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For Katherine, Jake, and Julia

ONE

66 HOURS 52 MINUTES

OBSCENE GRAFFITI.

Smashed windows.

Human Crew tags, their logo, along with warnings to freaks to get out.

In the distance, up the street, too far away for Sam to want to chase after, a couple of kids, maybe ten years old, maybe not even that. Barely visible in the false moonlight. Just outlines. The kids passing a bottle back and forth, taking swigs, staggering.

Grass growing everywhere. Weeds forcing their way up through cracks in the street. Trash: chip bags, six-pack rings, supermarket plastic bags, random sheets of paper, articles of clothing, single shoes, hamburger wrappers, broken toys, broken bottles, and crumpled cans – anything that wasn't actually edible – formed random, colourful collections. They were poignant reminders of better days.

Darkness so deep, you'd have had to walk off into the wilderness in the old days to experience anything like it.

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Not a street light or a porch light. Electricity out. Maybe forever.

No one wasting batteries, not any more. Those, too, were in very short supply.

And not many trying to burn candles or light trash fires. Not after the fire that burned down three homes and burned one kid so bad, it took Lana, the Healer, half a day to save him.

No water pressure. Nothing coming out of fire hydrants. Nothing to do about fire but watch it burn and get out of its way.

Perdido Beach, California.

At least it used to be California.

Now it was Perdido Beach, the FAYZ. Wherever, whatever, and whyever that was.

Sam had the power to make light. He could fire it in killing beams from his hands. Or he could form balls of persistent light that would hang in the air like a lantern. Like lightning in a bottle.

But not too many people wanted Sam's lights, what kids called Sammy Suns. Zil Sperry, leader of the Human Crew, had forbidden any of his people to take the lights. Most of the normals complied. And some freaks didn't want a bright advertisement of who and what they were.

The fear had spread. A disease. It leaped from person to person.

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People sat in the dark, afraid. Always afraid.

Sam was in the east end, the dangerous part of town, the part Zil had declared off-limits to freaks. He had to show the flag, so to speak, demonstrate that he was still in charge. Show that he wouldn't be intimidated by Zil's campaign of fear.

Kids needed that. They needed to see that someone would still protect them. That someone was *him*.

He had resisted that role, but it had come to him, anyway. And he was determined to play it out. Whenever he let up, whenever he lost focus, tried to have a different life, something awful happened.

So he walked the streets at two in the morning, ready. Just in case.

Sam walked near the shore. There was no surf, of course. Not any more. No weather. No vast swells crossing the Pacific to crash in magnificent showers of spray against Perdido's beaches.

The surf was just a soft whisper now. *Shhh. Shhh. Shhh.* Better than nothing. But not much better.

He was heading towards Clifftop, the hotel, Lana's current home. Zil had left her alone. Freak or not, no one messed with the Healer.

Clifftop was right up against the FAYZ wall, the end of Sam's area of responsibility, the last part of his walk-through.

Someone was walking down towards him. He tensed, fearing

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the worst. There was no question that Zil would like to see him dead. And out there – somewhere – Caine, his half brother. Caine had been helpful in destroying the gaiaphage and the psychopath Drake Merwin. But Sam didn't kid himself into believing that Caine had changed. If Caine was still alive, they would meet again.

And God knew what other horrors were out in that fading night – human or not. Out in the dark mountains, the black caves, the desert, the forest to the north. The too-calm ocean.

The FAYZ never let up.

But this just looked like a girl.

'It's just me, Sinder,' a voice said, and Sam relaxed.

'T'sup, Sinder? Kind of late, huh?'

She was a sweet Goth girl who managed mostly to stay out of the various wars and factions raging within the FAYZ.

'I'm glad I ran into you,' Sinder said. She had a steel pipe in one hand, the grip cushioned with duct tape. No one walked around without a weapon, especially at night.

'You OK? You eating?'

That had become the standard greeting. Not, 'How are you?' But, 'Are you eating?'

'Yeah, we're getting by,' Sinder said. Her ghostly pale skin made her seem very young and vulnerable. Of course the pipe, the black fingernails, and the kitchen knife stuck in her belt made her seem not entirely gentle.

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‘Listen, Sam. I’m not someone who, like, you know, wants to tell on people, or whatever,’ Sinder said. Uncomfortable.

‘I know that,’ he said. He waited.

‘It’s Orsay,’ Sinder said, and glanced over her shoulder, guilty. ‘You know, I talk to her sometimes. She’s kind of cool, mostly. Kind of interesting.’

‘Yep.’

‘Mostly.’

‘Yeah.’

‘But, you know, weird maybe, too.’ Sinder made a wry grin. ‘Like I’m one to talk.’

Sam waited. He heard the sound of a glass bottle shattering and high-pitched giggling from the distance behind him. The kids throwing their emptied bottle of booze. A boy named K. B. had been found dead with a bottle of vodka in his hand.

‘Anyway, Orsay, she’s at the wall.’

‘The wall?’

‘On the beach, down by the wall. She’s like, she thinks . . . Look, talk to her, OK? Just don’t tell her I told you. OK?’

‘Is she down there now? It’s, like, two a.m.’

‘That’s when they do it. They don’t want Zil or . . . or you, I guess, giving them a hard time. You know where the wall runs down from Clifftop to the beach? Those rocks out there? That’s where she is. Not alone. Other kids are there, too.’

Sam felt an unwelcome tingle running up his spine. He’d

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developed a pretty good instinct for trouble over the last few months. This felt like trouble.

‘OK, I’ll check it out.’

‘Yah. Cool.’

‘Night, Sinder. Take care.’

He left her and continued walking, wondering what new craziness or danger lay ahead. He climbed the road up past Clifftop. Glanced up at Lana’s balcony.

Patrick, Lana’s Labrador, must have heard him because he gave a short, sharp warning bark.

‘Just me, Patrick,’ Sam said.

There were very few dogs or cats still alive in the FAYZ. The only reason Patrick had not ended up as dog stew was because he belonged to the Healer.

From the top of the cliff Sam looked down and thought he could make out several people on the rocks, right down in the surf that wasn’t quite surf. They were big rocks, dangerous back in the days when Sam would take his board out there with Quinn and wait for a big one.

Sam didn’t need light to scale down the cliff. He could have done it blind. In the old days he’d done it hauling all his gear.

As he reached the sand, he heard soft voices. One speaking. One crying.

The FAYZ wall, the impenetrable, impermeable, eye-baffling barrier that defined the boundaries of the FAYZ, glowed

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almost imperceptibly. Not even a glow, really, a suggestion of translucence. Grey and blank.

A small bonfire burned on the beach, casting a faint orange light over a small circle of sand and rock and water.

No one noticed Sam as he approached. So he had time to identify most of the half-dozen kids out there. Francis, Cigar, D-Con, a few others, and Orsay herself.

‘I have seen something . . .’ Orsay began.

‘Tell me about my mom,’ someone cried out.

Orsay held up her hand, a calming gesture. ‘Please. I will do my best to reach your loved ones.’

‘She’s not a cell phone,’ the dark girl beside Orsay snapped. ‘It is very painful for the Prophetess to make contact with the barrier. Give her some peace. And listen to her words.’

Sam squinted, not quite able to recognise the dark-haired girl in the flickering firelight. Some friend of Orsay’s? Sam thought he knew every kid in the FAYZ.

‘Begin again, Prophetess,’ the dark-haired girl said.

‘Thank you, Nerezza,’ Orsay said.

Sam shook his head in amazement. Not only had he not known that Orsay was doing this, he hadn’t known she’d acquired her own personal manager. Not someone he recognised, the girl called Nerezza.

‘I have seen something . . .’ Orsay began again, and faltered as though expecting to be interrupted. ‘A vision.’

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That caused a murmur. Or maybe it was just the sighing sound of the water on the sand.

‘In my vision I saw all of the children of the FAYZ, older kids, younger, too. I saw them standing atop the cliff.’

Every head swivelled to look up at the cliff. Sam ducked, then felt foolish: the darkness concealed him.

‘The kids of the FAYZ, *prisoners* of the FAYZ, gazed out into a setting sun. Such a beautiful sunset. Redder and more vivid than anything you’ve ever seen.’ She seemed to be mesmerised by that vision. ‘Such a red sunset.’

All attention was again focused on Orsay. Not a sound from the small crowd.

‘A red sunset. The children all gazed into that red sun. But behind them, a devil. A demon.’ Orsay winced as if she couldn’t look at this creature. ‘Then, the children realised that in that red sun were all their loved ones, arms outstretched. Mothers and fathers. And all united, all filled with longing and love. Waiting so anxiously to welcome their children home.’

‘Thank you, Prophetess,’ Nerezza said.

‘They wait . . .’ Orsay said. She raised one hand, waved it towards the barrier, fluttered. ‘Just beyond the wall. Just past the sunset.’

She sat down hard, a puppet whose strings had been cut. For a while she sat there, crumpled, hands open, palms up on her lap, head bowed.

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But then, with a shaky smile she roused herself.

‘I’m ready,’ Orsay said.

She laid her palm against the FAYZ wall. Sam flinched. He knew from personal experience how painful that could be. It was like grabbing a bare electrical wire. It didn’t do any damage, but it sure felt like it did.

Orsay’s narrow face was scrunched up in pain. But when she spoke her voice was clear, untroubled. Like she was reading a poem.

‘She dreams of you, Bradley,’ Orsay said.

Bradley was Cigar’s real name.

‘She dreams of you . . . you’re at Knott’s Berry Farm. You’re afraid to go on the ride . . . She remembers how you tried to be brave . . . Your mother misses you . . .’

Cigar sniffled. He carried a weapon of his own devising, a toy plastic lightsaber with double-edged razor blades stuck into the end. His hair was tied back in a ponytail and held with a rubber band.

‘She . . . she knows you are here . . . She knows . . . she wants you to come to her . . .’

‘I can’t,’ Cigar moaned, and Orsay’s helper, whoever she was, put a comforting arm around his shoulders.

‘. . . when the time comes . . .’ Orsay said.

‘When?’ Cigar sobbed.

‘She dreams that you will be with her soon . . . She dreams . . .’

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just three days, she knows it, she is sure of it . . .’ Orsay’s voice had taken on an almost ecstatic tone. Giddy. ‘She’s seen others do it.’

‘What?’ Francis demanded.

‘. . . the others who have reappeared,’ Orsay said, dreamy now herself, as if she was falling asleep. ‘She saw them on TV. The twins, the two girls Anna and Emma . . . she saw them . . . They give interviews and tell . . .’

Orsay yanked her hand back from the FAYZ wall as if she had just noticed the pain.

Sam had still not been seen. He hesitated. He should find out what this was about. But he felt strange, like he was intruding on someone else’s sacred moment. Like he would be barging into a church service.

He sank back towards the cliff’s deepest shadows, careful not to be heard over the soft *shush . . . shush . . . shush* of the water.

‘That’s all for tonight,’ Orsay said, and hung her head.

‘But I want to know about my dad,’ D-Con urged. ‘You said you could do me tonight. It’s my turn!’

‘She’s tired,’ Orsay’s helper said firmly. ‘Don’t you know how hard this is for her?’

‘My dad is probably out there trying to talk to me,’ D-Con wailed, pointing at a specific place on the FAYZ barrier, as if he could picture his father right there, trying to peer through frosted glass. ‘He’s probably right outside the wall. He’s

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probably . . .' He choked up, unable to continue, and now Nerezza gathered him to her as she had Cigar, comforting him.

'They're all waiting,' Orsay said. 'All of them out there. Just beyond the wall. So many . . . so many . . .'

'The Prophetess will try again tomorrow,' the helper said. She raised D-Con to his feet. 'Go now, all of you. Go. Go!'

The group rose reluctantly, and Sam realised that they would soon be heading straight for him. The bonfire collapsed, sending up a shower of sparks.

He stepped back into a crevice. There wasn't a square inch of this beach and this cliff that he didn't know. He waited and watched as Francis, Cigar, D-Con, and the others climbed up the trail and away into the night.

An obviously exhausted Orsay climbed down from the rock. As they passed, arm in arm, the helper bearing Orsay's weight, Orsay stopped. She looked straight at Sam, though he knew he could not be visible.

'I dreamed her, Sam,' Orsay said. 'I dreamed her.'

Sam's mouth was dry. He swallowed hard. He didn't want to ask. But he couldn't stop himself.

'My mom?'

'She dreams of you . . . and she says . . . she says . . .'

Orsay sagged, almost fell to her knees, and her helper caught her.

'She says . . . let them go, Sam. Let them go when their time comes.'

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‘What?’

‘Sam, there comes a time when the world no longer needs heroes. And then the true hero knows to walk away.’