid it on the floor next to her, along with a spare magazine. He locked eyes with Sam for a moment and made a motion for him to stay still. Sam whined but obeyed as Marcus grabbed the rifle, turning to jump out the front of the train. David and Rachel didn’t notice his movement until it was too late and he was sprinting forward from the locomotive. “What the hell; Marcus, what are you doing?” David shouted at him, but Marcus didn’t turn around as he shouted back.

“Ending this!”

Once he reached the edge of the destroyed section of tracks, Marcus stopped and turned around. He held the rifle aloft over his head with one hand and the spare magazine with the other. A few seconds passed before the helicopter began moving toward him as Doe finally noticed him. With slow, exaggerated movements, Marcus laid the rifle and the spare magazine down on the ground in front of him then raised his empty hands back over his head. Hoping that Doe had a way of hearing him, he took a deep breath and shouted.

Leonard McComb | Nancy Sims

9:45 AM, April 21, 2038

“Let me see if I understand you correctly.”

Commander Pavel Krylov leaned back in his chair. A slightly incredulous expression graced his face, though he was fighting hard to try to believe what the woman across from him had just described.

“Your country developed a nanotech-based weapon that can think for itself. One of its first actions was to virtually destroy the world with nuclear weapons. It then proceeded to turn many of the survivors into some sort of abominations, though there are still some who haven’t been turned outright killed by nano-robots due to some sort of DNA... what was it?”

“Whitelisting.”

“Oh yes, due to some sort of DNA whitelisting. Furthermore, one of the chief scientists who worked on this project is with another group on the other side of your country with some sort of weapon that you hope will destroy these nano-robots. However, in case that weapon fails, you want me to take this ship to the coast and use our nuclear weapons against the nano-robots.

“Would you say that’s a reasonably accurate summary of what you described to me, Nancy?”

Nancy sat quietly for a moment before nodding slowly. “That’s about the gist of it, yes.”

Commander Krylov smiled briefly and looked down at his notebook. Halfway through Nancy’s story, he had pulled it out to start jotting down pieces of information she had given to him. Picking up a cup of coffee sitting on a nearby table, he took a long sip, flipping through his notes. Nancy watched him on in silence, chewing on her lip as she waited to hear Krylov’s verdict. With a sigh, he closed his notebook and set his coffee down before pushing a button on an intercom built in to the table next to him.

“Send in the cousins.”

Looking back at Nancy, Krylov sighed again. “If it were just your word for all of this, I’d have you and your companion thrown off the ship without a second thought.” Krylov paused and nodded slowly, running his tongue over his teeth. “But... well, you can hear for yourself.”

Commander Krylov and Nancy sat together in silence for a few moments until a sharp knocking came at the steel door.

“Enter!” Krylov swiveled his head to look at the two men who walked through the doorway. Hands in hand, they gave the commander a nervous salute and took their seats in a pair of chairs that Krylov gestured toward.

“Nancy, this is Andrey Lipov and Sergei Usov. I want you to describe these ‘swarms’ you spoke of to them. If you would speak slowly, I would appreciate it, since their English proficiency is somewhat limited.”

Nancy nodded and took a sip of water before starting. “I’m pleased to meet you, Andrey and Sergei. I’m not really sure where to begin, though...” Nancy looked at Krylov for some assistance.

“Just tell them what the swarms look like, what their behavior was and anything else that comes to mind about them.”

“Well,” Nancy took a deep breath, “they’re silver in color, normally anyway, though my friends have seen them in blue, as well. They make this sort of buzzing sound, like a swarm of bees, but angrier. I first saw them right after—”

“Nancy, if you could just stick to the details on these swarms for now and exclude the other details, that would be preferable.”

Nancy glanced between Commander Krylov, Andrey and Sergei, realizing what the look on Krylov’s face was about. *His men don’t know what happened... dear God, they don’t even know the world is gone.* With a gulp, Nancy continued. “I first saw them at a farm, when they were just going by, seemingly hovering in the air above the ground as they went. They moved quickly, too, but they weren’t aggressive towards me.

Later on, though, we started to see and hear about more aggression from the swarms, and we found a lot of human remains from their work, too.”

Over the course of her brief description of the swarms, Andrey and Sergei’s faces had gone pale. They murmured something under their breath as they crossed themselves, sitting in rapt attention on Nancy. Finally, when she finished, Krylov spoke up.

“Is what Nancy has just described to you an accurate description of what attacked the landing party?”

Quick nervous nods were Andrey and Sergei’s only responses to Krylov’s question. Sighing deeply, the commander waved at them, dismissing them from the room. They were both up in a flash, racing for the door and slamming it shut before another word could be spoken.

“Commander, what happened to those men?”

Holding his cup of coffee, Krylov tilted his head as he watched Nancy, holding his tongue for a moment before responding. “You know, Ms. Sims, this entire situation is quite extraordinary. And frankly, I’m still not sure what to make of it. Two Americans on my ship telling me that the world ended and that they need my nuclear weapons to wipe out an infestation caused by a rogue computer. Krylov sipped the coffee, curling his lip at the lukewarm beverage. He set it to the side and sighed again. “There are protocols for such an encounter as this, you know. Technically, I am supposed to take you back to Moscow for an interrogation before we negotiate your release with Washington.”

“But, Commander, you—” Nancy started to protest, but Krylov raised his hand to silence her.

“Calm down, Nancy. As I said before, you and your companion are fortunate that we had such a terrible encounter with these things you described, and that there were two survivors to corroborate your story.”

“Commander...” Nancy leaned forward, pleading with Krylov. “Please, tell me what happened. What do you know about these things?”

Krylov shook his head. “Nothing, I’m afraid, and certainly far less than you do. We were on patrol when we detected massive disturbances on the surface. We lost all communications and the land. Our Commander decided to send out two landing parties; one to an outpost in our country and one to a small village along the Strait in yours. Those two men you just saw were the only survivors of the landing party in your country. Our commander was part of it, and from what we heard on the radio and have been able to extract from Andrey and Sergei, everyone else was killed by those swarms, what you say are nano-robots.”

Krylov turned his notebook over in his palm, musing about the events of the last few weeks. “Then, of course, we detected something on the surface. It had to have been the same things. They didn’t follow us into the water for some reason; I’ve no idea why, though.”

Several minutes of silence followed after Krylov finished speaking as both Nancy and he thought over the revelations shared by one another.

“So, Commander, where do we go from here?”

Rachel Walsh | Marcus Warden | David Landry

9:24 AM, April 21, 2038

“You win, Doe! I surrender!”

Hovering just a few dozen feet from him, the helicopter’s rotor wash was blindingly powerful. Marcus turned his head slightly and kept his eyes closed as he waited for a response. Several seconds passed, and Marcus had nearly convinced himself that the next noise to come from the chopper would be the sound of a missile. So certain was he of his inevitable death that the crackle of a speaker made his heart skip a beat before it resumed its rapid pounding.

“Kick it away, then get down on your knees.”

The voice was precise and calculated, and Marcus knew that the lack of emotion in the voice was not just because it was coming through a speaker. The man behind the voice showed no emotions, and even now he was the epitome of detachment. Marcus did as he was told, kicking the rifle in front of him several feet away. The cockpit of the helicopter was darkened and impossible to see into, but Marcus knew that the man behind it was watching every movement with a hawk’s eye, looking for any signs of treachery.

“Where are the others?”

Marcus had counted on this question coming next and already had a response planned. Assuming that Doe already knew exactly how many of them were there and who they were, Marcus spoke carefully, doing his best not to contradict anything that Doe might have seen or heard.

“Rachel was in the armored car, and David’s... somewhere. I’m not sure where, but his leg’s under the train.”

Another several seconds passed in silence. Marcus fought the urge to look away, keeping his gaze trained on the helicopter. Finally, Doe’s voice came again.

“Get down on your knees and put your hands behind your head. If you move, I will kill you.”

You’d be better off killing me now, you fool. Marcus lowered his head, interlacing his hands behind it as he dropped to both knees. The whine of the helicopter’s rotors lessened as it descended to the ground, finally touching down. Marcus raised his head slightly and watched as a side door on the helicopter popped open. With the rotors still spinning, a man exited the side door. Keeping his head low, he walked forward toward Marcus, pistol in hand. Dressed in his ever-present suit and tie, Marcus’s first sight of Mr. Doe was somewhat threatening, if not slightly amusing. Though there was no questioning the fact that Doe was not a man to be trifled with, seeing a man wearing a suit during the apocalypse wasn’t something Marcus thought he’d ever see.

After he cleared the rotors, Mr. Doe straightened his back and raised his arm, keeping his pistol trained on Marcus. An all-black Walther, the cold steel matched the darkness of Doe’s suit and tie t

perfection, giving an appearance that wasn't just a coincidence. Intimidation was part of Mr. Doe's arsenal of weapons, but it was one that Marcus was far too tired to bother with caring about. Bruised, beaten and run down, Marcus was stretched to his limit. His physical condition, combined with feelings of shame and guilt over having lost control earlier and having led Mr. Doe straight to them, Marcus's mind was no longer capable of feeling intimidation.

"Your name is Marcus, correct?" Mr. Doe stopped a few feet in front of Marcus. He held the gun with an iron grip, his arm never wavering as it kept the barrel aimed directly at Marcus's left eye.

"That's right. Marcus Warden." Marcus blinked his eyes as he looked up at Mr. Doe, trying to wash away the dirt and dust that was still collecting there from the helicopter's downwash. "Do you mind turning that damned thing off?" Mr. Doe's eyes were cold and nearly black, and his expression didn't change at all while both he and Marcus were speaking.

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Warden. Tell me again; where are the others?"

Marcus started to remove his right hand from behind his head to point toward the APC, but he stopped as Mr. Doe's index finger smoothly moved toward the trigger. *Shit*, Marcus thought, *this isn't going to be as easy as I thought*. He stretched his back, moving it left to right in exaggerated circles. The cold steel and wood grain pressed up against the small of his back had turned warm, making every second more uncomfortable than the last. Having secreted the pistol beneath his shirt and pants before exiting the train, Marcus felt bad leaving Rachel and David defenseless, but one pistol wouldn't be enough to stop Mr. Doe. *It won't be enough if I fail here, anyway*.

"I already told you, Doe. Rachel was in the APC. David's probably dead by now, based on his *missing a leg*."

"You don't seem very broken up about their deaths, Mr. Warden."

Marcus shrugged as best as he could given that his arms were raised above his head. "I barely survived the end of the world, then I got to deal with some sort of hell creatures, then I got to drive a truck up and down the eastern seaboard and you just tried to kill me. I really don't give a *fuck* about them, you or anybody else."

Marcus breathed heavily at the end of his rant, his chest rising and sinking quickly. *Was that too much?* Doe was eying him closely, not saying a word. *Shit, it was too much*. Marcus tensed his muscles, preparing to throw himself to the side and grab his gun. It was a fool's plan, but he was about to completely run out of options.

"Well then, Mr. Warden." Doe's arm dropped a half inch, the only sign of his lessened aggression. "If they're dead, and you clearly will know nothing about what they knew, then your usefulness is at an end."

Flames exploded from the end of Mr. Doe's pistol along with a sharp crack that rose above the sound of the helicopter blades. Fire burned through Marcus's shoulder and he fell forward, unable to stop himself from slamming his face into the dirt. He rolled as his body's momentum continued forward, screaming in pain as his injured shoulder was scraped and bent against the ground, making

the pain nearly unbearable.

“You son of a bitch!” Marcus yelled, spit flying from his mouth. “Just kill me!”

Doe held the gun to Marcus’s head. Now just a foot away, he was crouched down, staring directly into Marcus’s eyes. “I suppose I owe you that much. Tell me something, though, before I do so.”

Marcus said nothing as he gritted his teeth and breathed heavily, fighting the blood loss and pain in his shoulder.

“Which one of you was foolish enough to lead me to you?”

Leonard McComb | Nancy Sims

10:02 AM, April 21, 2038

Another knock on the door followed Nancy's question, preventing Krylov from answering. The young man ducked in and quickly saluted the commander before leaning over and whispering in her ear. Krylov's face remained neutral and he nodded at the man. Taking his coffee cup, he stood up and gestured for Nancy to do the same.

"Please excuse me for a few moments, Nancy. I need to tend to some urgent business. We'll resume our conversation once I return. Until then, if you'd like to visit your companion, I've been informed that he's conscious. Afonin will show you to the medical bay."

Krylov stepped past the crewman who had spoken to him and hurried down the hall and out of sight. Grigory Afonin beckoned for Nancy to follow him and spoke in a thick accent, stumbling over his words. "Please, if you follow me." Commander Krylov, to his credit, had nearly perfect mastery of English, and when he had spoken with Nancy, his accent was far less noticeable than any of the others on the sub.

"Please, watch your head." Afonin pointed to the low doorway as they stepped into the hallway. Turning left, Afonin walked quickly and Nancy hurried to stay with him, distracted by the numerous sights and sounds around her. After taking care of the two Americans, Commander Krylov had decided to forego any pretense of stealth. The skeleton crew had quickly returned the Arkhangelsk to full power, and though most of the submarine was devoid of activity, lights, fans and electronic devices of various shapes and sizes were all powered up for use.

The walk from the room where Nancy and Krylov had spoken to the medical bay took several minutes. When she and Afonin arrived, he opened the door and stepped aside, allowing her to enter. "Knock to leave," he spoke quickly, then closed the door behind her. Turning from the sealed hatch to the room interior, Nancy's eyes adjusted to the dim lighting and she made out the shape of a body resting on a slightly inclined bed. She ran to the side of the bed and grabbed the hand of the person lying down, knowing who it was before seeing his face.

"Leonard! Thank God; you're alive!"

Leonard's eyes were closed, but he opened them at the sound of Nancy's voice. His face was bruised from falling to the ground when he was shot, and he was pale, but he smiled regardless, happy to see Nancy once again. A light blanket was pulled up to his chest, and as Nancy looked down the length of the bed, she could see that the outline of his right leg stopped at the knee. Nervously she reached for the blanket to pull it up and see the extent of the damage for herself, but Leonard's hand stopped her. He grasped her wrist weakly, trembling, and spoke softly, his voice cracking.

"Please don't. I'm not ready."

Nancy nodded and sat down on a stool next to Leonard. Taking his hand in hers, she held him tightly, staring at him in silence. Leonard's breathing was ragged, though his heartbeat was strong, and

Nancy could sense that he was fighting both the loss of blood and whatever drugs had been injected into his body to help dull the pain.

“I spoke to the commander of the sub, Commander Krylov, and told him what had happened.”

Leonard blinked his eyes slowly a few times, then gave up fighting the urge to close them. “Did I believe you?”

Nancy shrugged. “I’m not sure. He brought in a couple of other people who apparently encountered the swarms. Before we could keep talking he had to leave, though he said he’d be back to finish our conversation later.”

Leonard didn’t reply for a moment and Nancy looked at him closely, wondering if he had fallen asleep. After a deep breath, he opened his eyes again and looked at her intently. “Do what you have to do, Nancy. This sub is our last chance if Marcus and Rachel fail. Do whatever it takes to convince him of the truth.”

“Truth shouldn’t need convincing.” A voice from behind Nancy startled her and she jumped up, turning around to see where it came from. “It’s the truth, after all.”

Commander Krylov stood in the doorway to the medical bay with another man behind him. The other man walked in and pulled up a pair of stools next to Nancy before sitting down. Nancy sat back down slowly, still keeping Leonard’s hand held tightly.

“Nancy, I gather that your companion’s name is Leonard. May I ask, sir, your full name for our records?”

Leonard blinked lazily, masking the speed at which his eyes flicked between Nancy, Krylov and the other man seated next to the commander. “Leonard McComb. Professional sanitation engineer, survivor of the apocalypse and in desperate need of whisky and a peg-leg.”

Krylov laughed heartily at Leonard’s gallows humor. “It’s good to see you in high spirits! Our doctor was worried you weren’t going to pull through, but you’ve proved both his skill and your determination to live.”

Still grinning, Krylov took a small laptop computer from the man seated next to him and opened it, revealing the screen. On it was a set of open files, one of which was strangely familiar to Nancy, though she had trouble placing it at first.

“Do you recognize this information?” Krylov asked, holding the laptop closer for both Nancy and Leonard to view. Nancy looked at Leonard, trying to remember where she had seen it, when a memory returned to her and she suddenly realized what it was. “Where did you get that?”

Leonard coughed and spoke before Krylov could answer. “I’ll hand it to you, Krylov; your men are quite thorough in their searches.”

Nancy turned back to Leonard, her eyes wide as he continued, explaining the source of the data

Nancy.

“I grabbed the data stick from Rachel back at the armory, before things went to hell. I figured it would come in handy at some point, if we ever needed proof of what’s been happening.”

“Mr. McComb is correct, Ms. Sims. After his surgery, we found this data stick hidden in his belongings. After decrypting it, we were able to analyze the data in short order.”

Krylov paused and looked at Nancy and Leonard for several seconds.

“Well?” Nancy said impatiently, tired of Krylov’s delays. “What’s the point?”

“The point is that it confirms our story.” Leonard answered in Krylov’s stead, who nodded solemnly in agreement.

“Correct again, Mr. McComb. What you shared with me, Ms. Sims, was frightening, and viewing this data just made it a thousand times worse.”

“So... you’re going to help us?”

“Protocol, Ms. Sims, requires that I return to port immediately and deliver this high-value information to our intelligence service.” Krylov looked at the floor, sighing softly to himself. “However, given that there is no intelligence service, port or anything else left to speak of, I find myself forced into an awkward and unforeseen position.”

“Commander,” Leonard said, “what do we have to do to convince you to help?”

Krylov stood, closed the laptop computer and placed it under his arm. He took a deep breath, replaced the hat on his head, and straightened his back, adopting a more formal posture.

“Mr. McComb. Ms. Sims. The Arkhangelsk and her crew stand ready to aid you in the destruction of this pestilence.”

Rachel Walsh | Marcus Warden | David Landry

9:30 AM, April 21, 2038

Movement from behind Mr. Doe caught Marcus's eye. Before he could stop himself, he glanced at it, though Mr. Doe didn't appear to have noticed thanks to the sweat, tears and dirt coating Marcus's entire face. Marcus felt his heart jump as he made out the blurry form of Rachel, who was slowly walking up behind Mr. Doe. Her footsteps masked by the sound of the helicopter, Rachel was armed with only a shovel, though even a momentary distraction was all Marcus would need to finish out his plan how he had intended.

"Hey." Rachel's voice was weak and strained. "Doe."

Mr. Doe turned quickly, whipping the pistol around to face the new voice behind him. Rachel was just a few feet away, though, and lashed out with the shovel. The metal end collided with Mr. Doe's left arm, knocking him off balance, though he still retained the pistol in his right hand. Unable to keep a grip on the shovel in her weakened state, it flew out of Rachel's hands, clattering to the ground far out of reach.

A cold sneer, the first—and last—sign of emotion in Mr. Doe came as he leveled his gun at Rachel. As he opened his mouth to speak at her, a shot rang out. Looking down at his hand, he immediately questioned whether he had inadvertently fired his weapon or not. His finger was not on the trigger, though, and the lances of pain in his back and chest verified that the shot did not come from his gun.

Three more shots rang out in rapid succession and Rachel dropped to the ground as two of the rounds passed through Mr. Doe's body, tumbling end over end out the other side. The final round passed through his heart, lodging in his ribcage, and sending him toppling to the ground. He fell flat on his face, like Marcus had done, but instead of trying to move or roll with the impact, he stayed where he had fallen.

Behind where Mr. Doe had been standing, Marcus was on his side, his gun still pointed at the body in front of him. His arm was shaking violently and his breathing was labored as the red stain on his shoulder slowly spread down his chest. As Mr. Doe succumbed to his wounds, his body gave a small shudder. In that same instant, the whine of the helicopter grew louder as it began to lift off from the ground on its own. Presumably controlled by an autopilot system linked to a dead man's switch on Mr. Doe's person, the helicopter rocketed away, though a distant explosion was heard a moment later accompanied by a plume of smoke far in the distance.

Rachel and Marcus stared at each other over the body of Mr. Doe, neither of them speaking as they each caught their breath and tried to recover from what had just occurred. The sound of footsteps came from behind Rachel, who turned to see David slowly walking up on them, holding a piece of torn cloth against his arm. He stopped over Mr. Doe's body and examined it before nudging the corpse with his foot. Satisfied that Mr. Doe was finally dead, he leaned down and removed the pistol from Mr. Doe's death grip before sitting down next to Rachel and Marcus.

“Huh.” David snorted as he looked at Mr. Doe’s body. “That was sort of anti-climatic.”

Marcus started to chuckle, holding his shoulder through the pain. “For you, maybe.”

Rachel stood up and hobbled over to Marcus. She knelt down next to him and examined his shoulder. “It looks fairly clean. It passed right through, so you should be okay. We just need to clean it up and bandage it before an infection sets in.”

David got up before Rachel and headed back to the train. “I’ll be back with the medical kit in a minute.”

Rachel nodded her thanks and watched him walk off, waiting until he was halfway back to the train before speaking to Marcus.

“It was you, wasn’t it?”

Marcus looked Rachel in the eye, still feeling no small amount of shame over what had happened. “I didn’t know, Rachel. I was just looking at the computer and something popped up. I can’t even remember what it said at this point.”

Rachel nodded slowly and patted his arm gently as she sat down next to him to wait for David’s return. “I know you didn’t know, Marcus. For the time being, let’s keep it between you and me. David’s already strained enough as it is about your... well, whatever it was that happened before. He doesn’t need to know about this; it won’t do him any good.”

Marcus nodded and leaned his head back against the ground. The sunlight overhead was warm on his face, though the distant black clouds rolling in signaled that it wouldn’t last for long. “I can’t believe this guy’s dead. I mean, really, I thought it’d take more than this to kill him.”

Rachel sighed and stared at Mr. Doe’s body. His suit was wrinkled, torn and marred with dirt and a red stain on the ground was slowly spreading as his blood flowed along the path of least resistance. “I think it’s a rather fitting end, personally. After all he did and all I’m sure he was still trying to do, this will be his final resting place.”

“Sorry it took so long; this was all I could find.” David held up a clear plastic case filled with bandages, gauze, basic surgical tools and a small variety of medications. With a chunk of metal shrapnel embedded in his arm, he moved gingerly, not wanting to accidentally trip and drive the shrapnel further in. Rachel took the case from him and opened it, removing a pair of gloves, a small bottle of iodine, and several bandages and a roll of gauze. She motioned for David to sit next to her and then cleaned the area around the shrapnel, instructing him to keep his arm still despite the pain. After liberally dousing it with iodine, she gripped the shrapnel with her gloved hand and gently began to pull it out.

Rachel was by no means a medical professional, but her guess that the shrapnel hadn’t penetrated far into David’s arm was correct, and the metal was quickly out. Following that was more iodine and quick wrapping of bandages to help minimize the bleeding. After tending to David, Rachel turned her attention to Marcus, though there wasn’t much she could do for him except clean both sides of the

wound, bandage him up and put his arm in a makeshift sling. With all of their immediate injuries cared for, they all walked slowly back to the train and climbed inside.

“So,” David said at last, “What’re we going to do now?”

Leonard McComb | Nancy Sims

11:48 AM, April 21, 2038

The energy on the command deck of the Arkhangelsk was electrifying. A hum was in the air, carried on the backs of the crew members who hurried back and forth as they prepared the ship for its most dangerous mission yet. Although the ship had an official top speed of forty knots, Commander Krylov had ordered them to increase it by a minimum of fifty percent in an effort to get to the gulf as quickly as possible. They could launch the missiles before reaching the gulf if they had to, but they would not be in radio range of the area for a few more days. Without radio contact with Rachev, Marcus and David, they would have no way of knowing precisely where to target the missiles, assuming they would have to use them at all.

“How can you be certain that your companions are still alive?”

Commander Krylov and Nancy were standing around a chart table in a corner of the command deck, poring over a map laid out in front of them. Seated next to them with a pair of crutches leaning up against the wall, Leonard raised himself up as much as he could in his chair to get a view of the map as he responded to Krylov’s question.

“The last radio contact we had with them was before we hit Anchorage, but we got cut off, presumably because of the storms.”

“Storms?” Krylov looked puzzled.

“Oh yes,” Nancy answered, “these massive super storms. Haven’t you seen them?”

Krylov shook his head slowly. “No, we haven’t seen anything of the kind. But we haven’t been on the surface much as of late. Once we detected those nano-robots on our scanners, I decided it would be wiser to stay submerged.”

“Well, whatever they are, they’re huge. They take days to pass by, and they’re covering huge spans of surface area, with fairly short breaks in between them.”

Krylov sighed and looked back at the map, running his index finger along a path that had been drawn and redrawn several times already. “Then we’ll just have to make our move and hope that we can reach them once we get closer to the coast.”

A shudder came from somewhere deep in the bowels of the submarine and Krylov stood straight up, looking across the command deck at the face of a nervous crewman. He shouted at the crewman, a Russian and a quick response came in turn. It had pleased Krylov, apparently, because his demeanor relaxed and he leaned forward on the table once again.

“The engines are now running at one hundred and fifteen percent. We’ll be at one-twenty-five within the hour.”

“Can this old thing handle that?” Leonard looked mildly concerned as he asked the question due no small part to the ominous low frequency vibrations that were coursing through the vessel.

“The Arkhangelsk may be old,” Krylov said, with a slight note of warning in his voice, “but she’ll get us there. Right now we need to focus on what’s going to happen once we breach the canal and reach the gulf.”

Redesigned six years earlier, the Panama Canal had received a complete upgrade for the modern age. Twice as wide as it had previously been, the canal was nearly completely automated and its pumps operated off of a combination of geothermal and solar energy. The only human input required to pass through was to activate a control station, though the task was trivial compared to the large goal. Once through the canal, the Arkhangelsk would have to travel as fast as her crew could push her to reach radio range with the area that Leonard and Nancy presumed Rachel, Marcus and David would be. Without direct communications with them, the crew on the sub would have no way of knowing—much less where—they should be firing their missiles.

Leonard sat back in his chair and rubbed his eyes. “Just get us in radio range of Marcus and Rachel, Commander, and we’ll be able to tell you exactly where to put the missile.”

One of the command crew rushed to Krylov, a computer in hand, and placed it on the table. “Sir,” he spoke, in English no less, “we were able to reach the satellite. We’re getting live imagery now.” Krylov tilted the screen of the laptop so that Nancy and Leonard could see. Images scrolled slowly through the screen, showing roiling storms over the western section of the USA.

“Wait a second, that’s the satellite that Rachel and David were accessing.” Nancy couldn’t help letting the slightest bit of an accusatory tone slip. “How did you get this?”

Krylov held up the data stick they had taken from Leonard and placed it on the table next to the laptop. “Whoever put this together included access instructions for the satellite; it was designed that way, Ms. Sims. The person who made this wanted whoever found it to have full access to every resource left.” Krylov pressed a button on the laptop and an image on the screen froze. “And it’s a good thing, too.”

A massive storm was sweeping in toward the coast, directly toward the Arkhangelsk’s position. Looking across the bridge, Krylov shouted at the crewmen, raising his voice above the groans of the ship. “It’s time to submerge, gentlemen. Take us to five hundred!”

Shouts of affirmation came back and the submarine began to tilt forward, racing downward at a steep enough angle that Nancy and Leonard both clung to the table with white knuckles. Krylov smiled at them, remembering what his first voyage on a sub had been like, and wondering what was going through the heads of the two American civilians who had found their way onto his vessel.

After talking for a few minutes about what they were going to do next, Rachel, Marcus and David all fell asleep on the floor of the locomotive, their bodies succumbing to the effects of both the wounds and exhaustion. With the train tracks both ahead and behind the train destroyed, they had to quickly face up to the fact that they weren't going to be going anywhere. The destruction of the AP eliminated any hope of continuing on with it, as well, and the likelihood of finding any other vehicle nearby that would be in working condition was slim at best.

The first to wake up, Marcus quietly exited the train with Sam, walking slowly down the length of the train in the last few minutes of light they had. Night was nearly upon them, along with the edge of another set of storm clouds, and Marcus wanted to be certain that they hadn't missed anything. Flashlight in hand, he scanned the interior of the train cars, the doors of which were still rolled open from when the creatures inside had been trying to attack them.

Most of the contents of the boxcars were unrecognizable to Marcus, except for the few cars directly behind the locomotives. In addition to holding Bertha, the front few boxcars also held a variety of workman's tools, thick metal rails, wooden ties, spikes and—in the fourth car—a large amount of gravel for smoothing out uneven surfaces. While Marcus had seen the contents of a few of the boxcars previously, he had been under enormous stress while doing so, and this was his first chance to check them out in a relatively calm environment. Clenching his teeth, he pulled himself into the second boxcar, trying to keep his shoulder as still as possible.

Marcus played the flashlight over the interior of the darkened boxcar as Sam sniffed around his feet, growling at two dead creatures that were hanging out of the open door on the opposite side. Thunder rumbled in the distance, causing a shiver to run down Marcus's spine as the eerie atmosphere of the train began to affect him. Shaking the feeling off, he continued looking through the supplies, nurturing the seed of a plan that he had been forming since shortly after he had shot Mr. Doe in the back. Moving on to the next train car, he found that it was filled with more rails and ties, and between all of the supplies he had seen, there looked to be enough to lay down a half mile or more of track with little or no difficulty. From Marcus's estimation, the amount of track that had been destroyed in front of them by the missile was no more than thirty feet in length.

It'll never work, he thought, but stranger things than this have succeeded so far.

Walking back to the locomotive with Sam behind him, Marcus heard Rachel and David's voices before he saw them. As he rounded the corner to the front of the train, he saw the two of them standing near the destroyed section of rail, gesturing between it and the train behind them.

"Oh come on, David. It can't be that hard."

"Are you serious? One of those ties is several hundred pounds on its own. And none of us are in the best of shape, either."

The pair turned and looked at Marcus upon hearing the sound of gravel crunching underfoot. ~~Smiling, he nodded toward the damaged track and spoke to Rachel. "So you had the same idea, eh?"~~

David threw his hands into the air and walked back toward the train in frustration. "You're both insane!"

Marcus watched David walk back to the locomotive and climb back inside before turning back to Rachel. "What do you figure our chances here are?"

"Based on our track record, I'd say we've got a pretty good shot. It's not like we have any other choice, though. Going on foot is a no-go, and finding a vehicle that's still operational that could hold Bertha is a fool's errand."

"So is trying to lay down thirty feet of railroad track when none of us have any idea how to do it."

Rachel gave Marcus a half-smile and walked a few feet forward, to the edge of where the track had been damaged. She wobbled slightly as she walked, and Marcus could see that she was still fighting through a large amount of pain. The shallow crater in front of her was several inches deep, down to the bottom layer of gravel that the railroad ties rested in. The major damage hadn't been to the ground, though, but to the ties and rails themselves. Pieces of the wooden ties were scattered around and in the crater, and several short sections of rail were missing as well. At both ends of the crater, where the rails were intact, there were a few feet of mangled, twisted steel loosely joined to the intact sections of rail by screw spikes.

"Come on now, it won't be that bad." Rachel patted Marcus's shoulder as she circled around him, walking the perimeter of the crater. "It's not like we have to make it perfect. If we can fill this hole in with a couple of ties to put down in the middle and nail down a few lengths of rail on each side, we should be okay."

Marcus gestured to the long trail of train cars behind him. "Somehow I doubt that half-assing a railroad track is going to get that thing across."

"Well," Rachel mused, "what if we disconnected everything but the locomotives and the boxcars holding Bertha?"

Marcus kicked a large piece of gravel into the shallow crater, nodding as he considered Rachel's suggestion. "I guess that would be easier, but won't the AI be expecting a full train to arrive?"

"We'll burn that bridge once we come to it. For now, let's just see if we can do the impossible. Again."

Leonard McComb | Nancy Sims

4:18 PM, April 21, 2038

For what felt like the hundredth time in a day, Nancy was once again overwhelmed by the magnitude of the vessel she was on. Having been given nearly free reign to go wherever she wanted on the sub, she had taken to wandering the corridors while Leonard rested. Exploring the vast interior of the submarine was a strange experience for Nancy, who had never dreamed that a craft as large as the Arkhangelsk could have existed, let alone be capable of traveling at such incredible speed underwater. After exploring the ship for a few hours, Nancy finally found her way back to the dining room, where half of the small crew—including Commander Krylov—were gathered for a meal.

Nancy walked slowly through the dining room until she caught Krylov's eye. He quickly waved her over and she sat down next to him. A moment later a plate of steaming food was deposited in front of her along with a drink, napkin and utensils. While the food was less than appetizing, she dug into it with gusto, having only had a few sips of water and military rations since arriving on the sub.

“How is Mr. McComb doing, Ms. Sims?”

Nancy wiped some crumbs from the corner of her mouth and cleared her throat. “He was sleeping when I checked in on him last. I was going to go bring him some food. I don't think he's had much all to eat.”

Krylov waved his hand dismissively at her. “No, no, he's being well looked after. The doctor is ensuring he's getting everything he needs. What about yourself? Was your exploration of the Arkhangelsk illuminating?”

Nancy nodded and laughed lightly. “It was nothing short of astonishing, Commander. It's like a city under the water. There aren't that many people, though. It looks like hundreds could fit in here.”

“One hundred and sixty is the recommended complement, but she can hold far more, it's true,” Krylov said. Nancy had finished eating and Krylov stood up, motioning for Nancy to follow him. They walked together out of the dining room down the hallway as Krylov continued to talk. “Of course when we left port, we already had a small crew, but losing two landing parties to those things up there cut us down to what you see now.”

Krylov's heavy sigh weighed on Nancy and she looked at him closely, noticing the dark circles under his eyes and worry lines etched into his forehead. “Have you ever taken command of a submarine before?”

“I'm afraid not.” Krylov snorted. “I wasn't going to be up for a promotion for quite a long time. Losing Commander Alexeyev has been... difficult. On all of us. This nano-robot business, though, at the whole end of the world situation, that's going to be even harder to break to the crew.”

“You mean they don't know about it?”

“Not all of them, no. A select few who I trust to be discrete have been informed. They’re the ones who worked on decrypting the data stick and who accessed the satellite, among other things. The rest of the men don’t need to know yet. Knowing that their country has been obliterated would do little to invigorate them for the journey ahead, and we’ll need every man’s full attention to see this through to the end successfully.”

Nancy was quiet for a moment as she digested what Krylov had told her. When she spoke again her voice was softer. “You said the country’s been obliterated. Is that because...”

“Yes. As the satellite was passing over, I examined the imagery quite closely. We wouldn’t be en route to your country if mine wasn’t all but wiped off the face of the earth.” Krylov’s tone had a sting near the end, putting Nancy on the defensive.

“Commander, you realize that we were hurt just as much as you, right? I’ve seen more death and destruction than I could have ever imagined just in the few places we’ve been. You’re not the only one who’s suffered losses.”

“No, Ms. Sims, we aren’t. But we also aren’t the ones who started this disaster.” Krylov’s eyes and voice started to fill with anger, though as he looked at Nancy it quickly died out. He sighed again and stopped, leaning against the wall in the empty corridor. “You have my apologies. You are no more responsible for this than I am.”

Nancy placed her hand on Krylov’s shoulder, smiling grimly at him. “There’s no need for apologies, Commander. None of us expected to be in this situation. I, for one, am glad that we found you, and I know Leonard is as well. If Marcus and Rachel fail, then you and your crew are the last hope for all of us.”

Krylov closed his eyes momentarily and nodded solemnly before pushing off the wall and continuing his walk. Nancy stayed next to him as they wound their way to the medical ward where Leonard was sleeping.

“If you’ll excuse me, Ms. Sims, I need to tend to my duties. Please don’t hesitate to call for someone if you or Mr. McComb need anything.”

Rachel Walsh | Marcus Warden | David Landry

2:18 PM, April 23, 2038

Three strong individuals with experience, determination and a healthy dose of gumption could easily have replaced thirty feet of railroad track in far less than a day. Three inexperienced, injured and exhausted individuals struggling against all odds, though, took quite a lot longer. After consuming a healthy dose of painkillers that did little to diminish their discomfort, Marcus, Rachel and David set to work, committing to the only course of action open to them. The first few hours of the repair started with an argument between Rachel and David that lasted well into the afternoon. As Marcus slowly pushed load after load of gravel from the boxcars to the crater in a wheelbarrow he had found in a pile of other tools, he listened to Rachel trying to convince David that repairing the track was their only shot at getting out of their current predicament. David argued ferociously, citing the injuries, their lack of knowledge on the subject and listing off as many different reasons why it wouldn't work as he could think of.

Each argument was shot down by Rachel until, finally, Marcus ended the whole conversation by sticking his head in the doorway of the locomotive and whistling loudly.

“Hey, assholes. I got the hole filled in. Do you two want to come help, or would you rather die around some more while I finish it all up myself?”

Initially, David wore an angered expression, at least until he glanced past Marcus to see a pile of gravel filling the shallow crater where Mr. Doe had destroyed the track. This combined with the fact that Marcus's arm was still in a sling broke David's resistance and his anger fell, replaced with equal parts shame and acceptance. For her part, Rachel was apologetic, having completely lost track of time as she had argued nonstop with David. Marcus waved them away, rolling his eyes as he slowly pushed a final load of gravel to its destination. Rachel and David joined him and, together, the three evaluated Marcus's work in the light of the electrical storm overhead. Over the course of the next day and a half, Rachel and David threw their backs into the work alongside Marcus. Remaining uncharacteristically quiet, David said nothing negative about Marcus the entire time, having gained a healthy dose of respect for the man that he had shown incredible disdain towards just a few days prior.

The end of the second day of work brought renewed hope to the trio as they sat around a small fire just outside the lead locomotive, rewarding themselves for their hard work with a night of rest. Marcus stroked Sam's back as the dog laid sprawled out in front of the fire, dozing with an expression of ecstasy on his face.

“How much more do you figure we have to go before it's done?” David's question was the most he had spoken since the end of his argument with Rachel. Looking at Marcus briefly, Rachel cleared her throat and took a sip from her bottle of water.

“I think we've done all we can for laying out the ties. That was a hell of a job, by the way; you should all be proud of that.” Marcus nodded and smiled in agreement as she continued. “Now that the damaged ends of track are gone, we have to decide how to put down more of it. The way I see it, since we don't have nearly enough ties out there, we'll want to use the longer sections of track over the

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